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Centre Stage: Miles Aldridge

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For Miles Aldridge, the fashion photographer known for his alluring, acid-hued images, artfully composed and hyperbolically saturated with colour, the idea that photography has a responsibility to frame reality is not one to which he subscribes. In his years spent working for *W* magazine, *Harper's Bazaar*, the *New York Times* and numerous editions of *Vogue*, he has not so much recorded the world as focused on creating his own, populated by freezingly beautiful and forebodingly vacant women—a cast of sexed-up Stepford wives gone mad. Complete with rigidly coiffed hair and untenanted facial expressions, he traps them in a sickening, saccharine domesticity; lighting cigarettes off gas rings in candy-coloured kitchens and lying, sprawled, amongst the smashed-up detritus of dinner parties. “I don’t want to capture life, I want to invent it myself—if I may be so bold,” says Aldridge.

Aldridge constructs the shadows that linger behind the colourful shock of his images by shooting on film. Part of his process involves pre-shooting on polaroids, and he has just published 20 years’ worth of these intimate, behind-the-

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scenes pictures in a book, *Please Return Polaroid*. “With a polaroid, you have these amazing two minutes where you are waiting for it to process,” he says. “The film is quite unknown as to how it will come out, the chemistry, and what colours it will produce.”

Recently, he explained the significance of the ritual to Gerhard Steidl, his publisher, likening it to the comfort of a cigarette break, or repeatedly polishing one’s glasses. “I said, ‘You have the polaroid under your armpit and wait for it to cook—you stop for a second and think.’ He looked at me and said: ‘Polaroids. Wow. You really are a photographer.’”

The process of unpicking the structures of everyday life and packing them with a heightened sense of emotion is central to Aldridge’s work—a technique, he says, that was inspired by Alfred Hitchcock. He cites the opening sequence of *Strangers on a Train*, which simply sees two pairs of shoes walking slowly along a platform until they collide. “Hitchcock was a great master, and teacher of how to make a glass of milk look sinister.”

Aldridge’s methods might have been shaped by the greats of cinema—he loves Martin Scorsese and Federico Fellini too—but the root of his work is largely autobiographical. Artistically, he draws upon his father, an illustrator who, in the 60s, was famous for the hallucinogenic album covers he created for the Beatles, and emotionally, he looks to his mother, whose frustrated, post-divorce despair pervades his photographs. He recalls a meeting with longtime collaborator and legendary editor of *Italian Vogue*, Franca Sozzani. He explained an idea for an image he had: a shot of a woman pushing a childless swing in a playground. Sozzani was visibly shocked, but pushed him to take the picture. The more personal he makes his ideas, Aldridge has learnt, the more they are publicly lauded.

Mining the depths of his childhood has often felt like a form of therapy but, Aldridge points out, the catharsis can’t just be personal. “I think as an artist, you are charged with creating cathartic images for society,” he explains. “The gods and goddesses express these incredible emotions so that we can feel them gently.”—Isobel Thompson