

~When the Sky Fell Down~



The Myth of Guy Bourdin

introduction by Sean Brandt/interview by Klaus van den Berg

The making of a documentary film on one of the most important visual artists of our time, featuring full access to the entire Guy Bourdin archive, including never-seen-before footage. *When the Sky Fell Down—the Myth of Guy Bourdin* will be the definitive film on one of the world's most influential visual artists. It is also the story of a son's struggle to rescue his father's legacy from obscurity. In an exclusive for *Zoo Magazine*, market & trend researcher Klaus van den Berg talks to Guy Bourdin's son Samuel and director Sean Brandt to gain deeper insight into the making of their documentary.

Guy Bourdin is considered one of the most daring and innovative visual artists of the 20th century. With intense sensibility, he was able to touch generations of readers by creating a moment of magic using the most transient form of expression—the glossy magazine page. A singular artist with a unique perception on art, fashion, advertising and life, Bourdin was responsible for the groundbreaking turning point in the world of image making. In 1955, his first magazine commission turned the world of fashion photography on its head: he placed a Dior model against a backdrop of decapitated calves heads hung on butchers' hooks for the pages of French *Vogue*. For the next 35 years, Bourdin was the photographer darling of Europe's most prestigious fashion magazines. Using fashion photography as his medium, he explored the realms between the absurd and the sublime. Famed for his suggestive narratives, impeccable decors, and surreal aesthetics, Bourdin radically broke conventions of commercial photography with a relentless perfectionism and a sharp humor. For over 30 years, Guy Bourdin's photographs pushed the limits of what constituted contemporary fashion photography.

Working with Guy Bourdin was a challenge. Only a few could handle it. Many in the industry claimed he was impossible. It was well known that he flatly refused to work with people born under certain signs of the zodiac. Often, he would simply disappear on shoots. The stories are legendary: appearing unannounced at *Vogue* with a camel; setting a house on fire so he could photograph the escaping models; or his habit of taking sleeping pills for days at a time in order to dream. One never knew what Guy Bourdin would deliver. What was certain was that he would strive for the impossible. Despite his success Bourdin ultimately chose to distance himself from the vanities that surrounded him, preferring to live in the shadows. He never gave interviews and shunned being photographed. He never published books and rarely exhibited. As a result, his visionary work was almost lost to obscurity. Since

his death, Bourdin's controversial creative methods have been criticized and his archives impounded, while his oeuvre almost disappeared amongst the ensuing maelstrom. Today, the myths that circulate about his life's work remain shrouded in controversy and contradiction.

When the Sky Fell Down aims to set the record straight. Almost 20 years after his death, the Guy Bourdin renaissance is in full swing. Across the globe, crowds flock to the world's most prestigious museums to experience his work face-to-face. His shows have received unprecedented attendance and a plethora of media attention. Like a phoenix from the ashes, Bourdin's work and notoriety are now alive and well, and continue to generate speculation about his life and his creative process. Tracing Bourdin's story across half a century, *When the Sky Fell Down* is an exploration of the life, work and legacy of a revolutionary artist.

In shooting this documentary, Sean Brandt conducted more than 150 interviews with Bourdin's family, friends, collaborators, mistresses and stars. They share stories about his eccentricities, tell anecdotes about his controversial photo shoots, offer insights into his work and his legacy. Interviewees include Bourdin models such as Jerry Hall, Jane Birkin, Marissa Berenson, Anouk Aimee and Dominique Sanda. Contemporary artists and peers include Annie Leibovitz, Oliviero Toscani, Araki, Jean Paul Goude, Sarah Moon, Nan Goldin, Paolo Roversi, Steve Hiett, Ellen Von Unwerth, David Bailey, Terry Richardson, Nick Knight, Albert Watson and Grace Coddington also contribute, as well as artists and filmmakers influenced by his work such as Lord David Puttnam, Jim Jarmusch, Chris Doyle and Agnès Varda. Fashion designers Karl Lagerfeld, Tom Ford, Sonia Rykiel, Emmanuelle Ungaro, Marc Jacobs and Alber Elbaz also appear in the film, as do the editors and creative directors of French, Italian, British and American *Vogue*. Brandt also speaks to art critics and historians including Martin Harrisson, Christian Caujolle, Philippe Garner, Robert Delpire and the former French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang.

