Bringing controversy into fashion

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He made his name in fashion photography, but Oliviero Toscani has little time for the "stupid people" who enjoy designer labels. Instead, he is much happier in the presence of "real" people.

"Nobody is ugly," he says. "Everyone has their own unique appearance and character. I always see the beauty in everything and everyone.

"This is why I don't want to take any more photos of fashion models. I want to take photos of real people who live in the real world."

It's an attitude that is hardly surprising coming from Toscani, who was in Bangkok last week for a workshop supported by the Italian embassy -- the veteran lensman has built his storied career on stirring controversy and shattering artistic conventions.

And it's been a highly successful career.

AN EYE FOR DETAIL

Growing up in Milan, Toscani was exposed to the world of photography from a young age -- his father worked as a photojournalist for Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera. From developing rolls of films to cleaning lenses and camera equipment, Toscani quickly learned to appreciate the world of photography the same way his father did.

When he was taught to use a camera for the first time, Toscani says seeing through the lens completely changed the way he looked at the world. He became fascinated by photography and its unique way of storytelling.

At the age of 23, Toscani enrolled at Kunstgewerbeschule, a famous art school in Zurich, earning a degree in graphic design and photography.

After graduation he began working for numerous magazines in Italy. He started his career primarily taking fashion portraits, but as a junior lensman he would take on anything that was assigned to him.

Many budding photographers look to their more experienced colleagues for inspiration. But Toscani took a different approach. He says his inspiration came from reading newspapers and understanding what was going on in the world. His father also taught him to look at his work and interpret the hidden message in a photo.

"I love newspapers. I love reading and finding out what's going on in the world," Toscani said. "A picture without any story behind it means nothing to the world. It is flat and soulless."

It is that concept which Toscani has adopted throughout what has been at times a controversial career, as he took on complex social issues and placed them at the centre of popular culture.

UNITING COLOURS

Toscani rose quickly in the world of fashion photography, jumping behind the lens for many of the world's leading fashion magazines. Cindy Crawford's first photo shoot in her modelling career was done by Toscani.

But after years of doing this fairly routine editorial work, Toscani longed to try storytelling the way he preferred. In 1982, he was contacted by the Italian fashion brand United Colors of Benetton, beginning a long, successful -- and often controversial -- relationship. Instead of showing products on famous models the way he used to do, Toscani removed the model and the products entirely as he explored new concepts of art in advertising.

"I told Benetton that I wanted to create a groundbreaking advertising campaign for them, but I didn't want to use any of their products or beautiful models," Toscani explained.

"You have to be an author when creating the story in a photo, otherwise it doesn't work. I had something I wanted to say to the world and I reflected it through my work with Benetton."

He created many famous print ads for Benetton, including the "We on death row" campaign which aimed to draw attention to the use of capital punishment in the US. The campaign, showing close-up portraits of death row inmates, stirred up a storm of controversy, with US officials and victims' rights groups calling for a boycott of the company.

An image of a man dying of Aids was equally controversial, with critics lining up to say the company had gone too far. Another of Toscani's famous images showed three hearts with the words "black", "white", and "yellow" written over the top in a powerful but confronting message against racism.

"I got a lot of criticism, but I love it. It's shown that there are people actually looking at my work and the message behind the photo is powerful enough to stir up their anger," Toscani said.

He said if he had to take another photo to raise awareness on social issues today, he would choose the issue of migration since it is now one of the biggest problems facing Europe.

NEW TOOLS, OLD SKILLS

Toscani is now 74 and has witnessed dramatic transformations in photographic technology. Yet in a world where smartphones mean everyone can be a photographer, Toscani still believes photography hasn't lost its meaning or purpose.

"Technology has made it a lot easier for people to be able to photograph everything that is going on. The internet also helps spread pictures all over the world," Toscani said.

"However, if the picture doesn't say anything or serve the purpose of the photographer, it means nothing but a flat picture with no story."

Toscani sees photography as the medium that carries a message, and thinks photographs are the one true universal language that anyone can understand.

"Powerful photos can change the world as well as the perspective of people. That's why it is important to have something to say when taking photos if you want to produce high quality work," Toscani said.

"Photos are the timeline markers for human history. They simply document a true story. With tools like phones or compact cameras that everyone now owns, [photos] can be one of the tools that human can use to make their history together," he added.

"One hundred years from now, photography will still be the universal language that everyone understands."

RACE TO THE FINISH

Toscani no longer works for any fashion brands. Instead he is working on a project that he says carries far more meaning to the world.

In 2007, Toscani began Razza Umana, or Human Race. The project has taken Toscani and his team of photographers to cities, villages and squares all over the world, where they set up photographic studios and document local people and cultures.

The photographs and videos become part of a multimedia archive and will be the subject of publications and travelling exhibitions.

In 2011, he turned his attention to his native Italy to mark the 150th anniversary of the country's unification.

The Human Race project is recognised by the United Nations, which asked Toscani to travel to Guatemala to take the photos of local people from more than 30 different tribes. The country has been plagued by tribal conflict, and the UN wanted Toscani's work to show them that they are not all that different.

When he travelled to Thailand last week on a trip to promote his new wine business, Toscani went to Chinatown with his team. He set up a white screen as a background and asked passers-by to be part of his project.

He took photos of thousands of people, and plans to exhibit the work in Thailand toward the end of the year as part of the Italian Art Festival in Bangkok. Details of the exhibition will be announced later.

Toscani also plans to display his Human Race project soon in Italy. He plans to print all of the photos he has taken of people around the world and display them on 2x3-metre posters in front of St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

LONG STORY SHORT

Toscani travels around the world for both work and leisure. One thing he likes to do is to get to know local artists and photographers. He says different cultures shape the way different photographers think.

Toscani said that, for example, a Japanese photographer and a European photographer will not see the world in the same way. "Since they [Japanese] are disciplined people, their work seems different from others," Toscani said.

Even though Toscani is a world-renowned fashion photographer, he holds a dim view of the fashion industry at large. He thinks that people who follow fashion create a monoculture that he finds boring.

"Stupid people only care on how beautiful they are. Stupid people also follow fashion and brand names. It is so boring to see them have no personal style and always try to look like each other," Toscani said.

Toscani left a final tip for aspiring photographers looking to make their mark in a competitive world.

"A good photographer is a good author. Read a lot and learn storytelling techniques from the material you read," he said. "You must also learn to appreciate difference and be able to accept it."

SHARING HIS EXPERIENCE: Oliviero Toscani holds a workshop in Bangkok last weekend. Top, various Toscani portraits. Right, several of his photographs for Benetton.