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WHAT MAKES AN ICONIC PORTRAIT?

Vol 157
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+ Zed Nelson uncovers the ugly truth behind our obsession with youth & beauty

Right: Jean Shrimpton and Terence Stamp, 1963 © Terry O'Neill.

Far right: The Rolling Stones, 1969 © Willie Christie.



Celebrity skins

The lingering allure of classic celebrity portraits has made The Little Black Gallery's current show a sell-out success, finds [Diane Smyth](#)

I Want It All, currently showing at The Little Black Gallery in Chelsea, has been a run-away hit, claims gallery co-founder Ghislain Pascal, selling out quickly into its six-week run. He puts its success down to a number of factors, including collectors' re-emerging confidence as the economy picks up, but also the kudos of the photographers involved and – especially – the subjects of their shots.

As the show's subtitle makes explicit ('An exhibition of photographs of film stars, rock legends, cooks and queens'), it's focused on modern history's most iconic,

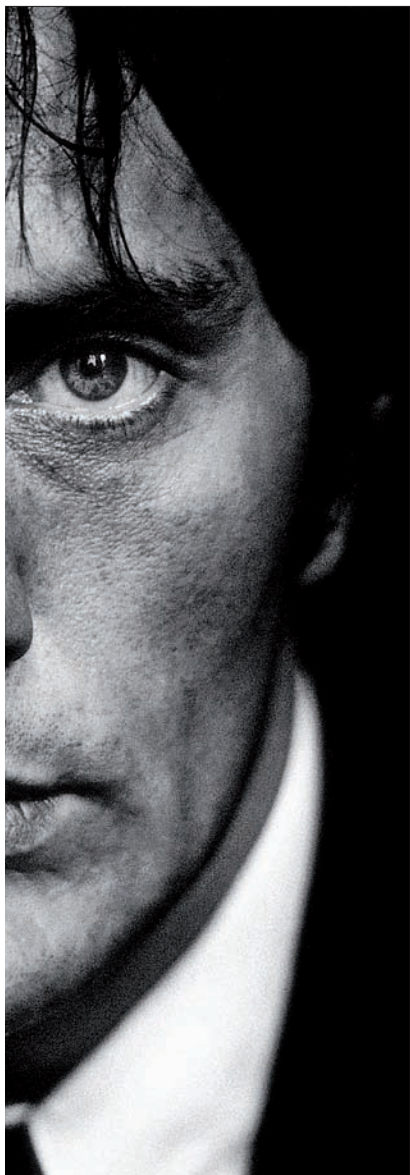
bankable characters – including James Dean, Mick Jagger, Marco Pierre White and Elizabeth II, and 'really seems to have captured the public imagination'.

'The prints have flown out of the gallery,' says Pascal. 'And in this case it's definitely because of what's in the pictures. People are coming in who are fans of the Rolling Stones or Marilyn or whoever it might be, then they're hearing the names of the photographers and realising they've heard of them too. Many of the images we could have sold two or three times over.'

The photographers involved

include some of the giants of British photography such as Terry O'Neill, Barry Lategan and Gered Mankowitz, as well as the late Bob Carlos Clarke, whom Pascal used to represent and whose wife co-founded The Little Black Gallery with him. And while the participants are naturally all extremely talented photographers, they're happy to concede that the sheer verve of their subjects is essential in the making this show. 'Anybody at the top of his profession in the public eye has charisma,' says Mankowitz. 'They have something special that draws people to them.'

The famed rock photographer is exhibiting what many regard as the defining image of Jimi Hendrix (see cover), taken in 1967 when the photographer was just 20 years old and the guitar legend was just starting out. 'He had just had his first hit record when I shot him,' says Mankowitz. 'And I'd seen him in November 1966 at a special showcase to introduce him to the London industry. He blew away everyone who met him. He was very charismatic and he looked wonderful – he took to the dandyish, foppish fashion of the day like a duck to water. He also had



a certain wildness to him, and in those days to see a black man who looked like that was really something.'

Modest and affable

But he was also modest and affable, and Mankowitz says one of the main challenges of the two portrait sessions he shot with him was getting him to stop laughing. 'We all thought that rock stars should be moody, sexy and serious – we didn't discuss it, it was what we believed,' he says. 'It was a move away from the smiling, friendly pop stars of the late 1950s and early 1960s. One of the problems with The Beatles when they started was that everyone liked them, even your grandma. Jimi had a different image that appealed to music lovers. What you got with Jimi was very much what you saw – he didn't have hair and make up, I didn't have an assistant. It was just me and the band.'

