

Capturing beauty

To enter Bruno Bisang's world is to discover the truly eclectic. The famed Swiss photographer's Zurich apartment boasts stylish paintings, stunning sculptures and the work of photographers he admires. Soft, languid jazz plays while Bisang, who is reserved but personable, sips red wine and talks about his life and work.



American model and television star Tyra Banks

By Chris Blake | It is a rare chance to catch up with Bisang, who spends most of his time in Milan, Paris and New York, photographing beautiful models and celebrities. He works in various genres including fashion, glamour, advertising and certainly not least, fine art. In truth, it sounds like a fantasy life. When asked about it, Bisang blushes noticeably with the mischievous look of one caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"I enjoy the freedom of not having a normal 9-5 job," he says. "I'm lucky to have been working 30 years independently. I choose where I live, when I go to bed, when I get up in the morning. I'm serious

with my work, but I'm free to do it how I want."

It is a long way from his Swiss-Italian upbringing. But that same upbringing proved instrumental in giving rise to Bisang's fame.

Ascona roots

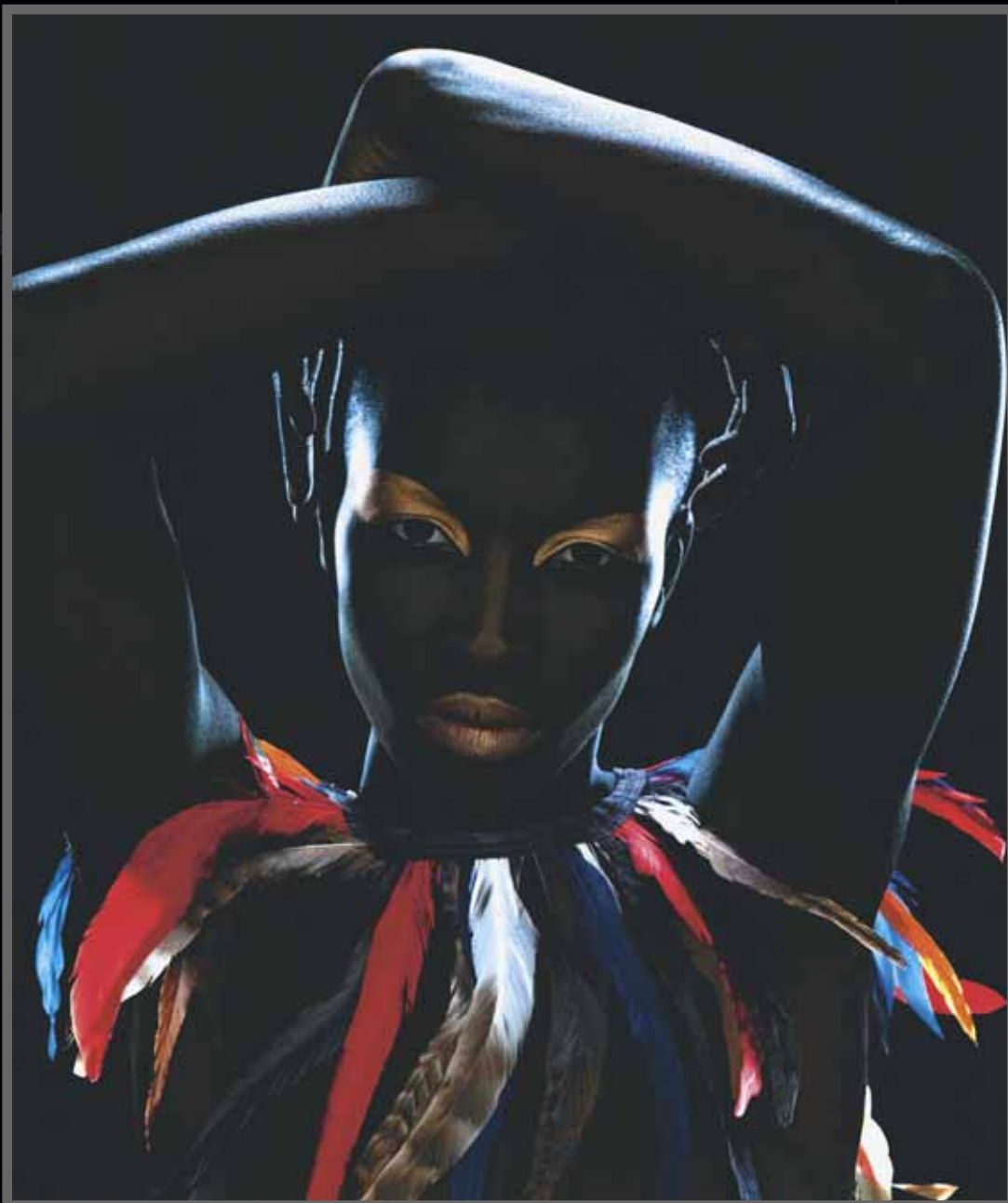
Bisang's Swiss-German parents moved to Ascona, in the Italian part of Switzerland, when he and his siblings were very young.

