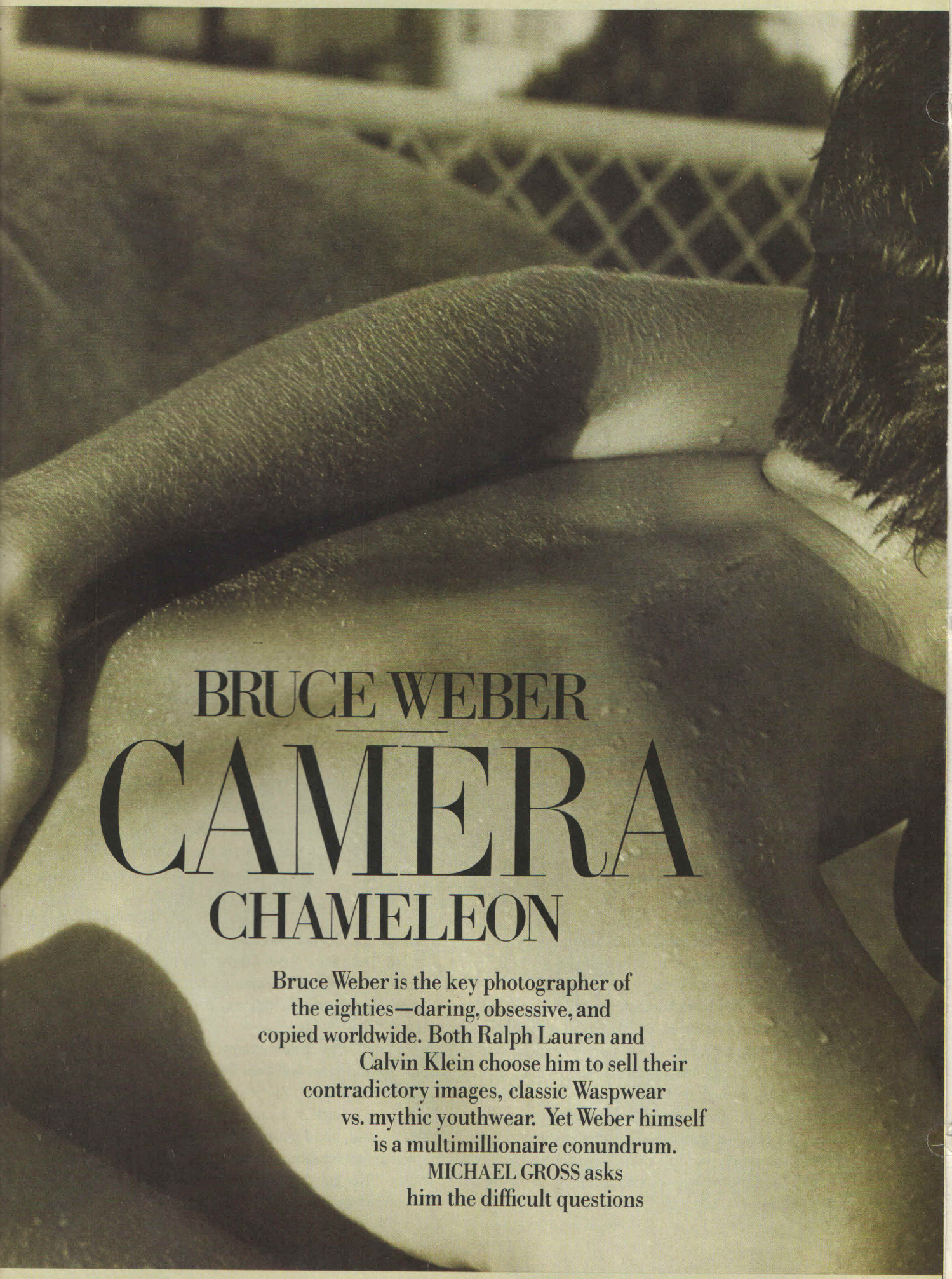
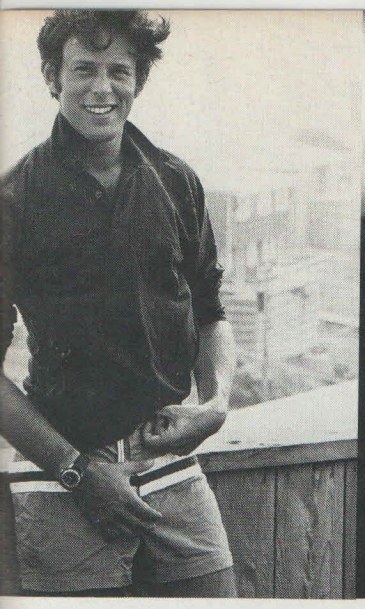
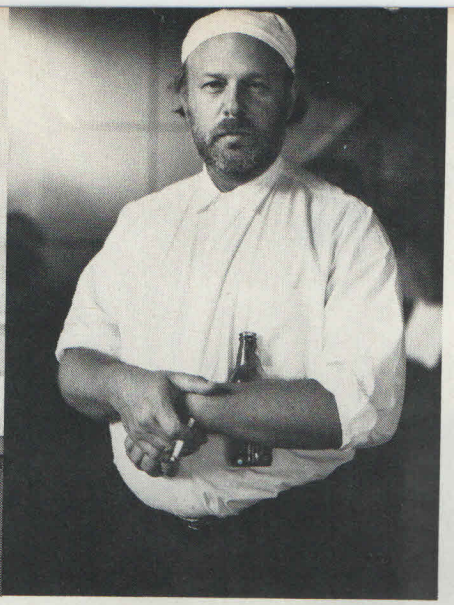


