



CONFUSED

247

# Q&A / ART WALTER PFEIFFER

## A PEEK INTO THE PRIVATE WORLD OF FASHION'S GREATEST UNDERGROUND PHOTOGRAPHER

His career has followed a winding path, taking in graphic design and art alongside painting and photography. He chose to focus on still-imagemaking after a curator fell in love with some pictures he had shot as tests, and he went on to shoot the disparate circle of friends and lovers that would show up in his ramshackle house and studio in Zurich.

The resulting informal photos encapsulated the beauty and youth that are synonymous with his name. Pfeiffer's breakthrough moment came when he was featured in a defining Jean-Christophe Ammann exhibition in 1974. In the mid-80s Pfeiffer dedicated himself to his photo-realist pencil drawings, only to return to photography in the late 90s, saying that it was impossible to work on both simultaneously.

It seems appropriate that his latest offering takes yet another direction, in the form of a new collection of archive and found images. A refinement of torn pages from magazines and newspapers, his own Polaroids and a number of illustrations and hand-drawn texts, *Scrapbooks 1969-1985* is an intimate insight into the working process of the photographer.

### What inspired you to first start making the scrapbooks?

I have been making them since the early days of my work. I had a job in a big department store a long time ago, we all were given a little diary but I thought it was such a nice object that I didn't want to ruin it by writing boring general daily things in it. 'At 9am I had breakfast.' No, that didn't seem right. We were all actually fired from the job eventually but I kept the little book and started gluing lots of things into it.

### What is actually in the books?

I began with the nostalgic period in my life, getting pictures of all the old stars, then added a few photos that I took with my smallest Polaroid and started to make some kind of collage. It is all cut out from newspapers and put together with my own work. In the early 70s, I started out by making them quite roughly, creating my own covers and gluing everything by hand. After I had made a few of these I started doing much more organised versions, curating them much more consciously and adding writing and texts in my own handwriting.

### What was it about the images that made you want to preserve them?

I just found so many beautiful pictures in the magazines and newspapers. They were so beautiful and it seemed a shame that they would quickly disappear. I studied graphic art, not graphic design, so it was a continuation of what I had learnt there, but really was at first just a hobby for me.

### When you first started making these books, did you make them for other people to see?

No, they were always just for me. In the early 70s I actually took part in an artists' book-contest and I gave them three of my scrapbooks to consider. I won the first round but another artist ended up winning. She was the wife of the examiner, so of course she won. The prize was to have a book published, but in fact I am pleased I did not win as shortly after that I had my own book of photographs published, and if I had done this found-image book my own would have been impossible. You see, everything has its own course. Although the books were not for my audience to see, I have always shown them to close friends and curators.

### Why did you stop making the books in 1985?

I'm not sure. Perhaps because my own work became more considered, and I realised that I very much liked the roughness of my original scrapbooks. Also because I started to paint and draw at the end of 1985, as opposed to taking photographs. I still cut things out now and have boxes of images I have kept, but I wanted to stop because I didn't want to do it for somebody else. I just did it for the joy of doing it. Maybe if I did it now it would be too conscious.

### What made you want to share those books with the public now?

I had a retrospective exhibition at the Winterthur two years ago. In the show I had a huge table, and I showed pages of these books under a glass box. All the people wanted to open the box and look at the books but it was impossible, you could only see one spread at a time. That kind of led me to know that people would like it, so it seemed the right idea. Also, I think it's important to do this because I don't want them to remain in the closet. It's like the films I made when I was younger - it took a long time for them to be shown but we did it eventually. It's better that they are seen than being kept in the dark. Also, I wanted to make

something new. I didn't want to do another photo book because it would be repeating a formula. I think it's better to always be a little bit surprising rather than repeat a formula you already know works.

### Was it hard to share them with other people after all this time? Are they personal?

No, because it's not a diary. I wanted to improve my work and to analyse what was around me, that is why I made them. I had about 20 books in total that I then edited down to one book of around 440 pages.

### Was the editing process difficult?

Not really. I mean, yes, if it was just me doing it I would have become very attached to images and want them all to be included, but I work with an editor, Martin Jaeggi. I sit next to him and plead, and he says, 'No.' It's not a sentimental or nostalgic thing for me, it has nothing to do with sentimentality or saying how nice those days were. I feel it is still really fresh. When I did the Winterthur show there were so many images that didn't make it I could cry, but you have to edit it down. You have to make decisions.

SCRAPBOOKS 1969-1985 is out now, published by Edition Patrick Frey



"It's better to be a little bit surprising than repeat a formula you already know works"

