

IMAGE IN PROGRESS

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Art in... dust

03 EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

WITH PHOTOGRAPHERS: GUIDO ARGENTINI - NICK BRANDT - TOBY BURROWS
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ph: Guido Argentini t: Emanuele Cucuzza

“The book is where everything begins.”

What is the ultimate objective of a photo project? **Guido Argentini** has no doubts and in an exclusive interview he tells us about his relationship with models, publishers, collectors... and the freedom to publish one's own books!



Linda sitting on a broken tv - ph: Guido Argentini

Aneta caressed by the window's light - ph: Guido Argentini





Petra smoking a cigarette - ph: Guido Argentini



Guido Argentini

was born in Florence, Italy. He studied Medicine for three years at the University of Florence. At the age of

23 he decided to turn his passion for photography into a profession and started to shoot fashion and beauty. He has lived in the USA, in Los Angeles, since the 1990s. His work has been published by some of the leading magazines in the world, such as “MarieClaire”, “Men’sHealth”, “Panorama”, “Playboy”, “Vogue”, “Max”, “Maxim” and many others. So far he has published four books: “Silvereye” (teNeues, 2003), an exquisite series of studio

and landscape nudes, a reflection of the artist’s great personal passion for sculpture and dance; “Private Rooms” (teNeues, 2005), an entirely different type of personal journey, one where eroticism and beauty are clearly inseparable in a unique ‘feminine universe’, in the intimacy of closed rooms, ancient villas, modern apartments and many hotels, from the most elegant to the most squalid insignificant hourly-rate motels; “Reflections” (teNeues, 2007), a vast collection of photographs of women looking at themselves in mirrors: a sort of unconscious research about the woman who studies herself, falls in love, and gets lost in her own image; “Shades of a Woman” (2010) includes six chapters, two in black and white and four in color, taken indoor and outdoor all over the world.

Tin alone in her room - ph: Guido Argentini



The beginning.

You started shooting photographs at the age of 17, yet you waited until you were 23, when you stopped studying medicine, to become a professional photographer. What made you confident that you could have a career in this field?

“When you make such a drastic change in your life you must believe in what you are doing, even when everybody around you tells you that “you are crazy”. Believing in yourself is the key to success in life.”

It must have been tough for you to move to the United States, especially when you did not speak the language...

“I came to Los Angeles in the early 1990s. I had a friend there but I ended up staying at her place for one night only. I had studied English for just a few months at a school in Florence, then it was a learning, “on the street” process. At the very beginning I was shooting portfolios for models and always trying to get pictures for myself that, eventually, would be part of my first book, “Silvereye”.”

Did you ever think about going back?

“No, I have never thought I would go back. Ever since I came to America I have felt a sense of freedom that I did not have in the country where I was born and where I grew up.”



Will you hear my voice? - ph: Guido Argentini

Why? Was it because America is a special place, because you were far away from Italy or simply because you were far away from the restrictions imposed by your milieu?

“None of these things. I believe everybody can find the place where he or she feels comfortable. There is no such thing as “the perfect place” to be in this world, it is always subjective.”

What advice would you give to young people who are considering the possibility to relocate abroad?

“I believe that Italy is not the best place to be if you want to be an artist. I always suggest to everybody to live abroad for a long period of time, at least a few years. It always expands your mental horizons. Even if you end up going back to Italy, after your experience, you will see things from a different perspective.”

How did your career as a photographer unfold? What type of commissions did you get at the beginning that allowed you to earn more money?

“At the very beginning it is always a mix of things that can create a possible income, model portfolios, a few editorials... I have done very little work for fashion catalogues in my life.”

Do you remember how you approached magazines at the beginning?

“I just sent them pictures. Magazines do not always

reply but, if you send something they like, they will eventually get back to you. The problem today is that too many people want the same thing. Everybody thinks that he or she is a photographer...”

Have you ever worked with agencies?

“Also on this matter it’s all subjective, an agent that is good for a photographer may not be good for another... The key is to be represented by an agent or agency that loves your work and believes in you.”

You have always considered the other photographers’ work as a useful source of inspiration, but also a way to monitor what has already been done, so as to avoid copying it. Which photographers inspired you the most?

“I never had a hero photographer that I followed. I loved and still love “good work”. So I appreciate the photographs of Avedon, Guy Bourdin, Newton and Irving Penn. They are very different from one another but they are all great photographers.”