BRUCE WEBER

CAMERA CHAMELEON

Bruce Weber is the key photographer of the eighties—daring, obsessive, and copied worldwide. Both Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein choose him to sell their contradictory images, classic Waspwear vs. mythic youthwear. Yet Weber himself is a multimillionaire conundrum. MICHAEL GROSS asks him the difficult questions





A portrait of the artist then and now

BEFORE AND AFTER: Briefly a model in 1966, the twenty-year-old Bruce Weber, *far left*, was the sort of "clean-cut, fresh-looking" boy now photographed by the forty-year-old Bruce Weber, *left*.

A bearish fellow with a scraggly graying beard, a rumpled black jacket, a wrinkled white shirt buttoned to the neck and stretched taut over an impressive belly, and a cheap scarf knotted over his apparently balding head: Bruce Weber, forty, is an unlikely, unglamorous fashion photographer.

But remember Calvin Klein's dictum: "In this business, *everything* we do is about creating an image." Weber's just-so sloppiness is meant to dissemble. He is unquestionably the major figure to have emerged in fashion photography in the last decade.

As the uncredited "*auteur*" of America's two best-selling fashion-advertising images—Calvin Klein *and* Ralph Lauren—Weber has given the fashion photograph a wholly American look, a look so successful it is copied everywhere from Italy to Japan. His instinctive Americanness perfectly matches the Reagan/Springsteen resurgence of patriotism. As he told the curators of his Kunsthalle museum show in Basel, "When people walk into the show, I want them to know it was an American who took these pictures. I want them to grasp the fact that I'm a photographer from farm country who has gone back East."

There are other things anyone looking at his pictures will quickly grasp. Weber's American openness about sexuality. His plundering of our visual past, in form studies inspired by Edward Weston, in scenes echoing the films of Nicholas Ray and John Ford. Most of all, his rummaging in our image attic for the archetypes of American boyhood: the cowboy, the athlete, the preppy, the rock star. There is an all-American willingness to take chances, the Andy Hardy–esque "C'mon, kids, let's all make fashion" attitude of his traveling repertory company of stylists, editors, models, and assistants, and his studioless-pioneer-cum-gypsy wanderlust. All this has given form to a newly dominant style—in photography and in fashion.

"The fashion photograph is evolving," says Alexander Liberman, the editorial director of Condé Nast. Weber "may be one of the first to have sensed it. As clothes grow simpler and less important, the human factor becomes dominant, and there Bruce is quite unique in daring to portray a reality that is seldom seen in fashion magazines."

At his rustic compound in Bellport, Long Island, Weber started an advertising shoot for the International Mohair Association at seven A.M. By ten, five nude bodies were crawling over each other on a couch covered with the client's fabric. Five mothers stood behind the sofa, distracting the models—crying infants—with bottles and toys. Weber crouched before them, moving babies in and out of the shot like a basketball coach. One of his assistants hovered over him holding an umbrella against the sun, her hand on his back as she whispered in his ear and changed the settings on one of three Pentax cameras.

