

Fashion History – Models Talking : Tony Ward by Nadine Dinter

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Nadine Dinter September 5, 2024



Tony Ward is a true legend, and one of the most renowned male supermodels of all time. His success goes beyond his striking sensual and rugged vibe or his high-profile relationship with Madonna. It's his distinctive approach to his craft that truly sets him apart. I'm thrilled to share this interview with Tony, where we talk about his early days, career highlights, and what he's up to now. Enjoy!

Nadine Dinter: Could you tell us a bit about your background?

Tony Ward: Hi my name is. Anthony Borden Ward, aka Tony Ward. I was born in Santa Cruz, California, in the United States of America. I am a Gemini. Ego and faith – one of the two is always trying to wrestle the other one down and give it a good titty twister. I'm a spirit/creature trudging through this life experience with you, my brothers and sisters.

How did you get your start in modeling?

TW: I was discovered by a history teacher in my college campus parking lot. He scouted young men for James French – creator, founder, photographer of *Colt Studio*. It was the year after I graduated high school. I was in college and living with my grandparents in San Jose, CA. I worked and worked out at the Ironworks Gym – I was obsessed with weight training and spent all of my time at the gym when not in school. I wanted to be a world-class bodybuilder – my dream was to create the greatest body the world has ever seen. I started training in middle school because I was a scrawny pipsqueak. I wanted to be tough, so I trained in karate and the art of pumping iron. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Lee were my idols; my fantasy/goal in life was to slay Arnold by jumping on the stage of the Mr. Universe competition, uninvited of course, because the element of surprise was key to the public shaming and outright decimation of the reigning king of the bodybuilding world at the time – haha, kiddie's dreams!

So, Joe the history teacher photographed me in my supposed first job as a model. He asked me to meet him in the parking lot of a mall. He explained that he would be photographing me for an advertisement for a sports shop here at the mall, and asked me to wait here for him, that he was going to talk business with the owners and grab the outfit I would be wearing for the photo shoot. He came back a short while later with a bag from the shop and handed it to me. I pulled out a tiny bit of a pair of turquoise blue, candy-striped dolphin shorts and a matching skintight slinky tank top.

“Okay,” he says, “the deal is all set – you can slip into that lil number. Let's do this thing!” I asked where I should change, and he looks over my shoulder and gestures to my '71 Mustang. Ummm okay: I hopped in the car and stripped down to my skivvies, my ass sizzling on the hot vinyl seats. I looked over to my window, surprised to find him sizing me up through the window. “You should take off your undies, as they may disturb the fabric of the shorts. They have to look their best – pristine ya know. For the advertisement.” Oh right. Joe leered, side-eyed at me, as I slipped off my underwear and pulled on the shorts, smiling and chattering at me, barely audible through the closed glass, that I am beautiful and that we are going to make a great advertisement for the client and really nice photos. And the cherry on top: a \$50 dollar payday – cash!

“This won't take long, go stand by that tree.” About ten feet away from where my car is parked. He's already taking snapshots as I hop out and saunter, kinda nervously, over towards the tree, cat-calling me: “Oh my God, you look amazing in those shorts, what a body! Oh boy, I'm gonna make you a star. Lean into the tree. Yeah, hands on your hips – niice! Now put your elbow up on the tree, smile, that's right, you're doing great. Sooo sexy.”

He was very excited, kind of shaky and perspiring. I was so nervous and sweating like a lil piglet, totally embarrassed to be seen by any potential passersby, trying to my best not to look ridiculous. And before I knew it: “Great! That's it – got it all done” as the last frame clicked. My doe eyes must have popped wider in surprise – wow, okay. All done? That's it? “Yep, let's get outta here and grab a Coca-Cola or whatever you want, it's on me.” We sat and chatted for a little while outside of a 7/11, him praising me at how great I did, that I have a lot of potential to be a great model, to be a star. He said he'd like to send some of the pictures to a friend in Los Angeles, Hollywood. A real big important photographer, and that he would love to photograph me for sure for his magazine. A real gem of a guy – Jim French of *Colt* magazine!

I became friends with Joe, and he well enlightened me on life, let's say. He introduced me to some of his photographer friends, and that was the introduction to the hustle-myself-for-photos period – a blast off into a life unexpected. Just a funny aside: Joe photographed me a lot. He was friendly, nice to me; he'd share

about art and history with me. Kind of fatherly... until he asked me if I wanted a massage. I declined at first, then, well, I was sore as hell one day from a very intense workout. Intrigue and a curiosity compelled, and before I knew it, oily massage, a finger in my ass, and Joe is sucking me off like a mad man. That went on for a while, as I began to think that's just the way it was done. Trade out yourself to put a model book together. And hell, I got about \$50 to \$70 duckies each time from the different "friends," if you will. Hustled my way into the biz. Kind of hilarious to find out later on that Joe almost never had film in his camera, haha. I never saw any photos that he took of me – ever!

I hated being photographed as a kid – I thought I was the ugliest person on Earth. Crooked teeth, big nose, ugly brown eyes, stupid face! That's why I worked so hard on building my body. Joe was the first person to say I was beautiful – it shocked me, totally total disbelief. Joe shared his art history knowledge with me, showing me paintings and statues in books. He would say: "Look at that, that is you! The lines of the bodies and faces, you look just like them." With a truly caring arm around my shoulder, he looked dead in my eyes and said, "You've created something in flesh that other men painted and chiseled out from marble. They captured and celebrated man's form... You are a sculptor just like Rodin – you just did it in the gym. You are your masterpiece!"