Shot all over the world, these candid interviews take us to the image centers of Paris, London, New York and Tokyo, and to the far-flung corners of the globe: rural France, the Italian countryside, the Great Wall of China, and small-town South America. Brandt shoots his subjects in swanky hotel rooms, down at heel cafes, magazine offices, deserted cemeteries and artists' studios with a photographer's keen eye for composition and lighting. And as an industry insider, he easily gains the trust of his subjects who speak

Double Act_Samuel Bourdin & Sean Brandt

openly and revealingly about Bourdin. Brandt has traveled from Australia across Europe and North America to China and Japan as he follows the exhibitions dedicated to Guy Bourdin across the globe. This observational footage provides a remarkable documentation of Bourdin's rebirth. In addition to these insightful interviews, Brandt has access to the entire archive of Bourdin's work, which contains over 6000 still images and 12 hours of personal footage filmed by Bourdin. Shot on Super 8 and 16mm film, it documents Bourdin's family holidays and photo shoots. Along with the interviews, this remarkable footage will add a distinctive texture to the overall film.

Klaus van den Berg: Who are the makers of this documentary?

Samuel Bourdin: As the only son and heir of Guy Bourdin, I am the owner of the Guy Bourdin estate. After my father's death in 1991, I took the responsibility of preserving, developing and showing my father's life works. He was a relentless artist who never ceased to create, whether he was drawing, painting, which he did all his life, or taking photographs. The documentary is a communal effort of the director Sean Brandt, the curator Shelly Verthime and myself. I am formally the film's co-producer. I am also engaged in the creative collaboration with Sean Brandt over many aspects of the film.

Sean Brandt: I have been a long-serving assistant of Guy Bourdin in the early 80s and a personal friend until his death. I am the writer, director, producer and one-man crew of this feature documentary. Over the last six years, I have been researching Bourdin's life and legacy. I am capturing intimate interviews from everyone I can meet who knew Guy Bourdin. I have also captured the story behind the Guy Bourdin renaissance including Samuel Bourdin's struggle to reclaim his father's life work, Samuel's collaboration with Shelly Verthime as the curator of the retrospective exhibitions, books and other projects that have brought Guy Bourdin's legacy and oeuvre back to the world.

KvdB: Whose idea was it to make this documentary?

Sean Brandt: Destiny brought me to the Victoria & Albert Museum in May 2003, where the premiere retrospective exhibition of Guy Bourdin was showing. I was on my way to the Cannes film festival via an elaborate connection of flights that took me via London. An hour out of Heathrow, I changed radio stations and heard the words 'Guy Bourdin.' It was the tail end of a BBC radio piece on the exhibition. Two hours later, I was astonished to see Guy Bourdin's



name in huge banners cascading down the walls of the famous London museum. I had not heard of anything about Guy since his death 12 years prior. Six months later, the same exhibition travelled to my hometown of Melbourne for its second opening. In Melbourne, I became re-acquainted with Samuel Bourdin and formed a friendship with Shelly Verthime. Whilst celebrating the exhibition's success with champagne overlooking the Pacific Ocean, I suggested we should combine forces to make the definitive film on Guy. It was agreed and we felt Guy was looking down on us then. Guy had actually brought me to Sydney as his assistant on a French *Vogue* shoot almost exactly 20 years earlier. Somehow Guy regained his passport from the French government, who had previously confiscated it, in order to make the trip. Samuel joined us from the USA. He was 16 then and I was 20. Guy gave me the hotel's penthouse reserved for him and he took the small room for the assistant. Samuel stayed with me for a few weeks after and we became friends. Guy loved that.

KvdB: What is the need for a Guy Bourdin documentary?

