

Back to my roots

So it's like this: if you really mean it about building a reputation for 'edgy, dark, raw and sexy' photography, some might say a good place to start focusing would be in the squalid, festering back alleys of a notorious Southampton red light district - with a gaggle of mysterious hookers and a trusty old Pentax 35mm.

Enter Jack Eames.

Now mainly London-based and a celebrated, award-winning hair, beauty and fashion photographer working with top clients like Toni & Guy, KMS California and Wella - alongside cutting edge hair salons up and down the country - Jack is more than happy to get back to his own roots for Litebook.

"I didn't exactly shine at school but somehow conned my way onto a photojournalism degree course in Southampton", says Jack, now 36.





"I went there first and foremost to learn how to write, but ended up falling completely in love with the photography side of the course. I was a poverty-stricken student and I had found cheap accommodation in the red light district – so when it came to my final year and dissertation I decided to try and fuse into the fabric of the area as far as possible and get to grips with the level of poverty and deprivation at first hand.

"My mantra would *have* to be:

desire and darkness"

I went out with my Pentax and worked hard for a long time to try and persuade the girls to let me photograph them. At one point I got pulled in by the police but I didn't give up.

It was a dangerous situation for the girls. They were worried about what their pimps would do but in the end I talked some of them round.

One girl told me how she had been raped a few years earlier and how she had stabbed 'the bastard' with a screwdriver.

That incident made me think about the pictures I wanted to make. I collected a set of tools together; screwdrivers, chisels and a hammer and fixed them into the lining of a coat.



The prostitute wore the coat open showing the tools. I scored the highest dissertation marks in the entire year for that coverage and left with a First Class Honours degree. The 'red light' shoot was tough on many fronts. I gave that particular girl a bit of money but she immediately made me drop her off at her heroin supplier. I felt dreadful about it. And throughout the countless hours I spent on that project I felt intimidated; constantly worried about getting my kit stolen. My teacher, who had worked with Amnesty International taught me that in extremis, if someone tries to steal your camera, use it as a weapon and just smack him in the face with it."

"As humans *we all* share basic feelings and emotions"

Jack worked on a few newspaper jobs at a national and regional level but found himself attracting growing numbers of commissions to shoot hair and fashion in Southampton.

"I was asked to shoot an H2O festival campaign and I did some quite raunchy stuff. As a result I printed large pictures for an exhibition but then people started nicking them off the walls. Curiously I was quite proud of that."

Now he lives in Hackney but still treks up to the north of England a couple of times a month to fulfil commissions for a number of clients.

In constant pursuit of perfection (and naturally never finding it) Jack strives for 'rawness and edge' in his work.



“My mantra would have to be: desire and darkness” he muses. “A free-flowing abundance of tension is crucial. As humans we all share basic feelings and emotions and they are centred around desire, sex and sensuality.

If I can get these three aspects into my work, with an added dash of darkness, then I can be reassured that what I am feeling inside me is coming into my pictures – and hopefully the client is buzzing on it too.

The reality these days with digital is that we all have the same sort of camera, similar lighting and similar software, so to be different I want to use my biggest and unique offering which is that which makes me tick; desire and darkness.”

Jack has worked for three years with Andrew O’Toole – an Australian photo-icon and a pre-eminent beauty and fashion photographer. (He worked with Helmut Newton and Annie Leibovitz back in the day).

“What I am feeling **inside me** *is* coming into my **pictures”**

“Andrew is just the best” says Jack. “He has a list of questions he puts to himself before his hair and beauty shoots, including; *Does the model look the best she can? Have I got the best hair on a certain angle of the face? Is the image interesting in its composition? Is it glossy magazine standard? How can I now make it better?”*

The late Bob Carlos Clarke is another mentor. “I took 100% inspiration from Bob’s imagery.

I have always been obsessed with his work. It reeks of sex.”

Paolo Roversi and Guy Bourdin also feature on Jack’s list of all time greats – but painters also inspire.

“I saw Bacon’s work at The Tate. I arrived first thing in the morning and I was the last one they threw out that night. I was besotted.”

The 16th century Italian master Caravaggio is a firm favourite too. “I study his paintings and study exactly what he does with light. Caravaggio defined the chiaroscuro technique – darkening shadows and holding the subject in a blinding shaft of light. And that has influenced the way I use light in my work.”

“A free flowing abundance of tension *is crucial”*

He adds: “In the main I shoot with just one light on the model; a beauty dish and a background light. I think some photographers kill their hair and fashion shots with overuse of lights. They think that just because they’ve got six lights at hand they must use them all. They often assume it will also impress the client.

I don’t work like that. I think you have to have the courage to centre just one light – in my case my trusty Bowens Gemini - on the model. This gives me the mood of darkness I crave.”

Recently I was commissioned for a hair shoot with a fantastic model. The entire kit inventory (all Bowens) comprised 2 Gemini heads; beauty dish, and a 5ft x 2ft softbox flagged





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to give more definition on the background.

People put hairlights on and honeycombs on top of heads – but I remind myself that the world itself is lit by just one light.

For me hairlights kill the feel – the shoot ends up looking like something for a model’s portfolio. If you light hair properly it is all about making the girl look sexy.”

Like all top photographers, Jack sometimes finds himself addressing the key question of creative independence. Paying clients can demand to run the show with storyboards and fixed plans ahead of a shoot.

“It’s true. Some clients want things lit in a certain way. They might pull out tear sheets and references and demand the subject is shot to their specific formula

“I listen to them; pick up on their body language and just try and get them to come round to my way of thinking. It’s helpful to get all that sorted out right at the beginning of a shoot session – but occasionally you just have to end up not working with people whose views just never marry up with your own. Fortunately for me that’s rare.”

“Hair and beauty photography is incredibly niche. I have great respect for other photographers’ work and I

never want to poach – so I give potential clients some work that showcases my own particular style. I point out that it may be different to what they are used to – but ask them to consider me if they ever need imagery like mine.

One of the key challenges for a hair and fashion photographer can be time available to shoot.

Jack explains: “Often you have just 15 minutes or so, especially with hair shoots. But the girls I work with are professional models, not celebrities. They work with me to generate the rapport needed.

It’s about eye contact and language used. In a way it is really sexual chemistry. I have to tease the best out of them.”

And sometime things do go wrong on a shoot. He recalls: “One night I had prepared the studio for an important commission the next day. Four top models and the client were turning up. I mislaid the studio keys and decided I would have to sleep all night on the studio floor. I got myself a takeaway and it made me violently ill – all night and all the next day. I still had to go ahead with the shoot though. You can’t show weakness. That was probably my most gruelling shoot ever. Fortunately the client

loved the images.”

Post production is big in the Eames workflow. “I shoot with Hasselblad and use their Phocus software so I am already manipulating the image with Phocus filters – giving it ‘my feel’ I charge around £1100 a day for a shoot but added to that will be £100 an image for post production work. Often that means an extra £800 a shoot.

Recently Jack completely reworked his own website.

“I stripped it down to the minimum; just fashion and hair. I need people to know that I am not shooting plates of food or buildings.”

If the next five years go to plan Jack will be shooting big campaigns for Toni & Guy and L’Oreal – and browsing the results of his efforts in magazines like Italian Vogue.

“Sometimes it takes years to figure out what you want to say and exactly who you want to be. I’m getting there.”

www.jackeames.com

By Trevor Lansdown

Model Agencies: Models1 and Nevs
Makeup artists: Crystabel Riley, Julia Wilson, Leanne Shaw and Helena Lyons.
Hair: Various including Shinya Fukami, Sanrizz, Mark Francome and Mark Pearson.