

The Telegraph

William Klein: Everything I did, I did for her

The legendary photographer can give any subject – boxers, thugs, slums – a touch of polish. Well, any subject except himself...



By **Nina Caplan**

04 Apr 2011

In 1948, a young New Yorker so fresh from army service he was still in uniform, arrived in Paris. The Red Cross gave him a bicycle, and his reading gave him a route: he wanted to be an artist, so there was plenty to see. “I always dreamed of working in Paris, of going to the Coupole and slapping Picasso or Giacometti on the shoulder,” says William Klein of that long-ago 20 year-old.

“Cycling to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts I saw this girl; I’d never seen anyone so beautiful,” he recalls. “So I asked her directions and then I asked what she was doing that evening.” He and Jeanne Florin married and stayed together until her death in 2005. “It was a great love affair,” he says.

“When I think back we had an incredible 60 years. Everything I did, I did for her.” And he did plenty – as a painter and an anarchic film-maker, but principally as one of the most influential and prolific photographers there is.

Klein is as springy and flexible as a cat: even a recent knee operation has only slowed him physically, and he’s clearly as impatient with his reduced speed as he has always been with external attempts to restrict him.

In the Fifties, inspired by Léger’s advice to forget galleries and get out into the world (“he said, ‘stop dreaming about getting in with collectors and museums, you have to

work like artists in Renaissance Italy, who collaborated with architects and were part of the city”), Klein went to Italy: “Things were really jumping there.”

An architect asked Klein to paint a series of space-dividing panels he had invented. “They were on rails, you could change the arrangement of panels something like 5,000 different ways. I photographed the abstract geometrical paintings I’d done on these panels and had somebody turn them when I photographed, so they blurred. And I realised that there might be something that could be done with blur in the darkroom. That was my first contact with photography.”

He was lucky, as talented, energetic people generally are, at some point.

Alexander Liberman, American *Vogue*’s legendary art director, saw the photographs and invited him to work for the magazine. Doing what? asked Klein. “He said, ‘we’ll see, you can be assistant art director or work with me, whatever.’” Such suppleness: Klein, Liberman and the times were clearly made for each other.

In the event, when he showed up in New York: “I saw these editors running around with harlequin glasses and hats and Liberman said ‘You wouldn’t last a day in this atmosphere, why don’t you do photography?’”

And so the artist became a photographer, and started right at the top. How fortunate those fashionista editors were so off-putting, although I suspect Liberman may have been motivated more by fear of mass walkouts than worry about the tender sensibilities of his new recruit.

Klein at 26 was probably not so different from Klein at 82, because the world’s opinion of him has never been much of a consideration. That is evident in the debonair insouciance of the fashion photographs, and in the hipness and humour of his city books and their adjoining commentary. And in the man, seated in the corner of his beautiful living room with its sprawl of books, records and magazines, talking as the sun sets over the Luxembourg Gardens behind him.

Klein’s first book, *Life is Good and Good For You in New York*, was a sensation. It came out in 1955, in Paris – no American publisher would take it (and, in fact, they didn’t until 1995). *Vogue*, which had paid for its production, didn’t use any of it either. Klein was accused of making New York look like a slum; well, he replied, New York is a slum. But goodness, his slum was stylish.

“Having lived in France for several years, I thought I had one eye that was European and one that was a street-smart New Yorker.” He photographed little boys with guns and men with moustaches. He showed a prescient awareness of the way advertising was altering the city in its own image (of one enormous advertisement, he wrote “there is something terrifying about this phrase written on the face of a city” – more so since Klein is clearly not a man who terrifies easily).

He says now that the book was about his family, which is not to say that it was affectionate. His parents were the children of Jewish Hungarian immigrants; they were not close. “My father was convinced that America was the greatest place in the world. I’m afraid I didn’t have the family I would have dreamed of.” No wonder he went to France and never came back.

“My sister was brilliant, she was in the 25 top math students in the country. When she finished college, I said, ‘Spend a couple of months here in Europe, you’ll get another take on life’. She never came – married some schmuck who made clothes for fat women on Seventh Avenue.”

Perhaps that made her happy? “Not really. What this guy wanted was to sell his outfit and play golf every day, which he did, and after a couple of months he couldn’t stand golf any more! He didn’t know what to do with himself, and finally he committed suicide:

jumped out the window. I never had any relationship with him, either.”

Klein’s French is fluent, his son, also an artist, is both French and American, and his English has odd quirks – he pronounces fashion labels such as Prada and Armani with a French accent. But he has retained his American citizenship, and talks idly of getting dual nationality (after 63 years?).

