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 controversial creative methods, Bourdin radically broke conventions of commercial photography with a senseless 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 hastily 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 a Vogue with a camera; 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 Aimée 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 film’s co-producer. I am also engaged in the creative collaboration with Sean Brandt over many aspects of the film.

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

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

The Myth of Guy Bourdin

introduction by Sean Brandt/ interview by Klaus van den Berg

Double Act, Samuel Bourdin & Sean Brandt

When the Sky Fell Down
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.

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 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 for the first time." 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: 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 tower in their village in Tuscany. Meeting Guy's nephew who now lives in my old Paris apartment. Finding old locations around the world where I have 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 and my girlfriend and myself become lost in the Gobi desert. They had never seen Europeans, let alone Guy Bourdin images. The ups are for Sean Brandt to 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 tower in their village in Tuscany. Meeting Guy's nephew who now lives in my old Paris apartment. Finding old locations around the world where I have 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 and my girlfriend and myself become 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: 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

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