Mirror Image

Tom Bianchi shoots from the hip

May 1, 1997

I’m trying to narrow the distance between what we desire and what we give ourselves," says photographer and entrepreneur Tom Bianchi, 51. He’s sitting on a chair in his modest LA living room holding forth on the subject of beauty and his role in veneration of same.

And who better to ask in the fashionably minimal ’90s? A makeup artist? Too much contrivance. A fashion designer? They simply gild the buffed lily. Better to ask someone who makes pictures that speak of a world where everyone is symmetrical, sensual, possessed of boundless energy and -- nude. Where the sun plays on chiseled torsos and the ocean laps at plump, well-groomed crotches. It’s the kind of beauty that takes hours of workouts (and an excellent knowledge of photography lighting, Bianchi is quick to add) to realize. Whatever it takes, Bianchi’s books of photographs, *Special Friends* and *Out of the Studio*, have become benchmarks in the lexicon of late-20th-century beefcake iconography.

To be sure, Bianchi has no shortage of detractors, many of whom see the world in his books as a world of shallow beauty, one that is closed to most mere mortals. “That world is no more unreal than the world we’re living in now, where in the past 24 months we’ve seen sick people return to health,” he offers. And perhaps we can all be Bianchi models someday.

Meanwhile, Bianchi is at work on two new books: *40+* is a photographic study of men over that age, and *In the Studio*, his most audacious work to date, pushes the sybaritic direction of his past efforts well into the realm of erotica or even pornography.

In 1993, Bianchi, a New York City lawyer before he became an artist, and some associates founded CytoDyn, a biotech firm developing a nontoxic class of anti-HIV drugs currently going into FDA-approved clinical trials. Bianchi, who is positive, sees no contradiction between his art and a complicated venture such as biotechnology. “The imagination to start this business comes from the same place as the imagination to do my first painting or make my first book. I’ve had enough experiences that by the time I entered adulthood, I knew I could accomplish several things with my life.”

And in fact, Bianchi credits such wide-ranging factors as law school, playwright Edward Albee and the erotic illustrator Blade with informing his understanding and appreciation of beauty. He credits Northwestern Law School with “cleaning up my mind and getting me focused.”

Albee was his first mentor on the subject of beauty. “In his apartment you would find everything from a 3-million-year-old fossil to a Henry Moore sculpture to something from Picasso’s rose period to some work by an unknown painter,” Bianchi says. “He could walk into a room and tell the difference between a mind that was acquisitive and a mind that was inquisitive. Real beauty in an environment lies in how much information there is, and how much love.”

His friendship with Blade may have something to do with the otherworldly quality of Bianchi’s work. “When I met him, I was already painting,” he says. “I told him that the day society got over its hangups about the subject matter -- eroticism in particular -- people would recognize the fineness of his vision and the beauty of the erotic universe he created.”

The big lesson, Bianchi says, is that the search for beauty, like the search for a cure for HIV, “takes a lot of right-foot-left-foot hard work. It’s not magic.” But oh, how magical the results can be.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Mirror-Image-1724-4604