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Foreign bodies

Think Nineties grunge-chic, and you're probably thinking of a Juergen Teller Image. But, as the photographer tells Sebastian Smee, while he's still fascinated with the wilder shores of fashion, his work is moving ever closer to home. Portrait by Gautier Deblonde

THIS ONE will take some explaining. The photographer Juergen Teller pauses for a good 10 seconds, then ruffles his hair. I have asked about the circumstances that gave rise to the somewhat surreal image you see above.

The sprouting flora, I have already learnt, is not an overgrown hedge: it's a resplendent version of the artist Jeff Koons's most famous work. Puppy. Nor is that a discarded Barbie doll straddling one of its ears: it's the American supermodel Stephanie Seymour. This, as it happens, is Seymour's place in Connecticut: her freshly mown lawn, her Puppy, and — not far out of shot — her 100 horses, her two swimming pools, her world-class collection of haute couture, her collection of late 20th-century art...

"I guess I met Stephanie around '94," begins Teller. We are on the ground floor of his studio and home in London's Ladbroke Grove. A table in the middle of the room is piled with prints of photographs. There is a scale model of a gallery on the floor, which Teller and his assistants are using to plan the hanging of his September exhibition at Milton Keynes Gallery; at the far end of the room is a doorway and stairs leading up (to his studio) and down (to his living quarters).

"She was truly a supermodel - especially in America. Richard Avedon had put her on a pedestal for 'those' Versace ads. And then, of course, there was her relationship with Axl Rose, from Guns'n'Roses. She was in one of their videos [November Rain], in the wedding scene, which was all over MTV for a while." Teller himself was already known by this stage as one of the world's leading half-dozen fashion photographers. He had made his name in the early 1990s as one of the first creators of fashion's "grunge look" and had worked with Seymour for British and American *Vogue*.

He also used her as the model for a story, in pictures, for *W* magazine, and this was the catalyst which, a couple of months later, inspired Seymour to ring both Wand Teller

asking them if they would be interested in doing a story about her house.

Why, I ask, did Seymour choose Teller? “She realises that I understand her sexual energy, and the way she can let herself be totally expressive,” he explained. “She could adopt extreme poses without being embarrassed. I didn’t direct her into poses like some photographers would. I let her do whatever she felt comfortable with.”

Seymour’s collection of haute couture clothes, from the 1920s to the present, is “vast, and really quite amazing.” according to Teller. “Nobody had even been allowed to photograph the place before, because it also has a huge private collection of art by people like Andy Warhol, Raushenberg, and Basquiat. I think that it was really liberating for her that I embraced the whole madness of that house,” he reflects. “They have such vast grounds. They own their own polo team! I come from a little village in Germany, so looking around this place - the whole thing was totally opposite.”

Teller talks fluently and at length, with a noticeable German accent and a few idiomatic turns of phrase (“slowly and slowly,” for instance, instead of “gradually”). He seems relaxed and responsive, absorbed by what he does, considered in the stories he tells. He responds to every question with serpentine, thought-filled pauses. His cruel, clear-blue eyes are enough on their own to grant him striking good looks - not that you would know it from the recent naked, sweaty and pudgy self-portraits he has been taking. The results of his collaboration with Seymour were first published in *W* magazine as a 32-page story. In the process, however, some kind of spark had been kindled: Teller did not want to let go.

When it was all over, he rang Seymour, and said, “You know what? That’s not enough. We gotta push this a bit further. There’s more to be done.” Seymour agreed (“she was really flattered,” he says) and so he continued to photograph her for two years, not only in Connecticut, but also at her homes in Palm Beach and New York. Several dozen photographs were finally selected from the thousands Teller took for a book published last year by Steidl, called *More*.

ONE OF the qualities most consistently lacking in fashion photography is the vulgarity of real life (different from the vulgarity of fashion). Many fashion photographers flirt with it, filling their pictures with signs of tastelessness and excess. But in the end, everything about fashion is designed to be swallowed whole, leaving no residue of grit. Wayward idiosyncracies are to be subjugated to the requirements of a pre-conceived “look”, whose final arbiter, of course, is always the client.

Juergen Teller seems gradually to have grown sick of all this. He has a special taste for

vulgarity, and as he cuts more and more of his ties with the fashion world which made him famous, he seems to be indulging this taste with increasing relish.

Part of his fashion fame, of course, already rested on this gritty, grungy reputation, so the departure has by no means been radical. The images that made the biggest splash early on in his career, for instance, showed the supermodel, Kristen McMenamy, naked, menstruating, and scarred, padding around a badly lit house with “Versace” scrawled in lipstick across her backside and front.

Later, he worked on a project called “Go Sees (Girls Knocking on my Door)”, which involved asking model agencies to send around to his studio any girls on their books. He photographed all the models who arrived on the threshold of his studio, and put the results in a book. There was something simultaneously boring, nasty and heartbreakingly exposing about the exercise.

He later asked many of the same models and some new ones into his studio and began asking them pre- prepared questions, which he videotaped. “I found they were more interesting and attractive in the way they were behaving in a moving picture than in a still one. They became even younger - especially when they were in a group. It became a real conversation, with giggling, and going back and forth. I would start with a couple of questions, and then they would start talking about their model lives. It became quite intimate.”

