

MARTIN COOPER

Martin Cooper – Shots Magazine Interview
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Thinking about your past and your boyhood, what do you recall about it that may have pointed you in the direction of becoming a designer and artist?

Wow...where do I begin? The home that I grew up in was not an artistic home, though I was very much an artistic child. My father is a dentist. My two older brothers are dentists. Both grandfathers were dentists, as well as my father's eldest brother. But I was one of those fortunate few who never had to struggle to figure out what they wanted to be and I knew early on that it certainly wasn't going to be the family business! "It" picked me. By that, I mean fashion. I always knew that I would live in New York City and be a fashion designer. By the time I was 9 or 10 years old, I was designing complete collections. My life seemed quite pre-destined and to this day, I'm doing pretty much what I set out to do from those early years.

I am also a great believer in mentors. My grandmother lived next door to us. She was a woman truly born before her time. She graduated from Pratt Institute in 1922, in what was called "fashion construction" at the time, the precursor to fashion design. She was the one who taught me to draft patterns. She bought me my first sewing machine and most of all, she was the one to teach me that the human body is a 3 dimensional form. She truly changed my life.

When I was 14, I was given special permission to attend the college-level summer program to study fashion at the prestigious Parsons School of Design in New York City. During that summer I met other young people who were thinking just like me. There is something universal about youth and talent. We were all on the same wavelength; all doing and exploring the same ideas and concepts.

I met a woman that summer who would also change my life. Her name was Marie Essex, and she taught fashion illustration at the school, and taught everyone from Donna Karan to Marc Jacobs. She was the only one who really knew how old I was and she took me under her wing like I was her own. I went back home to South Carolina a focused and changed person with my eyes set on returning to Parsons to study fashion when I graduated from high school.

Which came first, your interest in fashion or photography? How did each emerge as a significant means of expression?

Fashion definitely came first. But looking back, photography was always around me. My father had a beautiful leather trimmed Contax camera that he bought when he was stationed in Japan in the 1950s that I used quite a lot. He was very generous in that way. I could shoot as much film as I liked. Also, a funny story... my older brothers and I had the weekly responsibility of cleaning my father's office every night. I loved the weeks that I got to clean the reception room because it

brought me in contact with wonderful magazines like LIFE and National Geographic. I would say much of my visual language was established in that reception room! It also brought me an awareness of how other people lived in different parts of the world, with different customs and I was very curious about that. Those magazines were definitely learning tools and a travel machine for me. Even today, I read about 30-40 magazines a month. It is an addiction I am very proud of.

How did the two disciplines eventually “overlap”?

Great question. Between my mother and my grandmother I had access to all the fashion magazines going back to the 40s. Fashion magazines were an extension to yet another world. I have always been visually literate and I looked at photographers like Cecil Beaton, Horst P. Horst, George Hurrell, and George Hoyningen-Huene. They were the style-makers that defined modern fashion photography. But at the time I was actually looking at the clothes they photographed, not the photographs for themselves. It took me some time to put the two together. That happened much later. But from the beginning though, I was really fascinated with beautiful things. It's the Virgo in me. That drive eventually led me to become a clothing designer.

With photography, I was a late bloomer, though when I look back, it was always a part of my life. I'm completely self-taught. In the beginning, around 1990, I wanted to create a photographic project about women, by women. I would just serve as “producer” of the project, and guide an all female team to execute a particular concept I had. I looped my wife Karen into the project and over the course of 6-8 months, we interviewed models, photographers and writers to be part of the team and frankly, I was having a difficult time connecting with the photographers we were meeting. I was showing them tear sheets I pulled to give them the flavor of what I was looking for; you know, for the “feeling.” I felt the need to communicate the idea to them in a more succinct way so I decided to ask our best friend if she was willing to be my guinea pig and shoot a series of nude Polaroids to be used as visual references with the photographers we were interviewing in order to be able to say... “this is what I'm looking for, this is what I need.” Our friend Jane was extremely agreeable and we worked for a solid 2 months developing the visual concepts for that project. When Karen started looking at the instant images, she said in all of her wisdom, “why don't you just shoot the project yourself?” That project was never realized, but it gave me just the right push of confidence to explore figurative photography in a much more serious way. Up until that moment, I had never considered doing fine art photography as an artistic expression, but making images seemed to be a natural progression. I knew how to frame a shot, so it was just the technical aspects of photography that I needed to learn.

