

VINCENT PETERS

INTERVIEW -CITYIST by Man Sumarni

It's almost impossible to sail through the current fashion landscape without spotting any of Vincent Peters' work. His impeccably executed images stop you on your track and compels you to take a closer look. His work has dominated pages of French/Italian Vogue, Numéro, and British GQ, just to name a few.

Miu Miu, YSL, and Bottega Veneta are among the long list of advertising clientele he had worked with.

Our creative director caught up with Vincent in Ibiza for a fascinating conversation that led us through a remarkable career path of a visionary artist.

Let's start from the very beginning...

When I was a teenager, I applied but didn't get in to an art school in Germany. It so happened that I knew this girl whose boyfriend was a photographer. One night I was riding in the back of a car with them when I looked at the guy and thought here's this young guy who own a nice car, dating a girl I like, and had what seemed like a nice job.

I still remember the intersection where I had that ephipany which led to my decision to become a photographer. I was 17 when I committed to this decision and relocate to New York. While in New York, in the early ,90s, I worked as a photo assistant and hustling various jobs to survive in the city. At one point, I was a waiter at the Coffee Shop in Union Square.

I moved back to Europe after meeting an agent who informed me that I'd work more in Europe because my photographic style was too artistic for the US market. So there I was, back in Europe and spent almost 8 years of my life carving a career as an art photographer until I was too broke to pay my utility bills. That was when I came to the realization that this artistic career was a little too idealistic.

Someone had informed me that I could do a model test shoot and make \$100. At that time in my life, \$ 100 felt like \$50,000 to me because I was so damn broke. That's how I became a test photographer in Paris. Living day by day, earning just enough money for food and rent. Back in those days, there was no digital retouching and I couldn't afford to make real photo prints so I used laser copies for all my pictures. I did all my tests with just one roll of film because I could not afford the cost of developing an extra roll.

Around that time, I met this make up artist who told me „ ...look, I think you have what it take to do this professionally and get real shooting jobs instead of carrying on as a test photographer. If you are serious about your career, I want to work with you and help you move up to another level...” I was in my late 20s when I decided it was time to get serious and leave model testing behind. From that point on, I started working pretty quickly. By 2000, I signed on with Giovanni Testino and shot campaigns for Miu Miu and Yves St. Laurent.

How difficult was it to break into the world of fashion photography around that time?

I was lucky because I started working pretty quickly. My big break was Amica. For those who doesn't know, Amica was an Italian weekly magazine back in the ,90s. A very nice gentleman called Giovanni Russo ran the magazine back then and he gave me two editorial shoots per month. Amica customarily ran sprawling twelve page fashion stories with nice production budget to boot. I was shooting 24 pages a month for Amica. They kept me busy and helped dug me out of the hole financially .

Around that time Giovanni wanted to do some creative work because guys like Glen Luchford, David Sims, and Mario Sorrenti were pushing boundaries in fashion photography by doing dark, moody images inspired by paintings and sculptures for the likes of Italian Vogue, ID and The Face. There were also guys like Mark Borthwick and Juergen Teller who came into the scene with their conceptual amateur photography. That was a very intense and heavily conceptual period in fashion photography.

It's a stark contrast to what is happening in fashion photography right now. Nowadays, shoot references have become so incestuous and isolated. Almost 90% of inspiration for fashion shoots came from fashion itself. People are using last year's or even more recent edition of Italian Vogue as conceptual reference to their shoots. If they truly want to get creative, they should reference European Vogue from 10 or 15 years ago or pick up influences from other media such as movies, paintings, or sculptures.

That lead to my next question, which is how did you end up shooting for The Face and Dazed?

I met Katie Grand at a time when I was doing the most delirious shoot for Dazed. No one in the studio believed I was only drinking green tea with honey during the shoot. We were just very free to experiment and tried out every idea that came to mind.

Katie went from Dazed to The Face and took me with her. Lee Swillingham was running The Face at that time and he said to me „Show your work to me if you have great ideas and they're well done. But you have to prove that you are worth publishing!“ In the end, it was the combination of having great ideas, being different, and possessing the visual quality to translate those ideas that got me into The Face.