These days, Teller continues to shoot witty, unorthodox campaigns for the fashion label Marc Jacobs, and he does occasional editorials for fashion magazines. But by far the largest portion of his time has been spent on his personal work. and on organising a steady stream of one-man exhibitions and books. The latest of these is a small project called “Nackig auf dem Fussballplatz”, or “Naked on the football field”. The exhibition is more about Teller’s late father than football, but will include a video of Teller watching the last World Cup final between Germany and Brazil.

“I became so loud and aggressive and idiotic,” he says of this anguish-filled day (Germany lost). “Sometimes I recognise my dad in them. It really shocked me.” There is also a recent picture of Teller with Pele (imagined as a “bizarre sort of father figure”); a picture of David and Victoria Beckham kissing (“the happy family”) and of Teller’s widowed mother standing in the goal mouth of the field where Teller practised as a boy.

But by far the most extraordinary image shows Teller himself standing stark naked at night on his father’s grave, one foot on a football (his father hated the game) and a bottle of beer at his lips (his father was an aggressive alcoholic, who committed suicide). “It

took me 39 years to take that picture,” Teller laughs. “I haven’t shown my mother yet.”

BORN IN a small town called Bubenreuth, near Nuremberg, in 1964, Teller moved to London at the age of 22. For a while there in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he looked like a living demonstration of what Philip Roth called “the high drama that is upping and leaving - and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands”.

He was fleeing the prospect of compulsory national service and a worsening home life, darkened by his father’s alcoholism. “I didn’t see any reason why I should join the army, he says, “so I had to react really quickly and leave the country.”

When he arrived in the UK, he couldn’t speak English. “It took me such an effort to feel comfortable in this country. I struggled to make a living. I didn’t want to work in McDonald’s or be a waiter - I couldn’t fucking deal with that. So I had to make it.

“I could not fail for a couple of reasons: because my dad never believed in me, and the rest of the family thought I was nuts and that I’d be back in a couple of months. And because there was the pressure that if I did go back they would force me into the army. I had to put so much effort into making it here and learning English, that for a while I let my German background go. I left it; it was just gone.”

After a time, however, things changed. Teller’s father died. Teller himself was allowed to return to Germany to visit his mother, but not to stay, thanks to his Berlin passport and a loophole in the law. And then he began his own family.

“As soon as you have a family, you start to remember things which for a long time you’d forgotten. You know, where you belong, how your dad was with you and how I am with my daughter .. It’s an immense, big thing, suddenly having a kid. So, of course, I took my kid to Germany, because I wanted my mum to see her, and I wanted her to smell and eat and see my home.” Teller himself had started to feel homesick. “Suddenly it had dawned on me how much I missed: the air, the woods, the climate, the food - although not so much the people, apart from my family, of course.” In recent books and exhibitions entitled “Märchenstüberl” (fairy tales) and “Zwei Schäufelrle mit Kloß und eine Kinderportion mit Pommes Frites” (a typical German meal for two adults and a child), Teller has mixed in large numbers of photographs of his German family with characteristically strange but insightful portraits of celebrities and models, such as Bjork, 0 J Simpson and Kate Moss (a long-term friend whom Teller photographed heavily pregnant in the south of France last year, shortly after Lucian Freud had finished his extraordinary naked portrait of her).

“A friend of mine, Helmut Lang in New York, looked at these photos of my home and said, ‘Oh my god, you’re getting more and more German!’ “ Teller laughs. Does he intend to keep up the connection, I ask, or is it just a period of curiosity? “It’s more and more,” he says with certainty. “And I’m happy about that.”

THE SELF-PORTRAITS, which have also studded the recent book and exhibition projects (including this year’s Citibank Photography Prize, which Teller won), are a curious species, and Teller has a suitably curious explanation for them.

“I’m always occupied by how to photograph other people,” he says. “But whoever it is, it’s quite psychologically draining. You have to be sensitive, psychologically and visually aware, alert to the other person’s character, and then try to get that into a picture. I don’t really do that many pictures, because it takes it out of me.”

For “Märchenstüberl”, Teller wanted to photograph a particular French actress. He won’t name her, but says he had always admired her.

“She was very excited about it and knew my work. So we had lots of telephone calls and conversations, and I went to Paris and photographed her.

“It was really intense. We worked from about 10 o’clock in the morning to 9 o’clock at night. At about 6pm, I said, ‘You know I think we’ve got it.’ She said, ‘No, we’ve got to keep going!’ I said, ‘OK, if that’s what you want.’ Anyway, we left really friendly, and super-happy about the whole experience

Teller edited the pictures for two weeks, then took them personally to show the actress in Paris. After five or 10 minutes, he says. “She literally threw me out of her house! I was really devastated by it. I thought I had produced really strong work. But she accused me of making her look 10 years older. So I just thought, “Fucking hell, that means you think you’re 10 years younger!”

“Anyway, that’s when I thought, I’m fed up with other people’s opinions. I was spending so much time thinking about pictures, and about myself (especially now that I had a family) that I thought instead of photographing you, I’ll start photographing me - after all, what’s the difference?”

Teller remembered, too, the impact his crude-seeming images of Kristen McMenamy had had, and how people in the fashion world had said her modeling career would be ruined.

“I wanted to be as rough with me as I had been with others,” he says. “I wanted to feel

myself how that feels.”

You get the feeling from the results that it felt funny. These are theatrical, vulgar and strangely spellbinding pictures. Perhaps because of his link with fashion, Teller seems to struggle with the suspicion that not many of his pictures are particularly profound. He is probably right, but many are original, intensely personal, amusing and fresh. The best of them are also more than a little bit strange.