

STAY HERE FOREVER

Derek Henderson won our heart a long time ago. Now, the photographer shares what makes him follow his own.

WORDS Jess Blanch PHOTOGRAPHY Derek Henderson

“She’s almost like a tomboy in a way. She’s not that tall I don’t think, she kind of reminds me of Kate Moss. She’s got that thing ... She’s quiet but she has a great personality and it comes out in the pictures and she’s very relaxed and fun on the camera.”

I’m sipping tea and listening to photographer Derek Henderson as he peers through his trademark clear-rimmed glasses softly flicking through a series of nudes he’s done with model Zippora Seven over five sittings during last summer.

“I certainly don’t overly direct talent,” he explains. “I’m more interested in their personality rather than how I think a picture should look. They pretty much do what they want, and if I think it looks good, I encourage them to keep doing it. But with Zippy you don’t really have to say a lot, and she’s very comfortable in front of the camera, it’s almost like she ignores it in a weird way which means you’re probably getting more of her personality than your own, which for me is what it’s about. I’m more interested in the sitter’s personality than my own. She’s just very much a free spirit, if there is such a thing, Zippy’s that.”

Henderson, without a doubt one of the most iconic photographers in Australia, first shot Seven for *RUSSE* back in 2006 at Kurnell, south of Sydney. He modestly describes the shoot among the sand dunes (it is a desalination plant) as “kinda based around horses” with no recognition of the cult following it garnered. (Who doesn’t know a teenager with it on their wall?). With Zippy laying across a Palomino pony in little more than denim and suede, it managed to capture an untethered and slightly juvenile spirit that resonated at the time. Henderson admits he “doesn’t look at blogs that much” and regardless of the popularity of the shoot was attracted to her as a model. With Seven only 16, a further shoot for the magazine, inspired by the characters of Kate Moss

and Johnny Depp brought about outcry over topless photographs that was sad and unfortunate for everyone involved.

“No it was not nice, it was weird, having people from Channel Seven ringing you up, asking you about your daughter and making accusations. It was quite horrible really,” he says solemnly. “But it was a storm in a teacup really, I think it was media driven, I think at the time when Bill Henson was in the news for his so-called controversial pictures that he showed at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery so I think the media was just looking for stuff and I think it was just over sensationalised. And then it went in front of the board, the tribunal, and they OK’d it.”

You get the impression it takes a bit to shake Henderson. His mild manner suggests it all just kind of happens for him, through no specific engineering on his part. But perhaps this comfort is a sign of someone who has been doing something well for long enough to feel completely at ease and who has inspired many contemporaries? He is certainly known for his appreciation of a certain type of beauty and for staying true to his individual vision on a shoot. A tortured creative or highly amped ‘fashion person’ he is not. At times you see a glint in his eye that hints of wild times gone by, by which he now seems slightly bemused. Those who have worked with him all describe him as being “solitary” on a shoot with a tendency to go off on his own.

Above all, his pictures, like the images we’re sharing here, which are to be published in a book by the Edmund Pearce Gallery towards the end of the year, drip with a sensuality and naturalness that is unique to both our ideal of Australian allure as well as the chastity of our frontier. Sometimes it’s as though the air in his pictures wishes it was water. There’s a dreaminess, a lack of urgency that sees his images languish and yet somehow they are still charged with energy.

This is no doubt influenced by his own taste for American large format and colour photography that came out of the 70s, the likes of Joel Sternfeld, Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. “And some of the German stuff like Thomas Del Ruth and Thomas Struth, and Thomas Demand ... lots of Thomases,” he says. “I’m pretty obsessed with detail, photography as a medium is really good at showing the detail of the world, and that’s what I quite like.”

Henderson grew up on an orchard in New Zealand in a place called Hawkes Bay and, despite never being really interested in arts at school, a move to Auckland saw him think about taking pictures. “I think I was about 18, one of my great uncles was a photographer in New Zealand, and he showed me some of his pictures and he had a darkroom, so I used to go and take photographs and then develop them in his darkroom.

“I suppose like all young adults, teenagers or whatever, you’re really involved in culture whether it’s music, film, magazines, fashion – so I started hanging out with like-minded creative people that were studying fine art at university, and assistants and photographers, and fashion editors.”

Describing the scene of the early 80s as post-punk “when people liked The Cure and The Smiths and that kind of stuff”, he remembers music and film driving them more than fashion. “But then you become aware of magazines like Italian *Vogue* and then you get inspired towards that.”

A commission taking stills for a French New Zealand production called *A Soldier’s Tale* saw him set free from Auckland and hanging out in Borneo, Paris and Normandy. Because of this he spent some time in London and decided to move there when he finished the job. And he did, working for different magazines, “just sort of trying to work my way up that ladder”.

He struggles to remember what his first fashion job was: “There was a magazine







that was affiliated with its own by the same publishers as *The Face*, or maybe they were in competition with *The Face*, I think it was called *Sky* magazine, and at the time (around '87, '88), it was considered a pretty edgy sort of a magazine.

"You just got caught up in the moment," he recalls. "The whole grunge thing was starting up, and you know I used to know Corrine Day and David Sims, and all those people, so there was an energy of this rebellion that had been going on in fashion, because previous to that it was all quite glamorous and high end and maybe not so obtainable."