In your opinion, who are the most interesting contemporary photographers specializing in art nudes?

“I could not say... I don’t like the “nude” work of many contemporary photographers... I like more the work of a few fashion photographers today.”

And what about magazines? Is there any that you think we should follow?

“Italian Vogue used to be at the end of the 80s

Ananta the Infinite space - ph: Guido Argentini



and all 90s an amazing magazine. The editorials there were great, same with French Vogue in the 70s and 80s... Today I cannot find any magazine that really “fulfills my eyes”... Sad but true. Every magazine that tried in the past to create an artistic photographic publication specialized in “fine art nudes” ended up closing very soon. “Not only BW” in Australia, “Photographer’s collectors” in the US... they both lasted only a few years.”

Photography.

“I never studied photography, I learned by looking at the work of the photographers I loved growing up. The first camera is like the first love, you never forget it: Olympus OM-1. Then Nikon FM2 and Nikon F3 and I still have these cameras...”

Like us, you think that the medium is not important, but one of your peculiarities is that you work alone, without assistants, and this makes our readers all the more curious. To make the model feel comfortable it helps not to have people around, yet it is not easy in terms of organization. So, what is your favorite travel equipment?

“I use an analog Hasselblad with an 80mm and

a digital Canon 5d Mark II with 85 f1.2 or 35 f1.4 and no lights. I stopped using lights a few years ago. I just use what is available in the room where I shoot, a window, a desk lamp... Never liked reflective panels and I used flashes just for selective projects. I try not to use a tripod when I can. It anchors you to a place and you end up “missing” on shooting from different angles.”

Film and/or digital?

“I have been shooting digital for 2 years now. Very little film these days. Digital, if you know how to “treat” it, can give you amazing results. By the way, I always scan my films and then I work in Adobe Photoshop the way I used to work in the darkroom. It is just the most sophisticated darkroom ever existed!”

Do you do your own postproduction?

“I always do my own postproduction.”

The market increasingly requires also the use of videos; how are you getting organized on this front?

“I am working on a documentary at the moment. A film on myself and my photography. My film will have pieces shot on dv, some in dv hd, some with Canon mark II and some with RED camera. I will become a film maker when I have a story to tell.”

Oleg Dou photographed by Katerina Bekina



Looking at the new horizon - ph: Guido Argentini

The models.

You constantly refer to the concept of beauty, the focus of your research, as a way to attract attention so that you can tell your stories to a larger audience. However, today a good part of contemporary art seems to want to do away with this attraction for beauty, taking it for granted and even considering it inexpensive...

“My photography has explored different nuances of feminine beauty over the years. In my first book, “Silvereye”, the body was the main subject, the face of the model was always hidden on purpose, to put the accent on the shapes of the female forms. I was trying to be more a “bidimensional sculptor” than a photographer.

Sculpture is one of the greatest forms of art, in my opinion, and Brancusi is the one artist that inspired me immensely. In “Private Rooms” and “Reflections” I started to explore the eroticism of women from a male’s point of view. In both books the main goal and the main subject was the beauty of the women. You can see beautiful women also in my latest book, “Shades of a woman”, but in most of the images they are just an element to tell a story. Beauty should not be the only goal, it should be an element that helps to attract the attention of people but my photography must go beyond that. Most conceptual photography is often, esthetically, “not beautiful”. It looks almost like that what is not beautiful could be more intellectually in-



teresting. Look at the work of Cindy Sherman for example. She has now a retrospective at the MOMA in NY and one of her pictures 18x24cm (8x10") edition of 10 was sold a couple of weeks ago for \$750,000.00 at Sotheby's. Are Sherman's pictures about beauty? Everybody has a different approach when it comes to art. My approach, from now on, is to still use beauty in my photography but just as one of the elements I need in order to be able to tell a story. A concept must be supporting the new body of work."

Have you ever realized or regretted baring through your images a part of you that you did not know or want to come to the surface?

"Every time you take pictures and you publish them and make them available to the public

you show a part of yourself. If I did not want to show who I am I would not publish my work. I always believe in "sharing beauty". To take pictures just for myself would be a very selfish act. If any artist kept his or her work "private" there would be not art at all."

What meaning do you attribute to the word "decency"?

"The meaning I give is not important. Everybody has a different concept and idea of that. It is the same with Love. Is not "what it is" but always "what we make of it"..."

