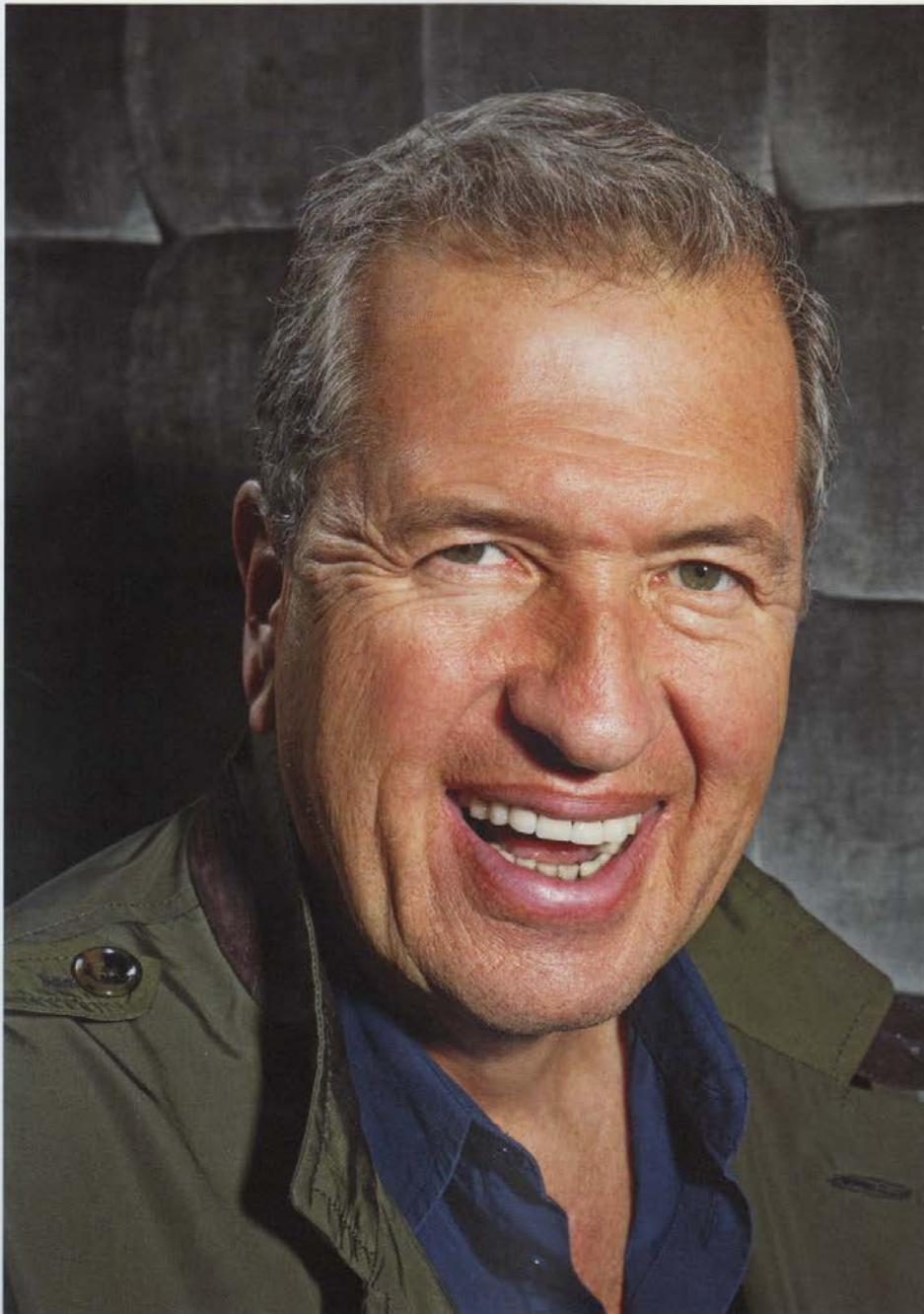


October 2014

MARIO TESTINO

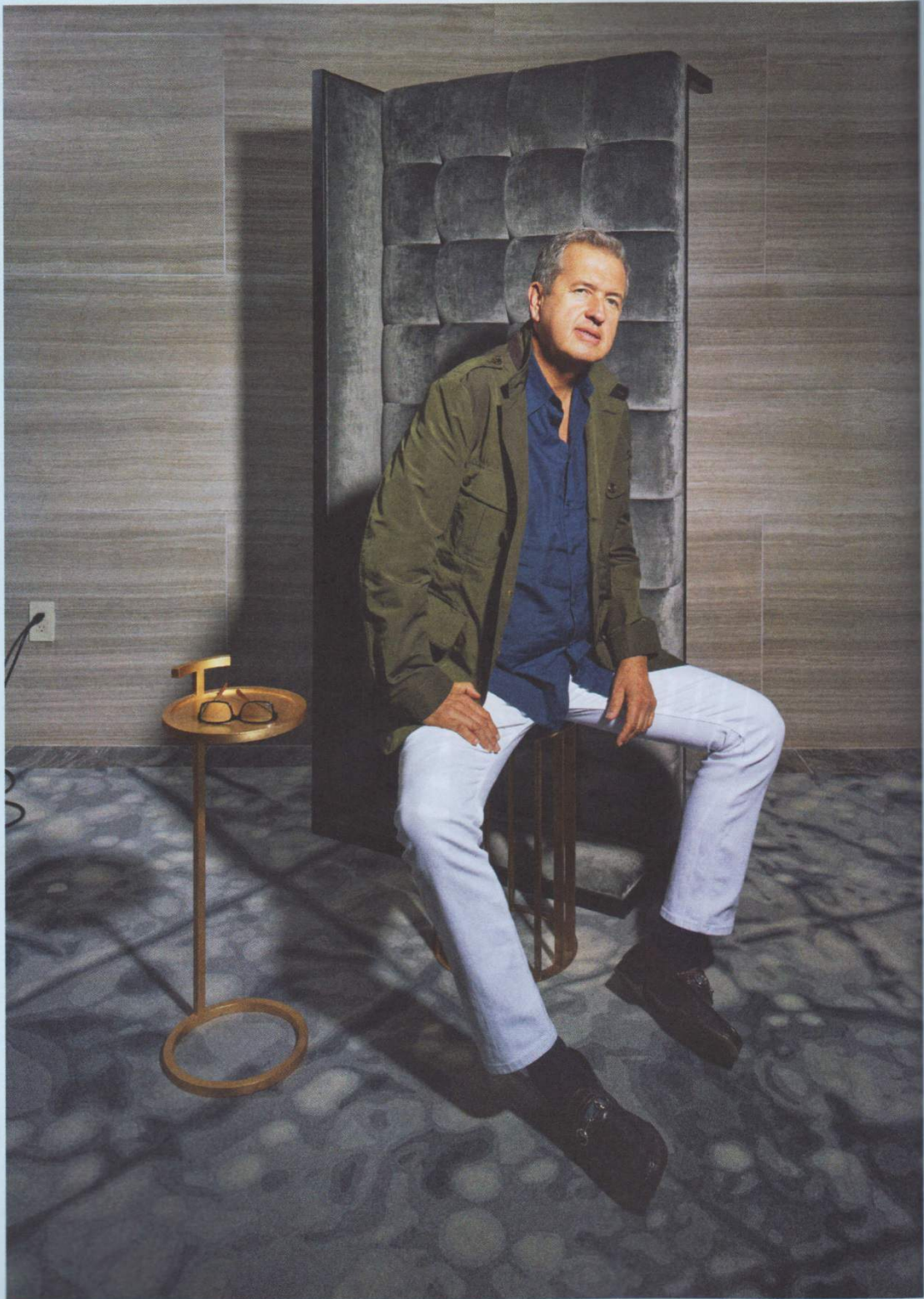
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Project Peru

For his latest museum show, *Vogue* photographer Mario Testino delves into the traditional and festive dress of his native country.

