

PETER LINDBERGH:

MODELS, & OTHER WOMEN

PETER LINDBERGH HAS ALWAYS BEEN DAMN NEAR IMPOSSIBLE TO GET IN TOUCH WITH, not because he wants to be alone but more for the fact that he is so much in demand for editorial and advertising shoots, and just recently for awards presentations and the openings of his own photography shows, that he is booked up months ahead.

It is not the money either. I tried to offer Lindbergh the first ad in a lucrative and creatively open campaign for a Swiss watch manufacturer earlier this year, and he could not fit it in until well after the first picture was due to run. So the problem remains: How do you portray the supreme fashion portraitist without actually getting to him in the flesh?

The clue lies in his own quotes and photographs and films, and comments made by some of the people who know him best. I hope to cut through this thicket to get to some essence of the man himself, and why he does what he does.

First for the visual evidence. In summer of 1995 Lindbergh took on the 1996 Pirelli calendar shoot, in a move away from the kind of high gloss beautifully executed production that Richard Avedon made of it the year before. There could not be a greater contrast between Avedon's colour sheet film studio style with the lighting placed exactly just so, the wind machine velocity precisely set, and the props and wispy garments chosen and placed on the supermodel with painful accuracy. As an expression of the Avedon beauty aesthetic it was spot on.

This year, it is Lindbergh's 35mm high speed monochrome on location, as if it were a movie shoot. Lindbergh himself commented about this change in direction. 'It was a deliberate choice,' he says, 'because, when you work in colour what you are looking for is a sort of first-degree reality, whereas in black-and-white you can

elaborate on that reality. You go further. I also wanted to create a relaxed work atmosphere for myself and my crew, with objects scattered about informally – a fan here, some forgotten chairs there. Only with black-and-white can one convey that kind of authenticity.’

The setting in the Mojave Desert contains all the furniture of an apparent feature film shoot, with ultra-high output HMI lights, movie cameras on tracking dollies, director’s chair, and black studio backdrop casually popping up in the photographs. Some of Lindbergh’s *Harpers Bazaar* fashion shoots had featured a similar movie set look. Was this artistic pretension or wishful thinking on the photographer’s part?

‘It’s not accidental,’ says Lindbergh. ‘I wanted to create a working atmosphere. All the objects used in these pictures have been used to make them. They were real tools. Portraying women in a real technical setting has always fascinated me. I like that backstage feeling. It’s not pretentious: it adds a technical aspect which contrasts with the femininity of the photographs.’

It is also evidence of his other career, as a director. Lindbergh made a 10 minute promo short at the same time as the stills shoot, hardly necessary as Pirelli calendars are strictly not for sale. Their 40,000 odd print run is always spoken for well before they appear, by the executives, celebrities and journalists on the mailing list. The Pirelli calendar is a media event, in the same way as Lindbergh’s debut documentary on supermodels, *Models: The Film* was the much anticipated fashion event of 1992.

Models is a walk through several disjointed days in the lives of Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Stephanie Seymour, Linda Evangelista, and Tatiana Patitz as they are photographed by Peter Lindbergh for *Harper’s Bazaar*. This 45 minute monochrome film is as much a celebration of the supermodel phenomenon as it is documentation of one aspect of these women’s lives.

Stylistically it is incredibly close to Lindbergh’s photography, with a kernel of romantic nostalgia for the great days of classical pre-Technicolor film-making. Campbell plays at being a helium-voiced Josephine Baker, trying to add another hyphen to her job description, Evangelista sits down on a Brooklyn street corner, marcelled black hair à la the height of the Thirties, and haltingly plays the piano accordion like a waif from an Italian Neo-Realist movie.

Then the girls all hang with the home boys at Coney Island after a shoot on the beach, all giggles and camping

it up and ogling the sights. The film shows them as real human beings despite the untouchable aura that supermodeldom carries, so that without the makeup and the hair and the clothes these five could just be an especially good looking gang of sorority sisters on the lam from college.

Lindbergh is in love with their personalities, but as to the photographer himself, *Models* does not tell us much more. He is an ever-present absence throughout, except when Evangelista complains at the end that 'You're all in my light,... Pete!'

To shed some light on the photographer, let's go back to his origins. His biography tells us he was 'born on the Polish border of war-torn eastern Germany, in 1944. Peter Lindbergh spent his childhood in the West German town of Duisburg, where his family moved in with his uncle after World War II left them with nothing.'

'As a boy,' it continues, 'Lindbergh spent all his free time outdoors. In Duisburg his uncle worked as a sheep farmer with a herd of 3,000, which he kept on a rented parcel of land near the Rhine river.' Ah ha, a clue! Is this where his love of the landscape comes from? It goes on. 'On one side of the river was green grass and trees. On the other side was heavy industry, populated with factories, where the boats came up to load.' Some of Lindbergh's most striking fashion images of the mid-1980s, for *Comme de Garçons*, were set in decayed factory buildings.

The 1993 Ilford calendar that doubled as a Lindbergh retrospective contains this explanation. 'In 1984 I was very much into machine and factory pictures. One reason was the great German tradition of black-and-white expressionism in films directed by Lang, Pabst and others,' he says. 'The other was that I was reading everything about Rodchenko, Vertov, Tatlin and Mayakovsky and the outstanding creative energy at the beginning of the Russian Revolution.'

So despite Lindbergh always being of the moment in the models he portrays, he is a traditionalist when it comes to his inspirations. Besides the aforementioned Russian Constructivist photographers, Lindbergh's photography bears resemblances to that of August Sander, the pre-war cataloguer of all the German character types, and, as Karl Lagerfeld points out in his preface to *10 Women*, the recently rediscovered fashion portraits of Rudolf Koppitz.

There is an essential Germanness in Lindbergh's photography, and his character, that as with all Germans who leave their native country has become heightened in

opposition. They are a family-oriented people, the Germans, with a hard edge to their nature and no fear of the human body with all its imperfections, naked or otherwise.

Lindbergh left his family behind while young, at 15, when he moved to Luzern in Switzerland to work as a window-dresser. After that he went to Berlin to take on odd jobs, studied drawing, dropped out and departed for Arles, hitchhiked, returned to Düsseldorf, enrolled in art school, and became a conceptual artist.

He became a photographer when he was 27, apprenticed to advertising photographer Hans Lux, then worked in that area until events took a turn. 'I got into fashion photography by accident,' Lindbergh elaborates, 'I did advertising photography for five years. Then one day a magazine editor [in fact the legendary Willi Fleckhaus of the equally legendary *Twen*] called me and said that my advertising didn't look like advertising. He gave me a fashion story. I did it, then *Stern* saw it and gave me fourteen pages.'

Then it was on to *Marie Claire*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar* when British *Vogue's* Liz Tilberis took the helm and bought in Lindbergh and Demarchelier for a small fortune, starting a bidding war that benefited even those who stayed with Condé Nast, like Steven Meisel.

In an interview published prior to his signing to *Bazaar* in 1992 and well before *10 Women* was simply a thought and nor more than that, Lindbergh was sceptical about venues other than the magazine page, like gallery shows. 'I always said no. It's a lot of work to do, and to do a book,' he pointed out then. 'At the same time it's a look back, and in the past few years I don't feel like looking back.'

What retrospective shows like the one now touring Japan, Germany and America well into 1997 give the photographer is the chance to put distance between them and a part of their life, study it with detachment, tidy up the past, put it away and then go on to the next stage. It's a cathartic act.

Late 1997 will see the release of another and larger book from the same publisher, of still lives, landscapes, portraits and fashion photographs. This second and more important book launch should be the opportunity to shed a brighter light on Lindbergh the man and the artist.