

So It Goes

· Mario Testino · Dane DeHaan · Brit Marling · Connan Mockasin · Esther Teichmann ·
· Derek Cianfrance · Langley Fox · David Fincher · Christopher Owens ·
· Gip - Son of the South · Poppy Delevingne by Toby Knott ·



Brit Marling by James Wright

Mario Testino

Words James Wright

Not many artists working today can lay claim to being as recognisable as their subjects. Legendary Peruvian photographer Mario Testino is, however, unique. Despite being known the world over for his iconic portraits of the great and the good, from Kate Moss to Diana Princess of Wales, Gisele Bündchen, to Gwyneth Paltrow, Testino has slowly become photographer, philanthropist and businessman all rolled into one. In a very rare interview, *So It Goes* editor James Wright had the chance to discuss fame, trust and what home really means to the world's most travelled man. Exuberant and honest, find out why, at almost sixty, Mario Testino is just getting started.



James Wright: What's the longest you've been in one place over the past year?

Maria Testino: Probably four days in any given place. I'm going to Dubrovnik next Tuesday and have to be in Dallas on Friday. I don't know why I do it to myself, but I've never really had the sense of needing to be in any one place. My comfort zone doesn't come from my home. It comes from who I'm with and whether I'm having a good time.

JW: That said, with such endless travel, it must be difficult to actually call one place home. Despite a career filled with such adventure and discovery, do you still feel a special affinity for London?

MT: Definitely. I adore it. I came to London because my best friend was studying here and I'd never been. It sounded amazing and I instantly fell in love with it. Sadly, London didn't have the sort of work I needed, so that's why I now come here only for a day or two at a time. I think I like it because it's not the epicentre of the fashion world. Everyone thinks I should live in New York, but it's too much. Work there is just never-ending. Funnily enough, when I became a photographer I immediately started travelling because I realised that to do the sort of jobs I wanted to do, I couldn't do them all in one place. It took me some time but I got there, little by little. I'm turning sixty this year and I think it's inevitable that you end up going back to your roots later in life. Since I left Peru thirty-eight years ago, I go to my true home now more than ever.

JW: Is it true you originally wanted to become a priest?

MT: At one point yes. I must have been fourteen. Initially, I really took a lot from my work helping out in the shantytowns. Then I went on to be fascinated by what life in the Church entailed. When I told my priest I was thinking about it, he told me to think very carefully about what commitment to his way of life would actually mean.

JW: You arrived in London in 1976 to study photography, squatting in an unconverted floor of a hospital, and working as a waiter to pay off your university bills.

MT: I was lucky growing up. Even though we weren't rich, my parents gave us the best they could. I travelled quite early on in life. After the comfort of my childhood, I went through a period where I didn't even have enough money to get the bus! But life isn't money, it's about how good you feel in the moment. I felt amazing when I had no money. I lived with my best friends in an old hospital. We were invited everywhere, but we had to cling on. If we were at a dinner party, we had to sit at the table and wait for the second helping to be served to stuff ourselves because we were so hungry! I couldn't say they were horrible times. I love earning money and having the possibility of buying things, going on nice holidays and being able to go home and visit my mother. Those things are exciting, but I think our priorities get confused and we forget what's really important.

JW: You once said, "Fashion is really a reflection of our lives. If you are a photographer in the 90s, it should look like the 90s, it shouldn't look like the 70s or the 40s or the 30s." Was this your approach even in the beginning, or did a particular photographer or period of photography initially influence your work?

MT: To begin with I wanted to be so much like my influences. I

wanted to be more English than the English. I thought you were so amazing, so much more cultivated and more knowledgeable about fashion than us Peruvians. The turning point was in the 90s when I came across the editor of French Vogue, Carine Roitfeld. She loved my nudes, and said they should feed into my fashion pictures. Her saying that allowed me to really be me. My nudes were very blunt, very blatant, very... honest. I think that honesty is what made her think my fashion work should be as honest. Up until that point, I think my fashion work was hiding, or at least trying to look like other people's.

