

DUTY KILLS
BY BOB CARLOS
CLARKE



STYLE

Made In Heaven By Bob Carlos Clarke

A legendary photographer referred to as the British Helmut Newton, Carlos Clarke was known for his pictures of semi-naked models and old rock stars.

by Britt Collins

RATHER PROPHETICALLY, BOB CARLOS CLARKE told his wife that he would die in a horrific accident and she would be the keeper of his flame. “Life has a strange way of coming back to haunt you,” says Lindsey Carlos Clarke, sitting in the immaculate terrace house in Chelsea, where she and Bob had lived for years. “Here I am looking after a stunning archive and every few weeks I come across another box of images I remember Bob creating, and they’re all unique and special.”

Ten years ago in 2006, the troubled 55-year-old photographer threw himself under a London train. Weeks before, he had been on suicide watch at the Priory rehab clinic, psychotic and clinically depressed. The Little Black Gallery is paying tribute to Carlos Clarke with a new exhibition to mark the anniversary.

The Irish-born Carlos Clarke, often referred to as the British Helmut Newton, was known for his pictures of semi-naked models and old rock stars. “Bob was the most exciting man I’ve ever met,” says Lindsey, a blonde who had been his model and muse since the 1970s and mother of his 24-year-old daughter Scarlett. “He was wild, dangerous and liked to push boundaries just like his pictures.”

A previous retrospective of his work sparked complaints for its sexual content. Now some of his images of a young Rachel Weisz in oil-slicked latex and Jerry Hall straddling an alligator, resembling snatched scenes from a porn movie, hang in the National Portrait Gallery. But his career-defining shots of Marco Pierre White, with his cheekbones, dishevelled hair and a fag hanging from his lips, for his White Heat cookbook, soar off the page and turned him into the original bad-boy celebrity chef. “Nobody had ever shot pictures in the kitchen that were so rock ‘n’ roll,” says Lindsey.

The raw reportage, black-and-white images — which The New York Times said looked as if they “were shot in a war zone, filled with blood and rattled, unshaven young men who appeared to be on a mission up the Congo” — was fuelled by what Pierre White calls Carlos Clarke’s originality and wit. “Bob

had such a wicked sense of humor and you can see that in some of his pictures,” he says. “When he did the White Heat session, he was a fly-on-the-wall and I just continued with my regular dinner service. He had an interesting take on the world and saw a beauty in everything.”

From the moment the two first met, they hit it off. “I found him fascinating but rather spooky,” recalls Pierre White. “A girlfriend took me over for tea with Bob and Lindsey. “The next day she said: ‘Bob wants to photograph you.’ He was an exceptional man in many ways. Apart from being a great photographer, he was a great intellect and raconteur.” Their time together, boozy nights of madness and glamour, “dinners with the late Tony Scott and Norman Parkinson”, were always entertaining. “I’ve met some amazing people, but very few where I’ve had the special relationship I had with Bob. I really miss him.”

Notwithstanding the partying, Carlos Clarke doggedly churned out coffee-table books and advertising campaigns for brands such as Levi’s and Smirnoff. “Bob never ceased to amuse me,” remembers Ghislain Pascal, who represented the photographer for many years and now looks after his estate. “Going to his studio for a shoot was always an experience. I had to keep him away from clients, as he had a tendency to speak his mind, memorably calling one a useless c___.” They met in 1996 through Tamara Beckwith and Pascal, her publicist. “Tamara was doing a shoot with Bob on a rooftop. She arrived straight from a nightclub having not gone to bed, and staggered around in high heels attempting to climb the ladders to get around on the roof. It was the most disastrous shoot ever.”

Beckwith, who had known Bob and Lindsey Carlos Clarke since she was a teenage ‘it girl’, eventually co-founded the Little Black Gallery in his memory, along with his widow and Pascal.

Speaking about Carlos Clarke and his impact, Beckwith praised his “bright intensity and dark genius”, deftly describing him as “a brilliant photographer and lover of the erotic — a man who thought in black and white, in life and art”. ◇