



Illustrated life

No detail is left uncovered in Miles Aldridge's eye-popping, erotically-charged fashion photographs, which transform sometimes sordid scenarios into acid-hued glamour. He tells Diane Smyth where he gets his inspiration, and how his ideas first evolve on paper

If Miles Aldridge is at the top of his game right now, it might as well have been pre-ordained. His father Alan was a celebrated art director, best known for his groundbreaking book covers for Penguin and his trippy album artwork for The Beatles and The Stones. Miles grew up in the company of the cream of the British art and music scenes in the 1960s, practising photography on his sister, and after joining a rockabilly band and going to art school, it seemed inevitable that he'd turn to fashion and wind up marrying a model.

Aldridge's acid-hued, erotically-charged photography is splashed across some major fashion real estate, including *Vogue Italia*, *Numero* and *The New York Times* to name just a couple, bagging him lucrative advertising

commissions with prestige names such as of Cartier, Sonja Rykiel and Longchamp.

And now there's burgeoning interest from the art world too. His work is currently on show in the *Weird Beauty* group exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York, and he's got solo shows coming up at Stephen Kasher and Hamiltons later this year, with Steidl scheduled to publish a book of his images in April.

Given this success, and the fantastical nature of his work, it's quite a surprise to find out that the 43-year-old Londoner is most inspired by real life. From his mother-in-law's feline obsession to a newspaper story on rich-kid crack addicts, his curiosity is sparked by the surreal insanity of the everyday.

'I'm constantly working on ideas,' he says. 'For example, I read an article in *The Independent* about a yuppie crack addict who'd trawl around council estates in her Prada dress looking for drugs, and I instantly wanted to base something around her. Then *Japanese Vogue* asked me to shoot a story on nail varnish, so I hijacked the shoot. No one is ever going to phone up and say "We want you to shoot about a crack addict" or "Shoot whatever you like", so you have to find your own way.'

Passion for detail

Aldridge usually sketches these outlandish ideas, working out on paper how to reformulate mundane – or even tawdry – scenarios into high concept fashion imagery. His drawings

are often loose, but they are still meticulous enough to plot where the lights, gels and even the sun appear on set. They also help him think through the shoot script, creating mini storyboards detailing what each spread could look like, right down to where the page-fold should fall. And these plans have proved useful for pitching ideas, winning over *Vogue Italia*'s legendary editor Franca Sozzani.

'I'm not only the director; I'm the producer. So I have to think about costs and how the shoot will work,' he says. 'The sketches help me do that because I have all the ideas already started without the pressure of the studio clock.'

His forthcoming book will show just how important the drawings are to his whole

Above: The Last Range Of Colours – *Vogue Italia*, 2007.

Overleaf: Le Manège Enchanté – *Numero*, 2007.
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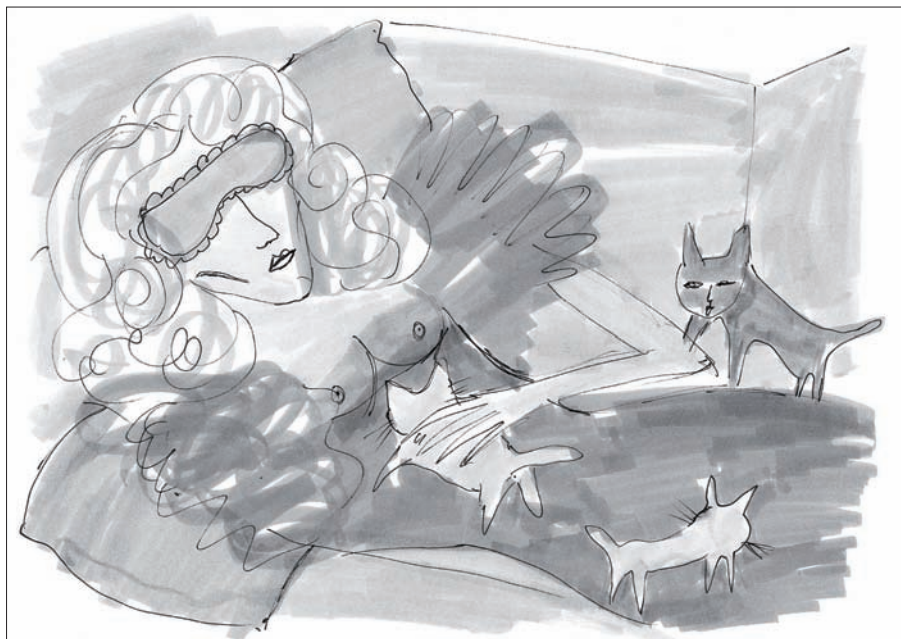
Above: *Cat Story* – *Vogue Italia*, 2008, with preparatory sketch (right).

Opposite: *Cabaret* – *Vogue Italia*, 2006.