The complete irony of this is that I feel my voice as a photographer is stronger because I have no commercial constraints placed on me like that of the fashion world. In photography, I make the kinds of images that I want. If someone enjoys my work and wants to further their relationship with a piece by purchasing it, that's wonderful, but selling is not the driving force behind my work. It really is about personal expression and the journey than anything else. On the flip side, my clothes must sell. Otherwise, what's the point? So it's easy for me to say that photography is the thing that makes my life right. It's the thing that gets me out of the bed everyday. It's my drug of choice. I am, however, extremely thankful that fashion is in my life because it affords me

the privilege to be able to make the types of images I want to make with no strings of commerce attached. As a matter of fact, I run my studio OrchisArts at “net-zero,” meaning that once everything has been paid for (model fees, printing, etc.) I donate all the net proceeds to Breast Cancer organizations like Casting for Recovery, which is a not for profit group that teaches breast cancer survivors the art of fly fishing as part of their physical and mental recovery. It’s one of the parts of my life that I’m most proud of.

What has being a fashion designer taught you that you’ve applied in your photography? Conversely, how has photography informed your fashion design? Are there practices specific to each discipline that you’ve brought to the other?

The short answer would be having the discipline to be creative on command. It’s the number one tool that I bring over from fashion because regrettably, I’m not able to shoot everyday. Sometimes not every month. So when I book a model, I have to have incredible discipline to harness the most from that session because the next session may not be in the immediate future. In fashion, there isn’t the concept or allowance for “writer’s block.” Other artistic disciplines allow the artist not to produce a body of work for years. As a designer, I don’t have that luxury. I must conceptualize and create 4 major collections a year. So to answer your question in one word, it would be discipline. Fashion gives me an incredible sense of discipline that I can apply to all facets of my life, including my photography.

Interesting story, and kinda related...when I was a freshman at Parsons in the early eighties, my group of friends were illustration majors, not fashion majors. These guys were a talented group who conceptualized and drew beautifully. They were also incredible musicians. When their drawing presented a problem, they worked thorough the drawing on their bass or drums. And conversely, when they encountered a snag in creating music, they worked through the music through their drawing. These guys were multi-talented. What I learned from them is that all creative energy is the same. Whether you’re making an incredible drawing, an amazing musical arrangement, composing a photograph or designing a coat, the thought process is exactly the same. It comes from the same core. It is interrelated.

Your largest body of work appears to be “The Altis”. How did that project come about and what was your approach to it?

That’s right Russell. To date The Altis is my largest body of work. That project had an interesting beginning. The Altis didn’t exactly start off as “The Altis.” It originally started off as an ode to a dear friend of mine that I grew up with in South Carolina. She is one of my oldest friends. We’ve known one another since kindergarten! It was to be an in-depth exploration of nudes and portraits. She lived in Boston while Karen and I were in New York so we were only able to work on the series a few times a year. Karen, in all of her brilliance looked at the images about a year into it and mentioned to me that the project had a very Olympian spirit to it that could expand into something larger. Ding, the light bulb turned on and I started doing research into the ancient Olympic games and in particular, women’s role in ancient sport. During the course of a year or so, I interviewed historians and anthropologists to understand what the games were really about.

What I learned was that women's participation was almost non-existent. Women were banned from participating in the ancient games, "a crime punishable by death." I felt that just based on gender alone, it doesn't mean that one can't excel in athletics, or anything else in life for that matter, so I made the choice to cast the project with an all female cast as a reflection of social and sexual equality in our living times.