In one of your videos you said that the most important things in selecting the most suitable models are attitude, artistic fit and the sharing of the project. In fact, you consider these



Will I be beautiful forever? - ph: Guido Argentini

aspects as fundamental to achieve what you call the “unpredictable magic” of certain photos...

“It is true, is not easy to find the right subject to work with. Often it is easier to create beautiful images with a woman that is close to you in life. Intimacy is there because you are a couple and, usually, women that like me like my work as well. I’m searching now for the next muse, but I believe it is like in love, you can search for it, it just “happens” or it does not...”

Even though they may not be paramount, you certainly have some objective physical characteristics...

“No, I do not have any physical characteristics that I look for. I love beautiful legs but the height of a model has never been an issue. Proportions are more important.”

How is your model research or selection changing? It is easier now compared to when you started?

“No, it is much harder these days. Now that I am looking for women that “understand” what I am doing and they should “love” being part of an artistic project it is more difficult to find the right subjects for my work. Unfortunately women are often more beautiful when they are young but they are more “understanding” and passionate about art when they are older. So the two elements

do not go well, most of the times, together.”

Do you ever rely on agencies or are the applications submitted through your website sufficient to meet your requirements?

“Very rarely have agencies have helped me to find models for an artistic project. They just do not care and are always interested just in commercial projects that can generate money.”

If we may ask, when you work for a project of yours, in percentage terms, how many times do you pay your models? How often do you get paid for your books? Do you ever work in tfp/tfcd?

“I started not to pay my models a few years ago. This way I know who really wants to be part of an artistic project... Many people think that I make money selling books, but, unfortunately, I make very little money with the sale of my published books. People should know that.”

However, models do need a few photographs for their book, for the composit and their website. How do you deal with that?

“Difficult subject... The pictures I shoot are never “for a portfolio” or to be displayed on Facebook. Most girls do not really understand this. I try always to shoot something they can eventually use for themselves.”



The books.

On your website you say that the pleasure of publishing a book is underpinned by the desire to tell something and share it. Have you ever felt misunderstood?

"Every time you make something "public", publishing a book that will be sold in a store or on line, you will have always a mixed reaction: Somebody will understand my pictures and somebody will not."

After four books, besides the beauty and sophistication of the images, what are in your opinion the recurring themes in your research?

"To tell a story is my goal. And to tell a story with one image only is not always easy. You do not have movement, you do not have words, you do not have music. The beauty of this is that everything is left to your fantasy and imagination. What happened before that shot and what will happen after is all left to the mind of the person that looks at the images. What is the woman in the picture thinking? What does she feel? For every viewer a different story..."

Are there different limits between what you

can publish in a book and what you can show in an exhibition?

"I never had a problem publishing or displaying in exhibitions my pictures and I never wanted to show something that was borderline pornographic. I believe that when there is "a concept behind" a book or a show any eroticism is justified."

How did your collaboration with teNeues come into being for your first book, Silvereve?

"Of course teNeues did not know me, so I contacted him and we met in person in Munich. He loved the project."

What type of arrangements can a photographer hope to make with a publisher of that caliber?

Let me give you some scenarios: are book printing costs totally paid for or are they split? Are copies given for free to the artist who can sell them personally or what percentage discount is typically given so that the artist can sell copies through his or her website? Does the author get a percentage of sales or is s/he paid a lump sum?

"In my three books I had each time a different agreement. There are no specific rules. It is all about the agreement which can be reached between a publisher and an artist."





Let there be light - ph: Guido Argentini



I shall be free - ph: Guido Argentini

Are there any guarantees in terms of print quality? Is the printer chosen by the publisher or by the photographer?

“The printer is chosen by the publisher. The photographer should be present for the printing process and I have always been there...”

Was it always the same printer?

“Every one of my books has been printed by a different printer.”

How involved is the artist, or how free is the artist, in choosing the photos and when is the choice made by the publisher?

“I always chose all my pictures and made my own layout.”

The same publisher published two more books of yours. What does it mean for a photographer

to publish with teNeus, also in financial terms?

“Between the time I published “Silvereye” (2002) and the time I did “Shades of a woman” (2010) the publishing industry changed drastically. Publishers have become more difficult in terms of investing money in new projects.”

Is that why you decided to publish your own books?

“I just printed “Shades of a woman” with the help of a sponsor but the book is now distributed by Damiani. You need a publisher if you want the books to be in bookstores worldwide. The goal is to have as many people as possible access my books.”

