

Recap & Reload with Michael Hoppen – Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Nadine Dinter September 28, 2023



Michael Hoppen is an iconic figure in the world of photography galleries and a must-see presence at major events like Paris Photo. His exquisite artist roster spans from Japanese greats like Masahisa Fukase and Akira Sato to legends like Herb Ritts & Weegee, to edgy talents like Harley Weir & Ori Gersht. We caught up for a little “Recap & Reload” to celebrate his gallery’s new location and Gersht’s upcoming solo exhibition. Thank you for making time to chat, Michael!

Nadine Dinter : When and how did you start your career in the arts / photography business?

Michael Hoppen: Photography has always been close to my heart, and I have taken pictures since I was 13. I did a foundation course at Goldsmiths, my BA at LCC (London College of Communication), and then went on to the Royal College of Art for a year. I left and began my own photography studio around 1981 and worked as a commercial photographer in the advertising and music industries until 1991, which was great fun and a worthwhile experience, but it ended, and I opened the Michael Hoppen Gallery in 1992, transforming the studio I had worked in into the main gallery space.

What was your main motivation for opening a gallery? Do you have any particular role models or idols?

MH: I started to collect photography in 1980. Comparing it to my own work was no fun as I was – simply put – not good enough. I knew what a good photograph could be and what it looked like, so it was a painful experience to realize that my work was lacking in the magic that is necessary and what it takes to make a really great image! Considering one’s own work against photographs by the likes of Julia Margaret Cameron, Guy Bourdin, André Kertesz, Richard Avedon, or Robert Frank was tough, but that’s how it worked through my mind. I have always said that it is very easy to recognize a great photograph but almost impossible to make one! However, my experience as a failed photographer had its benefits, as I am able to empathize with artists who have made great photographs, and I am fully aware of how incredibly difficult it is to do so again and again like my photography heroes managed to do so. I studied the chemical and physical processes of making a photograph and how the science behind each photograph works – making photographs is very different from simply taking a photograph. And for me, it is so important for the artist to be in charge of every aspect of the “making.” And it has been a privilege to have been able to watch great artists in action – manipulating the image with lighting, composing, cropping, processing, hand printing, retouching, and also witnessing how they “tricked-light” into the lens and onto the film or paper. I spent a lot of time in the darkroom processing black-and-white film, contacting negatives, and trying to print my own work, which was incredibly difficult, as anyone who has used a dark room would testify to. I also briefly ran an E4 handline for a three-month stint, processing other photographers’ Ektachrome film, which was a lesson in itself! All this experience has been invaluable for truly understanding the complete circle of making a photograph.

Who was the first artist you signed on?

MH: The first artist (of many) that I signed was the wonderful Colin Jones – a lovely and talented man. Mark Haworth-Booth, Senior Curator of Photographs at the V&A at the time, agreed to write the introduction to our very first catalogue, which was all of four pages. I was very proud of that first show. It was a seminal moment for me, and I look back on those early years of the gallery with great fondness.

After how many years in the business did you get the affirmation you needed? What drives you to continue working as a gallerist in your space?

MH: I still get great satisfaction from finding and working with great artists and discovering unusual pictures. I quickly realized that I had found my *métier*, and I loved helping to make photography something that people wanted to look at and hopefully take home to live with. I think when we signed Guy Bourdin, I really felt that the gallery was moving in the direction I had hoped we would – he was one of my heroes and my attempts to work with Bourdin as an assistant had failed, but my desire to work with his work was rewarded when I finally met with his son Samuel who gave me the opportunity to show his work to our London clients. That first show was one of the highlights of our gallery history.

In the late 1990s, I held an exhibition called *Astonish Me*, which examined the life, work, and impact of the great Alexey Brodovitch, a Russian-born photographer, designer, art director, and instructor best known for his art direction of the fashion pages in *Bazaar*. The title of the show referred to what Brodovitch demanded from the students that he taught in his New York “laboratory” in the 1950s, some of whom went on to become the most important fashion photographers of the mid-20th century. As well as having a huge influence on his students, Brodovitch was instrumental in making photography an art form within fashion, transforming how it was seen, used, and laid out. Sadly, the beautiful magazine “layout” has now almost vanished due to the shift to digital screen platforms and using layout software. It is great to go back to the 1930s to see what Brodovitch was doing at *Bazaar*, or if you are lucky enough to get access to copies of the magazine series that he created, *Portfolio*, of which only three were ever published, I am sure you would agree at how advanced and original his ideas were. He was a genius – I so wish I had met him.

What’s your business philosophy?

MH: One must be very confident in one’s judgment in the art business, as tastes can be very fickle. It is fundamental to believe 101% in an artist or work that you are dealing with and promoting to your clients and collectors. Over time, many of our clients have become great friends, and I take the responsibility of recommending work to them and working closely with them very seriously. I also believe that success comes from working hard, staying focused, and being nice. It is very important to me to stay curious about life, what other people are doing, and how they feel about the work, and to support one’s artists carefully, especially in the early years of their careers.

How many artists do you represent now?

MH: Enough! I never count them. Vintage work is a key part of our business, so we buy a lot of early work, and often a significant amount from each artist. We are not the most traditional photography gallery, as I am interested in almost anything that begins with a photograph, so vintage collages and objects that contain photographs are also part of what I

buy. I have just bought a fantastic collection by the avant-garde Japanese artist E-Qu, whose work I find fascinating. I was very lucky to be in the right place at the right time to access these works. I have focused on Japanese photography for some 20 years now, which has been an amazing journey.

