PURE, UNCUT FASHION: PHOTOGRAPHER MILES ALDRIDGE AND SET DESIGNER HAPPY MASSEE RECONSIDER THEIR RAW MATERIAL

Sometimes, the process Polaroids can be as compelling as the glossy fashion spread — arguably. Two new books testify.

By: Max Lakin November 9, 2016

Fashion photography is often about gloss, populated by the immaculate faces and lithe limbs of aspirational living. This is true of the work of Miles Aldridge, whose impressionistic playpen of acid-licked beauty comes with a pop art perversity. Aldridge's pictures traffic in performed eroticism and lurid colors to match, equal parts fetish and menace. They exist in a place near, as Glenn O'Brien wrote in the photographer's 2013 monograph Miles Aldridge: I Only Want You to Love Me, "the end of the luxury road."

Already concerned with an exaggerated version of reality, Aldridge's images take on another cast in the Polaroid test shots he makes as preparatory studies — a compact sketch of what he would commit to film. "I never threw them away," Aldridge says. "I would just throw them in a giant archival shoebox and forget about them." Now, over a hundred of these made during his 20-year career are collected in Please Return Polaroid (Steidl), a furtive reveal of the flotsam of a photographer's process (a selection of the original Polaroids will go on view at Steven Kasher Gallery in New York this month).

Divorced from their original context of fashion campaigns and magazine editorials, Aldridge's Polaroids enter into their half-life, a secondary art liberated from the work of pushing high-end frocks. They are notable not only for their content, which will be familiar to close observers of Aldridge's desperate housewives and plasticine women on the verge, but for how they offer a glimpse at a still-forming thought not yet molested by the many hands and egos that touch a shoot.
"I think when you're telling your own story, which is what's important for an editorial, you don't want somebody seeing the picture before you do, which is what happens a lot with digital shoots with everyone crowded around the screen," Aldridge says. "I like to have all the pressure on me, that I'm getting the picture right, and then sharing a Polaroid with the team, and that Polaroid gets pored over for detail. I like that methodology."

For Aldridge, the warm-up act is indispensable to the final product. "There's always been an interesting aspect to fashion photography that seems peculiar with the Polaroid: you have this problem of taking the picture twice," Aldridge says. "And weirdly, because this doesn't exist in digital, I actually find this process of having to repeat the gesture, whether it's a jump through the air, or hair blowing in the wind, or someone laying on a bed — doing it twice, for me, helps de-emotionalize the image, which is important, because part of what I'm aiming for is a sort of breaking down of the typical Cartier-Bresson 'decisive moment.' I didn't like that phoniness — pretending that this smile was real, this happiness was real, this moment was real. None of it is, especially in my business. It's not important that it's real, it's important that it's from someone's imagination."

Artists from Warhol to Hockney to Chuck Close have long been attracted to the Polaroid, perhaps precisely because it wrests some share of control from the artist. Polaroids in general, and Aldridge's Polaroids specifically, can often feel like found pictures, the results of happy accidents. Like Richard Prince's appropriated advertisements, these seize on the unsettling absence of anticipation. A twirl of spaghetti passes through a set of disembodied lips, redolent of Guy Bourdin. Pictures where Aldridge had set up the shot and the model hadn't arrived yet — lighting tests, really — feel like crime scenes, primed for forensic analysis. Gleaming pool decks, static doorways, deserted escalators — all faultless spaces very clearly gone wrong, some violence yet to be done.
In other Polaroids, assistants stand in for models, and offer the surprise of finding an unexpected civilian out of her natural habitat, as though she had managed, through some Purple Rose of Cairo plot twist, to walk into the magazine itself. Other photos still are damaged, through being stuck together or left under the heat of a studio lamp. These in particular, where the perfectionism has been scrawled over or melted, are thrilling.

"It's like Bob Dylan's 'Basement Tapes' — it's the raw, raw stuff," Aldridge says. "I've grown up in the Photoshop age, you can't avoid it. My generation, we're used to not being dependent on the colors the film gave us, and we could push the colors here or there. For a photographer who has grown up in that period, to have something so pure and untouched by computers feels strangely sort of anachronistic, like something from the 1960's or 70's. They are very sort of mysterious objects."

Aldridge's Polaroids share a searching, fragmented quality with those collected in Happy Massee's Diary of a Set Designer (Damiani). Throughout a career of roughly the same length as Aldridge's, Massee has packed a Polaroid camera like a Swiss Army knife, using it as a light meter, measuring tape, and reference library, enabling him to check continuity between takes or confirm props with a director.

Massee, it's worth noting, is not a photographer, but a set designer, whose work creating the atmospheric environments for Gucci shoots and Madonna videos, among others, has meant something of an itinerant life. Diary of Set Designer is an evocation of years of wandering and looking.

Along the way, Massee has worked with fashion photographers Inez and Vinoodh, Peter Lindbergh, Craig McDean, and Mert and Marcus. He’s done the sets for Jay Z’s “99 Problems” and shot Michael Jordan in the 90's as a beautiful blur. These finished shoots appear or are hinted at in the book, such as one Polaroid of a few dozen peppermint candy drum kits on the PATH train, a souvenir from a Michel Gondry-directed White Stripes video. But there are also compelling interstitials: assistants enjoying a break in the shade, early dawn hours seen from a Miami rooftop, teddy bears in a Budapest flea market bin. Sting and Keith Richards are given equal billing with old timers in Brooklyn and cracked tilework in Havana.

Massee insists none of these pictures were made with artistic intent. They are not the composite portraits Close made, or the experiments of André Kertész. If they have an analog, it might be the documentary Polaroids of Walker Evans. Most were taken from a car window, an acknowledgement of local faces, or given to people he encountered as a kind of thanks.

Like Aldridge, Massee points to the format’s lack of precision as its allure. “You really never knew what to expect,” he says. “You had no control whatsoever; it depended on the batch of film that you had, it depended on the lighting in the split second that you triggered the camera. You didn't have time to f--k with it. I suspect that the people who turned Polaroid into an art form at one point came across a picture that surprised them.”

“That's the whole point of photography as art,” Aldridge suggests. “Only you as the artist can know its value. A Polaroid is a way of testing whether a picture will be interesting or not. And quite often, in the panic of the editorial shoot, in the anxiety going through your head, you're not sure yourself. But seeing the pictures again, 10 years later, you go, ‘Actually that was a really good picture.’”