Sean Brandt: Guy Bourdin largely refused interviews and expositions. He shunned fame, avoided publicity and ignored accolades. He became an enigma, and in a sense, mythical. Thus he has been misunderstood in media, fashion and art during his lifetime and after his death. It is time to set the record straight.

Samuel Bourdin: People need to get a real glimpse of the person who was making all those timeless and intriguing expert photographs. It is also needed to share the truth behind his work with the world and why his body of work stands out like it does. As we are approaching the 20th anniversary of Guy's death, it also explains his influence and artistic ethic that still have an impact on the world of the visual arts of today.

KvdB: What is the concept of the documentary?

Sean Brandt: The feature film will be unique, just as its central character. The audience will go on a journey discovering who Guy Bourdin really was. The film will contextualize Guy Bourdin's contribution to contemporary image-making and look at both his professional and personal life and legacy. It abandons the linear structure of a

classic biopic. Instead, the film unfolds like a jigsaw puzzle, like a treasure hunt around the globe.

Samuel Bourdin: It is a fact-based documentary. From the people interviewed, the photo archives, film archives, painting and drawings, we hope to extract the essence of the man behind the works.

KvdB: What kind of footage has been shot so far?

Sean Brandt: Approximately 150 interviews with Guy Bourdin's family, friends, collaborators, mistresses and stars. They share stories about his eccentricities, tell anecdotes about his unique photo shoots and offer insights into his work and his legacy. The interviews are shot all over the world and take us to the image centers of Paris, London, New York and Tokyo and to the far-flung corners of the globe in rural France, the Italian countryside, the Great Wall of China, and small-town South America. Locations range from swanky hotel rooms, cafes, magazine offices, cemeteries to art studios. I think having known Guy so well has enabled me to get quite incredible access to a diverse range of people who all

have great insight into Guy Bourdin and his world. I don't really think an outsider could have gotten the material I have collected. I have also traveled from Australia across Europe and North America to China and Japan following the Guy Bourdin exhibition openings in museums across the globe. This observational footage provides a remarkable documentation of Guy Bourdin's rebirth.

KvdB: Tell us something about the editing and selection process.

Sean Brandt: We are about to launch into the process of editing which will be both exciting and challenging. Everyone who knew Guy Bourdin has some incredible anecdote or insight about him. The secrets that lie beneath every Guy Bourdin image are so fascinating, it is beyond belief. As the acclaimed photographer Toscani explains, "Guy came from another world. He was like a space cadet. He landed and he saw our world in a different way."

Samuel Bourdin: All footage that makes sense in the documentary will be in the documentary. There are no limits. This documentary has to grow from the inside out. We just have to extract the film from all the material we have.

KvdB: What kind of exposure and target audience are you aiming at?

Sean Brandt: Guy's story is a true hero's journey, which I feel will appeal to a diverse international audience. He was so unique, I feel, regardless of race, wealth or culture. His story will overwhelm anyone who is curious about a character who seemed not afraid of anyone. We hope to bring Guy's world to as many people who are fascinated by the unconventional.

Samuel Bourdin: We are aiming at a global target group bringing Guy's genius to a wide audience. Especially anybody interested in the creative world. I want a timeless piece; a reference for decades to come. A classic.

KvdB: What have been the ups and downs during the making of the documentary?

Samuel Bourdin: It has been a difficult process. It is very time-consuming for Sean, who relentlessly tries to connect the dots between the work, the people who worked with Guy, and the ones that understand his work. Toscani is one example of how a brilliant person can decipher Guy Bourdin's work without having even known the man.

Sean Brandt: The ups I call the 'Magic Guy Moments.' There are literally hundreds from 300 hours of research and interviews. For example, sneaking around the House of Lords in London with Lord David Puttnam, the famed film producer who once wanted to be Guy's agent. Or receiving a BlackBerry message from Madonna. Interviewing Guy Bourdin fans such as Catherine Breillart in her apartment. Toscani on top of a medieval village in Tuscany. Meeting Guy's nephew who now lives in my old Paris apartment. Finding old locations around the world where I worked with Guy 25 years earlier. Watching Japanese fashion people strip naked inside a real French chateau in the heart of Tokyo for the Guy Bourdin after-party. Watching Samuel present 999 red roses to Shelly Verthime for her help in bringing Guy Bourdin to China's national art museum. Being chased by a cop for interviewing Samuel under the Brooklyn Bridge, exactly where Guy had shot the famous Charles Jourdan shot of the cop chasing the model holding the huge bright yellow shoe. Showing Guy Bourdin's first museum catalogue to a Mongolian family after Samuel, my girlfriend and myself became lost in the Gobi desert. They had never seen Europeans, let alone Guy Bourdin images. The ups are



