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Make it Big

Strength, flesh, frailty, life, loss, family: Juergen Teller has made the transition from twisted fashion visionary to something far more important...

INTERVIEW BY PETER LYLE

Juergen Teller was working till six o'clock this morning. Some strong coffee, a couple of croissants and five hours later, he's at it again. "I knew I had this show for such a long time," he says "And every time it amazes us how fucking shit we are, in the end, at putting things down."

The deadline for shipping pictures to New York for his show at the Lehmann Maupin gallery is a matter of hours away and he doesn't want to waste any of them. The opening night of his other show, at the Milton Keynes Gallery, is in two weeks. On the second of three floors on his building off Ladbrooke Grove are two all-white models of the spaces his work will soon fill. They look a little like a pair of modernist doll's houses, with stamp-sized reproductions of Teller's photographs arranged on their walls. Yet just peering in at the tiny pictures yields a sense of the vivid atmosphere and disarming associative logic of each show.

Around the rest of the room, Teller's full-sized prints are everywhere, waiting to be transported to one of the venues or ruled out and put back in the cupboard. Kate Moss smiles out from the top of a bag of Polaroids in a polythene bag on a table; Björk and baby embrace before a hot spring; awe-inspiring, thrice life-size prints of women in unreal, courtly couture are rolled up in the corner. Then there are the recent pictures of Teller himself: naked, vulnerable, almost self-mocking at times; you might begin to wonder if he's trying to tell you something...

Teller's real self is a much closer to a buff, Athena poster ideal than his recent pictures have been. He is standing in his studio's ground floor living-kitchen area in the late morning, a lithe and sun-kissed 39-year-old with a phone perched on one shoulder, one hand stirring another rich cup of coffee, the other holding another cigarette, his bum peeking out of just dragged-on jeans. It's all a long way from the kind of pampered, over-assisted approach to photography Teller got used to back when his work was appearing in the pages of flush international fashion bibles month after month — not that he's regretting it. "For a very long time I sat there, in front of that empty model," he says,

“and sort of stared at the white walls and I couldn’t find a start, That’s the problem, and that’s the beauty of it.”

It’s partly a problem of his own making: the Milton Keynes Gallery, site of one of the two shows, had been asking Teller if he would exhibit there again ever since he first did so in 1999, and, some months back, suggested hosting Teller’s *Märchenstüberl*, the exhibition that accompanies the book of the same name and has recently been touring Europe. He decided he wanted to do something new instead and so has been working “until the last minute. That’s the beauty of it,” he says, “and that’s the problem I’m in right now.” He’s not really complaining, though; via a recent purple patch of exhibitions and publications — and, not least, his winning of the Citibank Photography Prize — he’s in the process of dismantling dated perceptions of him as twisted fashion visionary and moving towards something else: to being seen as an artist. Strength, flesh, frailty, life, loss, family – despite the wide range of subjects which have taken Teller’s eye and been captured by his lens in recent times, certain themes resonate throughout.

Don’t Suffer Too Much is the name of Juergen Teller’s Milton Keynes exhibition, It is about football, and it came from an idea planted when Teller first saw a picture of himself watching Bayer Leverkusen beating Liverpool 4-2 in the Champions’ League quarter finals in 2002. When, later that summer, Germany unexpectedly reached the final of the World Cup. Teller trained a camera on himself as he got excited, writhed and agonised on the sofa while watching his team lose, That film, the whole unflinching hour-and-a-half of it, accompanies a show of largely-recent and related pictures which it helped inspire,

“It’s very difficult for me to watch,” Teller explains, “I can’t really watch it very often, I only watched it once, from the beginning to the end,, . I have very strong feelings about it, I believe in it, but I can’t really watch it that often, It’s in a little way like you don’t want to listen to yourself on the answer machine. that’s a little bit of how that feels,” Yet filming it enabled him to explore some of the meanings of football in his life, and filter elements of his childhood in Bubenreuth, Germany through his experiences as an up-and-coming photographer in London. Teller loved football when he was young, ditched his interest when German footballing dominance and changing tastes rendered liking the sport a non-option for anybody who wanted to be cool circa 1979, and rediscovered it when the rigid limits of pub conversation gave him no other option.

