

Martine Fougeron

Tête-à-Tête





© Martine Fougeron, Adrien's rolling dog



© Martine Fougeron, Adrien's deep sleep

Martine Fougeron took intimate portraits of her two sons as her first photographic project. Her motherly gaze has evolved into a full-fledged ongoing series spanning several years on teen tribal life. In her house and studio, in the heart of New York's Chelsea neighbourhood, she talks to *Eyemazing* about her children – and their generation – with love, emotion and affection.

Sarah Baxter: You originally worked in the perfume industry?

Martine Fougeron: I actually started off being a visual, a concept person. My main function in the perfume industry for about seven years was to transcribe the emotion of a fragrance in visual and musical terms. The sense of smell is the only one that doesn't go through the intellectual brain; it goes directly to the memory. So I was using my visual sense – either photography or painting – to express the emotion of a fragrance. And then I realised that I was managing other people's creativity – I was Creative Director of a team of 20 world-class perfumers – and I thought I should manage my own! So I took up photography seriously – I'd been using photography for my personal use since the age of 15. My grandfather was always taking photographs; actually he was a video maker. And my father was always with his camera, so they taught me. And then when I went to Wellesley College, I took photography classes, black & white, and learned photography. I was always using photo-

graphy as a means to record my daily life. And travels. But when I left the perfume industry in 2001-2002, I decided to take classes, which I did at the International Center of Photography (ICP) and studied photography more formally.

SB: You went to ICP with the idea you wanted to become a photographer?

MF: No. I didn't realise what was happening really. I just got more and more involved in photography, with a couple of series, learning how to print, how to use Photoshop, and little by little I started more personal work. It was very organic, and one day I said to myself maybe I should take that more seriously. Things just happened, really. But now I think it was meant to be!

SB: How was your experience at ICP?

MF: It was great because it taught me the techniques, but also how to wait for a situation to arise, how to provoke a situation. And I think that helps the way I take photos today. It gave me both classical training (4X5), as well as the new digital SLR cameras. Learning the old techniques helps you with the newer ones. Knowing how the darkroom works helps you make a good digital print! But also, it teaches you how to practice your art, how you can become unique in your practice, what your practice is about, how it corresponds to who you are... There's a very psychological aspect in the way ICP teaches photo-

graphy, an artistic approach, to get closer to your uniqueness and express that. And the technique is just a means that allows you to find your voice.

SB: A teacher there suggested you should present your work?

MF: My final project at ICP was on my teenage sons. I wanted to do portraits. I wondered how I could portray a generation, boys in particular. I have two boys at my home and I was fascinated by their quest. When I started, they were 13, at an age when there's a part of femininity. Their masculinity is growing but they don't know what to do with it. I was fascinated by the search that they had for their own person. So that became my end project, and one of my professors told me I should apply for the Golden Light Award, and I won the portraiture prize. The Head Curator for this prize was Kathy Ryan from *The New York Times Magazine*. She liked my work, I got the first prize, and this really helped me to get into the world of editorials, which I hadn't really thought I would get into.

SB: This end project then became a recurrent theme in your work...

MF: After that first series, I made several others. They really turned into a study of teen tribal life; what they do at night. A lot of these kids hang out in my house, which is open and bohemian, in a way. I've known

these kids since they're very small, 4 or 5 years old. And they're a very multicultural group, which expresses city life. Usually, adolescents are shown in suburbs; or they're poor, urban kids, usually ethnic. And I realised very little had been done on multicultural city kids, living their teenage life in a private school, and not necessarily into drugs or in the throes of a destructive rebellion. I wanted to show the other side of adolescence. Not the destructive aspect of most of the adolescent work that we've seen in the past, like Larry Clark's work, or the work on girl culture by Greenberg, which I like; but I wanted to show what I was seeing. The inner quest of the eternal adolescent is what I was after I think.

SB: Can you tell me more about your collaboration with your sons and their friends?