During that period, we have guys like Sølve, Liz Collins, and John Akehurst shooting for the Face. I was part of that generation. The generation before us were guys like Craig McDean and David Sims who have become today's heavy weight in fashion photography. Back then, they were the young, inventive guys who worked for Bazaar with Fabien Baron. That's when the grunge thing was raging and fashion favored weird, edgy models. Contrary to that trend, I preferred sexy, beautiful women and Katie (Grand) was very encouraging with my choices of model. I was shooting Gisele for The Face back when she was very young and deemed too commercial by others.

If you recall, the models of choice were edgy Belgium muses like Hannelore and Delfine Bafort. Shooting styles were done in front of white, stark background and models were striking strange poses. Working against that trend, Sølve and I chose to shoot the pretty, sexy girls instead.

Then Mert and Marcus stormed into the scene with their hyper-retouched images and popularized hyper-retouched fashion photography. Mert and Marcus showed the industry that the computer is their main tool. The raw files from the camera are just part of the whole ingredient in creating their images.

That was a complete departure from the works of guys like Peter Lindbergh or even David Sims. Mert and Marcus brought artifice into fashion photography by doing their creative work on the computer like swapping in different background and changing the girls' faces in post-production.

That was quite a different direction in work exploration for fashion photography.

Did you have to move to London to shoot for The Face and Dazed?

Yes, I was living in London at that time.

We know that The Face and Dazed didn't pay photographers and your shoots require costly, big productions. How did you manage to finance your shoots back then?

I funded them all on my own. In stark contrast to just two years before, I was starving and penniless. I had a bicycle that I rode around and I couldn't afford even a movie ticket, much less paying for a cab to get around. Then everything changed when I signed with agent Giovanni Testino. On my first season as a professional fashion photographer, I was shooting campaigns for Miu Miu, Yves St Laurent, Rocha, Bottega Veneta, and Wolfgang Joop. By then, I was shooting five to six campaigns for one season so money was no longer a problem. I was determined to shoot the kind of photography I really wanted to shoot now that I have the means to fund them.

Have you been shooting all these big jobs before you started contributing to The Face and Dazed?

They pretty much went hand in hand. Financially, I was out of the hole around the time I was working with Amica and started shooting advertising. In those days, the budget was a lot better and magazines paid their photographers. However, you were required to fund the shoots with your own money if you shoot for magazines like The Face and Dazed. Nowadays, you have to fund your own shoots for all the magazines. Even with magazines like Vogue, 50% of the shoot expenses come out of my own pocket, especially with the way I shoot. I mount big productions. I rent cars, other props, and costly locations. I work with HMIs and I still shoot

analog films, which is costly and time consuming in the postproduction stage. Most of the time the magazine would say „Go ahead, have a good time...but here is our set budget for the shoot.“ I always have to make up the difference in production cost with my own money.

When you mention shooting HMI, do you shoot predominantly with continuous light?

That is correct, I have a simplified technical routines. It's visually cinematic and shot with HMIs. I used lots of mirrors as secondary light source. Everything is shot on 6x7 format analog film. I have been using the same medium format camera since I was 16, which is the Mamiya RZ.

You still shoot analog film?

That's right. I did shoot a couple of commercial jobs where I used the Pentax with digital back. For a long while, I did not shoot on digital because I did not trust the digital technical innovation back when digital technology was in its infancy stage. However, the technology has improved leaps and bound since then.

Look, I just published a book and some of the pictures in the book were about six to seven years old. Six years ago, the top of the line digital camera still did not possess a decent enough resolution and the whole hard drive storage situation was quite archaic by today's comparison. This is my life's work. I want to archive them so they can last a long time. If I have them on negatives, I can print them a hundred years from now and they will still produce the highest possible image quality. That's the main reason I have not switched to digital. Nowadays, when I shoot on digital for my commercial work, everything seem so sharp and artificial. It was so much about the tethered cable and the digi-tech guy who always try to run the show. People were tripping all around me on the tethered cable. Everyone constantly check on the monitor, which is not a healthy process for photography. That constant interruption to the flow of shooting is very crippling in my opinion. It create missed opportunities and kill the spontaneity of a photo shoot.