INTERVIEW BY JULIA COOKE

PORTRAIT BY GRANT CORNETT

(OPPOSITE) Mario Testino at the Park Hyatt New York hotel in Midtown Manhattan.

Mario Testino talks with his hands. He waves them when excited. He uses one to poke at the other to illustrate a point. He twirls them to emphasize the continuation of an idea, and he holds them in front of his body to indicate stillness. Testino addresses questions with half words, half hands.

With an oeuvre that spans *Vanity Fair* covers and *Vogue* spreads to exhibitions at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts—and this fall, Dallas Contemporary (through Dec. 21)—Testino's work moves fluidly between commercial fashion photography and fine art. Now the Peruvian

photographer, who turns 60 this year, is only picking up the pace: Along with his continued magazine work, Testino has also founded an art space in his native Lima (called MATE, Museo Mario Testino), branched out into personal projects, and expanded his fashion photography into short videos—all without losing his signature for taking photographs that lure the world's most known faces into original poses and fresh perspectives. From his iconic 1997 portrait series of Diana, Princess of Wales, to his ongoing photos of Kate Moss, Testino coaxes out

newly refracted angles of each figure he captures.

During a recent interview with him at the newly opened Park Hyatt New York hotel, it was clear how he inspires such candidness in his subjects: Testino is excited, energetic, and always present. He evokes a rare sense of eminence without being enigmatic. His smile is contagious. *Surface* spoke with him on the occasion of his current Dallas show, "Alta Moda," which features images he took of traditional and festive Peruvian dress during visits to Cusco over a period of five years. >

You're just off the plane from Peru. Between your museum and your "Alta Moda" show, you've gotten quite involved there in the last few years. How has your relationship with your native country and its artistic communities evolved?

It's a funny time in my life. So many things are happening at the same time. It's almost like the planets are aligning so that all the different elements come into one place and become a reality. The whole thing with Peru started because I saw this 1850s building that was derelict—it had been a restaurant. There are a few of these old buildings there; they originally were built as summer holiday homes, when Lima was based downtown rather than on the coastline. It used to be that most people lived downtown, and they only came to the coast for summer resorts.

They had built these farmhouses—very beautiful, big ones. They're historical monuments, so they can't be torn down or built on. Most of them are abandoned, and I decided that I would save one. When I bought this place as an exercise in restoration, I realized that I had a high bill for storage in London, where all the works went from my museum shows after they ended. I decided I would turn this house into my deposit. With time, my friends in Lima said to me, "You're mad! You've got to show your work here. Peruvians don't know your work, and it'll be an example to incentivize people."

We decided to open this museum where my work lives permanently. We have a temporary exhibition space, too: We just opened an exhibition of work by the artist Ximena Garrido-Lecca. The interesting thing for me is that I've been collecting art for the past 20 years. About 10 years ago, I went to Peru to look at art because I thought, "I'm looking at art all over the world, there must be artists in Peru who are great"—and I bumped into this guy, Miguel Andrade, who's one of the young influential artists of the moment there. He took me around to look at artists' studios and galleries. Based on what I saw, I then decided to publish a book, *Lima, Peru*, which I edited to define what the city was actually like. When people think of Peru, they only think of its mountains. I decided to define it through all these artists and photographers and locals.

So this was the start of your relationship with art in Peru?

Yes, and now opening this space it's become even stronger. We've only just started our new program, which will have changing exhibitions. It's really exciting. All of a sudden I feel there's a sense to my work living there, because it's helped as a platform to promote Peruvian artists. We're also going to bring things from abroad. Basically, what I want is to be a part of the movement that's happening there in a very strong way: There are art and photography fairs starting; galleries are opening; the Museum of Modern Art [LiMAC

just opened in the area where my space is.

At the same time that I restored and recuperated this historical monument, I bought another house that will be an extension of the museum. I was then asked if I would be the World Monuments Fund's president for Peru, and yesterday, I did a press conference to announce a new tax break that the government is giving to companies that are helping to protect these monuments. It's all making a lot of sense. So many things in life we do just by inertia: I was over at the house, I bought the house, I was going to use it to store my work, we turned it into a museum, we published the book, we started working with the artists. It's not necessarily a planned action, but maybe in my head I wanted that, and now it's coming.

