

Shoot to thrill

An iconic photographer challenges the heart and the head. *By Lara Cummings*

Bob Carlos Clarke married the first woman he photographed. "It hadn't occurred to me to be a photographer until I saw this girl who was modelling part time," he recently told *TBS*. "Somebody who knew her said, the only way you can possibly make an approach is to ask to photograph her. So I had to become a photographer." Fortunately, the film turned out well, and he realised then how much he enjoyed shooting women and never stopped. Carlos Clarke's eye for shock value, capturing contradictions and unorthodox views of everyday themes, has since won him awards for high-profile advertising campaigns, and acclaim for his photojournalism, celebrity portraits and fine prints.

Carlos Clarke is famous for photographing women in a way that challenges perceptions of fantasy and reality by blurring the line that divides them. His images can be beautiful but disconcerting, prosaic but fetishistic, frank but voyeuristic. Some scenes provoke a visceral reaction and others are about natural, untouched and, according to the artist, not always conventional beauty. In both cases he challenges conventions: Is a teapot with a phallus for a spout a representation of modern feminine requirements? Is it feminist? Or just a satisfying cup of tea?

Domestic Appliances for the Modern Housewife (Iron), the stabbing iron, pictured right poses a similar conundrum. Its inspiration came from a row the photographer had with his wife while she was ironing the bed sheets. "I couldn't understand how anyone could possibly be wasting their life ironing sheets and we got into this debate which she got very excited about. At a deeper level it's a sort of symbol of the dilemma of the modern female which is kind of about being told that they should be at home with their children and



Bob Carlos Clarke

Top Right: *Domestic Appliances For The Modern Housewife (Iron)* Above: *Adult Females Attack Without Provocation*

look after their husbands and at the other end she's supposed to be out there on the cutting edge becoming a billionaire."

Carlos Clarke's nudes are aesthetically stunning and ideologically less complex than his other photographic themes. As he simply states in 'The World's Top Photographers: Nudes,' "A successful nude is one that doubles the heart rate."

A well-known Carlos Clarke trademark image, however, is the rubber-clad

feminine form which meets his standard of presenting contradictory ideas simultaneously. What he likes about the effect of the skin-tight rubber suit is the way "it contains a body, concealing imperfections and defining contours... a way of being simultaneously exposed and impenetrable."

The point of his current exhibition showing in Madrid 'Love dolls never die,' is that the line between fantasy and fiction females has been blurred into oblivion. The photographer relates this to love dolls which are made to appear as real women and can even be programmed to say what you want. They can



Above: *Faithful Unto Death*

On the morning this image was taken the model's lover had cancelled their wedding and she didn't want to be photographed. She just wanted to cry. So she did, and he shot her. The image was subsequently purchased by Leicester & Alliance Building Society for an advertisement depicting loss. Of the complaints the banks received Carlos Clarke particularly liked this one: "I am appalled by your gratuitous use of a high-heeled rubber-clad 'lady' more suited to publications of a Continental nature than to a previously reputable financial institution."



For Dolls That Do Dishes

say you're the best lover in the world, the most handsome person they've seen or whatever you desire.


This theme extends to magazine and advertising images about which he says: "Women are being subjected to a subtle poison of altered images which are being presented as the real thing. Of course Cher doesn't look like a doll and Joan Collins doesn't either. They are remarkable women but by the time they've been through the process of surgical manipulation or digital manipulation in reproduction in magazines, it's all one massive lie. I don't want my daughter to grow up to conform to some illusory ideal which will not make her happy. It's all relative to say this because I've always been in the business of creating a sort of erotic illusion in one respect but I tended not to until this show. Here I thought, okay, let's see if I can manipulate and alter like everybody else is to make a point but before that I was a real purist; I print my own black and white work, and I never retouched or altered anything at all; the girls were exactly as they were taken and seen."

Carlos Clarke likes to source virgin models himself. Fifty per cent of them, he claims, would be turned down by a model agency for being "too small, having a funny nose or a bum that's a bit too big." He finds perfection "staggeringly uninteresting" and finds that the difference between working with supermodels or with the girls he finds in clubs or on the street is that "you get the feeling of having picked your own wild mushroom, otherwise they feel they are attached to a product and getting a lot of money for it. It's strange because it's like a hooker. It's like the difference between having sex with somebody who loves you and having sex with somebody you're paying."

People with conventional beauty can be the "dullest people in the world," he says. "There is often nowhere duller in a nightclub than the VIP area with a lot of posing crap, they're all so self-conscious. My favourite girls (to photograph) are often crazy nutters who end up sleeping on the street at night and taking risks. Risk taking is an important thing to get a result; someone who is prepared

to throw themselves onto your camera without any fear. That takes a lot of courage from someone or a lot of trust and very often supermodels won't have that. She'll have her agent sitting there telling her what she can and can't do. I like to think that I'm pretty scrupulous about not exploiting people: working with them rather than against them so to speak. If we are doing the shoot together I'll give them control. We will go through the pictures together and anything that disturbs them will get pulled out.

Following the success of, 'Love dolls never die,' in London, Bob Carlos Clarke brings this exhibition to Spain. On the theme of the show in the limited edition book published to accompany the London exhibition, Carlos Clarke refers to the commentary Eve Ensler makes in her new play, *The Good Body*, the point of which is to encourage women to realise that their bodies are meant to be different shapes and sizes and to stop trying to fix what was never broken. (See full feature on Eve Ensler page 18). Carlos Clarke's images don't say to me "you're not broke, nothing to fix," but I enjoy a beautiful nude as much as the next woman. As well as a challenge.

'Love dolls never die' is currently showing at PicassoMio Galleries in Madrid this month and next and in Barcelona in March and April. His work can also be seen on www.picassomio.com and www.bobcarlosclarke.com 

Madrid: Now until March 14
PicassoMio Gallery,
 Calle Lagasca 11, 1-B, ◆ Retiro (Line 2)
 tel: 91 781 0789

Barcelona: May 12 to July 7
PicassoMio Gallery,
 Calle Corseja 263, ◆ Diagonal (Line 3)
 tel: 93 368 5184