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'I don't get excited about clothes': Fashion photographer Miles Aldridge brings a realistic, bleak edge to his work

By Steve Appleford October 9, 2015



Miles Aldridge is a fashion photographer with an eye for the tragedy behind the glamour. The women in his pictures are extravagantly beautiful and impeccably dressed but often reside within scenes of domestic bliss minus the bliss.

His work is like a series of vivid single-frame movie melodramas: mothers and wives in the kitchen, in the nursery, in the bedroom, on the town, staring vacantly into the distance, lost in their thoughts and disappointments. In one picture, a blond wearing a slip points a pink hairdryer at her head like a gun. In another, a lipstick-stained cigarette is shoved angrily into an egg yolk, breakfast ruined.

"I don't get excited about clothes," says Aldridge, a youthful 50, sitting in his room at the Chateau Marmont, his morning tea and newspaper on the table. "If I can make someone

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buy a stupid dress, I'm not happy. That's not my job. If I can shake someone, that is enough for me. I want to give that feeling of 'What the hell am I looking at?'"

His pictures of super-saturated color and bleak undertones are on exhibition in "Miles Aldridge: The Pure Wonder," through Oct. 17 at the Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles. Much of the British photographer's work first appeared in the pages of Vogue Italia and was collected in his 2013 book "I Only Want You to Love Me" (Rizzoli).

"I go into my work as a fashion photographer to find an interesting way to record these dresses but hopefully record some of this stuff in the picture," he says, pointing to the newspaper front page. "Are we living in the period of plenty, anxiety, strife, peace, joy, delusion? I try to invest the work with those sort of feelings."

Aldridge drew crucial inspiration from some of the great fashion photographers of the 20th century, including Helmut Newton and Richard Avedon, but also the darkly vivid filmmaking of David Lynch and Alfred Hitchcock. He still remembers being unnerved in 1986 by the collision of bright and dark in his first viewing of Lynch's "Blue Velvet."

"How can you make roses, a blue sky and a picket fence so sinister? I'm still mystified by that," he recalls of the opening scene. "That film and the shower scene in 'Psycho' have stayed with me. It's probably why I do pictures like that." He points to a picture in the book of a woman lying in a hospital bed, a male figure in black leathers and motorcycle helmet watching over her like an angel of death.

A journalist once suggested in an interview that the picture was about rape, which surprised Aldridge. It had everything to do with the death of his mother, whose life raising him and his sister alone in London can be felt in many pictures.

The ideas tend to come before the clothes, inspired by dreams or daily life. One image of a full ketchup bottle shattered on the floor beside a pair of elegant shoes came after his then-wife brought him lunch on a tray and dropped the ketchup. He sketches the ideas like movie storyboards.

"I always meet with Vogue Italia after the Chanel show," he explains. "They've seen all the shows, I've seen none. I've done my drawings and my thoughts about what have you. I say I want to do a beauty salon or some ketchup on the floor or whatever, and they say, 'Why don't we do it with that collection...'. And that works really well. That is the old-school way of doing things."

The son of graphic designer Alan Aldridge — known for his work with the Beatles and Elton John — Miles first became a filmmaker, directing several music videos. His sister,

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Saffron Aldridge, was already a successful Ralph Lauren model, and one of his earliest photography assignments was to shoot her in a pregnant bride story. (His two younger sisters from his father's second marriage are also models.)

He's worked for magazines ever since, taking assignments for such varied international titles as GQ, the Face, Vogue Nippon and the New Yorker. He still prefers film over digital photography and despair over sentiment.

"When I got a chance to say something in my work, I wanted to undermine that world — all of this luxury will not make you happy," Aldridge explains, then adds of the pictures collected at Fahey/Klein, "I'm sure I can do much better. This work is a kind of juvenilia, even though I'm 50 now. I feel like this is a first album. It's kind of brash in its language. I'm really curious about how to do it better and where to take it."