

# WELCOME TO THE ALLURING WORLD OF MILES ALDRIDGE

JEREMY MARK, GRAZIA, SEPTEMBER 26, 2019



Miles Aldridge, *'I Only Want You To Love Me #4*, chromogenic print, 2011

**Glossy hair and make-up, extraordinary pops of dialled-up colour, and stylish scenes of domestic intrigue. Grazia is mesmerised by the ultra-slick, technicolour images of Miles Aldridge – photographer, image-maker and visual storyteller supreme**

A beautiful woman, dressed in a sunshine-bright polo-neck sweater and trousers, her hair teased to within an inch of its life and not an eyelash out of place, sits sprawled on the chequerboard floor of a fuchsia-pink, highlighter-yellow and pomegranate-red kitchen, her dinner plate smashed into pieces in front of her. At face value, *I Only Want You to Love Me #1* is a gorgeously striking fashion photograph. But look a little deeper. Take in the model's enigmatic expression, the dramatically shattered shards of china, and splattered food. Suddenly, this idyllic vision of suburban domesticity is not all that it seems. Why is she sitting like this? What caused her to drop her tray? What is she thinking? What is the story? Welcome to the glamorous, almost surreal, world of photographer Miles Aldridge, where we're seduced by vivid colour and perfection, as captivating as it is unsettling.

Miles explains his photographic career happened "by accident." He studied illustration at Central St Martin's, and in the early '90s began directing music videos for bands such as The Verve and The Charlatans. (Creativity runs in his family: his father Alan Aldridge was a prominent illustrator and graphic designer, most famous for his psychedelic designs for The Beatles, while his model sister Saffron and half-sisters Lily and Ruby have walked catwalks across the globe.

Miles' career path changed quite unexpectedly when his classical musician and model then-girlfriend took some grungey portfolio photographs he'd taken of her on Hampstead Heath to a casting for British Vogue. He got the gig, she didn't. From that moment,

he became the photographer everyone wanted to work with. "I hit the ground running, as the grunge look was what everyone wanted. It was extraordinary," he reflects. "Glossy magazines completely ruled the world back then, and once I got onto that rollercoaster, it just didn't stop. I was literally on a plane five days a week. I remember being in a taxi and not knowing which city I was in – it could have been New York, Paris, anywhere. I had to wipe the condensation from the car window with my hand to see if I could find a sign or some typography that would give me a clue to where I was. It was an incredibly exciting time."

We meet at his studio near London's King's Cross, housed in an unassuming industrial building. Enormous-scale, framed versions of some of his most iconic and also newer pieces rest against walls ready for collectors and galleries. Several – now rare and collectible – books of his work are laid out across a large white surface, as he prepares for Ex Libris, a major show of his photographic editions, screenprints, sketches and books, presented by his London gallery, Lyndsey Ingram, in New York at the end of October.

His office area (where we sit and chat) is a fascinating space, more intimate, with two sofas, a large trestle table, and floor-to-ceiling shelves filled to bursting with impeccably organised magazines and art, photography and design books. His heroes are all represented, from legendary photographers Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton, to his art icons Schiele, Matisse, and Richter, to mention just a handful. On the cork wall opposite are pinned various tears from magazines, postcards and sketches. As we discuss his work and career, Miles is as captivating as the images he creates.

**Storytelling plays a huge part in your work – how important is the tension between the fashion and the story in your photographs?**

Very, but it actually happens the other way round. I start with the story and then the fashion is sprinkled on by the stylist. With my images, I try to illustrate an element of tension that's going on in this person's world, as if at that moment they are having some kind of major realisation.

**What's particularly striking about *I Only Want You to Love Me* is that the make-up is quite muted in comparison with the dazzling kitchen and the fashion...**

The inspiration was Fellini's film *Juliet of the Spirits*, which I'd just seen, where there's a girl who plays a very minor role, but she is so pale in comparison with the colourful clothes she is wearing. The other great thing was the hair by Kerry Warn, which he described as "astronaut's wife's hair." Between us we'd talk about

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the character we were creating – here she was a riff on Blanche DuBois from Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I guess we were trying to create a sense of theatre.

**Domestic settings – kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms – feature widely in your work. What excites you about elevating these mundane surroundings?**

I think to be an artist, you have to tell your story. So for Van Gogh, it was about fields and empty rooms. But my world is full of memories of my own childhood, my mum and dad in the kitchen... these were the scenes of normality, but also of heightened passions, you know, screaming and shouting. One of my main influences is undeniably Pop Art. Pieces like Warhol’s Brillo Box [which elevate the everyday]. I guess what I do is kind of post-modern post-Pop.

