

The Magus

Interview with Karel Fonteyne for RIKA Magazine

By Matthew Freemantle

Belgian photographer Karel Fonteyne was briefly and powerfully known in the fashion world as a maverick photographer with a penchant for the surreal, the imperceptible and, often, the controversial. But it is Fonteyne's alchemical work before and to a larger extent after his foray into fashion that makes up the lion's share of his body of work. For the 2007 series *Pistoleros*, Fonteyne gathered twigs and branches from trees around his home in Menorca, Spain – including those from the nest of a peace dove - which were reconstituted as pistols and photographed in stark, trademark style as pointed indictments on the then raging conflicts in Darfur and Tibet. This series, as with all of Fonteyne's elaborate repertoire, expresses his unmistakable skill for imbuing his work with a combination of vitriol, irony, magic, disquiet, fragility and dark beauty.

Fonteyne began taking art photographs in the 70s, before moving to Milan and into the fashion world as a way of both earning a living and bringing something new to an industry that needed it. Fonteyne's series for French Vogue in 1990 would be his most memorable. It was the outset of the Gulf War when Fonteyne shot models smeared with mud surrounded by burning fires, the images at once shocking and potent. The series made him famous and deeply controversial and it wasn't long before Fonteyne had left the industry, sold everything and moved to Menorca to return to his art. He painted the house indigo blue and designed each room according to a different theme before selling it to a member of the Picasso family. Now, as in the beginning, he lives and works in his home country.

You say that when you decided to work in Fashion you did so “without making concessions”. What decisions did you make to keep your artistic integrity?

I showed my art pictures, explained what my ideas were and they gave me the freedom to create it. Most of the time I have an idea and I just follow my intuition, it's only later on that I see the meaning of it.

Painting white models black is both controversial and arresting. What was your original intention with the Black Earth series?

In the book *Black Earth* there are four chapters. In one of them, *Blue Hotel*,

I had the idea to paint white people black and was curious what would happen and come out of this experiment.

The girls painted in black underwent a transformation, their heart started to beat differently; primitive feelings came up. They were no longer nude, they were dressed in a second skin, reborn, totally liberated and free.

Black reflects light in a completely different way, it reshapes the volumes of the body and power comes up. White absorbs light, shapes weaken and one can feel really naked, overexposed.

In the book there is a story about how a blind person feels the back of a woman with beauty spots and discovers the story via a kind of braille.

The series "Fées en Diabes" became a scandal in France, but was embraced in Japan. With the benefit of hindsight, can you understand why this happened?

The French designers were shocked that I photographed the Haute Couture in a place like a war zone. The women were like ghosts in a bad dream. It came out when the Gulf War started, which made it prophetic. The French designers didn't see the humor in it, they can't relativize as they take themselves so seriously.

The Japanese designers liked the creativity of photographing the subject in such an unexpected way.

That project put you in the limelight. How did you cope with this sudden attention?

I did appreciate the recognition of my work but not the personal cult around it.

They started to invite me everywhere but I didn't respond to it. I also felt that I could lose myself quickly if success overwhelmed me.

You mentioned in an early email to me that trendsetters never become rich. Are you cynical or bitter about the fashion world?

People like to recognize what they see; they need to compare it with something they have already seen so they feel safe. But they lose their balance when they can't place things. This is just what interests me, taking things out of their context and putting them back together in a different way. The intention is to throw people off balance and take them out of their comfort zone so that they have to question themselves. So I took always the most difficult way; I didn't want to make concessions, which has a price. Others use the ideas later on and get the benefit of it.

Can you pinpoint a time in your life when were you truly happiest?

I am always happy when I am surrounded by the sounds and smells of nature.

How would you describe yourself?

A man with a complex simplicity.

When you quit fashion in 1994 – was there a certain event that forced you to do so?

Not really. I needed a break and wanted to live closer to nature and to rediscover my own rhythm.

There is arguably a strand of erotica in some of your work, notably *the A E I O U* series. Would you consider yourself in the same artistic neighbourhood as, for example, Helmut Newton? Is he someone you respect?

Newton projects the dreams of the rich and the famous. My approach is totally different as I am less interested in the outside world but explore the inside. It triggers different emotions that are more connected with feelings you can't place. I don't see eroticism in *AEIOU*: I simply catalogued people with numbers who play games.

You cite filmic influences such as Bergman and Fellini, both of whom worked in a similar monochromatic style, and addressed similar themes as sexuality, magic and bleakness among many other things. What excited you about these artists' work?

I began to photograph after seeing the movie "The Birds" by the Finnish director Tarjei Vesaas. I was very impressed by the dramatic black and white images. They were few dialogues but above all silence and sudden sounds of nature that became the dialogue. I recognized myself in what they expressed. The same happened when I discovered the South American writer Jorge Luis Borges. They all felt like similar souls.

This "inner world" that you speak of in your biography - can you elaborate on what this means to you?

It refers to who we are deep inside and how our minds react and reinterpret what we see and how we create our own reality, which is anyway another illusion.

(We are who we think we are)

I am interested in your quote: "We are who we were". What do you mean by that?

There is already information that a child inherits from his ancestry but he or she still has a lot of empty space to store. A child is a sponge who absorbs what he's touched and impressed by. He is marked by important moments that will later on become the platform of the person he will become.

What is most memorable about your own childhood?

The moment that I discovered that there was an in-between world. And, later on, that every angle of the same subject has a different illumination and meaning.

What do you make of the fashion world today?

Honestly, I never follow fashion. I just like to make photos of my thoughts - the clothes are a function of the idea. The clothes melt into the emotion. My latest project "Tales of Silence" is a good example of this. I prefer to work with atypical persons as they have a different glow or discharge from within.