

# DAVID HAMILTON: SUN, SAND, & GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS

**D**AVID HAMILTON is a committed believer in the good life. Not only does he live it up in the south of France, surrounded by an Edenic landscape, endless flowers, fine paintings, good food and shy young maidens, but he photographs them in a way that is timeless.

When he travels, as he does often, it is to other places offering the same pleasures in profusion - Venice, Hawaii, the shores of the Pacific, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. Thousand share the dream Hamilton lives, and judging from the popularity of his exhibitions, books and posters, and the annual *Le Monde* readers' poll, he easily rates as the most recognised of photographers in the world.

In his most recent book, *David Hamilton: Twenty Five Years Of An Artist*, Hamilton relates a key incident from childhood, during a bicycle ride through a park with friends: Two boys and a girl were on the grass. One of the boys had pinned the girl down, and the other boy had pulled up her dress and was sliding blades of grass between her knickers and her skin. The three of them were rolling around, giggling and joking. Without understanding why, the eroticism of the incident affected me profoundly.

During Hamilton's recent visit to Sydney, I asked him to tell me how this experience relates to his career in photography.

*David:* That timelessness, that innocence as with young girls, that's what I'm trying to capture. Girls - I suppose that's why I got into photography in the first place.

When I didn't qualify as an architect, I went the easy way, which was exhibitions and store decoration and so on, then into art direction and layout for *Elle* and *Queen* magazines in the swinging 60s.

As an art director you're directing photographers, then you pick up a camera and start shooting yourself. I drifted into that as I drifted into movies, a continuation of the same style.

Hamilton was a magazine art director during the heyday of Willy Fleckhaus' magazine *Twen* and Peter Knapp's *Elle*. He worked for Knapp in Paris, then when Jocelyn Stevens came looking for new talent to transform *Queen* from a royalist fan magazine into the rave of England's fashionable young things, followed him back to London. Hamilton later returned to Paris citing irreconcilable differences.

In his book Hamilton explains: *It was a golden age for art directors and we would defend our power of decision at any cost. Many editors and publishers didn't have a well-developed graphic style, however. My ideas about photography and layout were by now very specific and as he refused to listen to me, I told Stevens that I was leaving immediately. The exceptional quality of the fashion publications at that time was due to the fact that the art directors made the decisions and gave the photographic layout priority over the text. Later everything changed and those who came after were 'yes men'.*

Hamilton had followed a trail into photography already blazed by other ex-art directors like Duane Michals, Bert Stern and Art Kane. His first collection of photographs to appear was *Dreams Of Young Girls*, in 1970.

*Karin:* That book must have created a few ripples at the time, even though now it seems like such an encapsulation of that period?

*David:* For the young boys who saw it, it was their first turn-on, their first real young girl with no clothes on, apart from *Playboy* covergirls or whatever. Those people are 40 or 50 years old today, the movers and shakers of the world and they say, 'My God, I remember when...'

It's engraved on their brains. I've sold a million books, and that's ten million fantasies. I create fantasies that are first of all mine, created out of the way I live, and then for others, both men and women. Women see that the photos are feminine and bring out beauty, but you can't win with the feminists. The girl is nude and nudity is out with them, nothing to do with the word art.

*Karin:* A lot of photographers of nude young girls, like Sally Mann and Jock Sturges, have come under attack lately.

*David:* It's only an Anglo-Saxon problem. That's why I live in France. The Spanish and Italians and other Catholic countries, they've adapted to nudity, they don't give a damn. It's not a Scandinavian problem either. For Anglo-

Saxons it's become a taboo subject, worse than in the 60s or 70s, never as bad as today.

Karin: Where do you find your girls then? Surely not in an Anglo-Saxon country?

David: I normally only look for girls in Scandinavia, or in the south of France when they're on holiday, or in northern Europe. Other than that it's a waste of time. I don't know where they are here. I've been looking every day since Christmas, on every beach from here to Brisbane, the Gold Coast, and I haven't found one suitable girl.

Karin: What are you looking for in her?