I understand that your Altis work inspired a ballet. How did this come about, and what was your role in the process? Also, did seeing your work presented in the context of performance/dance in turn offer any personal insights to the photographic work it was based on?

In 2002, I was having an exhibition at the Media Gallery in Boston. Oddly enough, I was introduced to this gallerist through my same childhood friend that inspired The Altis. When we met, the gallerist said you should meet my friend Rebecca Rice. I said, "who's Rebecca Rice?" He said, "she's a choreographer for the Boston Ballet. I think you guys would like each other." Rebecca and I met and just fell in love. She really understood The Altis, and shortly thereafter approached me to collaborate on creating a ballet directly based on my series. It was one of the most fulfilling experiences I've ever had. Rebecca choreographed the piece, I designed the costumes and Martin Case composed the original score. In many ways it was a culmination of all of my life's experiences, and completed the circle. It allowed me to use my skills as a designer in my work in a way that up until that point were kept very separate. The work literally lifted itself from the photographs and came to life on stage. The images were projected 4- stories high and used as the backdrop to the dance work.

Historically, the games were performed in the nude, so that posed an interesting challenge for me to create a language of costumes and interchangeable elements that would seamlessly work back into the language of The Altis. At the time there were no "costumes" in the series per se, just props here and there. I wanted the look to have a definite nod to antiquity, but to also have a very functional appearance so there's a lot of leather, canvas, cotton webbing, D-rings and gear. Making the costumes was so much fun that I kept making them well after The Altis was completed. The costumes have become artifacts to this body of work, and we continued to video the fittings and make studio reels, little 5-minute video installations, of the model standing on a box in her white leotard with me draping the costumes directly on body. Some of them are published on my website. To date, I've costumed 4 ballets: 2 with Rebecca and 2 with Kevin O'Day (Pittsburgh Ballet and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago).

You've said you treat working with models as a collaborative act. Can you explain your approach in this regard?

Yes, for me collaboration is the thing that makes art modern today. I love the collaborative process. I love finding models that understand my visual language and want to help me build upon it. I have a very instinctual thing about casting models. It's my job to figure out why they have found themselves in my studio and what are they looking to get out of the relationship. I spend a tremendous amount of time weeding out the curious from the committed. I'm always fascinated about that relationship because it is also symbiotic, meaning that both artist and model work closely for a duration of time for the mutual benefit of both. The artist cannot express his ideas

without the collaboration of the model. And the model cannot 'perform' without the audience of the artist. The intimacy of collaborating is very therapeutic for me.

When I make the commitment to work with a model, she is making the equal commitment to work with me. It is a decision that I take very seriously because of the consistency I need throughout my work. When I pick a model, I can usually tell what type of longevity she'll have with my work. During the time I was casting for The Altis series, I was very upfront with a model about the commitment she needs to make toward our collaboration. Most importantly, she doesn't have to be experienced at all, but it's everything to me if she wants to be part of the creative process and build images together in a collaborative way. There is great intimacy to creating something from nothing. Trust is a huge factor in that. We build the images together as we shoot, then edit and crop them together right on the floor.

Another thing that is very important to me is documenting what happens in the studio during each shoot. My wife Karen has filmed in the studio for many years and she has also interviewed all of my core models to hear their version of the collaboration for the historical record of the studio. So not only does the model help create the images, we document who she is as a woman, model, muse and collaborator.

What have your models taught you about your work?

Models help take 'ego' out of the equation. I can't do what I do without them. It is a shared experience.

Do you find that the more you work with a model, the better the images become? Or are your results consistent as you work with someone over a period of time?

Historically, I prefer to work with the same models over and over again. Most photographers prefer to work with a new face or model every time they pick up the camera. I'm the opposite. I feel that the longer I work with a model, the stronger the images become. I would say that there is a core of about 10-12 models that I've been collaborating with for over 10 years. They have essentially grown up in front of my camera and they all have tremendous ownership about their collaboration with my projects. I worked on The Altis over the span of 10 years, but if you were to see it in its entirety, you would never know that the same model may be 10 years older or younger from one image to the next. It's seamless.

