

DANIELA FEDERICI: FILM, FAME AND OPPORTUNITY

DANIELA FEDERICI'S photography first came to my attention by means of a now defunct Melbourne-based magazine, *Tempo Libero*, near the turn of the decade. It was a time when little of any real excitement was going on in local fashion photography, and her glamour-laden imagery with its obvious debt to Italian Neo-realist cinema of the 1950s and 1960s was a real breath of fresh air.

Federici was just out of college and her work at the time, for all its accomplishment and future promise, soon became the subject of negative criticism from older, more established photographers. They would have done well to remember their own beginnings, when their early influences were also obvious. Such attacks often have their source in envy, and I looked forward to the time when she might impress her critics into silence with an even more mature and personal vision.

That time has arrived, I believe, and Federici has moved on to better things as a New York-based photographer and director. She is well on her way to a pinnacle that most photographers in Australia aspire to but few reach, has been recognised by acclaim from star clients, assignments from major advertisers, and representation by the agency of a more famous photographer in the shape of Herb Ritts.

I interviewed Federici by phone at the offices of her own new-born photography agency, The Index Agency, in the photo district of Manhattan.

Karin: I gather you've been busy lately, despite the August vacation.

Daniela: As you called I was researching a lot of old classic black and white photography because I'm just about to do the Badgely-Mischka advertising campaign. They want a modern version of that old classic stuff which I love. You never know even two weeks in advance just what you're

going to do; you can be on 20 different holds and then they get changed all around.

Karin: Every photographer's life is the same in that respect.

Daniela: I'd like a little bit of stability! But that's OK.

Karin: What do you love about what you're doing currently?

Daniela: When I first moved to New York from LA I was enthusiastic about doing a bit of everything, but I turn down a lot of stuff now. I'm a lot more choosy and do the things that I can get a bit excited about, things that have an idea behind them. I've gone into a higher pay bracket, so by shooting one or two days a week I can spend time prepping the shoot, and make sure the end result is what I envisaged it to be.

Karin: A different bracket—what do you mean by that?

Daniela: Two things. Career direction like whether you're a celebrity or music or fashion photographer—I've always done all three. It also means my rate going up so you can afford not to take all the jobs, be a little bit more selective.

Karin: You also mentioned doing commercials.

Daniela: Another thing I'm doing is directing a television spot to try and prevent teenage pregnancies. They're public service announcements you do for free, but they're great because you're doing something with a message.

The same ad agency I'm doing them with usually do something strong, pretty in your face. They've brought me in because I've done beauty spots, and a lot of videos, and they like the way I approach beauty. They want the young girls to look beautiful, but with a stylised approach.

Karin: Is that the direction you want to head in with your commercials work?

Daniela: I juggle. When I came to America I photographed all the celebrities, the music people and did the videos. I'm going back into fashion because I want to push more into a fine art level with my photography and my film work.

I also want to go into film, whether it's documentaries or feature films. I might actually consider going back to Australia to do film later. Most of the more sensitive and interesting films come out of Australia and Europe. If those

directors had tried to do those things here it wouldn't have worked.

Karin: Daniela, speaking of Europe and Australia, you have an Italian surname.

Daniela: I'm half Italian. My father is Roman and my mother is Australian. I was brought up in Fitzroy in Melbourne, and I travelled to Italy as a child. As kid I was dragged around all the churches and galleries. Later on in high school and university when I studied art I had seen half those pieces and they made more sense.

Karin: You saw them in the context of the culture where they were made.

Daniela: My background as a photographer also comes from film. As a kid I loved to watch the old Hollywood musicals, the glamour and the fantasy of Hayworth, Garbo, Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly had. A lot of my early photography was very film-based, black and white, recreating those movies' escapist glamour.

It wasn't until I moved to LA and started doing a lot of celebrity stuff that I stopped doing film-based stories. With celebrities you can't develop a theme or a story. Often it's just one strong shot, and that kind of kills any creative storyboarding.

I got pigeon-holed as a celebrity photographer. When I came to New York I started working for *Arena* and *British Esquire*. Now it's half fashion and half portraiture. I'm about to do Aretha Franklin. I've worked with Prince and Lenny Kravitz. A lot of people you grow up thinking are really cool—it's nice when you start to photograph them.

Now it's fun again because with fashion I can push my brain. It's been three years since I was doing full-on fashion so it's nice to do it again but with growth. I approach things differently. Now it's about beauty and simplicity—humility rather than the whizz-bang.

Karin: Your photographs of Anna Nicole Smith are very much about that old concept of glamour. Tell me about how you got to do that work for Guess? Jeans.

Daniela: After college I worked for a year and a half in Sydney, and I came to America for a wedding—Jon Farriss of INXS. Someone there showed my card to Paul Marciano of Guess?. I returned to Sydney, then got a phone call from Paul Marciano who said he loved my work and would I

come back for the Guess? campaign? I nearly fell over backwards!

Here I was a kid in Australia, and Guess? Jeans was a prestigious campaign. Paul Marciano told me he really wanted to keep up with what Ellen had started with Claudia Schiffer as Bridget Bardot, but take Anna Nicole Smith into a Jane Mansfield/ Marilyn Monroe direction—playful movie reportage.

Now that I have my own agency, I realise that it's very rare that someone at that level would take on an unknown to shoot that kind of major campaign. Paul Marciano was very daring to introduce new people into that whole scene.

Karin: Guess? has given a lot of people their breaks.

Daniela: A lot of unknowns, photographers and models. There should be more people like him, because he goes against the flow. Anna was very striking. She has beautiful skin and face. She was very voluptuous and middle America could relate to her, because a lot of American women are overweight. I love frail modelly girls too, but in reality fashion is a business about how many clothes you can sell, and if people can relate to the girls then you'll sell more.

I respect all the photographers around, and I understand why British photographers like Corinne Day and Juergen Teller strip all the glamour out, but I'm from another school where I use beauty and glamour as escapism. I'm a woman and I love clothes and dressing up. It's something to aspire to.

Karin: You're from a very different tradition from the English, and a very different kind of light.

Daniela: I understand their need to do what they do, When I was in college—I think I finished in '90 or '91—the fashion was getting ridiculous, everyone was looking like a Barbie doll. The glamour became vulgar. The grunge period had to come about to bring it back to some sort of reality check. Fashion is a business that goes around in cycles, constantly keeps moving, the same themes repeated but interpreted in a slightly different way.

Karin: You were so successful so young. How did you handle that?

Daniela: I was only a year and a half out of school, and I quite liked going to the parties, the lifestyle, and I lived it up. I'd go out drinking until 2:00 in the morning when I should

have gone home and gotten a good night sleep to be ready for my job the next day.

Now I take more time to research my work, to be more peaceful and quiet beforehand. If you really want to do it properly you have to give it 100%. I balance my work now by taking time off, going into the country, go travelling for a few months at a time—a backpack, a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. And no telephone.

Living in a city like New York you find you get caught up in a whirlwind, and you feel so empty. When you go to places like India you learn so much and you put that back into your work and your life.

Karin: You've done things in America that you'd never had the opportunity to do in Australia.

Daniela: That's right! I am sooo grateful for everything that's happened. I love what I do. I would like to move forward. In a couple of years I'd like to have a family. My maternal instinct is kicking in now apart from anything else! I'm 31.

I'd like to develop film scripts and films, and go more into fine art photography, documentary film. I've been travelling for five years non-stop and you get tired of hotel rooms. I don't think I could continue at this pace for another five years. I get tired. I go to bed at 10 o'clock every day now! But I love photography so much that it just feels like an extension of myself. It's my life!

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