I ask if his friends were American or French, and he says he never really knew many Americans in Paris (“in a way I regret it, but I turned my back on America, and the idea of hearing American women, with their voices”) but he doesn’t actually name any French friends. Maybe there weren’t any.

His wife once described him as “someone who never really wants to reveal who he is. All the important people, he was never polite to them, even those he liked. He hardly has any close friends. Maybe I’m the only one. He never played the game.” He still doesn’t.

“She’s kind of a bitch,” he says offhandedly of Anna Wintour, current editor of American *Vogue*, but I hear no malice in his tone, and the comment follows his remark that English editors are taking over in New York the way Russian Jewish immigrants did when he was starting out.

There’s Wintour, Tina Brown, who gets points for bringing photography – and indeed, Klein himself – into the photographer’s beloved *New Yorker* magazine, and Glenda Bailey of *Harper’s Bazaar*, who has recently lured him back to fashion to take pictures of Karl Lagerfeld, Marc Jacobs, John Galliano and others, each with their circle of acolytes.

For years, Klein experimented, taking models out on the streets, playing aesthetically and technically with the toys that a rich magazine can offer its stars. In between, he made books – on Rome (where the men assumed the models were hookers, and tried to pick them up), on Moscow, Tokyo and finally, eventually, on Paris. And he dipped into film, with his usual razor timing: *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest*, his documentary on the then-unknown boxer, covered the 1964 fight that made him world champion, as well as his later rematch with Sonny Liston.

“There was a lot of controversy [over that second fight]: did Liston lie down or was it really a punch? And it was funny, the day before the fight, Ali said, ‘I’ve been working with karate experts, I’m going to hit him here, with a corkscrew punch, and that’ll be the end.’ And they analysed the film, because people thought that Liston was either paid to lie down or wasn’t willing to be humiliated. And it was true, he really did hit him here, and that was the end.”

Ali, he remembers, “made this pretence of not knowing names of journalists, like white people used to do with blacks then”. He knew Klein was from Europe but he knew only one country from that part of the world. So he called the photographer “England”.

Klein’s cinematic riff on the neon lights of his birth town, *Broadway by Light*, was effusively admired by Orson Welles and won him a spot as Louis Malle’s co-director on *Zazie dans le Métro*, although Klein walked out on the project when shooting began. He assisted Fellini on *Nights of Cabiria* and pulled off a brilliant documentary about Little Richard, despite the singer himself withdrawing his co-operation early on.

And, because he hated the fashion world, except for the girls, Klein’s first feature film was a satire on that industry. *Who Are You, Polly Maggoo?* released in 1966, is still acerbic entertainment, as acidly refreshing as home-made lemonade, although you’ll probably have to take my word for it, because it’s not available in this country. All Klein’s films are difficult to get hold of here, and his books aren’t easy either.

Errata Editions has brought out a version of *New York* and Thames & Hudson has

reissued *Rome*, but for a legend in his own lifetime, Klein is damned elusive. There is talk of a Tate Modern retrospective next year, which would help, and certainly Simon Baker, Tate's photography curator, is a great admirer.

"He's a much more complex and sophisticated artist than most," Baker says. "And he's very tough – the pictures are tough to look at and must have been tough to make." Even the fashion pictures, he notes, are challenging.

Klein succeeded quickly, although there was a brief rough patch when his aristocratic Flemish wife was obliged to model – not an occupation she ever enjoyed. (It is very odd that two people so openly dismissive of fashion have had such a lot to do with it.) Klein, who says that the secret of being happily married for six decades is simply to choose the right person, will doubtless miss Jeanne for the rest of his life, but he is not a man to pine.

He mentions a girlfriend – a Portuguese film star, with whom he is making a new film – and he is putting together a new book, *Anywhere*. He has taken to digital with enthusiasm, and when I meet him, has just photographed Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter Marine, the new, supposedly acceptable face of the racist Front National, for a Left-wing magazine. The head of the FN photographed by a Jew?

"Well, she's like her father but, she's a blonde, not bad looking. I went to their little building outside Paris and it looked good – the buildings made a very sharp angle, and I put her in the middle with the FN sign above her head and said: 'OK – you show me that this is chez moi', so she went through a whole lot of poses; she thought that saying to the camera 'this is chez moi' was cool. It's very funny because these people are very savvy and suspicious but you tell her to do something like that and she'll do it: she doesn't realise that she's ridiculous."

For all his jagged edges, Klein clearly knows how to pick his fights. As he puts it, as succinct as one of his photographs: "Listen, if you spend your time fighting everybody who f--- you over, you won't have time to do anything else."