"It was quite good growing up with two languages," he recalls. "We spoke Swiss German at home and Italian in school."

He soon became fascinated by the local surroundings. And, he says, he was inspired by the Italian neorealism films from the '50s and '60s.

"There was a cinema beside the shop where my mother worked. At 10 years old, I was too young to go in. But there were always these pictures outside and when I looked at them, I felt something very strong and I knew I wanted a career in that direction," he says.

His interest in how to create images was already taking shape. "At first I was interested in film and television and I was told for that field, it would be good if I did an apprenticeship in photography. In



© All photos Bruno Bisang

From a shoot for the *Catiere del Garda* calendar

the end I stayed with photography because I knew I had found what I was looking for.”

It turned into a lucrative life-long passion. And while some well-known photographers still want to become film directors, Bisang is not one of them.

“I did some work in television and commercials, but it is not my thing. With film you always work with large crews of 20 or 30 people,” he elaborates. “I enjoy photography more, where you have a smaller crew and an intimate setting.”

The Bisang touch

It is in those settings that Bisang works

his highly regarded magic. Photography editor Dian Hanson explains this magic in her book, *The New Erotic Photography*.

“Most erotic photographers know how to capture beauty; Bruno knows how to improve upon it ... what started out as a pretty model is transformed into a spectacular woman,” Hanson wrote.

Bisang himself once stated “beauty alone is not interesting”. Rather, his goal is to reveal something from the model that isn’t obvious.

“I need to capture a special moment,” he explains. “For example, perhaps fragility or doubt. Otherwise you just

have a boring picture. It is not something you can really learn and I cannot say how I do it. I just see the special moment and go for it. One part is experience and the other part is just a feeling you have. At a live casting I might not give a model any directions just to see what she is able to offer the camera. I’m looking for personality.”

When he puts all the elements together, it is distinctly Bisang.

The power of sensuality

“The strength of my work is to create a lot of sensuality and femininity,” Bisang says. “The woman will look strong and proud.

PROFILE

Of course sexy as well, but it is bringing out the sensuality of a model or celebrity that I am known for doing successfully.”

A critical aspect of his proven method is the respect he has for his models. “I don’t want the woman to just be an object,” he asserts. “I want to create something that is not vulgar and that she can be proud of.”

Many of his favourite models are from Latin cultures. “In general they are more sensual in the way they express themselves. Of course where I grew up influences why I feel this way,” he adds.

Though not his exclusive choice, Bisang prefers to shoot in black and white.

“I like black and white photography because it is more eternal, says Bisang. “When you shoot in colour, it can already seem dated in just two or three years.”

And, he strongly believes simplicity has its place.

“Some photographers can make the process very technical and complex. But the final photograph does not depend on the quality of the camera or how many lights you use. The photograph depends on emotion,” he says. “You could accomplish a good photograph with one lamp.”

Motivation and challenges

Bisang has already succeeded beyond almost any photographer’s wildest dreams. But he still loves what he does.

“It’s not a job. It’s a passion. That makes all the difference. You don’t do it all your life to collect a pension ... you do it until you die. You’re always creating and it’s an adventure. You shoot in the morning and you don’t know what you have until you review it in the evening. Because you work with human beings and not machines, there is always something new and different.”

And there are constant challenges.

“With celebrities it can sometimes be difficult,” Bisang explains. “They might have a certain look and they want to stick to just that look. It is important to make them feel good and confident. So first, I do it the way they want. Later, I might suggest different make-up and hair. Because I earned their trust, they usually will go along with my ideas.”

Tomorrow’s opportunities

Despite all his success, Bisang has sombre words for those just starting out in photography.



A fine art nude from Bisang’s book *Exposure*

“It is very, very difficult for young people who want to break in,” he says. “There is so much competition and the world changed so quickly over the last 10 years.”

Bisang explains clients are not as loyal to one photographer as they once were since there are so many choices today. “They may use you one or two years and then they are looking for the next new thing.”

In addition, he says aspiring photographers seeking to break in “would definitely have to be a big talent and they could not do it in Switzerland because the market is simply too limited.”

A challenge for young artists is that while it is “natural that you find photographers you like and try to emulate them ... that won’t open doors for you. It is so important to find your own vision and then work on that vision. You have to bring

something to the market that only you can produce.”

Polaroid project

Photography enthusiasts may soon be able to take a journey through the history of Bisang’s own evolving vision.

Even after the start of the digital age, Polaroid snapshots were still a staple in photography – used for previewing the artistic direction of a shoot. Bisang has hundreds of Polaroid shots from his 30 years in the business, and he plans to publish a book of them. He enjoys the fact that the medium was not inherently perfect, nor prone to digital manipulation. Rather, he believes the snapshots held the raw character he finds essential to his work.

It is clear that Bisang, only in his 50s, has many more creative ideas to pursue – and more beauty to capture.



Bruno Bisang directing a photo shoot