Do you feel that working with the nude presents specific challenges to your work?

Not really, but I would say that if there are any specific challenges, it would be on the selling side. Corporations almost as a hard rule do not purchase figurative (nude) photography. I've been privileged to show my work to a wide audience, be it museums or galleries and I was thrilled when Bergdorf Goodman, the preeminent New York retailer of all things luxury, acquired about 12 nudes that are on permanent display in their store. As a public space, it was the right artistic environment to show my work. It set a gold standard because it broke (or bent) the rule in the States that it's taboo for companies to purchase nudes for their corporate collections.

Why do you choose to work with female subjects exclusively?

Hmmmm, no one has actually asked me that before. I've often thought about shooting the male nude, but I'm not sure what I could bring new to the genre. Maybe it's just that women are a lot more fun. I don't really know. Perhaps its because I grew up in a house of all boys, so the opposite sex is something that emotionally fascinates me. If I were to look deeper, perhaps it's because my life is very "female-centric." As a designer, my career has been dedicated to helping women feel empowered through the choice of clothing they wear, or in the case of my photography, how is she is portrayed in simple, honest terms. I like creating things that women feel good about. I also like being around female energy. I identify largely with it.

As a little side bar to this conversation, and an interesting point to share, women constitute about 85% of my print sales. I think that's the case primarily because women find my nudes empowering. They are able to see themselves in my work. I think that your average male collector looks for a different type of nude.

You often "storyboard" your images, sketching and planning them before you shoot. Do you ever work intuitively without preplanning? Also, do your images usually turn out as you planned them, or do the sketches act as only a starting point that lead to ideas you hadn't thought of?

I find that working with large format cameras forces me to know what I'm looking to get out of a shoot before the shoot happens. The film is just too expensive. With *The Altis*, I sketched out and storyboarded the entire project and it was shot in a shooting sequence similar to that of a filmmaker, meaning that like-things were shot together, as opposed to being shot in sequential order from beginning to end. Since I love drawing, I prefer to work this way. I can conceptualize at any time of the day, make a quick sketch, add it to my Sequence Book and shoot it when I can. It's really a diary and a starting point. Nothing is ever rigid or cast in stone. We always have the liberty to veer to the right or to the left. Sometimes a model's body can't move the way that I've drawn her. Most of the times, I will have to say, the final image looks just like the conceptual drawing. Other times, they look nothing alike. I love it though when a model is able to bring her own magic to the image, and veer away from the drawing, making it stronger.

Now back to collaborating with the model, I show her the sketch before we start to work. She'll know exactly what she needs to do. We discuss all the details and possibilities so it's really a tool to get us on the same page quickly, because I wont shoot a lot of film. In a 3-hour session, I will shoot only about 30 sheets of film; less than the equivalent of one roll of 35mm film.

What equipment do you work with, and how does it dictate the outcome of your images. Also, how does working with the immediacy of Polaroid film affect your work?

I only work in the large format. I shoot with two Sinar cameras. A 4x5 and an 8x10. My set up is pretty simple. I never want my equipment to get in the way of the creative process, and as I mentioned earlier, I need a particular consistency throughout my work which forces me to keep it simple so that I can replicate the exact lighting schematic if needed, several weeks or several months later. I only shoot in studio with controlled light. I use two 1000 watt Dps as the main source and two 500 watt Omnis on the backdrop. I use homemade dimmers for all four lights so that I can dial them up or dial them down as I see fit. That's it. Oh, I also hand hold a Maglite to

illuminate selective areas on the face or where ever it's needed. I never use reflectors.