about finding the treasures behind all the images of Guy. The down is that I am working largely alone doing the job of a whole crew without any financial support.

KvdB: Who is financing the documentary?

Samuel Bourdin: The project is self-financed so far. We needed to do this in order to keep total creative freedom and avoid third party interference. It is an organic process which could not be pre-planned in advance. From the material, we extract the essence. This documentary is too important for us to be the victim of short-term personal goals of third parties, TV time slots or production schedule programs.

KvdB: Is the documentary a commercial business project or created from an artistic drive? Or both?

Samuel Bourdin: I just want the film to be seen. It is not going to be some abstract art film.

Sean Brandt: We want the largest audience possible to see this seminal film. It is intended

for an international theatrical release and is seeking international television broadcast following the theatrical window. The DVD market will follow.

KvdB: In what way is this documentary different from the award-winning Canadian documentary *Dream Girls* about Guy Bourdin that has been released in the end of the 1990s?

Sean Brandt: No one I know, who knew Guy, liked that film. Guy Bourdin was unique, a true artist who never compromised and could never be bought. He made the impossible possible and strove for perfection. He would go to unbelievable extremes to create his imagination on celluloid, all before digital. He was a gentleman, almost psychic. Our documentary will be more intimate, truthful, complex, surprising, and original.

KvdB: What did you as 'insiders' learn about Guy Bourdin while making the documentary so far?

Sean Brandt: I learnt about how Guy became Guy Bourdin. About his integrity, his early life,

how he developed as a photographer and artist, some major moments that defined this progress and a lot about his secrets to his incredible vision.

Samuel Bourdin: You will have to watch the documentary. It is all in there.

KvdB: As a person, Guy Bourdin always shunned the public eye. The result is that he is still a mystery, an enigma for the public. What will the viewers learn about him?

Sean Brandt: Almost everything that is worth knowing. Like Guy Bourdin being also an outstanding painter and having an amazing knowledge of all facets of the arts. He was a self-taught artist and art historian. Or Samuel Bourdin having fought with a lot of people, helping him to regain total control of his father's estate. It took nearly a decade for him to be able to begin showcasing his father's work for contemporary audiences.

Samuel Bourdin: They will get to know him and see the work for what it is. No more

irrelevant and ignorant middlemen who pretend to know but misrepresent the work and the man.

KvdB: What is needed to make the documentary successful?

Samuel Bourdin: A good documentary with a fine-tuned, captivating and timeless content about the man behind the camera will answer all the questions people have. Guy Bourdin shot many hours of Super 8 and 16mm films that have never been seen before. This includes his youth, his personal life and on his sets. Excerpts will be used in the film. I authorized Sean access to the entire Guy Bourdin archive of thousands of images.

Sean Brandt: We plan to create a film like no other and for the film to live as a seminal document of Guy Bourdin's incredible impact to the world of narrative photography. We are currently looking for a partner to assist with financing the postproduction of the film. Guy's life story is unbelievably fascinating, as is his second life after his death. The documentary work is obviously priceless. However, post production elements of a theatrical film, such as soundtrack, technical print quality and marketing, are very important to contributing to the film's wider distribution and success.

KvdB: When will the documentary be launched?

Sean Brandt: My hope is to premiere the film at Cannes in May 2011 to coincide with the 20th anniversary of Guy Bourdin's death.

Samuel Bourdin: I say in two years, but maybe more, but not much more. Three years at the latest.

www.guybourdin.org
www.seanbrandt.com
www.visionary-films.com





