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Photographer Who Broke Molds

By CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS

Of the London fashion photographers known in the 1960s as “The Black Trinity” and “The Terrible Three,” two are dead and one is thriving — even, at 72, showing new buds.

While continuing his print work, Terence Donovan (1936-1996) went on famously to direct Robert Palmer’s “Addicted to Love” video. Sensing that he was headed for a crackup, Brian Duffy (1933-2010) fed his negatives to a bonfire and became a world-class restorer of Georgian furniture.

David Bailey, leveraging his recent celebrity as a sculptor (and a composer of Joseph Cornell-style cabinets of curiosity, and a still-life photographer of skulls and dead flowers with a strong whiff of Irving Penn), is the subject of a documentary by Jérôme de Missolz, “David Bailey: Four Beats to the Bar and No Cheating,” which is to be shown on the Sundance Channel in the United States on Feb. 9 and on CineCinema in France on April 27. A longer version is a hopeful for the Tribeca Film Festival in New York in April and is booked for FIFA in Montreal in April, Planete Doc in Warsaw in May and the IDFA in Amsterdam in November.

If the labels stuck on the Bailey troika nearly a half-century ago don’t sound completely admiring, it’s because they were coined respectively by two men, Norman Parkinson and Cecil Beaton, who had plenty to lose from the stealthy rise of these working-class lads with a surfeit of rough glamour.

A generation or more older, “Parks” and Beaton were gentlemen society photographers, meaning they were of society, though they of course also shot it, usually wearing parures and carrying a hard-walled purse.

Beaton was a master of the exquisitely-tied foulard and was forever in search of the garden hat that didn’t fall irritatingly “over one’s eyes so that one can’t really see,” as Mr. Bailey filmed him explaining in the delicious 1971 documentary “Beaton by Bailey” (on DVD with his films on Warhol and Visconti).

Compare Beaton’s bird of paradise with Mr. Bailey’s potty mouth (which he still cultivates) and the leather jacket British Vogue warned him not to wear to the St. Regis hotel in New York on his first assignment abroad for the magazine, in 1962, a trip made with his great love of the time, the model Jean Shrimpton. Mr. Bailey wore the jacket, the Vogue ladies gnashed their pearls. While the trinity didn’t depose Parkinson and Beaton, it certainly meant fewer checks from Condé Nast.

Despite the canyon of differences between them, the photographer Bruce Weber sees a straight line from Beaton to Mr. Bailey. “Like Beaton, David can take a society portrait and later that afternoon one of a gangster and later that night a fashion magazine cover and run out the next morning and shoot a crime scene.”



Laurence Uebersfeld/LuFilms

David Bailey being filmed on the set of “David Bailey: Four Beats to the Bar and No Cheating” in 2010.

With a whoosh of nostalgia, “Four Beats to the Bar and No Cheating” — the line is Count Basie’s definition of jazz — shows how Mr. Bailey’s early fame was based on getting models to do things editors had always forbidden, things that seem charming but un-extraordinary today, like kneeling on the floor to converse with a taxidermied squirrel. “I didn’t try and do fashion pictures,” Mr. Bailey tells Mr. de Missolz. “I tried to do portraits of girls wearing dresses.” One of the greatest pleasures of “Four Beats” is watching Mr. Bailey tying himself in knots on the question of a personal style.

“I want very sophisticated passport pictures. Without any window dressing. No palm trees. ... You can’t really copy what I do because I don’t do anything. ... When I say I have no, I don’t have any style, I do but I don’t want it, I don’t want the style to — My style is nothing.”



“Flowers Skulls Contacts” by David Bailey, published by Steidl

Mick Jagger in 1964.

The Gagosian Gallery holds the record for a Bailey photograph, about £120,000, about \$190,000, for a 72-inch-square silkscreen of the two most beloved Beatles. It is distinctly unfashionable to say the least critical thing today about Mr. Bailey in England, where he is nearly as fetishized as, say, the best man at his 1965 wedding to Catherine Deneuve, Mick Jagger. But Francis Hodgson has spoken up. The former head of photographs at Sotheby’s, London, complained that images at a Bailey show last year were “blown up not only larger than is interesting, but larger than the negative can bear.” He added that a photograph of Michael Caine had been “stretched to fit its £50,000 price tag.”

Even machine prints of Mr. Bailey’s work bring big numbers. The record for a copy of “Box of Pin-Ups” — a deliberate mash-up of portraits published in 1964, including ones of the murderous Kray brothers, Lord Snowdon and P.J. Proby in a crucifixion pose — is north of £20,000. As recalled in “Four Beats,” “Pin-Ups” — coming soon after the Lady Chatterley obscenity trials — returned Britain to

a state of “high Tory moral panic.”

Buoyed by such sales, Mr. Bailey hasn’t tiptoed into the sculpture market. Reflecting his long interest in West African and Oceanic art, the 14 bronze and silver works in his first exhibition as a sculptor, at the Pangolin Gallery in London last autumn, were produced in editions of 6 or 20 and priced from £1,500 to £25,000. Of 112 pieces, 8 have sold.

A New York art adviser, Wendy Cromwell, said: “Sculpture must be seen in person, but based on pictures it’s an amalgam of primitive, tribal, masks and Picasso. David is an enormous talent. Is he as good as Avedon? No. Is he better than Leibovitz? Yes. So I give him the benefit of the doubt. It’s not high art, but I wouldn’t dismiss it. Remember, though, he’s collaborating with a fabricator. How much of it is him and how much the foundry?”

While Ms. Cromwell said the prices were in line with bronzes by emerging artists, Benjamin Genocchio, editor in chief of Art + Auction, called them “an absurdity — the objects will be largely valueless the moment they leave” the gallery. “Bailey is working with art-historical clichés,” Mr. Genocchio added, “tribal artifacts, Surrealist serendipity. The sculpture has a naïve quality that feels a little forced.”

David Cohen, editor of the Web zine *artcritical*, likened Mr. Bailey sculpting to Luciano Pavarotti painting. “They’re somewhere between pro and celeb. Pro in that they’re accomplished in another art form, celeb because they wouldn’t expect to enjoy the reputation they have on the basis of this new outlet of expression alone.”

Having seen only images of Mr. Bailey’s pieces, Mr. Cohen said they were neither “bad” nor “remarkable,” but rather an “assemblage out of a long tradition that obviously looks to Picasso, Miró, Rauschenberg.”

“You wouldn’t pay much less for a total unknown,” he added. “But if you’re looking for a critic to sound off about how degenerate the world is that celebs make art as if they were ‘real’ artists, the problem is that in this case the celeb is an artist in his own field, and many of the sculptors feted today aren’t making anything much more distinguished.”

Enough about art. Is there any sex in this movie? There is. Sex, of course, is central to Mr. Bailey’s career. “Four Beats” shows Jerry Hall with her panties down and, as it must, revisits “Blow-Up,” the 1966 Michelangelo Antonioni film Mr. Bailey inspired about a fashion photographer.

“The David Hemmings character was a polite composite of the group of mostly foul-mouthed cockney lads Bailey was part of,” said the photographer Eric Boman, who met him around this time. “Bailey, however, had a very real charm many of them lacked, which took him into the hearts of the girls he photographed, and it was really that glow that showed in his early work. His contribution is exactly what Vreeland saw in him: He represented a break with the ‘elegant’ past and made the girls look sexy in the most direct and simple way. Sort of the way he is.”