Shoot (For) The Stars

Celebrity photographer Tyler Shields dominates the art world of the Internet age

BY MARIA BASS-FEZZER | OCTOBER 19, 2013 | VISUAL ART


Tyler Shields’ Instagram is probably through the roof.

“I can take a photo, post it online within five minutes, and watch it go around the world,” he says. “In a matter of an hour, a million people have seen it.” Within hours, 10 million people have seen it.

Although he is prone to superficiality, someone less familiar with his work might find this statement more bragadocious. But Shields credits his online presence as the reason he is so successful as a multidisciplinary artist.

The self-made celebrity photographer, author, and supporting cast member of Elf Mr. Eastwood and Company has been covered by websites like ARTINFO and The Huffington Post, and his work has collected by such prestigious contemporary art institutions as the Tate Modern. And he has his first show outside of New York or L.A. this month, at Miller Gallery as part of FirstFocus.

The Jacksonvillia, Fla. native gets a lot of back for being so popular. Newark Daily Beast columnist Chris Lee wrote, “Shields remains something of a joke in fine arts circles and is written off as a star-fucker by his vocal detractors.”

To hear him tell it, he’s just a guy who never went to art school (or high school, for that matter), taught himself how to edit skate videos (he was a professional inline roller skater in his late teens/early twenties) and took a picture with his roommate’s camera that got really big on MySpace.

“Without the Internet I would not be a photographer,” Shields said during a recent video interview from Paris. Nowadays vlogging online digital media representation is de rigueur for everyone from fast food chains to rising Hollywood starlets. But prior to the current cultural zeitgeist, editors for print publications rarely let their photographers leave the confines of the studio.

Andy Warhol’s name is often thrown around when speaking of Shields, and when asked about the comparison he seemed to think his particular union of art and celebrity had a lot to do with it.

“It’s flattering,” he said. “A lot of the art world doesn’t translate into the celebrity world and a lot of the celebrity world doesn’t translate into the art world. I translate both.”

Shields resists the idea that he chases celebrity, however.

“People are people. I don’t ever want to shoot somebody just because they’re famous.”

Yet he doesn’t photograph ugly people. The young and beautiful of Hollywood, who serve as his primary models, might do ugly things, but they’re doing it all while looking effortlessly gorgeous.

“When I started, no magazines could wrap their head around me,” Shields said.

The world travel was wanted to shoot outdoors in the places he visited — he didn’t want to be a studio photographer. “Now people understand how important it is to have imagery and how much that can do for you. Without the Internet there would be no audience for me.”

But eventually publications had to take notice. Shields consistently gets hangry, young, up-and-coming actors to pose for him. He’s photographed everyone from Lindsay Lohan to the entire cast of Revenge — often in nothing more than their skinnies.

And technically his photographs are beautiful. Black and white or color saturated, Shields uses movement and overt suggestions of commericalism, sex and violence that are simple, iconic and visceral. He shoots thematic series like those of girlfriend Francesca Eastwood’s mouth or silhouetted figures against breathtaking cinematic widescreen outdoor views, and they’re exhibited and sold on his website in larger-than-life, 7-by-4.5-foot glossy prints.

As an artist, Shields is clearly interested in performance. He’s directed music videos for Giselle Lefrançais and, included installations of bloody actors and “emergency medical procedures” at past gallery shows — which go well with his oft blood-splattered photographs — and can be seen on his girlfriend’s E! reality show, where she seems equally comfortable in front of as behind the camera.

His website features short, tension-filled video clips from his shoots with actors/models who often look to be pressed on the brink of some climactic event. Next month he begins filming his next project, “100 Veins” for the MoMA and a documentary for the Wall Street Journal about the art world of the Internet age.

“It’s all about being brand,” he said. “I think the world of the Internet age is all marketing.”

But Shields is ready for something new. He’s currently working on a book, The Art of the Possible, due out early next year.

“I’m schmoozing the best, and making sure the best are looking at my work,” Shields said. “I’m a writer, I’m an artist, I’m a philosopher. I’m a self-made mogul. And I’m not going to stop anytime soon.”
Abigail Dreslin in Prospect Park’s thriller, "Final Girl," about a pack of fetal teenage boys who choose the wrong girl to be the victim of their final initiation.

"I care about talent," Shields insisted. "Whatever the mass opinion of (the actors I shoot) is, they have extreme talent."

And he’s right in many ways. Shields’ photographs of Glee actress Heather Morris received a lot of controversy owing largely to her fake bruised eye and the set’s housewife theme. In her controversial photo shoot, the tall blonde leans seductively on an ironing board, is tied-up with the cord of an iron and clungly holds the iron to Shields’ crotch and face while the two fake surprised expressions at the camera.

But Morris does more than make sexy-face at the camera, and her physical talent has a lot to do with the series’ most interesting shots. The actress-singer-dancer does something I’ve never seen any other human being do before,” Shields said, “only she could do it.”

When asked if he worries that his work may propagate the tropes of sex and violence, he said, “If you don’t want to propagate sex or violence, you should duct tape your eyes shut.”

Shields insists he’s just “finding talent within talent,” but he also acknowledges that the fame of his models “amps it up even more” for his audience. So shooting beautiful famous people not only helps to build his models’ careers — being controversial is part of the deal.

The difference between Warhol’s "15 minutes on fame" and Shields' particular interpretation is that Warhol was referring to a breakdown of the hierarchy that only allowed certain people recognition, while Shields’ work reinforces that chain of command by photographing the already famous — despite the fact that he himself was originally an outsider.

Whether or not you like Shields’ work, the artist’s provocativeness will likely bring out a large crowd of people to see him attend his exhibition opening for Controlled Chaos at Miller Gallery on Friday. See the artist in action yourself to make up your own mind ... or just wait to see it on his blog.

Tyler Shields’ CONTROLLED CHAOS opens Friday at Miller Gallery in conjunction with FotoFocus. Receptions and exhibit details: milegallery.com.