At 1:30, several vans headed to the next location, the home of John Ryman, an "environmental designer" who creates sets for Weber. The second setup featured a seminaked seventeen-year-old male model, Sasha Mitchell, the boy Weber put on a pedestal for Calvin Klein jeans. His hips and legs were wrapped in a piece of the fabric. Weber had the fabric soaked, then moved him from a barn to a tree, searching for his shot. Behind the photographer, Mohair's British adman, Vernon Stratton, began to fret.

"I'm very nervous on this shot," he said. "Men's wear is terribly difficult. I can't make up my mind about men identifying with this. He takes millions of pictures and you just need one, so you have to keep quiet and wait to the end. One thing about Bruce Weber pictures, they're always memorable. When the committee sees it..." Stratton raised his eyebrows. "At the moment, it's completely wrong for what the fabric is. Mind you, I'm not looking down the camera. I don't know how much is showing." Between frames, Sasha dangled from a tree limb and was suddenly transformed into a Mohair Tarzan. Weber begged him to freeze and shot till the model literally dropped. Stratton was ecstatic. The copy for the ad would read: "Mohair: A natural miracle." "This is fine, fantastic, superb," Stratton exulted. "That's the thing about waiting."

"You have to be manipulative," Weber would tell me later in a goofy, infectious voice, "to be a photographer, to get results." Behind the big friendly dog, wanting you to like him, is a steely determination to protect himself and project his own view of things. He is a master at evading questions he chooses not to answer. He seems to confide easi-

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP LEFT, WILLIAM CONNORS; TOP RIGHT, ALICE SPRINGS

ly, but is often drawing out those he's with. Try to get him to admit the intention of his work and he'll wave dismissively and say, "What it's about is having fun."

"I'm on," said Elisabetta Ramella, model for the third shot, at four P.M., as Weber's team tromped into the field behind Ryman's house. "Did you bring the bug spray?" someone asked as Ramella stripped behind a blanket. Wrapped in a mohair sarong, she lay down on the sandy ground. By five P.M. the light was softening. Ramella's eyelids were fluttering as Weber stood her up. She complained of bugs biting her bare feet. "We'll do this quickly," Weber promised. Then Didier Malige, his hairstylist, spent long minutes arranging three more bolts of fabric as towering turbans on the model's head. Weber's stylist, Grace Coddington, on loan from British *Vogue,* gently tugged the sarong down to nearly uncover one of Ramella's breasts, and a blush crossed the model's white, blue-veined skin. Soon she was clutching prickly branches to her bare torso. "This is fine," said Vernon Stratton. "It's always easier with women's clothes."

At six P.M. Ramella began to grimace. Bites six inches in diameter had risen on her skin. At 6:10 Weber rubbed his eyes. After eleven hours he put down his camera. The whole side of his face had been rubbed raw. "Bruce would kneel on rocks in the freezing-cold Pacific for six hours and he never complained," says Donald Sterzin, an art director at Ralph Lauren's ad agency, who worked with Weber at *GQ*. "Sometimes he'll take twenty-five

TURNING POINT: Water-polo player Jeff Aquilon, *above, left,* in the photo that was "the start of everything," *Soho Weekly News,* 1978. Tropical whites, *near left,* classic Ralph Lauren men's wear, shot in Barbados, 1985.

rolls just to get the right gesture. No one else ever shot as much film as Bruce Weber."

Weber is a workaholic who will edit film till dawn the night after a session. Even on his Adirondacks vacation last summer, his first real holiday in ten years, he did several jobs. He is a perfectionist who demands control over his shoots, sometimes even over final layouts. He'll turn down work if he doesn't like the client, if they've already picked the location or the models, if he doesn't like the idea, or if it changes too much before a shoot. While he does discuss approaches and models with his clients, he says, "we never get specific." He lets his shoots take their own shape, trying to capture fantasies on film. "And sometimes they're not mine," he adds.

Weber is a camera chameleon who represents very different—indeed rival—designer customers: Klein, Lauren, Valentino, Matsuda, Versace, Jeffrey Banks, Perry Ellis, Azzedine Alaïa, Galanos, Karl Lagerfeld, Comme des Garçons, and even the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain.