**Is Pop Art also the inspiration for the incredible saturated colour you create?**

That actually came when I was shooting in Tokyo. I went to see an exhibition of Peter Lindbergh’s work, which was on display in the basement of a department store. It completely knocked me out – these incredible, large-scale black-and-white photographs. Going back up the escalator, I thought to myself ‘there’s absolutely no way to better what is currently being done in black-and-white photography,’ so I started thinking about colour.

**Many of your photographs are very painterly – your Lily Cole and Game of Thrones series for example...**

Sometimes people say to me, “You know that painting you did of that woman at the sink?” And I say, “You mean photograph,” but it’s quite a flattering Freudian slip. But yes, I am very much influenced by paintings. Like *A Painting*, my portrait of Lily Cole which was an earlier work, was in response to seeing an exhibition by Pisanello at the National Gallery in London. As Picasso said, “Good artists borrow; great artists steal,” so I took this idea into the studio and it worked brilliantly. I used a larger-format camera, which suited the painterly style I wanted to create and Lily, who was only around 14 at the time, completely bought into the idea. She was like a Victorian doll.

**Did you enjoy working with the Game of Thrones cast?**

My reference for that series was the work of two Northern Renaissance painters, Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer, which I’d researched before flying out to Los Angeles to shoot the portraits of Sophie Turner and Maisie Williams. Whenever I land somewhere new, I always head to a museum to absorb inspiration, and, would you believe it, the exhibition at LACMA was Cranach and Dürer – all the actual paintings I’d been carrying around photocopies of as inspiration. It was as if it was meant to be. The girls were incredible. They turned up a little worse for wear as it was the morning after the Emmy Awards, but it was such a great shoot. Prints of both the photos of Maisie and Lily Cole are now in the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London.

**For many years you collaborated with legendary editor-in-chief Franca Sozzani, who published some of your most iconic stories. Can you tell us about that relationship?**

Back then, magazines tended to have ‘gangs’, so there would be the i-D gang, or The Face gang, and I was one of ‘Franca’s boys’ at *Vogue Italia*, along with photographers like Craig McDean, Steven Klein, Peter Lindbergh, Bruce Weber, and Steven Meisel. We’d all have regular meetings with her – usually at the Ritz in Paris after the Chanel show – all the photographers would be lined up waiting to see the ‘headmistress.’ We’d each tell her what we wanted to do that season and she would commission one, two or three of those projects. So I would turn up with drawings of my ideas. I never really knew or cared what was going on in the fashion world, although I had a lot of respect for it. I mean, I went to see incredible shows, particularly some of Galliano’s for Dior, and Lee McQueen’s [Alexander’s real name, by which he was known in his inner circle], which were like pieces of extraordinary, beautiful theatre. But fashion was never the main interest for me.

**Let’s talk about your drawings. They’re pretty detailed, far more than simply rough sketches...**

I soon realised I could do so much better work if I planned things out more in advance. So I started sketching and then colouring in the sketches, so I’d know the exact colour the carpet needed to be, or the precise blue of the wall. Drawing helps me tie those things down. I started to exhibit the drawings alongside my photographs, and it kind of became what set me apart from a lot of my contemporaries.

**You shoot test images using Polaroid and then on film, rather than digitally. Being such a perfectionist, were you nervous when you first started exhibiting your Polaroids?**

There’s a real intimacy about Polaroid. Unlike shooting digital photos, where everyone can gather around a computer screen and offer their opinion, a Polaroid is between the photographer and the subject. Exhibiting them is really refreshing, particularly as my Polaroids are usually extremely close to the final photograph. I also see it as a contrast to the idea of the snapshot photographer, particularly the kinds of images we see on Instagram and across social media.

**More recently you’ve been exploring screenprinting with your (after Miller) and New Utopias series...**

In 2016, unfortunately Franca passed away, and without any form of exaggeration, I’d say that marked a huge change in my work, in the sense that up until then I was a fashion photographer working with a fashion editor. I also felt I couldn’t keep photographing new women in new kitchens. At the same time, I was introduced to a historic printing company in Barcelona, Polígrafa, who invited me to create a series of prints for them to exhibit at Art Basel at Miami Beach. So I’d just shot my project with my friend, the painter Harland Miller, and I was at his house in Norfolk where he had all these screenprints of his own work lying around, and everything

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started to make sense. The exciting challenge was how to make screenprints that look like photographs, and it took lots of testing, but we got somewhere we really liked. At Art Basel, the complete edition sold out in two days.

**You have the E/AB Fair in New York coming up, and an exhibition in Moscow in the pipeline – any plans to show your work in the Middle East?**

I haven't, but I'm very open to the idea. I've worked on some projects for Saudi Arabian clients, but I've never visited the region. I'd love to.

**With so much going on, and such a super-creative mind, do you ever get to switch off?**

I tend to wake up very early. My ritual is to make some tea and start making notes for the day ahead, then I go swimming in the men's pond on Hampstead Heath. After that, I can focus on what I need to achieve.

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