

# BRUCE WEBER: FASHION'S BEST FRIEND

**B**RUCE WEBER has become such a popular and well-known photographer over the past 12 years, that copies of his first book, *Bruce Weber*, now sell for eight times what they did when first published.

That book came out three years into the 1980s, at the point in each decade when it is reckoned that its direction has largely taken shape. As the succeeding years showed, the vision that Weber outlined in that book came to influence the aspirations of the period through two of its most important ongoing advertising campaigns, for Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein.

In the early 1990s Weber added Gianni Versace and Pepe Jeans to his roster of fashion advertising clients, kept up his editorial photography for magazines like *Interview* and those in The Condé Nast group worldwide, and continued to explore the creative potential of the photographic monograph. After *Bruce Weber* came *O Rio de Janeiro*, *The Andy Book*, *Bruce Weber* (again), *Sam*, *Bruce Weber* (second re-issue), *Bear Pond*, and now *Gentle Giants*.

Like all his photography whether commissioned or private, the images in *Gentle Giants* stem from personal interests and enthusiasms, in this case for the Newfoundland dog, a huge, black and some say native hound once confined to that region of eastern Canada. The book is not just nice pictures of furry beasts, however. It explores Weber's fascination for his fellow dog fanciers and breeders, and in the way that he first explored in *O Rio*, mixes his own journal-like text with a series of pictures—more personal snapshot album than formal photographic monograph.

Hitherto, as evidenced by the yawning absence of published Bruce Weber articles, he has been a reluctant interviewee. When I contacted him through his partner Nan Bush before the British release of *Gentle Giants* however, Weber was more than willing to talk about his life and work

and how they intimately intermingle with each other. We started with the subject of his versatility across creative media, with his interests in film, stills photography, and writing.

In previous books Weber had published contributions from ex-Beat, ex-junkie, still misanthropic writer William Burroughs, and hinted at a youthful liaison with playwright Tennessee Williams. I asked Weber how he came to write, and which other authors most influenced him.

He told me his story. "I was working on a book once on Sam Shepherd [the American playwright], a little book done to raise money for the Film Forum, which is a theatre in New York for the showing of independent films. And so, I didn't really want to write in the book so much about Sam did this, Sam did that and everything. I knew that he and I had a mutual admiration for Paul Bowles, so I actually wrote about my trip to Tangier, to meet Paul Bowles."

In search of other clues about Weber's past, I asked him about his childhood, his family and his first exposure to photography. He replied: "My Dad was this very handsome man, a bit like Paul Newman, and he was a businessman, and my Mom was very beautiful. He photographed her a lot, and they had this really crazy, neurotic life. I was left alone a lot, or was away at boarding school, and we lived in the country, Pennsylvania farm country with steel mills all around. It was kind of tough around there."

"Everybody played football, and I was into fashion and music and all those things you're not supposed to do. That's the kind of life I came from. I never wanted to do anything different than what I was about, photographically, because I didn't think it would be honest."

When the name Bruce Weber started to surface in photography magazines, it was with male fashion photographs celebrating a mythic, idealised image of American boyhood, of nobly posing footballers, aproned store clerks, quiffed small-town hoods and hustlers. Weber was drawing on the iconography of a provincial life he knew well, and would return to time and again in his photographs.

There is a similarity of subject matter between *Gentle Giants* and Weber's previous book *Bear Pond*. How did dogs come to be so important in his work? "I started using my dogs on some fashion photographs I was doing, because I really needed to hide the clothes. They looked really bad!" he explained.

"Then I began photographing my dogs, taking personal pictures of them. I had a house on a lake in the Adirondack

Mountains, upstate New York. We would go to this place, Bear Pond, take a canoe and go swimming, and I liked that freedom of taking a journey somewhere, and of taking my dogs with me. It was kind of an idyllic time. I don't think those pictures could be done again even with those same people."

Reconstructing the past as it might have been is integral to Weber's photography, especially in his advertising campaigns for Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren. For Lauren, Weber created an ideal world of immaculately dressed WASPs lounging on sun-drenched summer lawns, in recreation of his family's group photography sessions after a leisurely Sunday lunch.

Conversely, for Calvin Klein, he made real the fantasies he dreamt up when alone at home with his mother's fashion magazines, the hi-fi system and record collection—edgy boy-meets-girl-meets-motorbike rock'n'roll romances in gritty black-and-white.

Weber's fantasy life and fascination for the forbidden took him to the big city to study at New York University. It was the late 1960s, the time the giants of street photography were striding the pavements of New York, and Diane Arbus was to enter his life. "I met Diane when I was having a really rough time," Weber related.

"Nobody liked my photographs, and nobody could understand why I was photographing men, and rock'n'roll people and blues singers. I remember the first time when I was photographing this blues singer, John Lee Hooker. People said 'Why are you doing him? You should be photographing pretty girls and models,' and this was pretty discouraging."

"I was having a coffee at a place in the Village," he continues, "and Diane Arbus was sitting there. I knew her photographs very well, and I really admired her a lot. So, I went up and said, 'Hi, my name is Bruce Weber, I'm studying photography, and I really like your photographs.' After we got to know each other, she was one of the few people who liked my photographs, and she got me into classes at the New School For Social Research with Lisette Model."

Weber also befriended another of the loose group of photographers critic Jane Livingstone branded the New York School, including Richard Avedon.

Besides being king of white seamless paper and the flash-frozen leaping model, Avedon has always kept an interest in the social reportage tradition. So how did Weber meet Avedon? "I modelled for him when I was in

film school and I was totally broke,” he says. “I started to model because it was a way for me to experience other photographers I admired, and just somehow be closer to photography. I’m really proud I did that, because now I’m older I have a nice record of myself when I was young.”

The documentary approach and the idea of making fashion photographs doubling as records, has always been important to Weber. He was quoted in an early interview saying he wanted fashion photography to be about throwing some nice shirts on a group of friends and having a fun experience with them, rather than it being a big production about couture clothes, supermodels and large support teams. Many of his most memorable shoots, like the huge brochure for Calvin Klein in the late '80s, came out of Weber creating pleasurable occasions for a team of strangers who then became fast friends.

Weber told me how this approach resulted in the famous underwear series for Calvin Klein. “We were on location, we didn’t have a lot of clothes to photograph, and we had to do all these pictures, so we ended up doing all those nudes. It was funny, because people had to become quite friendly with each other at that point. We were just doing something we were living then, people were getting into athletics, and men and women were working out much more,” he says.

Weber feels he is still a young photographer and a young filmmaker, with a long way to go yet. He compares being a photographer with boxing. “Sometimes you have Don King managing you, and other times it’s like you’re losing the fight and then you need people to get you back up and keep your fists up,” he says, omitting to mention he has his own superagent and manager in the form of Nan Bush. “It’s so hard when you first start out, but any good photographer is starting out new each day, starting all over again.”

“I want to take this chance to really speak out to other photographers, especially those who share with me this feeling of starting new each day, that you’re never to think that you’re a machine, and to get rid those people in your life who think you are. You are going to screw up a lot, and it’s just good that you don’t buy into all that stuff, that you know the work is the important thing.”

“I always try to keep my photography close to my life,” he adds. “If I have to photograph three men in suits for example, I think about what I feel about those men, why they are wearing those suits, that maybe it isn’t a portrait of them but about them being at the Holiday Inn.”

“You’ve always got to be unafraid about having a fantasy life, and be unafraid that people will be judgemental. They are going to be judgemental anyway.’