Willie Christie, whose behind-



the-scenes shots of The Rolling Stones are also on show at The Little Black Gallery, agrees. 'The 1960s was against all that [styling and make up], and the Stones just took it one step further,' he says. 'They had this incredible energy – they still have it, and they're still the bad boys. They have a real rawness, and their music does too.'

Christie was also just 20 when he took his shots, shooting the Stones at a recording session in the Apple studio in 1969, shortly after Brian Jones' death. 'A journalist friend got the gig and he brought me in,' says Christie. 'I was very lucky – I'd been

assisting David Anthony for a year but I really didn't have much experience of shooting anything.'

'It was quite dark [in the recording studio], the group wouldn't allow any lights and they were sitting in front of silver screens that bounced the light around,' he adds. 'So I shot it on ISO1200 and pushed it a stop. That was on the Friday or Saturday and *Melody Maker* needed the prints on Monday, so I had to process the film myself over the weekend. It was really scary – I was reading the instructions on the chemicals.'

Overawed by the band Christie

'The Stones had this incredible energy – they still have it, and they're still the bad boys. They have a real rawness, and their music does too.'



'Although the Queen's position makes her an icon, she's also got that essential x-factor – charisma.'

'tried to stay as unobtrusive as possible' in the studio. Mankowitz, by contrast, shot Hendrix in his studio, against a backdrop and lit 'as formally as I knew how to do at the time'. But both got to spend a considerable amount of time with the stars, and say it was an essential aspect of their work. 'The idea of going to a hotel and just getting 10 minutes with a subject is no good at all,' says Mankowitz. 'I feel you really need to get to know them. It was a different way of working then – they'd come to me at the studio and we'd work together.'

'Hendrix and the band arrived in the late morning and I fed them – that's what I always did in those days. We'd eat and hang out and talk. You can't photograph someone in spite of them, if they don't want to be photographed. You have to make something special together.'

Terry O'Neill, whose portraits of Dean Martin, David Bowie and Terence Stamp and Jean Shrimpton are all at Little Black, also agrees. He shot Bowie for years, building up a strong rapport through the star's many image changes. Stamp and Shrimpton, meanwhile, were personal friends, allowing him to take an unusually intimate picture of them. 'I'd known Stampie for two years when I took that shot,' he says. 'They were a couple at that stage, and I wanted to photograph them because they were the most beautiful faces of the 1960s. That's why I went in so close.'

But, he adds, it's the combination of knowing the subjects well and being open to the unexpected that really makes for iconic images. 'The shot of Bowie happened completely by accident – the dog just leapt in the air,' he says. 'It was just lucky I had the right lens and he stayed in the frame. Bowie didn't turn a hair, it was remarkable.'

Chris Levine, who's showing a rather different subject, agrees. He shot the Queen over two portrait sessions, tuning into her



Opposite: *Lightness of Being* (The Queen), 2004 © Chris Levine.

Left: Twiggy, 1966 © Barry Lategan.

breathing to build his empathy for her. But it was an off-guard moment that helped make the image he's showing at The Little Black Gallery. 'I created two images – *Equanimity* and *Lightness of Being*,' he says. 'Both titles are inspired by meditation.'

High expectations

'*Equanimity* was a commission from Jersey to celebrate 800 years of allegiance to the English Crown, so there were a lot of expectations. I was quite blasé about it until two weeks before the shoot, and then I was very nervous. But she was very interested in all the technology, and very well informed. She enjoyed the first sitting so much she let me have a second. *Lightness of Being* was just a moment – I asked her to rest her eyes between the images, and found a

moment of peace and stillness.'

Levine was surprised when the Palace asked what he wanted the Queen to wear, but he took the opportunity to style her as simply as possible, in unfussy clothes and a plain (though still lavish) crown. Seeing her arrive in the outfit was one of the most surreal aspects of the shoot, he laughs.

Levine has also been surprised by the sheer success of the *Lightness of Being* shot, which he says has been phenomenal. 'It's been published all over the world and is gaining momentum,' he says. 'I really didn't expect it. But I think it's pop culture. We live and breathe it, and images of celebrities strike a chord with all of us because they give us an insight into their lives.'

And, he adds, although the Queen's position makes her an icon, she's also got that essential

x-factor – charisma. 'We live with her image all the time, he says 'In fact it's often hard to remember that she's 80 because we're surrounded by images of her as a young woman. But she transcends her age. She's a real one-off.'

O'Neill almost echoes his words, describing Shrimpton as 'unlike any other girl'. 'Stars just have something, I don't know what it is,' he says. 'When they're around the room lights up.' **BJP**

On show

I Want It All – An exhibition of photographs of film stars, rock legends, cooks and queens is on show at The Little Black Gallery in London until 10 October. Visit thelittleblackgallery.com.