I also did this other project, "Alta Moda," which was to document the dresses from the mountainous region of Cusco. These are clothes that have existed for centuries and been the key element in defining a society, an area, a status, a profession. Everything is defined in these clothes, and now, with the World Monuments Fund, we're beginning our next project: to recuperate this abandoned palace in Lima's Rímac district. My plan is to try and turn this into a costume institute, to bring all these dresses there. What I noticed when I did this exhibition was that we've been looking at these dresses for years, but nobody really pays any attention to them. During this documentation, a lot of people became very proud of them. I think it would be a really interesting thing to put them together—we're 25 different regions in Peru, and each region has so many different ways of dressing. We could also use the space to promote the fashion industry in Peru.

The clothes and the Martin Chambi backgrounds in your images are stunning. You've previously said that you tried to fit as much time and history into each frame as you could. What techniques did you use to achieve that?

Using the Chambi backdrops, to me, brings a lot of history to it. Photographers like Irving Penn went to Peru and documented some of the people of the region, and they also borrowed the Chambi backdrop. Then Chambi himself documented a whole region: Cusco was at the time of the Spanish conquista the center of the Inca empire, and where the Spanish came and settled and stole their control over the Incas. Chambi documented the turn of the century—he showed me a side of Peru I didn't really know existed, a sophisticated Indian side. I wanted to bring back as many references to the pictures as possible, so when you see these dresses you don't only see what the dresses document, the stories they tell. Through Chambi's backdrop you can almost travel back through his archives. It's a bit of a romantic idea for people that actually know about it, but to me it made me feel that way when I was doing it.



It's like a historical layering.

The more layers there are, the more exciting something is. I've been a fashion photographer for decades, and to me, a photo of a girl in a dress can be a bit limited. I always try to put it in another context. For example, I was just in Peru—I've been working on a new project there on something that happens on the coast. It's called *caballo de paso* and it involves dressage horses. They bring with it a whole tradition, a whole way of dressing, a ceremony that to me is so wonderful. In the world that we live that's constantly changing, to hang onto certain things is so fascinating—even though I love the constantly changing side, too. I'm like a contradiction. I went to do this fashion story, and I wanted to put it in a context, where the clothes actually belong to a lifestyle and a whole way of living. I wanted to give it more layers.

It's clear from the "Alta Moda" photos that the drama and the iconic treatment of your subjects carry over from your fashion work to this work. How do you cultivate trust with your subjects?

When I look at my "Alta Moda" pictures, I don't know whether my fashion work comes from that or whether that comes from my fashion work. I began finding it difficult to determine where the beginning of the project was: Did it start in Peru with looking at those dresses that influence my color, my posing, the way I look at fashion? Or was the way I'm looking at them a result of my learning about fashion in England, America, Italy, and France?

When you were growing up, were those dresses part of your life?

They were present. I traveled a lot in Peru, but you weren't conscious of looking at them. This is something I find so amazing: how things you think you don't like, don't want, or don't pay attention to suddenly become so important or relevant.

Let's go back to your question about my subjects. I've realized that at the end of the day I never wanted to be just a portrait photographer. I also wanted to be a fashion photographer, because when you approach a photo with a model, that model is a blank canvas on which you can draw anything

Traditional women's dress from the Tinta District of the Canchis Province in Cusco, Peru (2010).

you want to. When you approach a portrait, the persona is very present in the picture—you've got to work around them. When I look at a photo of an actress wearing an outfit, there are so many layers. When you look at it, you're thinking of her films, her private life, her children, her traumas, her father, whom she works with, the directors; there are so many other elements. When you look at a photo of the model, you look at the dress, you look at the girl, and it finishes there.