It's like having a conversation where you are being recorded and someone keep interrupting you by constantly pointing out something you've just said. When you become too aware of yourself, your intuitive train of thought changes dramatically. In photography, you have to learn to let go. When I shoot on film, I take on a lot of responsibilities and like most good photographers; I have the intuitive knowledge of when I got the shot on film. You are going to eventually lose that intuition if you are constantly interrupted during the shoot.

Did the celebrities who are used to the digital work flow ever question your method of shooting on analog film?

They were aware of how I work beforehand. I never had any problem with all the celebrities I've worked with. To tell you the truth, I think it's a relief for everyone on set because almost

no one wanted to see themselves looking unretouched on a large monitor. On top of that, you have those who are non decision makers like make up assistants, or even caterer who just stopped by to deliver food, peering at the monitor and chimed in with their unsolicited opinion on the images. That is completely out of line and unfortunately happened quite often on digital sets. Unhealthy environment like that foster insecurities and kill the charm of happy accident. You have to leave the process alone or risk losing all those happy accidental shots.

Do you think it's harder for new photographers to develop a unique style?

I think it's horrible for the young photographers. I've spoken to people in the fashion business who remarked „Oh these young photographers, all their work look the same...“ To which I replied „ But you created the environment that force them to shoot the same stuff with your set standard of what's considered a good picture.“

Creating an image is very much like music composition. Nowadays, people use computer to create music, you no longer have to learn to play any instrument to create music. Every note can be made through the keyboard on your laptop. You need to know how to play the real instrument to create music with soul, you have to know how to play the real piano or strum a real guitar. The same goes with creating a photograph, you have to at least learn the basic. That is why I still shoot film because there is an authenticity to it. You need to familiarize yourself with the instruments that you use. In the end, you can copy a melody by pushing keystrokes on your computer to stitch up some tunes, but that's just sampling. Photography in itself is light, film and prints. There is an art to this craft. You should master the skills to do it the correct way. Once you learn the skill, you can decide to use it any way you want and develop your shooting style from it.

How do you develop your style?

Honestly, for every photographer, there is a psychoanalytical process on how you shoot your work. It's very difficult to explain because in a sense, every photographer's work is his own psychoanalysis. You learn about yourself through your work. What you think is beautiful the moment you press the shutter come from a very intuitive place.

My work is influenced by the American movies that my father told me about when I was a kid. Early American cinema serves as a connective bond between my dad and I. When I shoot, I create this world. My world is always shot on set. My pictures are pre-arranged and cinematic. but it's my world and there is something in there that I'd like to share.

To summarize, through the photographs, you will find out more about the photographers than they do about themselves. If what they shoot is truthful, they will feel compelled to share what they saw and experienced. That might have changed today because of the over sharing tendencies this younger generation have due to their adopted social media habit and the way they interact with their peers. I am still a traditionalist in a sense that I don't share my personal life on Instagram or Twitter. I don't even own an Iphone.

Let's talk about the new book, THE LIGHT BETWEEN US. Was it difficult getting clearance from the celebrities to use their pictures in this book?

It's not an easy process. I wasn't going to do the book for that very reason. There were a couple of them who flatly said no. The book consists of my personal work. All these images came predominantly from cover shoot assignments. Otherwise, you wouldn't be getting the kind of celebrities that I've been shooting. However, I didn't want to use published images for the book because it will turn into a commercial compromise. I want to showcase unpublished images that are more personal to me. The ones that reveal a side of the celebrities that is more unexpected. That's why it's very hard to get clearance for these images. But I can understand their sentiment because in the contemporary world, these celebrities need to be protected from the social media hysteria. It was never like this back when I started out in this business. It has since turned into one big exhaustive process.

How long did it take you to put this book together?

I hired a woman with an assistant who handled all the clearance. We teamed up with Trunk Archive who act as our advisor. During the clearance acquisition process, some celebrities were very accommodating while the few who said no, to my surprise, came from the ones whom I had the most amazing rapport with during the shoot. It goes to show you there are no rhyme or reason, or even logic, for that matter, to the celebrity culture.