Ralph Lauren says he presents Weber with a mood dictated by a season's clothes. "Bruce will then shoot it as he sees it." The Mohair session "was no more planned than that we would drape people in fabric," Grace Coddington explained. "What happened after that was anyone's guess."

Inspiration sometimes comes from his models. The male amateurs Weber habitually uses "don't fall into clichéd responses," graphic designer Milton Glaser says. "Their awkwardness makes his pictures dissonant and consequently more interesting." On shoots, Weber's eye is always searching for the telling moment. "I'm constantly staring at them. I'm watching who they talk to, I'm watching how they handle themselves, what they say, the relationship with the other people at the table." Even when the models are off-duty, he'll snap a tableau if he spies a potential photograph. One of Calvin Klein's topless underwear ads was of a model who, feeling ill, had lain down on the grass. Klein's Obsession ad was inspired by models skinny-dipping after a shoot in Mexico. "It was so warm in the pool," he says. "We were just doing what we were doing."

Weber's relationships with Klein and Lauren thrive on mutual trust. "I started working for those guys in a totally unbusinesslike, totally unconventional way," he says. "When I work for Ralph Lauren I draw upon experiences I had in boarding school, trips, family, things I've read. With Calvin I'm interpreting what's happening in his life, his feelings. Ralph is thematic. Calvin is almost architectural. Ralph always loved a lot of the same clothes that I loved from antique stores. Calvin's pictures were always about skin. When I work for them, I'm really interpreting what's happening for them at the moment, and I don't just mean in clothes. I mean in their feelings."

"He's given each one a distinct mythic image that's either beautiful or scary," says Barbara Lippert, advertising critic for *Adweek*. "For Lauren it's perfect breeding. For Klein it's threatening eroticism."

"His style was very similar to what I believed in," says Ralph Lauren. "I never liked real fashion. My thing is much more earthy and natural and rugged-looking, and that was Bruce's feeling." Calvin Klein agrees: "We understand each other. It starts with that and ends up with a photograph."

The source of Bruce Weber's chameleon-like empathy lies in his troubled, solitary boyhood in Greensburg, a small mining town outside Pittsburgh. "Part of why I do what I do today is because my family was so crazy, like really insane," he says. His parents drank heavily, had affairs, and traveled constantly. Left at home, he endlessly studied the snapshots they took. "My world was centered about visual things and the way people looked and the way they dressed," he says. In school, he was a water boy, not an athlete. "I had an enormous fantasy life and really wanted to be as athletic or as handsome or as muscular as the people in my pictures." These fantasies of an ideal adolescence and family life inform most of his photographs.

The constant upheavals in Weber's family left their mark, too. "It gives you a toughness that makes you survive," he says. It also gave him an emotional openness—the positive flip side of his manipulative nature—that helped him "deal with a lot of different kinds of people," whom he'd later attract into his photographic surrogate family.

Weber moved to New York University to study theater and film in 1966 and became, he says, "slightly a little bit of a party boy." That summer, he decided to earn extra money modeling. Roddy McDowall, the actor, took his test photos. He looked like many of the models he photographs today—"young, clean-cut, fresh-looking, rosy cheeks," recalls his modeling agent, Roberta Remy. "I was completely dizzy, never on time," Weber says. Modeling didn't last long.

By 1969, Weber was in Paris, trying to become a photographer. Back in New York a year later, he began shooting press parties for record companies and rock magazines and taking head shots for actors, learning how to coax the best from insecure people unused to being photographed. Just before her death, Weber met Diane Arbus and showed her photos he'd taken of a Gypsy couple "almost making love," he remembers, "in this loft with twenty-five birds." Arbus sent him to study with Lisette Model, who taught photography at the New School. "She'd say, 'You've got to photograph a tree when it's first planted, when it's dying or it's in a storm. A tree is a special thing. Don't make it like a Hallmark greeting card.' "

Weber began photographing fashion for a trade magazine, *Men's Wear*, in 1973. "I was totally infatuated," he remembers. The model, Mike Edwards, who later dated Priscilla Presley, "was the kind of guy girls really dream about meeting. I thought, I really want to photograph this and give women, and other men if they want, something to look at in men. I wanted them to get the romance of a guy."