JW: Your book *Let Me In!* documents the ways in which your work has repeatedly broken down the traditional boundaries of celebrity portraiture. Kate Winslet once said of you, "We know that he will talk us into doing absolutely anything for him." Trust is obviously a vital component in capturing the spontaneous shared moments that define so many of your iconic portraits.

MT: I speak my mind. Some people will listen to me and others won't. I think I'm quite a weird mixture. On the one hand, I'm an aesthete and I like images, but on the other, I'm a mixture between a businessman and a marketing person; I sort of seize the moments when people need to do certain things that might change the way they're being perceived, or might help their career, or might give them a new look. I think when you present things to people in the right light, and they can see that it's not just to my advantage but also theirs, they know I'm thinking of them and their interests, not mine. Ultimately in photography you have two options: you give the photograph to the person or you take it. I think I give my pictures to people, and in a way that 'giving' makes people feel safe.

JW: Is it in the stolen, unguarded moments where you often find beauty? Beauty in the imperfection?

MT: Don't get me wrong; I thrive on imperfection, but starting from perfection. I try to elevate it to that place where there can be imperfections. There is imperfection and there is imperfection. If I strive for beauty, then my constant search is for beauty in life – who or what will make my day more exciting and more wonderful. The beauty that I look for is not necessarily a blatant or obvious beauty. A lot of the girls and guys I like, I consider beautiful, but other people didn't for a long time, Gisele being one example. I considered it amazing that people really couldn't see her beauty then. She did not fit the standards of the time; she was different, seen as an odd bird because she had breasts!

JW: Why can people instantly recognise a Mario Testino photograph?

MT: What do you think? Maybe it's a certain glamour? Not many people like glamour. Certainly not today's photographers – it's seen as superficial. In a weird way, I find glamour quite life-enhancing. It may look superficial, but it can be very lingering on your soul.

JW: Is there a conscious effort to channel the spirit of your youth into your photography? A colour, energy and vitality reminiscent of your childhood in South America?

MT: It's a search for my youth. My late teenage years are ones I search for all the time. Anna Wintour once said that I seduce everybody. I like seduction and the feeling that people are ready to

let go of it all and do anything. I want to enhance life with colour and joy. I hang out with Kate Moss so much because she's life-enhancing. She will always have something fabulous to tell you. She will have a beautiful new dress, a beautiful story, a beautiful jewel or something new that I haven't yet seen. She reminds me of me in a way. I always wanted something better for myself, so when I found it, I wanted to share it with everybody. Strong people stand by themselves and enjoy what they discover.

JW: Do you still find the first frame of a shoot nerve-racking?

MT: Of course. I still get worried about making the right choice. The moment anybody airs a sigh of doubt, I doubt myself too, but I have learnt to be tough on myself. Maybe on others too. When you believe in something you have to go for it because otherwise you don't get anything.

JW: Comfort can only lead to laziness.

MT: People have always said to me, "You won't be able to get that" and I am shocked by that thought, because I believe I can get anything I want to. I think everybody can. You just have to put your mind to it, work hard and not give up.

JW: You didn't grow up in an age of digital photography and still have your point-and-shoot 35mm film camera.

MT: I have given it up. I embraced digital just before the summer. Too expensive, too much film processing.

JW: No! Too much margin for error?

MT: Exactly. We live in a world where you can fix things. A lot of my competition is twenty years younger than me. Today they get a camera, take a picture, put it on the computer, know every problem and fix it. That's an amazing gift. I used to take a picture, send it to be processed and a week later would get the film. A week of suffering and then when the film wasn't what I thought it would be, a week of disappointment.

JW: Yes, but you've said you want a picture to reflect a moment that actually exists. Doesn't the progression in editing software and post-production create an alternate reality?

MT: That's true, and I do, but that doesn't come with the camera or editing software. It is a mistake to think that it isn't real, because your world is your world – what you are living and shooting.

JW: You've spoken about the merits of obsession – that it's a positive thing to fixate on a person, a country, a movement. Is it fair to say that your obsessions often develop around the 'new'?