Has there been a big turning point, overhaul of the gallery line-up, or major move (of whatever kind) since first opening your gallery?

MH: The pandemic changed everything for us, so after over 30 years in our big three-floor gallery in Chelsea, we decided to move. However, I was ready for a change after so long in one place. It was a huge move, as it had been my “home” for 37 years. We are currently working from a wonderful private space in Notting Hill, which can be visited by appointment, and we will open our new space in October this year. This new space will not be a traditional gallery but more a room where different disciplines can interact with each other and create intriguing and interesting dialogues. I don’t want to give too much away at present as we are in the process of building it right now, but it’s very exciting to see it develop and come to life. Photography will still underpin everything we do, but it will come with twists, turns, and some surprises. I hope our clients and friends will enjoy the room and engage with us in our new direction.

Any highlights or challenging moments?

MH: There have been many moments that I could mention, the majority good, but certainly some challenging moments, too. On a positive note, I remember one of my tutors from London College of Communication, where I did my BA in photography in the 1970s, visiting the gallery eight years after we had opened. It was the famous John Berger, and who became a major influence on my career. He said he had watched me “grow” as a gallerist and told me how much he enjoyed our program, which meant the whole world to me. I had another great teacher, Bruce Bernard, whose introduction to *Photodiscovery* I still look at often. He came to many of our shows, always arriving at the gallery before we opened and leaving when people started to arrive. This is a habit that I have picked up from him, and I rarely attend openings as I like to see shows without the crowds. Both Berger and Bernard had exquisite taste and were visually informed with a fluency I am still in awe of. I was lucky to learn so much from them, and I miss them. I also remember discussing the photography market with Henri Cartier-Bresson at a lunch given by Maryse Cordesse during Recontres d’Arles some years ago. Henri was an extraordinary man and a brilliant photographer who I got on well with. We had a heated discussion at the table about how important photography had become culturally in a wider sense. He enjoyed challenging the concept of a photograph being “art” and having value within the art market, telling me it was all “bullshit”! He knew that, like many photographers, he had certainly benefited from this “new” brave market, and I remember seeing the twinkle in his eye as he provoked the discussion about the world that was so important to all of us. I wonder what he would think of photography today, with almost everyone having a camera in their pocket? I’m sure his answer would surprise us. I do miss the older statesmen of photography – and there are so few left alive today – I so enjoyed seeing Elliot Erwitt along the aisles of a photo fair, honking his horn attached to his Zimmer frame as he moved through the throngs of visitors!

Any particular anecdotes you want to share with our readers?

MH: Many years ago, I got to know Slim Aarons well, when I arranged the purchase of his archives for Getty. He always declared, “If you want to learn about photography – go and study painting” – I believe he was right.

What’s new & what’s in store for 2023?

MH: As I mentioned, we will open our new space in October. We will show photography, textiles, objects, posters, books, and all things that relate to photography and design. So it will be a more varied visual experience than before, which I hope will provoke discussion and interaction. I think seeing photography with other disciplines and in a different context is interesting. I was contemplating how we “live” with art, which prompted me to include some of my other collecting interests in the new space. It is certainly a challenge I am enjoying and looking forward to seeing.

I am also still very focused on Japanese photography, and the gallery has substantial holdings of some of the very best. It’s a unique visual language that I am somewhat addicted to. I have been going to Japan for 22 years, and I still can’t get enough. It’s a wonderful country with a dynamic photography community, and there is still so much to discover. The photographers we work with make such beautiful prints, and the quality is exemplary. It was Mark Holborn and then also Martin Parr who first introduced me to Japanese photography via Japanese photo books, and once I had seen some of the key publications by these masters of the image, I was hooked. Both of them have had such an influence on me in that sense, and I am truly appreciative of the time and introductions that they gave me. *Beyond Japan* (1991) by Mark Holborn is a photography bible I could never be without

I am also certain that AI will be a gamechanger in the art of photography. It's a fascinating tool and has huge potential – in the right hands, it will produce some very interesting work. As we see in the photogram, you don't need to use a camera to make a photograph, and AI will expand the definition of a photograph further.

Your advice for photography collectors?

MH: Collecting contemporary and vintage photographs can be complicated and sometimes confusing, so I recommend working with a good guide who knows the field well. I have worked with many of our collectors for 25 years or more, and it is always a pleasure to look at works together and enjoy the hunt for great pieces to help build their collection. I also learn so much from working with collectors with interests in areas previously unexplored by me. I have always said that it is important to buy what you love, listen to your gut feelings, and ask the right questions. Go for timeless imagery and vintage or small editions of ten or less with contemporary work unless it is absolutely irresistible, and the price is right. Images by anonymous photographers should not be disregarded, as there is a big collecting circle for this material and “Anonymous” is often one of my favorite photographers! It is very enjoyable hunting for great photography with no baggage attached. And one of the best aspects of photography is the photography book. There are some wonderful books out there, and they can be informative and, moreover, beautiful objects in themselves, especially the Japanese photo book, which has a dedicated collector base.

Photographers on your watchlist?

MH: I'm very interested in the work of Harley Weir, Yusuke Yamatani, and Thato Toebe. They are all artists I am watching and hope to work with.

New gallery address:

Michael Hoppen | 10 Portland Rd, London, W11
T: +44 (0) 20 7352 3649 | W: www.michaelhoppengallery.com

Upcoming show:

Ori Gersht | *The Unreality of Time*
Private View: Thursday 19th October
From: Friday 20th October – Friday 1st December

For more information, check out their website and visit the gallery's IG account @michaelhoppengallery, too