David: She should be a 14 or 15 year-old, and like Claudia Schiffer or Kate Moss – a beautiful, sexy young girl who's intelligent enough to act. With beauty it's bone structure, not the makeup, and I don't work with models.

The five elements of beauty in no particular order are skin and hair, which go together because the finer the hair the finer the skin, the lighter the hair the lighter the skin, turned up nose, long neck, wide eyes, and wide mouth. There are other types too, what I call La Classe, like Grace Kelly, Garbo and Hepburn – the great classics with bone structure. Then you've got the Woman woman – Liz Taylor and Sophia Loren; the Sex Symbol like Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot; the time-honoured prostitute as a type; then the Lolitas, the innocents.

Hamilton expands on his fascination for the Lolita type in his book: *There exists among young girls some rare beings who are able to exert a powerful erotic attraction upon certain much older men. It seems to me that their femininity is revealed sooner than that of their contemporaries, a femininity too mature for their age, an animal instinct. It is a kind of magic, a fleeting charm which touches such men, of whom I am one, in a secret part of their sensibility. By means of my photographs I make a sincere confession that few men, bewitched as I am by the forbidden desire, will dare to make.*

Karin: David, tell me, how do you live and work now?

David: I live in a 12th century house in the south of France. I love decorating so it's done to my standards. The young girls come there and it's very much like a holiday for them. There's no studio so it's all very hit-and-miss. I have a

young wife who's Belgian and speaks four languages and is also an artist, and she looks after the girls. She was one of them in the beginning, and we work as a team. I was married just over a year ago for the very first time, and after so many years I picked a winner.

*Karin:* So how do you pay for it all?

*David:* Well, I've published 20 books, almost one a year. I don't do much advertising. My one job a year was for Nina Ricci, for the perfume L'Air du Temps. I had the contract worldwide and to live, all I had to do was one job a year! Now that's finished I may have to work two days a year!

I love to do portraits wherever I go. I was invited by Madame Marcos to the Philippines when she was boss, and I've just come back through there. I photographed the same Blue Ladies as they're called, and I've done the same group in various places like Palm Beach, Newport, Venezuela, all over the world. I have an agent here, one in Paris, one in Japan. Someone said to me years ago that it's amazing how successful I am in spite of the number of people who try to help me.

I just had a big exhibition in Japan, with 75,000 people paying admission, plus the sale of catalogues, books, posters and so on. It's not nearly as much as a big advertising job, but I wouldn't have it any other way. This morning I was invited to Hawaii where I go quite often – it's a Japanese client in this case and he leaves me his Rolls Royce and a house 10 times the size of this one.

*Karin:* You're best known for your photographs of girls, but your subject matter is much broader than that.

*David:* I stay with the same group of subjects because every photograph has to be timeless. The nude never dates, young girls never grow old either, and the classical ballet, Venice, flowers, landscapes, and still lifes, they never date. I prefer black-and-white because it's more noble, and if it has to be colour, then monochromatic colour. The collector prefers black-and-white, the public prefers colour of course. I'd love to make a black-and-white movie, after all it's coming back again, fashionable almost.

*Karin:* Has your work been influenced by any other artists?

*David:* For me, art is creating order out of chaos, so what can you do with a bunch of flowers to make it special?

Picasso would do it one way, me another, Fantin Latour another, Monet and Manet in their own ways. My book before this was *Homage To Painters*, and I have more respect for painters than photographers.

I think my total opposite, Robert Mapplethorpe, is the best talent of the last couple of decades. Most of the great photographs were taken before 1920, and after that it was all technique. Those photographers were the Pictorialists who stepped out of painting anyway, like Stieglitz, Steichen, Kühne, Demachy.

Young people today are so super-qualified in technique yet it all looks like postcards, no soul and no feeling. I do admire some people however: Sally Mann and Jock Sturges and Ron Oliver, all 8'x10' camera photographers. They're all doing the Lewis Carroll thing, but I'm afraid if Lewis Carroll was alive today, he'd be in jail.