

Women's Wear Daily
Tuesday, January 17, 2006

Flash Point

By Elisa Lipsky-Karasz

NEW YORK — Is photography's bad boy going soft?

Anyone taking a look around Juergen Teller's latest show, "Nürnberg," at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery, might think so. There's an image of a burbling baby in a bath (Teller's 11-month-old son, Ed), a sleeping fawn curled up in the woods and photo after photo of tiny flowers pushing bravely through the cracks of monolithic Nazi ruins in the title city, Teller's hometown. Where are his infamously provocative shots? There is no naked Teller sticking his tongue into Charlotte Rampling's ear, and no frighteningly waxy closeups of Yves Saint Laurent grinning maniacally.

Not to worry. There, in the corner, is a shot of a nude Teller crouching in the snow — all well and good until closer inspection reveals he has captured himself mid-bodily function. On the facing wall is one of Kristin McMenamy calmly exposing her shaved nether regions to the camera in an outtake from the fall 2005 Marc Jacobs campaign.

Then, of course, there's the artist himself, who emerges bleary-eyed from the room where he is trying to hang the exhibition in time for last Friday's opening. Clad in a pink T-shirt and jeans, sucking needily on a cigarette, he musses his hair, which is already standing on end, and examines the photographs lying scattered across the gallery floor.

"Any drinks happening?" he pleadingly asks his agent, Katy Barker. "I'm really knackered," he offers, by way of explanation. "I've just come back from Japan, and then I was in London for three days, then Paris."

As he nurses a vodka and soda and grabs a fresh cigarette from behind his assistant's ear, Teller considers the photo of himself in the woods. "First of all, I am occupied physically, in my head, with changing my son's nappy. Always, every day. And it's quite powerful and overwhelming." He pauses, then continues carefully, "In a way this could be seen as a very gross picture, but I see it as a very innocent, romantic picture. It really just shows s-----ing in the snow, which is pure, and the struggle with going to the toilet. It's more a metaphor of how life is. That life can be nice, it can be difficult, but you have a responsibility in your life."

It's clear that these days Teller, now a father of two, is occupied with the idea of responsibility and the cycle of life, despite his nomadic lifestyle and his reputation for pulling stunts, such as suddenly stripping on a set. This show, his third to date with the gallery, is composed of a major new body of work of photographs taken over the period of a year in Nürnberg (or Nuremberg to Americans), many at the decomposing Zeppelintribüne, once the site of Nazi rallies. The structure, which was later abandoned, was near his grandmother's home and, as a child, Teller snuck there to play.

"Of course, we were aware as children that something really bad happened there. It's a very powerful, daunting place," he recalls, looking at the images of plants growing through the crumbling stone walls of the parade grounds.

"I wanted to turn it into something beautiful. The weeds and the flowers are kind of like a regeneration, or healing. It's not Germany how it used to be."

Teller, who left home for London in 1986, struggles openly with his German identity. His desire to re-fashion the perception of what is German is served well by the allegorical nature of his work. "You grow up, very much with this guilt about being German," he iterates more than once. "I remember when I was young and first started to travel, you are quiet about being German. You didn't want to say it. It's not a very healthy thing. I wanted to overcome that."

He also has much in his personal history to work through: Teller's father, Walter, was an alcoholic who committed suicide in 1988 at 47. Stemming from that, many images in the show portray Teller, now 42, as his own young family's patriarch: either as a protective force (he says the shot of himself hugging a stuffed fawn represents "the vulnerability of young life, and holding your family and your moralistic ideas together"), or as a proud papa behind the camera.

"She's very perceptive," he boasts of eight-year-old Lola, who is his daughter with stylist Venetia Scott and is featured in photos posed alternately in Teller's London living room or the woods in Nürnberg. "It's not like she is playing, and I snap around. We are really working. She is very aware and has the same concentration that Gisele [Bündchen] has."

Bündchen herself appears in the show, in a shot that first appeared in *W* magazine (*WWD*'s sister publication). By mixing outtakes from his professional life with that of his personal past and present, Teller staunchly refuses to be categorized as either a fashion photographer or an artist. "Life is more complex," he asserts. "I don't separate my day job with the evening. I take the same approach when doing a photograph of Kristin

McMenamy or Gisele as I do photographing my son." In fact, the only aspect of Teller's life that he does not feature is his wife and the mother of his son, gallerist Sadie Coles.

While not all photographers are so comfortable exposing themselves to the camera lens — not to mention that it smacks of narcissism — Teller sees it differently. "It's not my reality," he says. "There's a certain reality within my work which is then catapulted into a certain fantasy. It's a dramatic, over-heightened storytelling."

But it's also therapeutic. "It's part of dealing with myself, and my past, and my present and future," he says of the show. "Within the pictures, there's an optimistic tone. I'm working actively to make my life better, to come out of the dark." He pauses. "But that's black and white talking. It doesn't mean that I only had bad memories when I was younger. There were good and bad memories."