

**Financial Times**  
**Friday 5 September 2003**  
**p. 10**

'I'm so ugly and awful. I'm like a monster'  
Juergen Teller has turned his unblinkingly probing camera on himself, with results that are revealing both for viewers and for himself, says Charlotte Mullins

It is unnerving to be interviewing a man you have previously seen in the buff. Whether coming out of a sauna, smoking on a football pitch or posing in his mum's front room in Bavaria, Juergen Teller is always resolutely naked, his appendix scar, penis and paunch dewy with sweat, his eyes bleary, his hair mussed up.

Teller's nude self-portraits formed part of his winning Citibank Photography Prize exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery in London earlier this year and are included in all his recent books. Gazing at dozens of these black-and-white prints before meeting him in the flesh, I came to feel as if I knew him, in all his imperfect glory, and to admire him for exposing his own form to the kind of scrutiny he usually reserves for supermodels and celebrities. But, as his forthcoming exhibition *Don't Suffer Too Much* shows, these nude self-portraits actually reveal less about him than a simple film of him sitting, fully clothed, watching a football match.

Teller is one of the most fêted fashion photographers of his generation, regularly shooting campaigns for designer Marc Jacob and features for Vogue. His starkly honest photographs expose his desire to capture the raw soul of every person he photographs and his books are filled with images of Kate Moss as a peroxide-haired blank canvas, Charlotte Rampling trashed in a hotel lobby and Yves San Laurent looking for all the world like a waxwork dummy. But over the past few years Teller has started to turn down more commercial work than he has accepted and has increasingly worked on his own projects, successfully repositioning himself as an artist with exhibitions around the world.

In his Milton Keynes show the overarching theme is football and there's a powerful image of Rampling (who is a close friend) looming large in goal, her protective glare animal-like in its intensity, her fingers curled like claws. There's also a photograph of a floppy-fringed David Beckham and a recent image of Pele looking like an immortal icon. But while these starry players of the beautiful game may initially suggest that this show is a continuation of Teller's investigation into what beauty means, previously seen in his *Go-Sees* series of adolescent models and his portraits of last year's Miss World

contestants, the real subject of this exhibition is Teller himself.

I was the captain of the youth football team in our village, and a total football fanatic,” Teller recounts. He still avidly follows Bayern Munich on television, to the extent that his former partner, his daughter and his mother all hate being in the same room as him while a match is on, saying they don’t like what he becomes. So two years ago, he decided to see what he looked like for himself and photographed himself the moment the final whistle was blown as Bayern Munich beat Liverpool. The result surprised him: ‘You normally look at yourself in the mirror when you are brushing your teeth or doing your hair or shaving, that’s how you see yourself. You never see yourself crying, or laughing, or at these sorts of moments, shouting or being completely stupid. So after seeing the picture. I was like — ah. I didn’t know I had all these muscles in my neck. I was thinking, where did they come from?’

A year later, when Germany went through to the final of the World Cup, Teller decided to go one step further and film himself as he watched the match on television alone. What he saw in the footage, which will run unedited in Milton Keynes with the sound amplified throughout the galleries, absolutely terrified him. “When I watched the film, well initially it was so fucking awful I just couldn’t watch it. Oh my God, I thought, I’m so ugly and awful. I’m like a monster. It took me six months to go through with it. I didn’t have a good relationship with my father — he drank and became quite aggressive towards my mum and it was awful for me to watch that film because I suddenly recognised a lot of him in me. That was the most shocking thing for me to see.”

Teller studied photography in Munich after pulling out of an apprenticeship scheme making violin bows in his claustrophobic home village. His mother supported his choice as well as his decision to escape his statutory army service and flee to London in 1986. His father did not.

When Teller started his own family six years ago, his difficult relationship with his father, who committed suicide in 1988, haunted him. “When you have your child and suddenly you are a dad. doing all these dad-ish things, you ask yourself, hang on a minute, what did my dad do? Having a child made me think a lot.” He spent time at his childhood home near Nuremburg, where his mother still lives, working through memories. “It was the first time we were talking about it up front for years. It forced us to talk about it, about things that we had brushed under the carpet. He wasn’t there but he was still dominating our lives.” One of the photographs in the show is of his mother standing in front of her husband’s grave, defending it as if it were a goal. When I ask if she’s defending his father’s memory, he says no. “She’s protecting life,” he explains after a long pause. ‘It’s quite a complex photograph for me, and it’s very sad.’

Teller is friends with Tracey Emin and a postcard of a Sarah Lucas self-portrait is taped up on his kitchen cupboard. Both Emin and Lucas use autobiography to create impassioned work and Teller's exploration of himself in his uncompromising photographs follows in this tradition.

But what marks him out is that all of his portraits whether of Rampling or his mum or Pele or himself are equally unflinching and revealing.

Whether working on the latest ad campaign for Marc Jacob or photographing his mother tending his father's grave, all Teller's images have the same power to get to the heart of the matter. And yes, sometimes the truth hurts.

---

'Juergen Teller Don't Suffer Too Much' Milton Keynes Gallery, September 6 - October 26

'Juergen Teller: Daddy You're So Cute'. Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York , September 13 - October 18