

ALBERT WATSON: ALWAYS ON

BY AYSEGUL SERT, PHOTOGRAPHY ALBERT WATSON

FEATURES

As the story goes, Albert Watson got hooked on photography when his wife surprised him with a camera on his 21st birthday. Essentially self-taught, he made a name for himself in Los Angeles, then in New York, and ultimately worldwide. Nothing and no one escaped his lens — not Christy Turlington, Naomi Campbell, Alfred Hitchcock, Sean Penn, Mick Jagger, or Beyoncé. Not the entire 1980s, not fashion, movie posters, landscapes, and certainly not the covers of Vogue or Rolling Stone. Hailing from Scotland, he grew up in a mining town in a household of humble means. In line with what Watson describes as a Scottish trait, he worked hard and persevered. Blind in his right eye since birth, Watson would not be deterred from becoming a master at the art of capturing images. And though he may not be hopping from one plane to the next and traversing oceans and continents at the pace he once did, he sure isn't stopping. With a current exhibition at Hasted Kraeutler Gallery in New York, along with two new books, UFO (Unified Fashion Objectives, Abrams) and Strip Search (PQ Blackwell), the legendary photographer is going strong.

Venice: After decades in photography, what keeps you motivated?

Albert Watson: I discovered something that I'm passionate about. I'm lucky. I found that I was quite good at it; when you find something that you are good at you tend to do it again and again. Then you become more confident, you can work on it more, and get something out of it. When you are 20 years old and you have chocolate for the first time, you go, "It's delicious!" Forty years later, somebody gives you a piece of chocolate and it still tastes delicious. Photography is like that to me. It still tastes good. I'm not bored with it. When I'm behind the camera, time disappears.

What makes a good photograph?

You need some memorability, something that holds the attention. A good photograph should have some kind of charisma. You also need good timing and a very good support team to work with, who helps you organize. You are only as good as the team you set up. My images are about graphics and precision. They are not accidental; they're pristinely composed. A photograph should tell a story, so that when you look at it you'd want to explore more.

Times are changing rapidly. How do you feel about digital versus film, and about color versus black & white?

I do shoot some digital but mainly I shoot on film. It's like driving an automatic car versus one where you have to shift gears. It's still a car, it's still driving. Just like it's still a camera and you still have to be the one making the photograph. It's not because the method is different, that it means it's going to take a better picture; you still very much need the eye. Color and black & white are different pleasures. My approach is classic. What's important is that pictures have some emotion in them and that they hold up to time, based on their strength and simplicity.

You inspire many. What inspires you?

I'm always looking, I'm always on. It's like you are working almost all the time; you're observing lights and shapes constantly. I get inspiration from different sources — going to the museum, looking at a book by Gauguin or Weegee, watching the light coming down on a glass of water on a table. Anything can click something in your brain. You make a mental note of those visual instances and use it sometime later. I worked a lot, I enjoyed it, I was able to do it. I think that speed suited my personality.

What was it like growing up in Scotland?

The educational system was quite good. It made me interested in things, which is one of the main things that education should do. A good education awakens your curiosity. I come from a poor background. I was 17 years old when I left home. We have this almost Scottish Presbyterian work ethic: the way to God is through work. In other words, God will reward you if you work, and I did. I still do.

Looking back, what lessons did you learn?

It's important early on to get the technique out of the way so that later you don't have to think about it, so that it becomes a part of you. It's like driving a car. At the beginning you are concerned about a lot of details; you keep checking the mirrors, the brakes. You become a little better at it after three months, much better after six months, and within years you drive without thinking. Photography is a little like that. You have to look at photographs, find out how they were lit, how they were printed, and by doing so you fill that reservoir of knowledge which is experience. And experience helps you when you are faced with that moment of taking a photograph. You should inject into the image a certain amount of intensity and charisma. You need to get something special out of it, something unusual. If you put that as the intention, it will come out in the picture. What you get is what you give.

If you are in New York City prior to December 4th, stop by Hasted Kraeutler Gallery at 537 West 24th Street to see Albert Watson's current exhibition. For more information visit www.albertwatson.net