“When I came here in ‘86,” he says. “I felt very much the English thing - that I live in this country and they treat me like a German. All the angle points they had were: (i) The War and (ii) We’re Better At Football. And, of course, the only thing I could hang on to was not The War, but We’re Better At Football. And I started early playing every Sunday, playing football and watching, since I came here in ‘86. Football, in a way,

brought me together with a couple of people while I was speaking really bad English at that time. That was something, with people in the pub and whatever, that would be an angle point to talk about. And England is completely obsessed with football, and it just gets worse and worse and bigger and bigger. It's like a full-fucking-super-phenomenon. But it's quite mad how people get sort of lifts through football. It's insane. Twenty-two people running round with a ball."

Obsession - and specifically male obsession - haunts the film. 'Football gives you the chance of looking into something and locking out your other experience, says Teller, "your other life, and you become completely absorbed in something where you don't have a responsibility and you follow that and you can be completely childish and whatever you want.' Teller admits he was "like a 12-year-old" when he met Pele for some work for FIFA and he, along with a 1999 picture of the Beckhams, fulfills that function in the show. But its other gender angle is about women and football. In *Don't Suffer Too Much*, there are several pictures of Juergen's mother and grandmother. Like Charlotte Rampling in the portrait that's also featured in the show, Juergen's mother Irene poses as a goalkeeper in one.

"I was thinking a lot about what things mean, and what a goalkeeper means, what the whole thing means, you know? And for me it's sort of acting like a woman - in that case my mother, or, in general, a woman "guarding life, but being unable to protect it completely, and letting the ball in and things like that." Football is not just a metaphorically useful means for Teller to relate to maternal family, though — she really was a fellow fan too. "I had a strong relationship with my mother and I didn't have a strong relationship with my father at all. She was quite sporty, and I got that sportiness from her. She was not an extreme football fan at all, but she was following football and watched games with excitement and *dadadadada*. And my father didn't at all."

One picture from both the new shows - one which Irene Teller has yet to see - is a recently-taken picture of her son, naked, by the grave where his father was buried in 1988, when Juergen was 22. Teller, who first photographed his father's grave ten years after he'd died, with his mother standing beside it, had to clamber into the graveyard at night to get the shot he wanted. In the picture he stands, legs wide apart, black and white ball under foot, bottle of beer in hand, As soon as he printed it to a proper size, he said, he realised that it was a "key picture" and that he was ready to make it public. "I had a very strong relationship with my grandmother, and in a way that emphasised the substitute dad idea, because my father wasn't around, because he killed himself, being an alcoholic, and that, in a way, emphasises that I also have my problems but..." he says, pointing at the print, "overlived this scenario with a football."

In another naked self-portrait, Teller squats, Buddha-like, on a football, on a football field. “I wanted to empathise my meaning I have with football. I couldn’t have done, or I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to do. that picture on the football court over there,” he says, flapping towards the wide-open window, “but that was where I spent my childhood, playing football on that piece of dirtshit in our village. And the reason why I’m naked in it is not so much the nakedness, but the meaning of being naked with the truth. Not the raked flesh itself, but it sort of emphasises that you’re as honest as possible - and a certain humour with it,”

And, at that point, I think of the common response to Teller’s new self-portraits: people feel bemusement, even awkwardness, at their apparent lack of guile. Their apparent mocking tone. As he explains them, I’m starting to ask what’s wrong with me: why on earth, finding that the nudes weren’t posed proudly and flatteringly like Greek statues, or made more mysterious by tricks of shadows and light, did I think Teller was somehow slighting himself? Perhaps its because I’m English.

As well as our preoccupation with The War and the World Cups, the other thing that really struck Teller when he first moved to London “was that it felt for me very strange how uneasy English and American people are within themselves, within their bodies, which didn’t really exist how I grew up. When I lived in Munich from the age of 20 to 22 and shared a flat with different people, you’d walk naked through the kitchen to make yourself a cup of coffee. And this was such a shock for me, arriving in this country and how uneasy they feel with their body. Like, you fuck a woman - you fuck their brains out - and then when she goes to the toilet, she puts a towel round her because she’s embarrassed. For me that’s a big shock.”

When he first arrived on the frontline of British fashion consciousness through magazines such as this one, and before he started becoming a regular fixture in US Vogue, Calvin Klein campaigns, Hamnett and the rest, Teller was one of that generation of fashion photographers most frequently charged with immorality and irresponsibility - accused of glamourising heroin, eating disorders, grunge, dirt. Yet that looks even more misplaced in retrospect. What Teller’s doing now, at least, is not about dangerously skewing others’ self-images or misrepresenting misery - it’s quite the opposite. It’s about drawing your attention to things you might otherwise avoid. Even in Teller’s own family, the pictures have helped build a spirit of warts-and-all honesty...