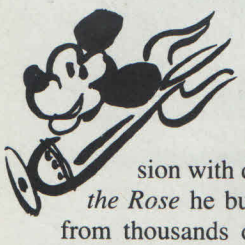
Weber felt people of both sexes were "starved for a way to look at men. It was something I had a sensibility about. I knew it was a way for me to start. I took something that was very, very, very easy for me to do in the sense that my feelings about men were very clear to me and I just photographed what I knew. It was a means to an end. But it seems like a really stupid way of going about it."

He was encouraged nonetheless by Donald Sterzin of *GQ*. Peter Schub, the agent of Irving Penn and Lord Snowdon, intro- *(Continued on page 116)*

ARTS FAIR

Trevor's stories sometimes appear slighter than they are; it is only afterward that one realizes his mastery of language and his profound, unsentimental humanity. The title piece of this collection, set in Ireland in 1847 and 1848, shows Trevor's gifts to best effect. In it, Fogarty, a poor Protestant butler, reveals to Miss Heddoe, a governess newly arrived from England, the tragedy and horror of the Ireland of the Famine. She listens seriously (Trevor's characters really listen as well as really talk) and records her impressions and her distress in a diary. In time, however, this "young woman of principle and sensibility" comes to terms with this "news." The story concludes: "She has wept into her pillow, she has been sick at heart. Stranger and visitor, she has written in her diary the news from Ireland. Stranger and visitor, she has learnt to live with things."

—David Rieff



TIM SHEAFFER

As a semiotician, Umberto Eco has a justifiable obsession with details. In *The Name of the Rose* he built a whole monastery from thousands of microscopic bits of data. And in the title essay of *Travels in Hyperreality* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) he takes apart contemporary American kitsch. To demonstrate that "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake," Eco immerses himself in theme parks and waxworks, Disneyland and the Forest Lawn cemeteries.

The garish jungle of "signs" proves almost too much for Eco: it sends him into manic, frequently hilarious flights of recapitulation, ricocheting from Brazilian occultism to designer jeans to Charles Manson. Eco delights in unforeseen connections: in New York City he finds neo-feudal castles (Citicorp Center and Trump Tower), "with their courts open to peasants and merchants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for the lords." While not all his journalistic pieces have worn equally well, at his best Eco is an ideal intellectual companion: sharp, enthusiastic, and alive to the grotesqueness of the ordinary. **—Geoffrey O'Brien**

Bruce Weber

(Continued from page 106) duced him to the late Bea Feitler, later the new *Vanity Fair*'s first design director, who showed him her photo collection and gave him jobs for *Ms.* magazine. Then he met Nan Bush, who had run Francesco Scavullo's photo studio in the late 1960s. In 1973, Weber moved into Bush's apartment, and she began finding him work: ad jobs for $1,000 to $1,500, photos for a catalogue house that paid $750 a day, and magazine work for $200 to $250 a page.

Andrea Quinn Robinson, now beauty editor of *Vogue,* gave Weber a job for *Seventeen* magazine in 1976 and found him "agreeable, but strong about how he felt. I drove him crazy. I'd say, 'Bruce, I'm going to get fired for this picture.' " Weber says that art directors thought "I was incredibly abrasive for somebody so young."

In 1978, Weber shot a Ralph Lauren catalogue on Shelter Island, a "Vogue Men" supplement, his first entire issue of *GQ,* and his first spread for the *Soho Weekly News,* featuring twelve-year-old Brooke Shields in men's wear. "It really looked different from what was happening," says fashion editor Annie Flanders, who now runs *Details.* Five years later, the world caught up with androgyny and cross-dressing.

For the next four years, as his photos filled *GQ,* Weber and Donald Sterzin scoured America, combing schoolyards, picking through college-yearbook team photos, hanging around gyms and sports fields, even crouching in dunes with binoculars, trying to spot new faces on beaches. Sometimes the model searches became epic. "Our phone bills," says Nan Bush, "are not to be believed."

Weber's most famous discovery was Jeff Aquilon, a Pepperdine University water-polo player. The first photos he did of Aquilon were, Weber says in one of his standard euphemisms, "pretty much aggressive." *GQ*'s editors "were really frightened of seeing men's skin. Pushing the sleeves up was an amazing adventure."

Soho Weekly News wasn't as inhibited. Annie Flanders says she encouraged Weber to go "overboard to excite." The result was Weber's breakthrough—Aquilon bare-chested on a rumpled bed with his hands down his underwear. More traditional editors told Weber he'd never work again. Fashion publicist Kezia Keeble, then his stylist, grandly proclaims those pictures "the start of everything!"

