The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ladies' Man

The intimate art of iconic fashion photographer Denis Piel

By Ruth Moore

February 20, 2017



Work for the likes of Vogue pushed Piel to global prominence. **Denis Piel**

With one vest strap slipping off her shoulder and an otherworldly beauty, the young model fixing you with an unyielding stare from the gallery walls is easily recognizable as a 16-year-old Uma Thurman. The man behind the image, photographer Denis Piel, has just opened his first exhibition in Russia, "Film Stills," at the Lumiere Brothers Center for Photography.

"What I remember about that day is that I couldn't stop shooting. There was just one marvelous picture after another," he said in an interview with The Moscow Times.

With his sunshine-yellow shirt and warm Australian accent, Piel cuts something of a contrast to the glossy, high-end fashion photographs he's best known for. Born in France and raised Down Under, Piel's career led him to Europe and then New York, where he became one of the few photographers to secure an exclusive contract with publisher Condé

Nast.

The current exhibition focuses on the peak of his career as a fashion photographer during the 1980s. Inspired by "Filmscapes," a retrospective of Piel's photography from that era — due to be published later this year — the show features some of Piel's most iconic shoots with models and actresses such as Christy Turlington, Andie MacDowell and Goldie Hawn.

The idea for the show was born when Piel and the director of the Lumiere Center, Natalia Grigoreva, met at the fine art photography fair Paris Photo. Choosing to focus on the cinematic quality of Piel's work, Yana Iskakova, the curator of the exhibition, studied hundreds of Piel's photographs before making her final selection.

"A photo doesn't presuppose any movement," Iskakova told The Moscow Times. "It's a captured moment. But sometimes you get the impression that there is some storytelling within that still image, as if you are viewing a film still. You begin to imagine the images that came before and after it — that is the feeling Denis's photography evokes."

A flair for the cinematic is a central feature of Piel's style: Like a film director, he would brief the fashion team on the "story" and talk with the model about the role they were playing, offering more ideas as the shoot progressed.

"I'm looking for emotion and reality, not a posed picture. A girl can pose as long as she likes but I won't click the shutter. It's when she stops that suddenly there's a picture," he said. Piel's habit of observing everything, even the in-between moments of a shoot, kept his models on their toes. Sometimes he would even end a shoot but still have his camera in his hand in case he saw something he liked.

"He would ask models to do things like remember an event from when they were five years old," said Iskakova. "The girl wouldn't have to reply but something behind her eyes would perceptibly change and he'd know it was time to take the shot."

It was Piel's ability to breathe life into the glossy pages of magazines such as Vogue and Vanity Fair that made him in such high demand as a fashion photographer. He shot more than 1,000 editorial spreads over a decade working for Condé Nast. When asked about his work with some of the biggest names in fashion and film, Piel shrugs: "They weren't stars at the time."

The photographs of Uma Thurman for Vogue Italia were, in fact, the future actress's first professional shoot. Not that you'd guess from the unguarded way she appears before the camera.

"Sensuality is key to what I do," said Piel of his often sexually charged photographs.

One photograph from the exhibition features Andie MacDowell raising her dress above her thighs in front of a balcony window. The voyeuristic shot, published in Vogue Italia in 1981, is intimate and dramatic at the same time. MacDowell had turned down requests to pose for photographer Helmut Newton, making the pictures even more significant.

"When the pictures came out everyone asked her how she did it. They said things like, 'those photos they weren't you,' and in a way it's true, because she was a totally shy person," said Piel.

He remembers the glamor of those years: the beautiful women, exotic travel and possibilities of fashion photography. When asked whether it was a surreal experience, he smiles.

“It’s a story I don’t tell very often but every year I’d take a month off. I’d travel somewhere remote with a limited amount of money and live for that period completely by myself alongside a local community. That was my grounding — it was a retreat.”

Piel and his family eventually moved to southwest France, where they now run an organic, sustainable farm. Camera always in hand, Piel recently published a book, “Down to Earth,” featuring photographs taken over the course of one agricultural cycle on his land. Images of fields and earth are punctuated by nude models lying in spring meadows and tilling soil.

“I’m still looking for cinematic moments,” he said.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/02/20/ladies-man-a57199