MT: To an extent, but when something is good then it doesn't go away when it's not new anymore. It lingers. It stays. I'm obsessed with people. I have been obsessed for twenty years and I can't get enough of them. I am obsessed with contemporary fine art. I have been collecting it for twenty years and I can't get enough of it. Finding the 'new' doesn't mean forgetting the old. So yes, I am obsessed with new things I discover, or, by rediscovering things I carry on loving them. I was in Peru recently and I became obsessed with this artist I'd met. I made a book just because I needed to find a way to spend time with him. I spent a whole afternoon talking to him and I left thinking that

it was the most refreshing moment I'd had in a long time because he challenged so much of what I thought, and how I thought, but with proper foundation. His challenge was invigorating. He made me rethink things.

JW: Why?

MT: It was his freedom. When you allow your mind to take in anything you find valid in the moment, I think it makes you very rich. Most people are not like that. Most people make up their mind and decide they are this or that, and for them to embrace anything different in life is very hard. This artist was one of those people. I watched him just sway. In Peru we have earthquakes and the buildings are built so they can sway, because the moment something is too rigid, it breaks.

JW: A useful metaphor for your career perhaps?

MT: Yes! It made me think that that is what I strive to find in life, people just like that, who go through life swaying like those buildings and embracing what life brings them. Lately, I worry that I've become quite fatalistic, thinking that everything has been decided already. We come, we inhabit and we do our job. In a weird way it seems that everything is pre-determined. We are born in a country, a city, a district, a house. You are born into a family, you don't choose it. You are born with attributes already given to you. I'm responsible, but I was born like that. I didn't have the choice. I couldn't be any other way than the way I am. If I am going to have an exam then I will go to bed early. I won't go to bed at five in the morning and get out of my mind. What I have done is to be like the buildings in Peru – I have allowed life to take me. When I look at it, everything was there already, in a way. Yes, I have worked hard, I have sacrificed and I have travelled, but I was born like that.

JW: Above and beyond all your peers, you're notable for an acute ability to navigate the age-old conflict between art and commerce. What is it about you that brands turn to?

MT: I think the most important thing when you're working for other people is to be able to detach yourself from yourself and embrace them. I realised a long time ago when I started and looked at work of the photographers before me, they all had a fixed style; whomever they worked for, the picture looked like them. They considered that a strength. I considered that a weakness because you could only have three or four clients. You couldn't have twenty clients for whom the pictures all looked the same. I learnt this through my time working for magazines. I worked with British Vogue, French Vogue and American Vogue. They are my three main magazines and they are all different, run by different women and aimed at different people. They have different codes and different likes and dislikes. I managed to spend time in New York, Paris and London to understand what those things were. So what I do is apply my knowledge, my taste, or my ability for putting things together, but in accordance to what they are all about. For instance, if I go to work for Burberry I am not doing Mario Testino, I am doing Burberry. I listen very carefully to Christopher Bailey and what he wants, so as to fully understand what he is trying to say. I am the communicator and I help enforce his idea. When I go to Michael Kors, I listen to Michael Kors. When I go to Versace, I listen to Donatella. In a way, I am the building that goes with the



Dana Wolfoway, US Vogue, Los Angeles, 2004



Kate Moss, Harper's Bazaar, Los Angeles, 1996





Gwyneth Paltrow, New York, 2000

flow. Most people like to define everything. What they like in sex, music, food, whatever. But I think you have to embrace the people that come and go in your life. That is what I do – I go to the brands that I think I can deliver for, and I think they understand that – that I will go and study who they are.

JW: Do you feel that longevity comes not only from an understanding and appreciation of the business of fashion, but actually a love of fashion itself? Unlike many other photographers, you seem to have a love of and interest in the industry, from design and catwalk to casting.

