



# THE DOLL MAKER

Famed for his dramatically sexy, fetishist portraits of rubber clad dominatrixes, Bob Carlos Clarke describes himself as 'enslaved to sensuality'. On the eve of his first exhibition in 12 years, debuting digital work, Gavin Stoker visits Bob's South London 'doll factory'.



*Glamour photographer uses digital to create fantasy femmes*



#### Above

*This barber shot formed part of an advertising campaign for Wallis. You've got to have a sense of humour, and that's something you don't often see with commercial photographers.*

#### Previous page

*This is an image from my new show where actress Rachel Weisz has been honed to perfection. It hasn't needed much to make her perfect, but it's that extra little bit that takes it into the realm of fantasy and makes her more perfect than any woman could possibly be, without breaking ribs.*

"Get that thing away from me!" recoils Bob Carlos Clarke when presented with the latest issue of *TDP*. Fiercely opinionated, and until recently vehemently anti-digital ("a self defence mechanism, because I don't understand it"), it's fair to say Bob is the sort of photographer they don't make any more.

He's slightly frazzled; the effect, he explains, of a day printing photos of his latest pneumatic muse. Next to the statuesque buffed blondes portrayed by the late Helmut Newton, Bob Carlos Clarke's own brand of photographic erotica provides a peculiarly English and wry depiction of feminine wiles: less starchy, more 'snap and tickle'.

"With digital the problem is that there is no end to the options," he continues with a sigh, shades and wiry hair recalling a jaded rock star. "And that's where people fall down. They lose sight of the fact that the image has to happen in the eye, the mind and the camera, at the right time."

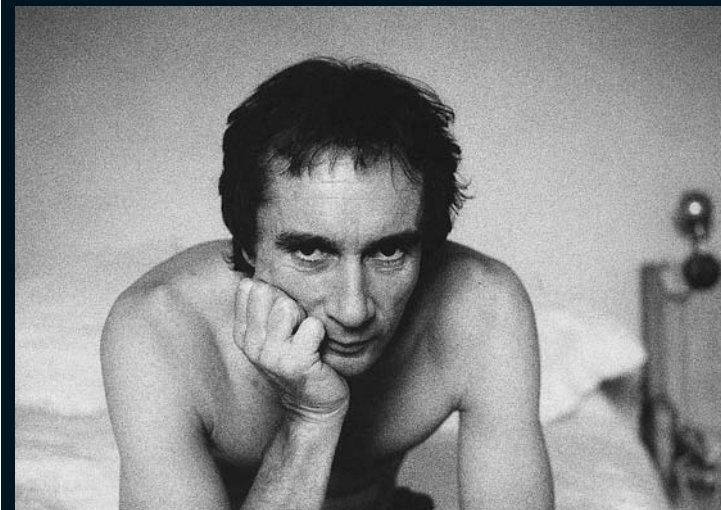
Bob picks up an Olympus C-8080 Wide Zoom he's been sent, raising an eyebrow at the myriad controls.

"This is a beautiful little camera," he enthuses, on a roll. "I just about know how to take a picture with it and the results are quite encouraging. But the multi function button was the worst thing that happened to anyone. Somehow they've managed to make very simple functions very complicated for anyone over 40. All I want to do is pick up a camera, read the light and take a picture. But these people who work in white coats and write programs fuck with my mind. I don't want to be told how to take pictures.

"Basically I'm a technophobe; I will subconsciously but deliberately lose any instructions, so I do something that is potentially fatal to the machine. In my heart I believe that if you can't work a camera without instructions then it's not properly designed. It's just a shutter and a lens that should go click when you press a button. It confuses me enough to get furious; that's why I've tended to sideline digital cameras. But I do constantly monitor the market.

"And apart from my dear friend Patrick Lichfield (interviewed *TDP* issue 1) who goes on and on at me

## BIOGRAPHY BOB CARLOS CLARKE



Born in Southern Ireland in 1950, Bob Carlos Clarke moved to England in his teens, trying out journalism and advertising for size before settling on a career in photography in his mid 20s, completing an MA at the Royal College of Art.

Establishing himself as a commercial photographer, Bob became equally renowned for his imaginative monochrome erotica, detailed in a career-spanning series of books. These range from an illustrated version of *Anais Nin's Delta of Venus* (1980) to last year's collection *Shooting Sex* ('the definitive guide to undressing beautiful strangers'), equally suited to the coffee table and bordello.

For more of Bob's stunning images, visit [www.bobcarlosclarke.com](http://www.bobcarlosclarke.com) or check out [www.eyestorm.com](http://www.eyestorm.com)



about the money he's saved in processing by going digital – the irony is he's one of the richest photographers in the world, perhaps that's why! – I'm now getting feedback indicating certain printing houses are refusing digital files because they can't get the result that they can from real film. That may be because the printers are all out of touch, but I think it's something more significant. Obviously digital is here to stay and we're all gonna have to like it or lump it. I guess I'll have to invest in a medium format digital camera soon, but seeing as I've been using the same cameras for 20 years or so, I'd like it to last more than a week."

### Guys and Dolls

Despite Bob's reservations about digital capture, his new show – entitled 'She Comes Complete' and due to debut in London this coming November – owes a significant debt to advances in imaging technology.

"My new show is the antithesis of everything I've ever preached," Bob admits. "I've gone for brutal clarity and intense manipulation. It's a complete fusion of old and new technology: traditional darkroom 'wet' processes and state of the art Photoshop retouching. The files are huge and are going to be printed about five foot high."

