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Photographer Spotlight: Miles Aldridge

By Michael Kurcfeld
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The first thing one notices about the photographs of Miles Aldridge is their giddy, electric color — italicizing a radiant world of gorgeous young women frozen in odd vignettes. Aldridge, bored with his meteoric success in fashion photography, veered off around 2000 into conjuring story fragments that were “more truthful about how I felt about the world.” There are many fashion photographers who eventually pursued personal artistic work, notably Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton (two of Aldridge’s heroes). But he brought something else to the studio: drawings and storyboards of his idiosyncratic *aperçus* and “half-remembered scenes” about culture, consumerism, and sexuality rendered with the flair of a commercial illustrator, which he had worked as early on. Gradually, Aldridge insinuated these notional blueprints into a broad body of work that exploited the visual idioms of fashionable glamour to explore darker, more thought-provoking terrain. Aldridge patented a recognizable weave of close-up sensual beauty, icy

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surfaces, hot hues, hedonism (food is a frequent subject), taut composition, and absurdist comedy with vaguely unnerving punch lines.



Aldridge's father, Alan, was a brilliant illustrator who created revered picture books like *The Beatles Illustrated Lyrics* and enjoyed a flamboyant pop-star-like celebrity in London's swinging '60s. He became a huge influence on Aldridge's career, not so much in person (after divorcing his mother, he migrated to Los Angeles on his own) as through his work and his prodigious library. "He became a kind of Wizard of Oz figure," says Aldridge, "who vanished but left behind a great art library — an amalgam of his vision, from Hieronymus Bosch to Superman. Plenty of

pop art but also highly complex hallucinatory imagery." Miles followed in the illustration path but finally decided it was too solitary for a young man on the make in cool Britannia. He teetered toward filmmaking — and even made a few music videos — but one day his then girlfriend, a model, got him to shoot stills of her with his dad's Nikon. These photos got the attention of the British edition of *Vogue*, and he was asked to come in. Six months later, he was shooting the cover of *W Magazine*.

Before venturing beyond the high-gloss job of "documenting dresses and selling lifestyles," Aldridge says that he felt "disloyal" toward his love of art and cinema. His autonomous work liberated him to be inspired by "the night interiors of Edward Hopper, the strange nudes of Paul Delvaux, the light of American musicals, the comic drama of Fellini, the pop songs of the jukebox, the blank expressions of silent cinema ... and real life." The common thread: drama and artifice. Aldridge also mentions his love for Hitchcock and Lynch. By taking control of what was created in his studio, like a film director, he was able to subvert the rules of promoting haute couture. He messes with the idolatry of feminine beauty, swapping prescribed fantasy for his own — a blend of private encounter and borrowed detail. "I'm a voracious consumer of other people's work. I'm hungry for images. I love finding something, even if it's just a color in a piece of abstract art ... finding connections between all the books I've read and all the films I've

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seen. My subject matter is the culture I've grown up in." The end result: artificial "decisive moments" that fuse a cerebral eros with the congenially offbeat.



I couldn't resist asking Aldridge if he ever gets blowback from feminists about his images of smoldering women, often scantily clad (if clad at all), in poses not always easy to view as empowering. His work is fairly heavily invested in the male gaze, women viewed through the objectifying lens of the male libido. Is his work in any way a critique or satire of that? Or is it really a celebration of female beauty with no irony or apology? "Strangely I've never had women super-glue the locks to my galleries, or complain. In fact, most of my collectors are female, and they always say the same thing, more or less — that my pictures make them smile, which is such a lovely compliment." Aldridge points to the fact that much of art history shares an appreciative focus on the female form, and certainly the most common image at any photography fair is the female nude. What saves him from any legitimate umbrage is that his pictures are not in any way leering or prurient. If anything, they give pause as one witnesses a seduction of a different kind: a chilled balancing act of the carnal and the comic.

"The Pure Wonder," a retrospective of Myles Aldridge's works (2000- 2012), his first show in Los Angeles, is on view at Fahey/Klein Gallery through October 17. His latest book is I Only Want You To Love Me (Rizzoli).