I'm always thinking that the pictures that have lingered in my mind are Ron Galella's of Greta Garbo or Jackie Kennedy in the street. You look at the image, but you're not looking at the image per se. The image is a reminder of so many other things in your mind. When I go to photograph these people, I try to give the picture to them. It's an exercise that I've realized: Life is like a boomerang—you give out, and it comes back.

When I photographed Princess Diana just before she died, I thought it would be more exciting for everybody to see the real person rather than to look up at a princess you can't touch. In a way, that takes away from the

strength of the photographer, because the whole subject matter is more important than your technique or your lighting. You're completely giving the photograph to that person you're working around. In this case, I worked around what I thought would be fascinating for people to look at—to feel they're sitting next to the princess instead of looking up at a throne. I never anticipated the results those pictures could have. They put me into a whole new plateau, especially in England, where all of a sudden I became Diana's favorite photographer.

So what do you look for in a subject?

I've noticed a lot of photographers are interested in the models, but I'm interested in the girls. When I photograph Kate Moss in a funny way, sometimes I have to look at Moss playing a character. I'm much more excited about photographing Kate Moss than making Kate Moss look like Brigitte Bardot—which doesn't make any sense to me, because I already have Kate Moss there. If I had Brigitte Bardot, I'd like to photograph Brigitte Bardot as she is. It's an exercise that I notice is not so common in fashion photography. People like to change people, to make them something they're not.

People have spoken a lot about the sensuality of your work and your essential appreciation for women and womanhood. This is different from the whole grunge movement that was going on around the time when you came up.

You can only look at people from a place that's your own. It's true—the human form is something that does quite excite me. I feel amazed by perfection, by bodies that are well made. I could have been a sculptor because I'm obsessed by form. It's pretty rare to find perfection in form: It exists very rarely, and the moment I see that it's true, I want to show it. That's probably where my sensuality comes from. I'm always undressing people. It's true that the moment that you're in the process of undress, sensuality and sexuality come into the game because that's what people do: You take your clothes off to make out. It's sort of a funny line I'm constantly facing.

The two sides seem to me to be equally essential.

They are for me, too. It's an obsession with form. Then there's an obsession with freedom. I grew up in an environment that wasn't quite free. Anything you wanted to do that wasn't part of what already existed was considered negative or not accepted. When I did my first book, *Any Objections?*, the main point was to say: "Sorry, you might think I'm different, but I'm ..."

Do you approach taking photos differently if you're taking them for a museum show or for *Vogue*?



Years ago, I was having lunch with Anna Wintour when Irving Penn was still alive. She was telling me, "I have to find the right commissions for Irving because he wants to do pictures that are able to hang on a wall." It really stayed in my mind, this thought of somebody thinking about the longevity of an image. Because magazines are made out of immediacy, you almost have to create an image that has impact, but that has to finish so that you want to throw out that magazine and buy a new one. That's the contrary of images being on the wall. Consequently, Irving Penn used to do one or two pictures for the magazine, but couldn't really do a 20-page story. In my case, I realized I find that whatever you do, you have to elevate it to its maximum level. Artistic expression is how far you can take your mind to really express itself without any limitations. It's asking yourself, "How can I achieve exactly what my mind wants to create?" It's an exercise I do everyday. I've learned that you have to listen to the inside of your body and go against everything that's out there trying to stop you from making it. In a sense, maybe seeing my work in museums has made me stop and look at how I process the work, but the actual process of the work hasn't changed.

I do it like I've always done it, but I guess I'm tougher on myself—how I execute it and how far I take it. Sometimes you can say, "Oh, it's okay, it's good, but is it amazing? Is it brilliant? Does it really communicate what I'm trying to say?" In my profession, we work with so many people and half of the time is spent communicating to people what you want. I've spent a lot of time trying to get everybody to understand really what I want, and how I get the thing inside my head out. Other people's talents are very important, and I rely on them, too.

What's the first thing you notice about a subject when you first meet him or her?

Personality. It's the most important thing. Either they have it or they don't. I like a personal point of view, people who really believe in what they believe regardless of anything else. I've been working a lot with Cara Delevingne—we used her for the Burberry campaign three years ago—and she always surprises me with her point of view, with the way she sees life. To me, that's what ticks, the persona.