In your book, you stated that the proceeds from the book will benefit the Family Justice Center of the Protection Against Violence department at Berlin's Charité hospital. Why did you pick that particular charity to support?

I was in a hotel one night and there on the television was a talk show program interviewing a guy who investigated accidental child death. He discovered many children who died „accidentally“ showed signs of violent mistreatment and most of these accidents might not actually be accidents at all. The investigator stated that in Europe, there was an average of 2 child deaths resulted from domestic violence every week. I am not certain if I quoted the correct number given by the investigator during that interview but the fact of the matter is there's a staggering number of child death in Europe due to mistreatment by their own parents.

Most of the traditional children's aid organization works with the parents of these children. They might inadvertently support the people who harmed these children. These cases of sadistic mistreatment against children triggered a strong impulse in me to act. I want to shine a spotlight on this appalling situation by using my book to at least create awareness. Look, the fact that we are talking about it, and the fact that this question continually came up during press interviews for the book release is proof that this tactic is working. The organization I am helping with is very thankful for the publicity they have been receiving because they have had difficulty getting the word out without any help from the conventional child protection agencies. This organization called „The House Of Short Distances“ have been receiving a lot of criticism for going on the offensive against those conventional child protection agencies.

Do you have any advice for the new wave of aspiring photographers who are looking to break into this oversaturated field?

There is a very nice book from Hemingway called „A Movable Feast“ and there is this quote in that book given by Hemingway to aspiring young writers that goes like „All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know“. That quote is applicable to the process of creating a photograph. I believe in photography, you have to be true to your inner self. It's a journey of self-discovery and it's not about doing what others expect of you. You can recognize the style of every famous photographer we've mentioned in this conversation. They are building a reality and within that reality, there is an authenticity to it. I think the people who look at my work have a comprehension in my knowledge of the world that I have created. Some people might think that it's repetitive, but at the very least, it is an authentic and complex world.

One of my first campaigns was for Miu Miu.

Miuccia Prada, who didn't like to talk on the phone, used to fly me to Milan at least three times a week for those pre-pro meetings concerning the campaign shoot.

In one of these meetings, the most memorable conversation I had with her went something like this...

Miuccia: „Who is this girl you are going to shoot?“

Me: „Do you mean the name of the model?“

Miuccia: „No, the girl you are going to shoot, who is she? What is she like? Does she cheat on her boyfriend?“

Miuccia: „Does she get along with her father? Does she smoke or drink? Is she on a diet? Who is she?“

Me (mildly confused): „I don't really know..., I envisioned her living in LA, she have a house and a pool.“

Miuccia: „Yes, but does she throw parties there? Does she still live with her parents?“

Miuccia: „I want you to know THE GIRL. The main character and the world you are putting her in because that's going to make a difference when you are shooting this campaign.“

She was absolutely right.

She pulled away the curtain and I was like; „That is it!“

You tell a story through the world of your own creation.

Exactly. It's a diary in a sense.

Woody Allen has a world. Hitchcock had his world. For Helmut Newton, every picture he took is a window to his world and they all make sense. Every time you look at the images he shot, what you see is more and more complex but they all fit together. That's damn fascinating.

You look at all the images he took; they are like pieces from a big puzzle when put together, become the world of that photographer.

When these pieces of puzzle fit, an observer will say „I can imagine myself in that world.“

That observer will start to understand and care about the work. That is the moment when

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you have established a communication and that is all we've ever wanted as photographers. We want people to care about our work. There's nothing lonelier than photographs that don't connect with viewers. The ones where people see an image and go „I like that picture with the girl in it because she is naked..." Oh, great!

As a young photographer, don't fixate on ways to get famous or how to amass millions of followers on Instagram, which photographer you should be copying, or what kind of lighting to emulate on a shoot. Think about your characters and the world they are living in. You'll develop your style out of that train of thought. If you are good, you will shine and people will notice because there really aren't that many visionary photographers out there right now.