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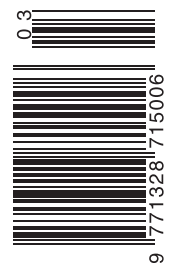
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Christian Blanchard On Fashion Photography's Creative Edge



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Fashion Film Pho

Christian Blanchard

Daring images driven by a fresh creative vision have helped Christian Blanchard make a name for himself in fashion photography by the tender age of 30. Interview by Alison Stieven-Taylor.

The somewhat vacillating world of fashion isn't for everyone, but one Australian photographer who seems to have successfully cut through the miasma of hairspray, fabric(ation) and egos to make his mark is Christian Blanchard, an almost obscenely talented 30-year-old who's breathing new life into the field. Of course, Christian Blanchard won't admit to such grandeur, he's surprisingly self-deprecating and enormously likeable, reminding me of my eldest son, Jackson, who is 19. I voice this thought when we first meet in Melbourne. He shoots me a grin, "Why, because he's a little shit?" he laughs, his voice echoing mischief. But it's his tenacity and creativity rather than his irreverence that has seen Christian breakthrough into an intensely competitive field. And he's collected some heavy-hitting friends along the way including Christian Blanckaert, former vice-president of Hermès International and undoubtedly fashion royalty.

I ask how he knows Blanckaert who, I assume, is hard to gain access to, with no doubt innumerable minders blocking the way. Christian laughs and explains. "We met at L'Oreal Fashion Week in Melbourne. By chance I bumped into him, a little old man. He says, 'Hey guys, what are you doing?' And we were like, you want to come and party? We didn't know who he was. We introduced ourselves and when he got to me he says, 'I know you, you is me and I'm the same name as you', and I'm like... shit, this guy knows who I am!"

Christian continues. "It is so refreshing to find that this man who had such an important position within the fashion community globally is so grounded and down to earth and fun. He's just this beautiful, sweet, golden person and I think that's what makes someone rise through the community. As pretentious and vacuous as it can be, you need to have that approachable quality where you can connect. No matter where you are from or who you are, it is important to be able to bond with people from all walks of life... and now we're brothers."

Right Place And Time

Blanckaert is an impressive connection, but Christian Blanchard seems to frequently be in the right place at



the right time – an email from him at the end of last year was full of news of his partying ways in New York where he was attending various fashion week events and hanging out with the likes of Nicky Hilton and Chloe Sevigne. At the Melbourne Spring Fashion Week screening in 2010 of his debut short

film *Animalia* – which was shot for the Melbourne label Trimapee – we talk about the film which was shot on Nikon D3S and D3X D-SLRs. The storyline is an abstract take on the mating rituals of animals. Male and female characters, reminiscent of pre-historic birds, act out a life and death scenario where in the

tography Fusion



end the triumphant female kills her mate in the heat of copulation. It's a startling film, the sparse soundtrack complimenting the ethereal mood of the largely black and white imagery.

I'm intrigued by the simplicity of the premise and the powerful punch it packs. But I'm not surprised when the powers-that-be declare the content not suitable for general exhibition. Although there does seem to be a double standard at work here, with images of barely-clad, emaciated models and exposed breasts seemingly par for the course (there is no nudity in Christian Blanchard's film), but the suggestion of sex, even with feathered friends, was obviously too much.

New Challenges

Later that week we lunch at Captains of Industry, one of Melbourne's fantastic hidden cafés off Little Bourke Street, just down the hill from Christian's city studio. Over vegetarian baguettes and strong coffee he talks about a new project called *Arcadian Spirits*.

The basic premise is to throw a bunch of young models together, both male and female, in an old hippy commune on the outskirts of Melbourne, take

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away all forms of technology and see what happens over a weekend. This organic process will be a test of willpower for Christian as his natural inclination to step in and direct proceedings.

I ask how the weekend will possibly unfold.

"We'll have an open door policy, but the models can stipulate what level of nudity they are comfortable with, whether they're in a relationship... that kind of stuff... so we can capture really intimate moments," he says matter-of-factly. Then his face splits into a grin as

he adds "Maybe we'll have the follow up movie of the birth of the child from that project". He plans to shoot on VHS rather than film because "...it has this amazing documentary quality, it is becoming the new Super 8".