How have your photos changed in the last five years?

It's inevitable that you get better at what you do. What I'm noticing the most now is that I don't compromise. If I want this to be that color, I will do anything until I get that color. Maybe before I accepted life and its limitations, and now I don't. I'm seeing in my work more and more that I set out to do one thing, and I think at the result it's closer to what I set out to do than it was maybe five years ago.

It's gotten more expressive.

And freer. It took me a long time to think that I could do something well. I think somewhere along the line I began considering myself intelligent, not in a pretentious way. At the same time, I see so much that's better than what I do. I'm quite tough on myself.

What does exhibiting in museums mean to you?

It's a different exercise. Museums have become more accepting of what's happening in the world today. What's a museum today? Is Instagram a museum? How many people look at Instagram every day, at every image we put there, and what's the reaction? Sometimes museums aren't fulfilling those needs to society. I find museums today are a little more receptive. When I had my first show at the National Portrait Gallery in London, there was the biggest reaction, and it was the biggest success: It got almost 170,000 visitors. It was the height of celebrity culture, the height in our history of people knowing all the celebrities. I think today this celebrity craze has died down a little bit. I see magazines are into models again. Now all of a sudden models are celebrities again. Look at Cara Delevingne: She has more than 7 million followers on Instagram.

I read in a profile that at some point you wanted to be a priest. Is that tied in some way to the charity work you're doing in Peru today?

You know, it's a weird thing. I've always liked helping. I used to think that went with being in the church, and then I realized that it's just something that's in you. I also love partying and life and traveling and luxury. It was a priest that actually pointed this out to me: "Apart from that the fact you like to help poor people and people in need, you're completely not about sacrifice." In a funny way, I'm back to doing those sorts of things through my charity work. It's a different way of helping. I just like to be a part of a certain energy, and if I can help that energy go in the right direction, then great. You see so much poverty and so much inequality today that it drives me insane. But it also feels like there are communities that have so far to go, and you can participate in that.

You've been working on some video projects recently, and with your Towel Series on Instagram, you're also experimenting with digital media. What impact do you think videos and Instagram are having on fashion photography?

Instagram, for me, has been a very interesting exercise. It's the first time I can communicate to people directly. All my career I communicated to people through *Vogue*. Even when I work for *American Vogue*, or *British Vogue*, or *French Vogue*, it's the respective point of



(TOP TO BOTTOM) Traditional women's dress from the Tinta District of the Cusco Province in Cusco (2007). Traditional women's dress from the Espinar Province in Cusco (2007). (OPPOSITE) A traditional Mestiza women's dress from the Paruro Province in Cusco (2012).



A leader of the Auqa Chileno dance group and his "lady," from the Paucartambo Province in Cusco (2012). (OPPOSITE) Testino in Cusco in December 2007.

view of Anna Wintour, Emmanuelle Alt, or Alex Shulman. If I do it through Burberry, it's Christopher Bailey's; if it's Michael Kors, it's Michael Kors's. It's never really my point of view. My books gave me that freedom—that sort of direct contact—and Instagram gave it to me with a reaction from the people.

The Towel Series has no commercial value. I just do pictures of whom I like, and I make them look like exactly how I would like to. There's no real resolve, nothing is going to be sold, nothing is going to be gained; it's just pure production. People say that I'm very prolific.

With the films, I have to say—I was just talking to my editor at *Vanity Fair*, Jessica Diehl, because we just did a job, and all of a sudden I noticed that normally I would

have done this job, it would be printed in the magazine, and that would be it. But what's happening today is that we do film. Now I've started talking in the films. I find that it's very interesting to communicate in the moment. It's all about honesty and putting it out there—it's not about withholding. For many years, we photographers had a trick, and we didn't want anyone to know what we did. We just wanted the result of selling that picture or doing the job and getting paid. Today, we can share everything. Through talking to the camera, it just adds a completely different level to the work.

