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A propos de l'exposition « L'Art de Lee Miller »

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Géraldine Chouard et François Brunet

- 1 Chercheur honoraire au *Victoria and Albert Museum* où il a été conservateur du département de la photographie durant trente-cinq ans, Mark Haworth-Booth enseigne aujourd'hui la photographie à la University of the Arts de Londres.
- 2 Il a publié de nombreuses études et monographies (Bill Brandt, André Kertész, Paul Strand, Bruce Davidson). Il est aussi notamment l'auteur de [Photography: An Independent Art](#) (1997) qui retrace l'histoire du fonds photographique du *Victoria and Albert Museum* (dont il commente quelques images sur le site du musée). Son dernier livre [The Art of Lee Miller](#) publié en 2007 a été traduit en français et publié chez Hazan en 2008.
- 3 GC: It is well known that Lee Miller has not only been a great photographer but also a fashion model and a war correspondent; she has compared her life to a "jigsaw puzzle", her biography by her son Anthony Penrose is called [The Lives of Lee Miller](#). What do you make of this cubistic destiny?
- 4 MHB: In my book, *The Art of Lee Miller*, I quoted as an epigraph a report in the New York magazine *Creative Art* which told its readers in 1933 that Lee Miller 'is making a surrealist jig-saw puzzle - which, you will admit, is a puzzle'. Lee Miller's life does not fit the usual templates. She was not only a supermodel who became a professional photographer but she was in turn several different kinds of photographer and then an outstanding reporter in another medium again - words. This daring foray into different fields is part of her attraction today.
- 5 GC: Do you see her as an object or rather as a subject? How do you interpret her picture of a severed breast?
- 6 MHB: I believe, with Antony Penrose, Lee Miller's son and the American scholar Whitney Chadwick, that Lee Miller's experience as a woman and a model informed the

remarkable photographs she made at a Paris hospital of a woman's severed breast (following a radical mastectomy) displayed on a dish with table linen and cutlery. This is a Surrealist photograph but also a feminist one. It is not like more recent still life photographs of body parts which seem to me mere *grand guignol*.

- 7 GC: How does she manage to be so classical and non-conformist at the same time?
- 8 **MHB:** Perhaps it helped to be present at - and actually at the heart of - the Neoclassical moment in Paris in the later 'Twenties. This is very much present in the highly original artists Lee Miller worked with including Man Ray and Jean Cocteau. This is something I hope I brought out in my book.
- 9 GC: Lee Miller worked from both sides of the camera: is she unique in this position? How does she compare with other women photographers?
- 10 **MHB:** I recently got to know better than I did before the work of Robert Capa's colleague and lover Gerda Taro. Of course Taro died very young but Lee Miller was her superior, in my view, as a war photographer. Lee Miller was unprecedented, I believe, in working at a high level on both sides of the camera.
- 11 GC: Did she invent the solarization process?
- 12 **MHB:** Only inadvertently - the credit belongs to Man Ray, in reviving and mastering for creative ends a phenomenon well-known as the Sabattier Effect. Lee Miller mastered it too.
- 13 GC: How do you understand her time in Egypt, in her career?
- 14 **MHB:** Over 2000 negatives survive, plus further vintage prints for which negatives don't survive. I am just back from an 18 day research trip to Egypt with Antony Penrose: this will feed into a new Lee Miller exhibition and book in due course. It was fascinating to follow her from motif to motif and to learn to 'read' her photographs more accurately. I don't know any work from Egypt in the 1930s which matches Lee Miller's for range of subject matter and subtlety.
- 15 GC: How is she received now? Do you sense any difference in her reception in England, the US and France? How do you interpret it?
- 16 **MHB:** Her son has worked on Lee Miller for 30 years, produced the key books and many exhibitions and done an exemplary job. The response to the centenary show has been very positive in the UK, the US and in France. More than half a million people saw the show. That is extraordinary.
- 17 GC: She moved, at the end of her life, from the darkroom to the kitchen: how did this happen?
- 18 **MHB:** I think you need to put it into context. First, many outstanding photographers have had short careers. Lee's was 1929-53, nearly 25 years. Second, other photographers - like Lee - had a very productive but tough war - like Bill Brandt. After the war Bill concentrated on portraits, the nude and collage. Third, as Dr Becky Conekin has argued, you can see Lee's move from photography to *haute cuisine* as contributing to the arts of life in a significant way during Britain's Age of Austerity.
- 19 FB: How did you like the Paris venue of your exhibition? What was your input? What were the gains / the losses after London?
- 20 **MHB:** I worked closely with Marta Gili, director of Jeu de Paume, and her team. It was a wonderful experience. The show looked very different from London - different but just

as good or (some might say) even better. London was rigidly chronological, Paris was more visually dynamic.

- 21 FB: How would you sum up the French reaction to Lee Miller? Any interesting comments?
- 22 **MHB:** I was asked more than once by journalists about why I selected no death camp photographs. My answer was that I think the scenes are most powerfully presented in the magazines in which they were seen at the time: I showed them in several different ways, as vintage originals, as a modern facsimile and as blow-ups so that the texts could be read. I am acutely aware of the problems of presenting photographs of atrocities, having worked very closely with Don McCullin on a retrospective exhibition in 1981.
- 23 FB: What is your perception of the Paris photo-world, especially museums? How does it compare with London? Is it really true, as some malicious critics would have it, that France is miles above England in the display of art photography?
- 24 **MHB:** Paris has many active institutions but so does London. Perhaps someone should do a serious survey on this subject! To those (usually British) who continually tell me of the superiority of Paris, I point out that Bill Brandt never had a retrospective in Paris in his lifetime and the great recent Diane Arbus show was seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) but not, alas, in Paris.
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