The photographer describes this first show in 12 years as a satirical, Stepford Wives-style reaction against the current fad – particularly prevalent in the US – for retouching fashion and glamour images to such an extent that skin appears plastic. That and the proliferation of cosmetic surgery which "mainly makes women look like freaks".

"Digital retouching is a bit like an old tart who slaps on too much scent night after night, and doesn't



**Top**  
*This is a Czechoslovakian model named Lenka. 'Sharkwoman' is a predator – a supermodel who attacks without provocation.*

**Above**  
*This is my current tiny muse, Katy, depicted as a radio-controlled doll who completely responds to commands. It's inspired by the Real Doll company in America, and is currently a work in progress.*



Glamour photographer uses digital to create fantasy femmes



## DEATH OF THE TRADITIONAL DARKROOM?

**"I had the feeling that film was gradually vanishing, and one day, like in a landslide, it would just be gone. But it is taking a long time to die – companies are still improving emulsions. In some respects I wish digital hadn't arrived now, but earlier or later. Because if I was 80 I could probably leave it alone and relax; if I was 25 I'd be up to my neck in it. Having said that, I'm lucky to have experienced both worlds: the experience of a 'real' darkroom is entirely different to any man sitting in front of a computer screen. Pushing around pixels is not very sensual; it's like internet sex – you might get off on it but there's not much physical sensation. Not in the way that there is in a darkroom, when you're handling paper, silver and chemicals, you've got the red light and you're on your own – and no one dares come near you, because printing can make people pretty wild. It's a very intense experience. When it comes out good it's the most rewarding thing in the world, when it comes out bad you want to kill yourself."**

will have the door of a washing machine on her belly, so when you've finished looking at her you can at least wash your shirts. I was inspired by the Real Doll company which makes dolls for men who can't have, or want, relationships with real women (slogan: 'if you've ever dreamed of creating your ideal woman, you've come to the right place'). They cost about \$6500 but wouldn't go on at you, would always be on time, wouldn't get into a fight with you and storm out; they'd stay quiet, always beautiful, never unfaithful."

Are you saying you're now falling into line with something you hate, to meet the clients' demands? "Oh completely. It'll be quite interesting to see if one can come out the other side. I've been quite successful in getting well known, but I've rarely been true to myself in terms of my personal work, although I've done more personal work than the average commercial photographer. But I don't want to go to my grave having done some fantastic shots for Persil. It's just not enough. I think if you have any talent at all, like a great body, get your kit off; if you run like the wind then become an Olympic runner; if you're a great singer then sing your heart out. So if you can take pictures and have a slight edge on other

### Above

*These dolls are the thing all men desire, but if we ever had the misfortune to get one, they would become our worst nightmare. But I'd still go for it.*

### Opposite page

*One of the things I'm interested in, is that manipulated images of women should carry a government health warning to say: 'this woman is not real' or: 'if you were to acquire this woman she'll probably kill you' or 'she'll never iron your shirts'. She's gorgeous but be careful: casual sexual encounters with strangers could be fatal. There should be some kind of warning that comes with the picture.*

realise how stinky she's become," Bob continues, slightly incredulous. "It's all about knowing where to apply it and when to stop.

"With my new show I'm saying 'here you go guys, if you want it you can have it, I can turn girls into dolls better than anybody.' Ever since I started syndicating pictures to the tabloids, my studio has become 'The Doll Factory'. Post operative girls come in with silicon 'enhancements', Botox, capped teeth, extended nails and synthetic hair, then I take it further, and carve them into the shape that we feel is going to do it for the viewer. The dolls in my show are like Pammie Anderson or Jennifer Lopez but I've made some of them useful. For example, one

people, then you should use that and have an obligation to do it. A lot of the time I don't even enjoy it that much, although people say to me 'you have the best job in the world, you're so fortunate'. But it's a nonsense kind of image I have."

So how would you like to be perceived? Because in the past you've been portrayed as the photographer who takes pictures of glamorous girls in rubber.

"Well, that's fine. Oddly enough I took 10 years off photographing fetish stuff—and I've just returned to it. Because, a bit like the Queen Mother keeping the same hairdo for 60 years, there comes a point when you're better off doing what you do well, than to constantly re-adjust and accommodate fashion. That's one of the reasons why I'm not a lot richer; because if I was a fashion photographer, preferably gay, I'd be on £20,000 a day. But I can't understand fashion, I don't like the people or the magazines. The business is incredibly silly and I'm glad that my 'hero' photographers, Cartier Bresson, Lartigue, Man Ray, WeeGee, weren't fashion photographers. The best photographs capture something that isn't intrinsically someone else's design."

What would you like to be doing if you had ultimate freedom?

**“Creating an image is intense. When it comes out good it's rewarding. When it comes out bad you want to kill yourself”**

"I'm happy doing what I'm doing now. I'm just about to get happier because I'm finding the courage to return to doing pictures for myself. We have this weird hypocritical culture that gets a vicarious kick out of what other people do and I'm part of that, so all I can do is satirise it and have fun with it. And that's why I feel better and happier now, because I'm returning to where I should be. I think I've seen the light and can understand what I'm trying to do with my pictures now."

Bob Carlos Clarke's exhibition 'She Comes Complete' will appear at the Eyestorm Gallery, London, in November. Visit [www.eyestorm.com](http://www.eyestorm.com) for details nearer the time.

