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# Features & Arts

Capturing the essence of life: David Bailey self-portrait, 2022, ahead of a discreet selling exhibition at Sotheby's; below, Princess Diana, photographed in 1988 ('she asked me what magnanimous meant'); Jean Shrimpton, 'the most beautiful girl in the world', 1961. Bailey and Shrimpton had a four-year relationship in the early 1960s and remain friends. He has said his secret was to fall a bit in love with his subject



## 'Diana's hair was terrible. The Queen's skin was beautiful'

David Bailey talks to *Lucy Davies* about photographing royalty and living with dementia

"Terrible hair," says David Bailey, handing me the contact sheet from a portrait of Princess Diana. "You know, from the hairspray - solid as a plastic dummy." To be fair, it was the 1980s and anyway, lavish use of Elnett probably saved Diana from injury: during the shoot, Bailey's assistant dropped a light on her head.

"I thought, oh f—!" says Bailey, though the Princess was remarkably understanding, and made a point of reassuring the girl afterwards. "She said, 'Don't think about it; it was a terrible accident'. I told her she had been very magnanimous - that's right, because she asked me what magnanimous meant."

You may recognise the shoot in question. An outtake from it was published widely earlier this month, having been released for the first time in an exhibition at Kensington Palace. I say widely, though Bailey claims not to know a thing about it. I wait while he upbraids his assistants.

"This one," he says, tapping a different shot, "is probably where I was trying to loosen her up." The Princess is smiling, sweetly goofy. "Everything she is doing here is what I told her to do, though if I want to make them laugh, I tell them something funny. I don't say, 'F—ing laugh!'"

One hopes he said nothing of the kind to the Queen, when she sat for him in 2014, but his gambit that time was to ask if "the jewels" were real.



"I said, 'I bet that cost a few bob, girl!'"

"You called her 'girl'?"  
 "It just came out. I call everyone 'girl'. But she was girlish. Made a real effort. We had a laugh. Beautiful skin, the Queen."

Bailey - whose rascal looks and glorious insurrection made him the poster boy for the Swinging Sixties - turned 84 in January. He is rotund, dapper in a clapped-out way, dressed in his trademark flannel shirt, scarf, trainers and a baseball cap. Beneath it, his owlish eyes are watchful.

We have met to talk about a discreet selling exhibition of his work at Sotheby's, its prints priced at between £20,000 and £80,000. Discreet, though, Bailey is not: his conversation froths with inside stories. He also swears like a navvie - I fear for the virtue of the builders in the mews below - and sews up almost every sentence with a wheezy cackle. Four years ago, he suffered a stroke and was diagnosed with vascular dementia.

"I forget things - I'm like Mortimer here," he says, ruffling the chow chow that has sidled up to the table. He inherited the dog from his youngest son, Sascha (he has another son, Fenton, and a daughter, Paloma). "Look at him, you can't tell one end from the other with all that fluff!"

How is he coping with the diagnosis? "I just get on with it. I've always been dyslexic so it didn't make much difference." His family? "They joke

'Oh, don't tell Bailey, he'll forget, hee hee'. It has its advantages because I forget the bad times, but sometimes I forget the good times too. What did you say your name was?" He is cackling again, though when he prises the lid off his takeaway coffee, I notice his hands are trembling.

Bailey's photographs are extraordinary things: so vital that they seem to crackle. He loathes talking technique but has said that his secret was to "fall in love with [the subject] a bit, just for that moment." Only one person has defeated him: "Warhol. You couldn't find him. I don't think there was anything to find."

His favourite print from that 1965 shoot is in the exhibition. Warhol's mouth is slightly open, revealing weirdly tiny, doll-like teeth. Seven years later, Bailey went to the US to make a documentary about him, though Mary Whitehouse had it banned. "I don't f—ing know why. Oh yes, it was [Warhol "superstar"] Brigid Polk painting with her t—. I fancy people wouldn't even notice that now."

You don't come to Bailey for political correctness. He turns acid when I broach MeToo and is perplexed by cancel culture: "People's minds change, but the time doesn't change. They can't change their actions."

The son of an East End tailor's cutter, Bailey was born in Leytonstone in 1938 and took his first photos during national service in Singapore, then assisted the society photographer John French. It was John Parsons, though, the art director of *Vogue*, who gave him his break.

Bailey was the enfant terrible at *Vogue*, whose payroll he joined in 1960. On the wall of his studio is one of the pictures he took for them, a ravishing study of a model in a 1965 Balenciaga wedding dress.

"Did they mind that you photographed her from the back?"

"I didn't f—ing ask them."

"*Vogue* didn't tell you what to do?"

"Course they did. I ignored them."

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, pretty much every cultural titan of the day sat in front of his lens. His fame quickly surpassed theirs, not least for his womanising. He dated models Jean Shrimpton and Penelope Tree, plus Anjelica Huston, and was married to Catherine Deneuve and Marie Helvin. He's been with his current wife, the model Catherine Dyer, since 1986.

Bailey and I look through proof prints for the show together: Michael Caine with an unlit cigarette in his mouth; Jane Birkin wearing only a necklace; the Queen, also in a necklace (though a dress besides); Jagger in a furry hood. The Rolling Stone lived with him for a while. "I don't mean sexually, but when he was 18 or 19 he had nowhere to live, so I let him crash with me. We were great friends."

"Jean was the most beautiful girl in the world," he says, when he gets to Shrimpton. They were together for two-and-a-half years and are still the best of friends. Does he associate her with a happy period in his life? "It's always been a happy period in my life. S—'s happened but you get over it."

He pulls out another: "Look at her arm. She was actually perfect." I ask Bailey if his idea of beauty has changed over time. "Beauty is not what people think," he replies. The first time he became aware of that quality "was when I went with my mother to Bond Street, to see the New Look [fashion collection] - you know, Dior, so it must have been 1947 or '48. She couldn't afford it, but she put it on and spun around and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Her spinning, that skirt swinging. She was beautiful, though I didn't know it at the time. She was just my mother."

He breaks off to push a well-known fashion magazine across the table. "I'd never take a picture like that. I can't believe they published it." Who does he like? "Only [the fashion photographer] Tim Walker." But more generally he's not impressed with the scene. "The days of star photographers have gone. Something's happened, because it's gone for everything - music, and art. Nobody knows any painters except David Hockney."

Bailey knows quite a bit about art. He has painted since childhood, and has easels set up in his north London and Devon homes. Several photographs at Sotheby's are overlain with playful brushwork, while on the wall here in the studio are paintings of people, but not portraits, he clarifies, "because painting portraits is boring."

He loves Caravaggio and Julian Schnabel, though Picasso is the don. He turned down the offer to shoot the latter "because it seemed like a long way to go for one picture" and has always regretted it. "But it's good to have a regret, and it's my only one."

The current exhibition also includes some of his vanitas still-lives, of flowers and skulls. I tell him they remind me of Irving Penn. "Good," he says, visibly brightening - the American photographer was a friend.

"They're about death, those pictures," he says next, so I ask him whether he thinks about it more now - how he would like to go. "I really don't know," he replies. Would he like to choose when? "No," he says. "Better to let it happen. Better not to know."

'Bailey's Parade' is at Sotheby's, London W1, until March 16; sothebys.com

DAVID BAILEY / COURTESY SOTHEBY'S AND IMITATE