The life they were living was not about money at all, he admits, it was way more independent. "You'd be in some nightclub at three in the morning and you kind of glimpse someone like Leigh Bowery and, all of a sudden, you'd sort of think, 'Fuck I'm really a part of this movement in culture ... even if I'm just the tiniest little piece in it and I might not even be one of the movers and shakers but I'm here and here's this person' and you could tell there was an energy and everyone was stimulated by it. You know, the music's amazing and just for a fraction of a time it all sort of comes together and you're all having a great time and you feel it's right at the cutting-edge of whatever is going on."

As often happens however, he returned home and then to Sydney a bit burnt-out from having too much of a good time and "probably not concentrating enough on my career". He started working for Marion Hume, who at the time was the editor at Australian *Vogue* who he credits as giving "the whole industry a bit of a boot up the arse" and changing the way people looked at fashion in Australia. "I remember being inspired looking at Australian *Vogue* and there were a lot of photographers that I thought were doing amazing things for it. ... Like Grant Matthews, I always thought he was a really good photographer actually who worked for an independent magazine called *Follow Me* and Max Dupain."

In this ever-evolving industry that is both media and fashion it's interesting to hear Henderson's perspective on where things are headed. "Yeah, look it seems to run in cycles really, people say no one wants to look at magazines but I think, I somehow, just the physicality of them, there will always be a need for them ... They're precious kind of items in themselves, it's not quite the same in looking at photographs on a computer.

"You have to remember a lot of production has gone into making these

beautiful images. So it's almost like they deserve publishing, there's a lot of time and energy that has gone into them. Sure, we live in the age of digital media but you go and look at a lot of teenagers rooms they still rip out a lot of pictures in magazines of pop stars and fashion models and pin them on their walls. That still happens."

So what's next? Henderson has shot for the magazines he likes, conquered big ad campaigns and tinkers away at his 'for love' projects but where to now? It's here he shows some insight into determination that made him. "Well I don't ever want to give up being a photographer. I think I'm lucky because it's a profession where it doesn't matter how old you are. You look at people like Helmut Newton, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn – they pretty much were taking photos up to the day they died. So that I think I'm lucky, it's really a fortunate thing and the world's inspiring, you're always learning, you're always meeting different people. So I'm never not interested in taking photographs, it's probably an obsession. But one that I enjoy so I don't think I'll ever get sick of it."

Gratitude aside, he's insistant that he only wants to do editorials for the best magazines and reveals a competitive streak. "I want my story to look the best in the magazine and if it doesn't, I'm pissed off. So that drives me a little," he says. "I like a challenge; it makes you use your brain. It's better to be working constantly than not. It's good to be active and it inspires your personal work as well. I don't think I'd want to be a photographic artist because I think I would be thinking about things and I'd probably get bitter and twisted. Whereas if you're working, you're practicing your craft. And I work on lots of personal projects, I mean I've got four or five that I'm constantly working on whether they come to fruition is, well, it is what it is."

Henderson's personal works (there have been many books and exhibitions) are more like fine art projects and in many circles he's know for these as much as his fashion editorials. In fact, engaging him on these works are like opening a Pandora's box into what makes his world go around.

"I'm working on a project about space craft that have maybe crash landed into the earth maybe hundreds of thousands of years ago and have just been exposed by the change in the global climate. But that's quite time consuming because we have to make them in 3D. I photograph the landscape and

we strip that all and it's sort of got to do with landscape and place.

"And then I'm working on another one that is about a Yeti, you know those abominable snowmen thing and meeting one of those guys. That's loosely based around colonisation." He continues enthusiastically: "... then I'm working on another one about serial killers, people that look like serial killers." Our conversation gets stuck on this point. "What does a serial killer look like?" I ask him.

"Well that's the question, what do they look like? More often than not, they don't look like what you'd imagine them to look like. It's quite hard asking if people want to be in my show about serial killers," he says.

Really? Who would have thought? And so I ask how that conversation goes.

"Oh it's difficult ... Yeah ... But most of them kind of get it ..."

"What kind of reaction do you get?" I ask.

"Are you nuts? Why do you think I look like a serial killer?"

"Have you met any serial killers?"
"No, not that I know of. I hope I never meet any of them," he says with a smirk.

The exchange gives away more about Henderson than he realises and makes me laugh when I listen to it later. It exposes an edge that is well-hidden when you see him in exploratory mode, cruising around Bondi. For Henderson though, Sydney is where he is happy, for now.

"When I was younger there was always this colonial view that we are missing out, that we're not in the centre of the universe, because we're not in New York or Paris or London. And that's all part of finding yourself and expressing yourself and realistically if you're working as a fashion photographer there is probably more opportunities if you live in New York or London or Paris, but for me right now? No I don't want to live in those places, I actually find more inspiration by not living there. By maybe going there a few times a year and being inspired by it but I don't want to live there."

And he sees globalisation, as ushered on by the web, as a way to keep up, as a way of evening out the field. "I mean if you're good at what you do then people will buy it. But at then end of the day if you're doing something that is good then maybe it will open more doors to other countries and you can take advantage of that. So you just have to get with the program." 