MF: I had two extremes. I had my younger son Adrien who loved photography, loved lighting, and we were really collaborating on the shots. I would ask him to repeat a pose that I would see, and he would love to see how I would set up the lights, how I would set the camera, which angle I would take and he would ask a lot of questions. We were both learning, and now he's become a photographer himself. My elder son Nicolas, however, was in full adolescent crisis, and he didn't want me to take pictures of him because that was his power over me. So I had to find other ways and it was hard. That's when I went from the view camera to the digital camera. By the time I

would get the view camera focused, my son was gone! So I had to trick him, really. With the digital camera, I would still pre-measure, but I would anticipate what I thought would be his reaction, because I know him so well, I would pre-visualise a shot. Let's say I would go up to his room, knock on his door and I knew that as soon as he would see the camera, he would turn away from it. And I thought, why not show the resistance? Because that was also part of our life: that resistance.

SB: You called your series *Tête-à-Tête*...

MF: Because it shows the intimate relationship I have with them, and they have with me. "*Tête-à-Tête*" implies an intimate one-to-one conversation between two people. It's usually used in a romantic atmosphere, but I thought I would divert it to use it like a kind of love/hate relationship that exists between mother and son. And afterward I used *Tête-à-Tête* as a tête-à-tête between myself and my sons' friends. I think with their friends it was easier than with my sons. Because with my sons there's a lot more emotional baggage when you take the picture. With their friends, they were more just flattered that I would take a picture of them. In the end, I think that because the friends liked the pictures that I was taking of my sons, it helped me take more pictures of my sons because their friends would say to Nicolas: "Why are you resisting so much? Look, it's really a great picture of you, it really expresses who you are." It is

interesting psychologically. It is interesting in terms of the passage of time, and I think it made him turn around.

SB: Are there scenes you imagined that you wanted to create with them?

MF: I think in my case, especially with two adolescent sons, reality is even more unbelievable than the unreality I could create. And usually I take things that are very domestic, simple things: a meal, reading, sleeping, in their bedroom, getting their haircut, a party... They're extraordinary things, because they're happening in their life. But they are not composed out of reality. In reality, I try to do like Vermeer. The pictures don't look like Vermeer even though I have a tendency to use light where you don't know if it's a natural light or if it's an enhanced light. I am very interested in enhanced light to create a mood. Most of my pictures have lights that I put in them, but you can't tell if it's natural or not. It's a mix of both natural and enhanced light that freezes a particular moment that I've pre-imagined. It's because of the lighting that I use, that the pictures seem out of time, like a painting. A lot of my collectors actually collect paintings.

SB: You are influenced by Dutch painters?

MF: Yes, because they depict domestic scenes, simple scenes. And through simple scenes, you get to a metaphor of someone's life; of beauty, of pensiveness.







© Marine Fougéron, Adrien and Nicolas' mid day breakfast



© Marine Fougéron, Nicolas' match

I try to compose my shots in terms of painting, in terms of the masses of colours, the geometry, the lines, the diagonals. And because my sons are comfortable with me (most of the time!) then I sort of disappear. So I have a lot of time to compose the shots while they are hanging out.

SB: Is it a way for you seize or stop time? To see your sons like eternal adolescents and not getting older, becoming men?

MF: I think I'm trying to capture the eternal adolescent in my shots. A lot of people say my photos could be from the 50s, and yet they're very modern. So that eternal adolescent soulfulness in the quest, in the fact that they sleep a lot, their pensiveness... That's what I am trying to capture, to memorise that state.

SB: You are interested in the project becoming a book?

MF: Yes, I would like to publish a book on the Tête-à-Tête series. I've made four series so far. I'm in the process of doing series five, which is more focused on teen tribal life at night: young couples, first love... And this summer I'll do series six; and I think next year I'll do series seven and eight. And I'll stop there, because my elder son Nicolas is 17 this year, but he'll turn 18 soon, and he'll be going to college. So basi-

cally, I have one year and a half left to finish this particular work. After that, things will be different, because there won't be this daily kind of encounter anymore.

SB: Can you talk about your next project on scents?

MF: I will start a new project in September about individual memories of scents. I want to work on the relationship between strong emotional memories of scents and the visualisation and the music of those scents. So it's sort of a synesthetic project: working from the memory of a scent, visualising it, and putting it to sound. It'll be a multi-sensorial installation: photography, music and odour.

SB: Do you consider yourself more as a French photographer or an American photographer?

MF: A Franco-American photographer! I think I've learnt from the American photographers that you can allow yourself to explore your intimate personal life, and allow yourself to do that, in the tradition of Nan Goldin. And from French photographers, I think I've learned the preoccupation about aesthetics, composition, history, culture... And I think I'm a mix of both traditions.

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