



Walter Pfeiffer

Routine, Please!

Zurich, September 2023 Interview by PEDRO VASCONCELOS

For five decades, Walter Pfeiffer has erected a powerful legacy. From groundbreaking homoerotic imagery to a prominent presence in fashion photography, the artist has shown a rare gift: to evolve no matter the stage of his career. With his new book, *Chez Walti*, he's looking at the last twenty years, honing down on his rise to become one of fashion's darlings.

The journey to get to where he is today isn't a linear one. Pfeiffer thinks of the ebbs and flows of his career as catalysts, the foundations of the success he's achieved. Every phase was a step to get to where he wanted to be. We catch Pfeiffer as he's gearing up for the exhibition of his new book to talk about everything from his youth obsession and distaste for routine to the necessity to create the art you want to see.



How are you this morning?

Oh, you know, I have a book launch coming up. With these things, I'm acting all day, having to meet all these new people. It isn't out yet, but I showed it to some friends, and they liked it but, you know how it is, friends are always nice. What did you think of it?

I think I'm biased because I love your work overall, but I really enjoyed it...

Wait until you see it printed. You must have it in your hands. The cover is very colourful, it always has to be. I learned that from my early days when I worked with movie posters. They have to be striking so people on the street pay attention to them. I always try to have colour on my covers, I just didn't for some earlier work because we couldn't afford it. *[Laughs]* So, we had to use black and white.

Speaking of your early days as an artist, you've spoken about how when you started taking homoerotic photos in the 70s, there was no other contemporary photography of male nudes. Do you think that absence motivated you to create what you wanted to see?

I mean I could only see them in the library, I would go to the books with some of my favourites like Cecil Beaton. I knew I couldn't reach what he did but I did what I could, I didn't want to copy, I wanted to find my own way. Thankfully, I've always had an eye for beautiful people. But I needed to do it. Art here was always so normal. My mentors encouraged me. Throughout my career, I've always had mentors that have guided me.

You've also said that when you started taking photos they were more so for your pleasure. What is the difference between taking a picture for yourself versus with an audience in mind?

These days, there isn't a great difference. I'm lucky I can choose. I'm not 24 and at the beginning of my career. My clients now know my work and are fans. I'm not a millionaire but I don't have to work like I did in the old days. Nowadays, it has to be for pleasure.

You have mentioned in the past that you hesitate to identify as a photographer. What do you classify yourself as?

I said that because it took me a long time to get where I am. It took me a long time to get a paid assignment. I had my way of doing things but because I had no money, I had to change. Step by step, I changed even for myself. Otherwise, you're not able to evolve, to go forward. I wanted to take steps so I could step into another world, the one I am in now.

The model seems to be an essential aspect of your work. Do you find that the model has the power in your artistic dynamic?

Yes, absolutely. The pictures depend on them. If they're enjoyable, they make me not want to stop working. I don't like working with professional models. Before I could just be in the street and go up to people and ask them to be in a shoot. But nowadays, it's harder.

Really? I thought it'd be easy, I feel like with social media everyone wants to be famous...

That's exactly the problem, that's why I'm not interested. If someone wants to be a model, please stay at home. All those of you who are not aware and don't care, those are the valuable ones, the ones that are rare nowadays.

Having said that, you've shot some extremely famous people, like Tom Ford or Virgil Abloh. What always strikes me is that you make these superstars look quite human...

That is because I prefer to shoot people as people. Even the supermodels, in the beginning, I have to create an atmosphere that is fun, humorous and full of kindness. I need to make them my friends, even if for a short time to bring out their human side.

This new book has pictures from your entire career. Do you find that curating and selecting your own photos changes your perspective on them?

Yes, I think so. But it's not a big revelation. This book, like the ones I did before, surprised me. When I start, I think it's going to be one thing and then it always ends up something else.

I love *that* people still laugh when they're young.

Where did *Chez Walti* start and where did it end up?

The main purpose of the book was to make a retrospective from 2000 until now. That year was really the start of my career in a way. It was when I made a big change and started looking for assignments. I used to just be around my people and have fun. That was the year that things changed. For the book, I wanted to show that I can do more precise pictures, unlike in my earlier days.

In the publication, you mention you are interested in "creating dream worlds" based on youth. What do you think fascinates you so deeply about youth?

I used to be a teacher in an art school. I didn't want to do it at first but then I was hooked. My students taught me so much. I love that people still laugh when they're young. Before the earnestness of life comes and everything becomes so serious.

You've said you're never going to stop taking photos. Is there something you're still trying to achieve?

I always want to do new things. Drawings, paintings... That's why they hated me, they weren't used to artists like that. They always just wanted to discard me as a fashion photographer when I'm not even really one. I don't want to get bored. It always gets boring when I think I know too much. I want to keep discovering. The only thing is... Please, no routine, I can't stand it.

All images from Walter Pfeiffer's new book CHEZ WALT I - Photographs 2000-2023, Edition Patrick Frey, 2023 published on the occasion of his latest show Sincerely, Walter Pfeiffer at Kunstmuseum Luzern, Switzerland