MT: The first thing I go to is the clothes. I get excited by clothes. The difference between me and other people in the business is that my interest in clothes exists in relation to people. Clothes, for me, on a hanger, do not exist. They only exist on a girl or on a guy or on myself. People sometimes think my work is superficial but it's not that simple. I love the glamour, what shines, what is attractive, but I never leave it just there. I always want it to have the 'other' and if I don't, the picture falls flat. When you have a photograph, a big photograph on a wall, it can touch on the superficial but it has to touch us, and move us in some way. You need to have layers to get that reaction. People have sometimes criticised the immediacy of my work. I work for magazines and magazines are about immediacy – you have to get excited when you look at them. Books are different, they linger. You sit there, you look, and you look again. If you look at the history of photography, a lot of the photographs that linger are not necessarily the most arch or esoteric, but the simplest; the picture of Jackie Kennedy walking down the street, the photo of Marilyn Monroe on a bed. At the end of the day, people will connect more with emotion than with decoration. The magic of photography is that you can capture a thousandth of a second. It is not painting, it is photography. It's a bit like making a comedy – it's harder than a drama.

JW: Without explaining away inspiration and process, making something seem and look effortless is one of the hardest things to do.

MT: It's hard to make things look effortless! It's so fucking hard to do. It's so hard to elevate something to perfection. Not many people notice and most photographers don't think it's important, but the hair, the make-up, the length of the dress, the height of that heel all matter. These are stupid things in a funny way, but they say so much. The way a girl holds a handbag will tell you a whole story. It is those subtleties of human movement. How do you communicate to the other person something wholly visual? We forget that clothes, fashion and dressing are the most basic ways of communicating to other human beings. You come with a V-neck and you are giving me a message – your sleeve, loose and open, is showing a certain looseness in you. Everything is a message. And to me, my pictures are full of

those messages and it's that message I find most exciting. At this time in my life I am still trying to define how close you can be to reality and still be out there.

JW: Peru seems to be more and more in your thoughts as your career progresses. With the foundation of the MATE museum in Lima, your work and the work of other Peruvian artists has a permanent home. Ultimately, what would you like the museum to accomplish?

MT: I just want to bring things to Lima, push people and expose them to things, to things they wouldn't ordinarily see. I believe I was formed by many different things and I never looked down at anything – I love elegance like I love punk. I love the establishment like I love the underground. I love tradition like I love the new. You know, my parents had some money, my father worked really hard.

He had holes in his shoes sometimes. He would rather pay for me to have a first-class ticket to go somewhere and see something than to get another pair of shoes. That generosity, I found quite amazing. With that generosity I could go and see everything I saw and become me. With that exposure I became me and I managed to go abroad and come to London. Imagine coming here from Peru and seeing that everyone just dresses how they want to. London is, for me, the centre of tolerance, where people can do what they want; as long as you don't interfere with me, I will let you be you. In a way, I want to be able to bring that to Peru, because Peru is not like that.

JW: You feel there's still a closeness and conservatism in Peru?

MT: Yes. The strong family unit is a wonderful thing, but at the same time I see a lot of people suffering because they can't be themselves. They still need to be what they are expected to be, but magic really comes from being you.

JW: It seems like change has been integral to your journey; like the building in Peru, you've gone with the flow. Do you think you're still evolving? Do you think you always will be?

MT: My mother is ninety-two and she's learning computing. That to me says it all, because changing is learning and if you stop learning then what do you do?

JW: Stand still.

MT: And standing still, you crack. I don't want to crack. That is why I am so open to anything and to anybody new or any new style. That's why I went to digital overnight. People said don't do it and I said why?! Take the risk, jump. People don't jump; they are so worried about what will happen. They go to bed and they think about it for years on end. I don't want to spend my life like that. Somebody once said to me, "I don't want to tip-toe to my grave" and it's so true. I want to go to my grave running in an avalanche of all I have lived, all I have seen, all I have done.

Somebody once said to me, "I don't want to tip-toe to my grave" and it's so true. I want to go to my grave running in an avalanche of all I have lived, all I have seen, all I have done



Personal Work, Giuseppe Sardinian, Los Angeles, 2006



Gwyneth Paltrow, Tom Ford And Stella McCartney, Milan, 2002



Kirsten Dunst, Los Angeles, 2004



Marinera, 2001



Oliver By Valentino, Fall/Winter 1967/88