Meanwhile, Weber had won jobs shooting Calvin Klein's first men's jeans pictures (one of which became their first Times Square billboard), and a twenty-seven-page fashion portfolio. Soon afterward, Ralph Lauren hired Weber to shoot some of his first print ads. Lauren and Klein spearheaded a new kind of fashion advertising, buying multiple pages in magazines, keeping their images consistent no matter what product was being advertised. Weber's photographs were given display that was unprecedented for anyone in fashion, particularly someone so young. Imitations of his work quickly began creeping into advertising for other clothing lines—a sure sign of commercial success.

There are other signs of Weber's success. Private sales of his pictures earned him over $150,000 last year. His $1,500 prints are sold by New York's Robert Miller Gallery, and Bellport Press will shortly publish his second book of photographs. His advertising day rate, exclusive of expenses, is about $10,000. Last year Ralph Lauren alone spent $3 million through the Geers Gross Advertising agency for production costs and Weber photo sessions. In a business where top names earn $500,000 a year, associates estimate that Weber makes $1 to $2 million. He spends it on "personal" projects: photos of Marines, Aggies, Olympic athletes for *Interview,* his own issue of *Per Lui,* the Italian fashion magazine for young men. He collects photographs (by Edward Weston, Larry Clark, Sid Avery, Kurt Markus), cars (a 1963 Porsche, 1963 Mercedes convertible, two pickups, a Jeep), and property (a TriBeCa loft, the Bellport compound, and, last year, Longwood, an eleven-acre, eighteen-building camp on Spitfire Lake in the Adirondack Forest Preserve).

Weber's secret seems simple. His men are always sexual objects. His women are strong, silent types. "There's an erotic undertow," says Alexander Liberman. "The existence of male sexuality is tangible. He puts you face-to-face with a reality convention has always hidden."

By putting men in the position formerly reserved for women, sexually attractive, the center of attention—and often by photographing them with

shorthaired women wearing man-tailored styles—Weber confronted traditional mass-market assumptions about sexual roles. "His pictures are homosexual," sniffed one corporate art buyer after visiting his gallery. On the other hand, Barbara Lippert observes, "his photos make straight people think they're missing something."

"I'd rather shock than get no reaction," Weber told me. "I think people are really frightened, not so much by the sexuality in pictures as by a confrontation, things they might have to answer for themselves. I think people are really embarrassed if you say, 'Did you ever fantasize about that? Did you ever dream about that?' If you went around and asked people those questions, they'd be really frightened of you."

"You can't quite tell what the emotional load is," observes Milton Glaser. "The images give you room to project."

What people project is often Weber's problem. He signed a copy of his first book for Paul Cavaco, who styled many of his best-known ads, "To my brother. We'll always be in trouble." Cavaco says that inscription "is what we're about. If we're not afraid they're not going to run the picture, we didn't do our job. If we're not at risk, there's no point."

Calvin Klein's ads have been particularly controversial. "I don't set out to upset people," Klein says. "My aim is to stimulate and excite. What I've come to realize is that everyone doesn't see the same thing. People were upset by what I do." Klein has yet to print a series of photos of two models "making love underwater in cutoff jeans," Weber says. And when he shot a series of disturbing primeval photos for Karl Lagerfeld's fashions and fragrances, only a handful ran. Weber's stubble-headed men and gauze-clad women entwined with ivy and crowned with twigs were "a little more extreme than anticipated," says Pat Beh, advertising director of Karl Lagerfeld Womenswear Inc. Lagerfeld himself calls them "classics," regrets that "I cannot fight always," and hired Weber again this spring.

Weber's commitment to risk also finds him at odds with most fashion magazines. British *Vogue*, which published his evocative tributes to artist Georgia O'Keeffe, photographer Edward Weston, and author Willa Cather, can no longer entice Weber to work, because, he says, my photos "got killed constantly." When Condé Nast bought *GQ* and it was conservatively repositioned, Weber stopped working there too. Some say the change in *GQ* resulted from an antihomosexual shift. *GQ*'s new editor, Arthur Cooper, admits the magazine had been perceived by advertisers as oriented toward homosexuals. Because of AIDS, even the hint of homosexuality may be falling out of fashion.