My love affair with Polaroid began before I realized that I would become a photographer when I shot Jane on the Spectra camera. I now shoot with T55 (and type 665 before Polaroid discontinued the film) for 4x5 and mix T804 and T809 for 8x10. Not only is T55 my favorite because it's so smooth and velvety, but it's a great confidence builder with the model. She can instantly see what she's giving back to the camera. It also allows us to edit or make decisions right there on the fly... "rotate your torso a bit to the left." Click. Wait 23 seconds. Peel the film apart and we know if we made the right decision or not. My use of Polaroid film sits at the very center of my creative process because by nature it makes the experience inclusive for all.

You seem most attracted to history and the traditional. Do you feel that by working within a traditional framework that you bring anything new and/or "modern" to your images?

I'd like to think so. I hope that my work helps to evolve the tradition of the genre. For me, the Nude is a genre that is one of the most complicated things to get your arms around, and so easy to get wrong. There are so many additional aspects that are projected on the genre from societal, cultural and political aspects. I certainly have no interest in trying to change the public's view of the Nude, but I hope that my work helps to educate and promote healthy and positive images of women.

I am also highly aware, as most of your readers are, that traditional photography, as we know it today, will not exist in the same form in the near future. I specialize in toning. I spent years studying 19th century toning recipes. Most of the chemistry exists from yesteryear, but it's the paper that's changed. The trick was to get old chemistry to work on a modern paper. No easy feat. In the last year or two, I have lost one of my films (T665) and Agfa has discontinued making my paper. We spent years perfecting all of the elements...lighting, paper, and chemistry to create a look of platinum, but not. I wanted a look that was even more romantic than platinum. I'll now have to start that process all over again. I can't say today how this will effect how my images will be printed in the future, but I do know that it will not be the same.

As modern photography continues to evolve, I know that my work won't switch over to digital. That would be too easy. Not special to me. I'm also aware that the market for the traditional is getting smaller and smaller. More niche like. I don't shoot in color, I don't shoot in "snapshot" style and my images aren't printed mural size. I generally print 16x20". I'm finding something very attractive about the 19th century and alternative processes. It's very self-sustaining. If I can't buy my paper, I'll make it. If I can't buy my film, I'll make my own film. I want to not only create compelling images, but also create images using a technique and methodology that brings inherent value to it. An heirloom.

What have you most recently been working on, and where do you see your work going in the near future?

I've been working on 2 new bodies of work that I'm quite passionate about. I've spoken about one of them more publicly than the other. The first is a body of work that explores why I feel the

human pelvis is the most fascinating and controversial bone in the human body. This body of work will contain photographs, drawings, visual shapes or hieroglyphs and video installations. The other project centers on a 19th century historical figure. This project is definitely a point of departure for me and will take my work in a completely new direction. I felt it was time to use my voice as an image-maker in a stronger way. It will also be an image based multimedia project. I think I will always use the human figure in my work, but it may not always be the center of it.

What have your creative pursuits brought to your life and in the end, how would you most like to be remembered as an artist?

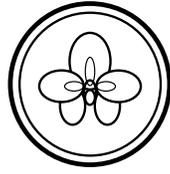
I would have never thought in a million years that I would have started an artistic exploration in photography, and more particularly the nude as a genre. After all, I'm a fashion designer. 16 years later, I now love the fact that by day I spend my energies creating a language of clothing to dress and adorn the body, but by night, I reduce the layers and affectations down to the nothing.

Photography is extremely self-satisfying and calming to me. It's something that's mine, separate from the commercial world. It's something that I can do the rest of my life. For that I am truly blessed. For me it's also all about the journey, and those that I've met and collaborated with along the way.

As for being remembered as an artist, I think the night is way too young to say!

Martin Cooper is a fine art photographer living and working in London and hopes to publishing a monograph of The Altis. His work concentrates on the photographic Nude, beautifully hand toned. He is also VP of Design for Burberry, the British luxury goods company. His work has been collected by The Polaroid Collections, The Henry Buhl Collection, the Beth Rudin- Dewoody Collection and Bergdorf Goodman. Cooper's studio, OrchisArts, makes contributions yearly to breast cancer organizations. Please visit martincooperphoto.com to learn more about his work, or contact Jayne H. Baum, jhbgallery.com.





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