He explains: “The relationship I have with my mother now, and photographing her in front of the grave, it opens up discussions, and dealings with the conversations with my mother about, when I was little, how we lived and about suicide and talking about it, so it’s something positive, it brought us more together, because people might never discuss

that. Some families never go near certain subjects because it's too hurtful or too close or too dangerous. But within doing these photographs, I also wanted to open up a conversation with her about certain things about life."

When Teller talks about his photographs and what they reveal, he often makes the process sound less like one of artistic composition than one of simply framing the unavoidable truth. Like when he remembers taking Lola, the daughter of Teller and stylist Venetia Scott, to the zoo. "When I was there with this elephant, the keeper fed him a banana, and the way that elephant was eating the banana fascinated me. So I said, Well, can you do that again?" and I suddenly found myself creeping into his mouth with his trunk right here [rearing up], his mouth here, and I was right in there. But I got so excited about that whole thing because it looked so abstract. It nearly looked like a hermaphrodite, where the tongue looked like an enormous huge penis and throat looked like a vagina in one go. I just thought. 'This is insane!' and I suddenly looked up and thought, Fucking hell, if he drops his trunk I'm fucking dead.' So I got out of it and got him fed another banana."

The elephant's pink, juicy mouth is in the Lehmann Maupin exhibition alongside a frozen dog and a brown bear. The equally suggestive stalagmites represented on these pages will be there too. There's a pregnant Kate Moss, Björk and baby, Willem Dafoe, Stephanie Seymour with her bum in the air. There are the incredible, vast prints of the women who actually buy haute couture which Teller first took for W, who look frozen in their ornate outfits and embalmed in their skin and are even more severe and imposing in their new, larger-than-life forms. But there's a fleshy vigour to everything, a logic to the relationship between all of these different forms, and celebrity, fashion and basic biology are all subsumed under the undeniable connections that unfold before your eyes. "Everything in a wide sense is a kind of a self-portrait," Teller says. "It's just the way you see things and you're curious about certain things and just excited about them."

Which, presumably, is why Teller still feels the urge to justify his work in fashion, even though it only takes up a fraction of the time it used to. Ever since his 1998 book *Go-Sees* sent up the conventions of the photographer-model relationship, he's been pulling away from fashion. His twice-annual work for Marc Jacobs is the only high-profile campaign he's been strongly connected with in recent years, but he's even keen to make sure that everybody has that in perspective.

"It's important not to shy away from commercial work," he says, by way of explaining why he makes a point of including it in his art exhibitions when he feels it belongs. "Certain pictures work in their own right and for me it's exciting to work to objectives or being asked to photograph Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore [for Jacobs] because I like

their music. The reason why I do it, it's not only for the money terms and because I'm so fascinated about that Marc Jacobs handbag, but I'm certainly excited about spending some time with them, and doing some work, that it makes sense for Marc Jacobs but it also makes sense for my own self. In a way I do very little pictures, even if it seems for some people that I do a lot of work. It's lust that the work I do gets recognised as such. Like, other photographers, instead of shooting a Marc Jacobs campaign, they shoot fucking 15 of them, but you wouldn't necessarily know who that is, who done it. But I do little but spend more time on it and people notice it. "

And just as Teller has moved on to packing and choosing fashion work so that it fits around his art, so he says that he now has the confidence to do what he wants without fear. "In terms of fashion photography, most of them have too much respect for the client, the model and all that," he says. "That's not how I wanna work. I wanna have fun with it. I wanna explore it. I wanna use them to give them the best possible reflection of how I see the world.' Which, presumably, is why he will be fiddling with his model galleries until the very last minute — and why the end result will be worth every last drop of effort.

"You develop more confidence within the world, as a human being, about taking risks," says Teller. "And on one level not taking things so seriously, and then again, taking things so seriously that you can allow yourself to have fun with it. I have that chance of making that fucking space my own - let's go in there and piss in the corner if it feels great." Teller pauses for a moment, perhaps contemplating legions of Teller-endorsed piss-artists, before amending that with the all-important criterion which has been so fruitful for his own work. "If I do believe it's the good thing to do..."

Don't Suffer Too Much is at Milton Keynes Gallery until October 26. Juergen Teller: Daddy You're So Cute is at Lehmann Maupin, New York from September 13-October 18. Two books will be published in October by Steidl.