The conversation moves back to still photography and his recent move to Sydney, or as I put it, his "abandonment of Melbourne". He laughs and says I am not alone in thinking that, but cracking the Sydney market is an important step in his career in fashion. And another opportunity to expand his body of work



which has included spreads for Mimco, Amstel, L'Oreal and Nobody Denim.

"They don't really know me in Sydney, so in some ways, it is like starting again. It's a challenge, and I'm looking forward to it."

Igniting The Passion

Originally from Perth, Christian Blanchard studied photography at high school and then later at Mount Lawley TAFE, but after a year-and-a-half of listening to lecturers who weren't necessarily at the leading edge, he left keen to get started. For a year he did work experience at a studio working with three photographers. It was a lean time, the work without remuneration, and he eked out a living as best he could. But it was also a time in his life when he says his eternal flame of passion for photography was lit. And he hasn't looked back.

He laughs when he talks about the younger generation of photographers who want to work with him, telling how the conversation inevitably comes down to the question "When am I going to be paid?"

"And I'm like, when are you what? You have to be prepared to do stuff for nothing and to learn as much as you can, but they don't get that".

After staying with the same studio for three years – Christian progressed from work experience to paid assistant to fulltime photographer. In 2003 he moved on, eager for the next opportunity which, in this instance, was Melbourne. For a few years he shuffled back and forth between Perth and Melbourne as projects dictated. Then he "...ran away to New York. I wanted to see the world".

After New York came Paris, London, Tokyo and Thailand.



"I wasn't working, just running amuck, taking photos, actually going through that whole self-exploration thing and working at odd jobs to make ends meet."

After getting the travel bug out of his system – for the time being, at least – he threw himself into work back in Melbourne.

"I'm a 'yes man' – when a job comes in, I'll take it; to keep myself alive, to keep buying new toys. But I still like to take time off. Last year I took three months and worked on my own stuff, but I also had time away from the camera. It helps me to refresh." A recent personal project was an Alice in Wonderland inspired fantasy

shoot with twin sisters who were interchangeable as 'Alice'. The images are very slick, the production values complex and both the models and sets highly stylised.

Even though I know this story intimately, seeing it through Christian's eyes gives me somewhat of a new perspective.

"I work to my own vision and build on my own story," he states by way of explanation.

Asked if he were to strip down to the basics, he doesn't hesitate.

"My laptop and my camera bag with two cameras; the one I use all the time, the Nikon D3X and the other, a D300, which is a few years old and used as a back-up".



New Challenges

The next time I see Christian Blanchard is in Melbourne at midnight. He is in the bowels of the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre, in the pump room underneath the main diving pool where he is shooting another short film for Trimapee, this time an underwater story involving birth. Time and again the models float to the surface – the man in white, the woman in black – oxygen bubbles and tendrils of fabric trail in their wake. Christian shoots the scene through glass panels.

The noise in the pump room is deafening. I step in over-sized gumboots, dodging puddles in the dim light to reach Christian who is alert despite the late hour and calm in the face of a tight deadline. They have to wrap the shoot by 3.00 am and get their gear out before the early morning swimmers arrive. He has no time to linger.



“They don’t really know me in Sydney, so in some ways, it is like starting again. It’s a challenge, and I’m looking forward to it.”

As we make our way through the tunnels to the main poolroom above, I ask him about pushing boundaries and keeping it fresh. He replies, “What’s kept me going year after year, shoot after shoot? I don’t like comfort. The moment things become easy I want to find a new challenge because I don’t ever want to plateau and feel like I can’t learn anymore, that I can’t get any better because then you become complacent and lazy and lose the passion in the process.” With Christian Blanchard you get the feeling there’s little chance of that ever happening.

*Alison Stieven-Taylor is an author and photographer based in Melbourne. For more information visit www.realityillusion.com and www.astloveslife.blogspot.com. Her latest book, *Rock Chicks*, profiles the leading female rock stars from the 1960s to today. **AP***



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