

DAVID BAILEY – STARDUST – THE THOUGHTS OF A PHOTOGRAPHER

As a photographer, myself, I fully understand the importance of David Bailey and the place he has in photographic history. Indeed, I even teach students about the importance of his Manhattan photoshoot with Jean Shrimpton and how it 'changed the face of fashion photography and defined a whole generation'. In much the same way that I can recognise the importance of the likes of, say, *Easy Rider* and the impact it had on modern cinema. When all is said and done, however, much like *Easy Rider*, when it comes to David Bailey's work, I just don't really like it.

Walking into the first room of Bailey's *Stardust* exhibition my eyes were, of course, drawn to the prodigious print of Andy Warhol. Having seen the image countless times, it was pretty incredible to finally witness it in its full glory, particularly in this digital age, when seeing photographs in print is a rarity. This image of Warhol has become so synonymous with the artist that it's almost like standing in front of the man himself. Sadly, however, that's where my enthusiasm for the exhibition both starts and ends. What followed, unsurprisingly, was room after room and image after image of celebrity and stardom that we've seen time and time again and the deeper I got into the exhibition the more my enthusiasm waned.

Don't get me wrong, there were a few pieces that stood out that got beneath the surface of its subject and brought 'something else' to the table other than celebrity. Images of Terence Stamp, Noel Gallagher, Andre Kertesz and Marianne Faithful, the one taken at a strange upward angle, all brought a reality to them that was often lacking in most of his other work. Out of the many Rolling Stones shots the one that stood out most was the one of Brian Jones and Penelope Tree. The supine Brian Jones, almost lifeless, in the shadow of a beautiful but fearful woman, portentous of the fate that awaited them. Of course, Tree wasn't the girl that would play a part in Jones' downfall and with my own projected narrative realised the illusion is shattered.

These isolated examples aside, however, the majority of images left me pretty cold and were even, dare I say it, just not very good? The Damien Hirst selection reeked of machismo; the wasting of time by two 'top dogs' of their inherent disciplines. The portrait of fellow photographer Don McCullen showed little, if not nothing, of the man so expertly portrayed in the deeply moving documentary of the same name.

And then there was the Catherine Dyer room. A room filled with images you'd expect a professional photographer to take of his family adding little to the exhibition except self indulgence. Even more than his artwork which has probably come under the most criticism. I think the self indulgent inclusion of that is far more forgivable than a room full of family photos., Regardless of whether or not it was good or bad, at least it made me feel something. Way more than the inclusion of perfunctory family photos that aroused little more than a tired sigh.

I will take a moment to mention his Naga Hills series because, for me, this was the only real highlight of the exhibition. A series of which to be proud. Its prominence in the exhibition would suggest that Bailey perhaps feels the same. Well crafted documentary images that spoke of the people in them rather than any stardom they may or may not have been courting. Unlike much of the rest of the exhibition these images held my gaze long enough to notice the minutia that made the images. A machine gun, bottles of Head and Shoulders, a Bruce Lee poster. They contained a narrative that was the antithesis of his celebrity oeuvre and, unlike the majority of his photographs, there was no mutually beneficial relationship at work here.

And therein probably lies my mistaken expectation of this exhibition. On reflection, I now take full responsibility for the fact that I shouldn't have gone looking for something more moving or emotive but more just to admire a comprehensive photographic archive. Without doubt *Stardust* is a great collection from a vast canon of work by one of Britain's most successful photographers; a fitting acknowledgement of the importance of Bailey's contribution to the visual annals of British culture. And, as I am quick to point out, I will never underestimate their importance nor will I stop including Bailey in my teachings but, after my journey through Bailey's *Stardust* the fact stills remains; I just don't really like his photos.