Alexander Liberman dismisses this theory. "Is Michelangelo's *David* a homosexual sculpture?" he asks. "Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein sell images. Fashion magazines fundamentally sell garments. This is where we have trouble with Bruce. The store or the manufacturer wants its garments to be bought. He gets the aura, but where is the merchandise in a Bruce Weber photo? Bruce wants to make a woman look like a truckdriver's moll. It doesn't work. I think he despises fashion. Every time we've tried a sitting, there's been a distortion. He is fortunate he has income from advertising sources who accept the outer limits of his urges."

So Weber displays unused big-money assignments in little magazines like *Details*, and in his books and shows. His artistic validation in Europe—museum shows in France, Switzerland, and Italy—excites him. But American museums have yet to buy his work. "It's not my area of interest," says Cornell Capa of the International Center of Photography. "I'm not pro-him. I'm not con-him. I'm not interested in advertising photography." To the art world, Weber remains within the commercial perimeter. "He makes magnificent scenes, moods, and places and conveys a sense of lost times," a photo editor explains, "but reality is not transcended. You can taste the dust, but it never happened." Can he ever transcend? "The public is

CREDITS

Page 8: Photograph by Norman Parkinson.
Page 14: Photographs, center, left to right, courtesy of Sue Arnold, by Kelly Wise, Pablo Guerrero; bottom, by Roxanne Lowit, Dick Bloom/*National Journal*, D. G. Seidman.
Page 24: Top, styled by Maxine Siwan; makeup by Gena Dry. Photograph, bottom, by Janette Keeler.
Page 31: Photographs courtesy of the Daniel Wolf gallery, N.Y.C., and Archive Pictures.
Page 34: Teacup and saucer from Think Big, N.Y.C.
Page 37: Photograph, bottom, from A.P./Wide World.
Page 38: Photographs, top, both by Lucien Capehart; center, by Robin Platzer; bottom, both by Star Black.
Page 50: Photograph by Lynn Goldsmith/LGI.
Page 52: Photograph from the collection of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House; reprinted by permission of Joanna T. Steichen.
Page 55: Photograph, left, from Topham.
Page 56: Photograph by Julain Parker/Spooner/Gamma-Liaison.
Page 57: Photograph from Photo Trends.
Page 58: Photographs, left to right, by Alan Davidson/Camera Press London, Brian Aris/Camera Press London, Jim Bennett/Alpha, Alan Davidson/Globe.
Page 60: Photograph from Rex Features Ltd.
Page 61: Photograph by Mike Lloyd/Rex Features Ltd.
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Pages 64–65: Photograph from Camera Press London.
Page 66: Photograph by Schall/Condé Nast Publications Inc.
Pages 70–71: Large photograph from the collection of Stephen Birmingham.
Page 70: Small photographs, top two, by Patrick Lichfield; bottom, left, courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Lapique. Table plan and telegram courtesy of the Countess of Romanones.
Page 71: Small photographs, top to bottom, by Nick De Morgoli/Camera Press London, Raymond Depardon/Magnum, Ron Galella, A.P./Wide World; bottom, left, courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Lapique. Menu courtesy of the Countess of Romanones.
Page 72: Large photograph by Ron Galella; others, clockwise from top left, from Collection Viollet, Keystone, by William Vandivert/*Life* (© 1939 by Time Inc.), from Keystone, by André Ostier.
Pages 78–79: Photographs by Frank Scherschel/*Life* (© 1955 by Time Inc.).
Page 82: Silk-paisley bathrobes, about $900 each, Hermès, N.Y.C., Palm Beach, and Dallas; zebra-stenciled ponyskin shoes, $300, Manolo Blahnik, N.Y.C.; gold-and-enamel frog cuff links, $1,200, David Webb, N.Y.C., Houston, and Newport Beach, California.
Page 83: Top, Ottoman strapless gowns by Carolyne Roehm; sixteen-button cotton gloves by Portalano; lace elbow-length gloves by Yves Saint Laurent Couture, to order from Paris. Center, linen blazers by WilliWear WilliSmith. Bottom, polo shirts by Polo by Ralph Lauren; pink silk sport coat by Polo by Ralph Lauren, $395, from Bloomingdale's, N.Y.C., and Polo/Ralph Lauren shops, Chicago and Newport Beach, California; blue silk sport coat, $395, Polo/Ralph Lauren shops, Madison Avenue, N.Y.C., and Indianapolis; silk scarves, $115 each, Hermès, N.Y.C., Palm Beach, and Dallas.
Pages 100–101: Photograph courtesy of Calvin Klein.
Page 104: Small photographs, left, both courtesy of Calvin Klein.
Page 109: Photographs courtesy of Cable/Kubinsky.
Page 110: Photographs, left, by Douglas H. Jeffery; right, by Gerry Goodstein.
Page 111: Photographs, top, by Beverley Gallegos; bottom, by Alain Loizon.
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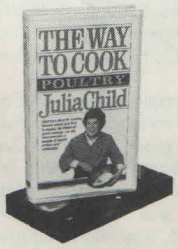

