

Star Shooter Rediscovering Photography

A well known photographer in Los Angeles used to quip that what most of us on the commercial side of our craft actually get paid to do is the labor-intensive equivalent of tracing someone else's sketch. Serious print work—for ads or high-end magazine covers—is indeed a collaborative brew of talents. For a serious photographer's personal style to survive the fusillade of creative inputs that inevitably blur this process is not a matter of politics or personality; it's the function of imagination, the skill to engage with a subject and everything else that constitutes the gift of making images that demand a viewer's attention.

The list of photographers with the originality and genius to consistently pull this off is a select one, traceable back to names like Steichen and Stieglitz. Today, among the contemporary heirs to their legacy is a daring and versatile editorial portraitist, Mark Seliger, whose intense, sometimes quirky celebrity images have collectively become a staple of upscale American magazines. When a photographer of this caliber publishes a hardcover collection of what he deems private, non-commercial work, there's no question that we're going to want to look at them. Thus is the case with Mark



Seliger's newly released *Listen*, from the prestigious publishing house of Rizzoli International.

If Seliger's name isn't on your mental speed dialer, many of his images almost certainly are. He served as chief photographer for *Rolling Stone* from 1992 to 2002, producing over 100 covers for the magazine during that time. Among these are some modern classics: The carefully posed nude lineup of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, a poignant tight shot of ill-fated Kurt Cobain; the *Seinfeld* cast costumed as characters from the *Wizard of Oz*; some choice nuggets of photographic gonzo like disturbing, target-painted Johnny Knoxville or music's perennial two-man wax museum: Mick Jagger and Keith Richards; and, of course, steamy, iconic kitten fantasies of Jennifer Aniston, Gisele Bündchen, Cameron Diaz, Christina Aguilera and Angelina Jolie.

On other shelves of the newsstand—often with the same issue date—you'll find Seliger's Drew Barrymore pouting from the cover of *Harper's Bazaar*, Cindy Crawford on *Vogue*, an assertively naked Kim Kardashian starkly lit on *W*, President Barack Obama smiling from the cover of *GQ*—and inside many of these same publications, any number of provocative studio portraits: ever-inscrutable Al



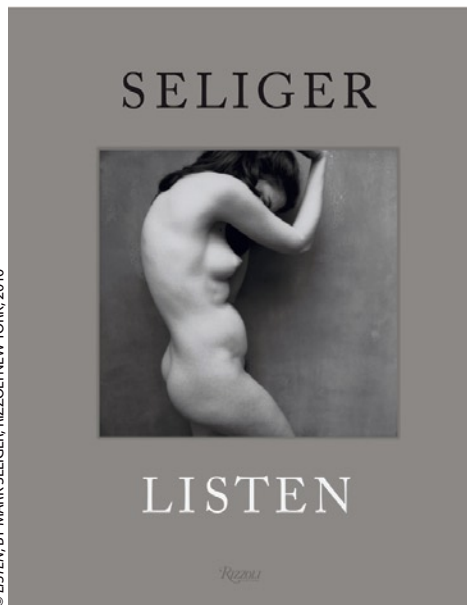


Pacino, rock legend Chuck Berry, Christopher Walken, Tom Waits, off-in-the-ether Bob Dylan and the stunning French actress Marion Cotillard acting out Hitchcock's infamous *Psycho* shower scene in a chilling *Vanity Fair* montage.

Lest we forget, the process at work here is "Commercial photography," capital "C" small "p." Even with Seliger's signature inventiveness and wit jumping off the magazine page, we all know there's a committee fussing around behind every image. If it's not the nimbus of handlers, art types and editors who hover over every celebrity shoot on earth, it's the obligatory clutch of decision-makers (frequently the stars themselves, plus agents, managers, hangers-on, even spouses) giving their final say to whatever shots will make it into print.

No Tabloid-Grade Celebs in Sight

In *Listen*, Seliger makes a hard right turn away from all that star power and guides us through 90 exquisitely rendered black-and-white windows into the core of his artistry. With the book's release, (Seliger's seventh to date) *GQ* announced, "Mark Seliger sends the hair and makeup people packing and shoots stark, exquisite photos that have nothing to do with celebrity, but everything to do with photography."



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Listen
 Mark Seliger
 Rizzoli New York
www.rizzoliusa.com
 200 pp

That's a pretty fair assessment of Seliger's impulse for *Listen*. The large format images, nearly every one given its own spread, are an eclectic mélange of earthscapes, architecturals, astounding close-ups, nudes, still lifes—serene and often melancholy arrangements of light, texture and shadow, and with one possible exception—dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov—not a single tabloid-grade celebrity in sight. Not a single pixel, either. Every original was made on film, in formats from 35mm up to 8x10, and all were printed by the platinum/palladium process that Seliger loves for its nearly supernatural tonal range and luminosity.

In the book's closing interview with *GQ* Design Director Fred Woodward, Seliger muses on the impetus for this collection: "I think it's mainly...allowing myself to rediscover the reason why I started in photography in the first place...the whole excitement of going out and taking a picture, without any real consideration besides just having the experience." That being the case, an inference might be made that photography intersected with Seliger's life at a time of some gloomy introspection. Nearly every one of these powerful, lavishly executed images portrays a resolute darkness: New York's trusty George Washington Bridge vanishes into oblivion; the achingly wrinkled hands of choreographer Merce Cunningham reach skyward from his deathbed in 2009; the posture of a voluptuous nude betrays more strain than grace, and the eyes of a man named Dennis, his face extravagantly disfigured with tattoos and faux-tribal metal piercings suggest an inner wound more painful than the countless holes in his skin.

But all the darkness in this collection has positive mojo for Seliger. The Dennis portrait, for instance, is more about a fellow artist than a tortured soul. "Body modification," Seliger calls it, "an artist expressing himself..." The bridge to nowhere? A kind of allegory: "We are always kind of bridging ourselves from one thing to another and all of a sudden it's gone. [That morning,] fog enveloped Brooklyn on the opposite side...it was breathtaking... and then it moved on." The contorted nude and the outstretched choreographer's hands: both are powerful expressions of Seliger's love for the "incredibly visceral art" of the dance.

Whispered Reassurance

Every working advertising or editorial photographer has at least one, usually several, large format books lurking in his or her canon of published work. Seliger himself has done a handful of these, and they're beautiful. But *Listen* stands out as a kind of gift to other photographers. It's a whisper of reassurance that, even beneath the flashiest patina of commercial success, there's a basic urge we all share: "I don't think that feeling ever goes away," Seliger told Fred Woodward, "There's always that desire to take a picture."



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