Overleaf: *Doll's House* – *Vogue Italia*, 2008.

On show

A selection of Miles Aldridge's photographs will go on show at Hamiltons Gallery in London from 31 March. For details visit www.hamiltonsgallery.com.



creative process. Titled *Pictures for Photographs*, the first half is taken up with the drawings that inspired his photographs.

But while the ideas go down on paper first, it's his cinematic execution that transforms his real-life inspirations into the high-kitsch glamour for which he's celebrated. Inspired by the Kodachrome and Technicolor palette of 1950s Hollywood, along with directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Federico Fellini and David Lynch, he strives to perfect every detail he records. 'I'm quite a classicist,' he says. 'I rarely use just one light source. If there are shadows, there has to be a good reason for me to not put blue into them, and I will usually warm up the highlights.'

'I want every element to be as fabulous as it can be. I'm often



shooting quite sleazy scenarios, so aesthetically the photographs need to be as elegant as they can be. It's like Hitchcock in the shower scene in *Psycho*; the audience is watching a woman being murdered, but at the same time they can't help but try to catch a glimpse of Janet Leigh's naked body. It's the push/pull of sexy and horrific.'

He uses a Hasselblad H-system camera with a Phase One P45 digital back for ads because clients insist on it, but for editorial usually opts for 6x6 colour negative film and a Rolleiflex 6008, or sometimes a Linhof large format camera. His images then have to be processed, printed and scanned, and although that's a laborious process compared to digital, he's convinced it's the best. 'It's hard to



get the saturated colour on digital in such an honest way,' he explains. 'When I started out on film it took me a while to work out the skin tones and saturation. I want the primaries to be primary and the skin tones neutral, and the Rollei has this incredible ability to render vivid colours. But it's becoming increasingly difficult to use. Every time I shoot with it something rolls off, and I have to send it off to Germany to get fixed. I'm a bit of a dinosaur.'

'When I started, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton were the only people who had had books and exhibitions – and even then there was the feeling that they had to sneak off and photograph something that wasn't fashion to be taken seriously as artists.'







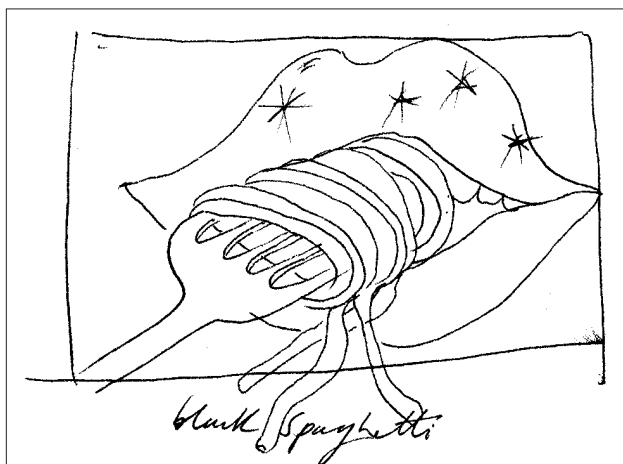
Above: Home Works – *Vogue Italia*, 2008.

Right: Lip Synch – *The Face*, 2001, with preparatory sketch.

Fashion as art

Aldridge laughs that he's 'slightly obsessive' over the technical details, and one of his most treasured possessions is a book by Bill Brandt, stating which camera, which film and which exposure he used for each shot. And Aldridge is at pains to assert that, more than ever, high-level fashion editorial has to reach for perfection, both technically and conceptually, because if it doesn't readers will turn to the internet. 'If magazines don't showcase luxurious, beautiful imagery, all the information they include might as well be gleaned online,' he says. 'The details about what you should and shouldn't wear are all online already, so magazines have to be more exciting and aspirational; they need to enter into art territory.'

'Paradis [based in Paris] is a good example. It would consider itself an art magazine, but it mixes its art photographers with those who are considered fashion, all of whom have also had books and exhibitions. When I started, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton were the only people who had had books and exhibitions – and even then there was the feeling that they had to sneak off and photograph something that



wasn't fashion to be taken seriously as artists. Now fashion is given more credit.'

And it's not just the internet that raises a new imperative towards art. Conceptually, fashion photography has been pushing its commercial boundaries for more than half a century.

'Why does fashion photography exist in the first place?' he asks. 'Originally there was this idea that women needed to be informed about what to wear; Horst P Horst and George Hoyningen-Huene had all these rich women parading expensive Balenciaga. But at a certain point it was no longer just about pictures of women wearing clothes. From the 1960s onwards, fashion photographers were able to take shoots and make them about almost anything. It has expanded into something much more interesting.' **BJP**

In print and online

Pictures for Photographs, by Miles Aldridge will be published by Steidl (ISBN: 978-3-86521-841-4) in April, priced £70. Visit steidlvilleville.com. You can see more of his work online at milesaldridge.com.