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Bruce Weber

always against innovation," Mr. Liberman says. "It takes a long time. He's got to be brave and glory in it."

But sometimes Bruce Weber isn't brave. He wears hurt feelings, rejection, and raw wounds like medals. On the day I went up to interview him he took me on a boat ride around Spitfire Lake. I had the distinct sense I was being manipulated, pulled into the middle of a lake in a little rubber boat without pencil, paper, or tape recorder. It was here that he brought up the subject of the last question interviewers always ask him. The dangerous question. The one they save for last because they fear it will get them thrown out. "And you know what it is?" he complained incredulously. "The last question is always: 'Are you gay?' "

Back in N.Y.C., we met in the French bistro beneath his TriBeCa loft, to tidy up a few final points, and now, on dry land, I too asked the last question.

"We have a lot of friends who have died lately," Weber answered, nodding across the table at Nan Bush. "What am I supposed to do? Deny those relationships?" □

The Dear Romance

(Continued from page 80) an American accent such as you've got.' And she hung up."

The next day Luis and the Duke went to Saint-Cloud to play golf, and the Duchess and I had lunch on the terrace. I commented on how beautiful the garden looked. "Yes," she said, "it gets better every year. Everything gets better with age except women."

I asked how she had slept. "I hardly slept at all last night," she told me. "I lay awake worrying about the servants breaking the dishes we used for dinner. I just know that when they wash them and put them down, they don't bother to put two towels under them, and one towel really isn't enough."

It was just the two of us, so lunch was served by Georges and a footman. The Duchess ate almost nothing. She never needed to diet, and the Duke had his own regimen. He awoke between eight and nine in the morning. His breakfast was cold water; then nothing else until around 11:30, when a tray was delivered to his bathroom. There he had a large brunch while he shaved; his favorite dishes were smoked haddock and small white sausages, which he had sent to him from England. He usually skipped lunch. Often he played golf during the lunch hour, as he was doing that day.

In the afternoon we went to an art gallery on the Faubourg St-Honoré to see a new exhibition. From there the Duchess went to a fitting at Givenchy, and I returned home.

The Duke was standing in the driveway with some gardening tools in his hands, and he waved for my car to stop.

"Aline, where's the Duchess?"

"At Givenchy, sir, having a fitting."

"She shouldn't be doing that. She had a cold this morning. I'm worried to death about the Duchess, Aline. She's really doing too much. She's going to become ill."

"Oh, sir, I don't think there is cause to worry. She seemed very happy and comfortable, and she has her car with her."

I continued up to the house, and he went on with his gardening. He was not the kind of country gentleman who loves gardening as long as somebody else does the dirty work. He employed three gardeners, but he had planted dozens of the trees on the grounds with his own hands. He did not, however, dress for the role of gardener. That particular afternoon he was wearing a tweed suit with knickers which I knew he had inherited from his father, George V.

About 5:30 he called to me from the boudoir. "Aline, the Duchess still hasn't come back." Just then the front door opened and she walked in. "Ah," he said, "darling." I never heard him call her Wallis, always "darling." He put his wrist to her forehead and seemed pleased. "You should have a hot bath and get into bed and rest. I've had your tub drawn."

As they walked toward her room, the Duchess called up to me, "Aline, dear, be sure to stop in before you go out. I want to see how you look."

Luis and I were dining at the Spanish Embassy. Their Royal Highnesses had been invited, but they had declined, and were going to spend a quiet night at home.

We were expected for dinner at nine o'clock. At 8:30 we stopped off in the