

# Guy Bourdin: Vogue legend

He rode a camel, picked models by star sign, and once tried to dye the sea. Alex Rayner on a film about photographer Guy Bourdin



Sinister and surreal ... a Bourdin shot from 1977. Photograph: Estate of Guy Bourdin/Art & Commerce

## Alex Rayner

Tuesday 22 March 2011 09.00 AEDT

Few photographers could make French, Italian, American and British Vogue come flocking two decades after their death. Yet along with Annie Leibovitz, David Bailey and David Puttnam, the creative directors of those magazines appear in a documentary that exalts the photographer in question, Guy Bourdin, as one of the most daring visual artists of the 20th century.

Bourdin died 20 years ago this month, aged 62. The film has been made by Sean Brandt, his assistant from 1982 to 1985. Brandt has been filming tributes from fashion and art luminaries since 2003, many shot on locations that once served as backdrops for Bourdin's sinister and erotic shoots: "Swanky hotels, down-at-heel cafes, deserted cemeteries," says Brandt.

The film, *When the Sky Fell Down: The Myth of Guy Bourdin*, not only draws together 150 of these talking heads, but also features film footage and drawings by Bourdin, supplied by

his son, Samuel. Then there are countless images shot for the likes of Vogue, Chanel and Charles Jourdan shoes, dating from the 60s to the 80s.

Doing the interviews was the easy part. A harder job lay in the resurrection of Bourdin's reputation. Though he died in relative obscurity, unflattering stories came to light in 2003 when the V&A ran a retrospective of his work. Bourdin was accused of being cruel to his models, whom he photographed in highly stylised, surreal scenarios: vomiting up nail varnish, lying apparently dead in immaculate shoes. "I never saw him being cruel," says Brandt. "Guy would push his models, but only to get his vision recorded on celluloid."

However, Bourdin's life was turbulent. He was abandoned by his mother and raised by an unloving father in war-torn France. The early deaths of both Bourdin's first wife and a subsequent girlfriend are matters of public record, as are tax difficulties that saddled his estate with debts. Brandt also confirms more eccentric rumours about Bourdin's life, such as his insistence on working with people born under certain star signs; his use of sleeping pills in order to dream for long periods; and his arrival at French Vogue's offices on a camel.

He was a demanding boss. "Often he would simply disappear on shoots," says Brandt. In the age before Photoshop, Bourdin also went to extreme lengths get his shot: he once tried to dye the sea deep-blue. With the film's production nearing completion - Brandt financed it himself and is now casting around for investment - *When the Sky Fell Down* is set to screen at Cannes. The documentary will, in Brandt's words, "serve as both the definitive film on one of the world's most influential visual artists, but it's also the story of a son's struggle to rescue his father's legacy from obscurity." Samuel sued Madonna, claiming the video for her 2003 song *Hollywood* leaned too heavily on Guy's classic images. She reportedly settled out of court.

Rescuing Bourdin from obscurity might seem straightforward given the high regard for his work. Yet he never published a monograph during his lifetime and preferred to publish his images in magazines rather than hang them on gallery walls. So what was he like to work with? "Probably a good analogy is good sex," says Brandt. "A lot of foreplay, mucking around, games, teasing, hard work and then, usually very late at night, a miracle."

## Since you're here ...

... we've got a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever, but far fewer are paying for it. Advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike some other news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism open to all. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure.

Become a Supporter

Make a contribution

- Photography
- Documentary
- features