The production of books and print boxes for collectors with sophisticated packaging implies a long and accurate search for the right suppliers...

The Immobile is in the moving - ph: Guido Argentini



“It is a long and difficult process. The best printers for photography books are probably in Northern Italy. I printed my books with different companies and I had good and bad experiences. I’m still looking for the “perfect printer”...”

Is there a particular aspect of book printing that you find most satisfactory?

“When I print books they must be in offset printing. Unless you make a dummy in a few copies, digital is way too expensive. I used different papers and I like the spot varnish but it all depends on the project. What is important are images more than size, the paper or the way you varnish them.”

Where did you find the right supplier for the packaging?

“I have one in Italy and one on East Coast that I

work with. I’m trying to develop the relationship with the Italian one at the moment...”

In addition to your website, your books are sold in selected galleries worldwide. Do you have a distributor or have you established direct ties that you manage personally?

“With galleries I work directly but they don’t sell most of the books... Books sell through bookstores and Amazon, where you can buy “Private Rooms”, “Reflections”, “Shades of a woman” and the limited edition of “Silvereye” and “Shades of a woman”.”

Have you ever advertised your books on search engines or social networks?

“Just on Facebook when my last book came out.”



Heilmarmene - ph: Guido Argentini

The exhibitions.

“I have several galleries worldwide but the one that I work more closely with is my Gallery in Japan, Galerie Sho Contemporary Art (www.g-sho.com).”

What are your most successful markets?

“Probably USA and Germany.”

How do you like to set up your photographs?

“I used to make Lambda Chromogenic prints in the past but I switched to Archival pigment ink because I get much better quality in both, color and BW. Colors are more real and vivid and BW looks very much as the fiber base prints I used to make in the darkroom. I like different types of

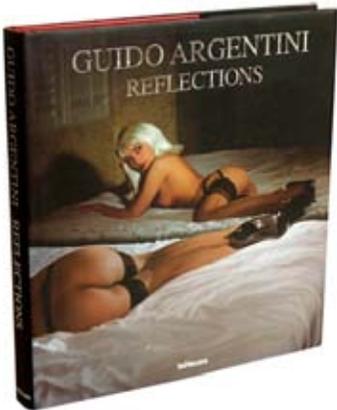
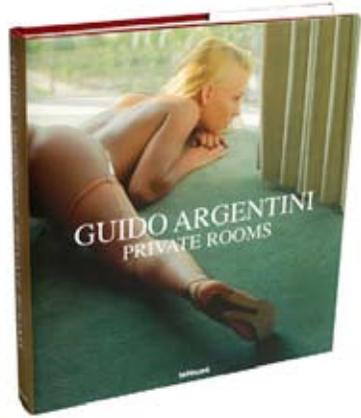
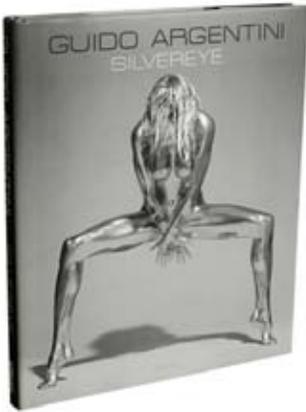
frame and display. It all depends on the images. I recently made polished Aluminum frames for the silver collection and they look amazing. I’m also working with an artisan in Florence on a series of very special frames in wood and antique gold finishing for a series of images I’m working on at the moment.”

Are you for or against glass or plexiglass on your photos?

“I always have plexi on my pictures, always using a spacer so that plexi and print never touch.”

Have you developed any friendship or some sort of collaboration with your photo collectors?

“I have one collector in Texas that loves my work and he flew me first class there to meet him in



person a few years ago. He has been a collector for 7 years already. He has probably the biggest collection of nude photography in the world..."

Do you ever take private commissions?

"Yes I did it in the past and I'm willing to do it in the future, if the idea and the money are good."

When you work for a new photo project, are you more naturally intrigued by the idea of a book or that of an exhibition?

"The book is where everything begins. The exhibition is a follow-up to a book..."

If you could make a wish, in which museum would you like to exhibit your photos?

"MOMA in NY and Modern Tate in London. In a few years..."

You say that you did not want to work on the recognizability of your photos from a technical point of view. What are the traits you would like to be remembered for one hundred years from now?

"I'd love to be remembered for who I was and for what I told people with my work. I'm just beginning to do what will be my best work..."

www.guidoargentini.com