What led you to pursue a career in modeling seriously?

TW: I would say my first job modeling was in Los Angeles. Joe finally reached out to Jim and got to planning a trip for me to fly for a weekend down to meet and do a shoot with Jim French for *Colt* magazine. Wow, I am going down to Hollywood dream city, it was gonna be an adventure like never before. The total unknown – exciting, scary, and titillating. I knew it would be nude photography but really had no idea what was to come. Jim picked me up from LAX on a sunny, hot Friday afternoon. A very sweet and affable, older man, white hair and bearded, he smelled very nice – Hermes cologne, I found out later. We chit-chatted all the way – very sexy grandfather, kind of. No awkwardness whatsoever. Just sweetness. I felt very serene, soaking in the sun on the freeway in his convertible. We wound up in the hills in Hollywood proper. Lots of trees – it really surprised me: I just didn't consider cities as having any trees. Jim had a great old house up in the hills, a pretty great big backyard like I'd never seen. Swimming pool and a little pool house, and back, well beyond the barns for horses (no horses, though) it looked like what I imagined a movie set would look like – it was sprawling, lots of space to shoot photos. No matter where I looked, it was a fabulous scene to drop a naked boy in. Hmmm excitement! I just felt so dreamy... He set me up in a spare bedroom in the house, asked me if I was hungry. Starving, I said. He looked at me and chuckled, rolling his eyes, and said, "Hardly my boy, that body is well preserved, but I will make you a lil something special." I took in his fine taste in furniture – sculptures and paintings of male figures, books and magazines, big sliding glass doors out to the luxuriously furnished patio and big pool. Just wow! He called me over to the kitchen table and set down a big bowl of granola and fresh berries and yogurt and excused himself to make phone calls and arrange plans for the photo shoot for the next two days – busy, busy business. He called over his shoulder as he walked away: "There's coffee in the pot on the stove. Grab some, and why don't you have a nice shower and cool off. There's a robe and slippers on the bed in your room. Grab a towel and the baby oil from the bathroom. Get out to that pool and relax. Get a nice tan, don't burn though. Need you nice and golden for the photos tomorrow. Oh, and by the way clothing is optional in this household. It'd be best nude for no tan lines," as he waved his self away to his busywork. "Luxuriate! Mi casa es tu casa."

That experience would mark and predestine my career as a model and my life forever. My naïveté was syrupy sweet and astounding. Thank God for my luck to meet such a respectable gentleman. A consummate professional and great talker and director. He was very matter of fact about what he wanted to see. "Put these assless chaps on, cowboy hat, and boots. Rub this baby oil into your skin all over, get yourself erect. And yeah, beautiful, stand by the fence, yeah great! Lean on it, tense your muscles, your thighs, chest, oh great! Perfect, hold that look over there. Wow, what a profile, what a nose, now turn around, get one of those shit kickers up on the fence, squeeze your ass cheeks, haha, Wow! Oh yeah good boy, glorious, amazing! That's just great – turn a little to your side so I can see your cock just so. Keep it

hard, Tony. You can keep touching it, rub it, pull on it. That's right, baby, gotta keep that baby up all day today."

At one point later in the day, when the shoot was coming to an end and the light was lowering through the trees, Jim's photo assistant walked up to me with a sweet smile and asked if I needed any oral assistance – it took a second to dawn on me what was being implied. "Jim asked me to help out if you needed some." I'd been raging teenage horny all day and a split-second surge happened just at the thought of getting sucked off in front of someone exploded my mind! My reply: "I'm good, no thank you please, that's a very nice offer." I was just about shot for the day – totally wiped out at the moment. My cock fiery red from all the stroking and fondling. The surge carried me through though. I was 19 and hell full of spunk. Shocking that I never ejaculated all day – I was a warrior that day! We wrapped the last shots for the day. Jim came up to me as he was unloading the last of film, he slipped his arm around my shoulder, and whispered in my ear, "Gorgeous boy, super-hot. You did a fine job today, just wonderful. Go on in and take a shower, rest up for a couple hours. We're dining in tonight – something scrumptious and a lil bottle of wine for pre-celebration. Later, around 10 pm we'll shoot in the house studio for a couple of hours, then *fini* – to tie a pretty bow on a truly delicious Day 1."

Day 2 was the same delirious excitement fun, fondling, and character play – a fabulous evening of chit-chat, laughing about silliness and my awkwardness all the time, James easing my mind on my path ahead as a model to just relax, enjoy my every experience – moments are so precious – respect, respect, and always stay open to learning new things. What bliss! I was so happy and looked forward to seeing what a true artist could create with me as muse. He made me feel a part of the process a co-creator. What a great man, and the opportunity to grow up and experience and own myself. And as an unexpected cherry on top, Jim paid me \$800 – twice what was agreed upon originally, what a lucky bunny I was. My hopped up '71 Mustang got a new set of racing meats! The beginning of glory days.

Tell us about your first professional booking / runway / fashion shoot.

TW: My first legit fashion shoot was with Bruce Weber, around the tail-end of 1984 in New York City – ohhh holy wow. For *Per Lui* magazine, a pretty important men's fashion magazine at the time. Two very iconic shots Bruce took of me that day came from that shoot: *Tony with Empire State Building* and *Tony profile in white swim trunks*. Just powerful and exquisite, pure Bruce Weber, living black & white brilliance!

My manager at the time, Bob, president of a Kansas City advertising agency with selling point genius, created my first model composites. Three different cards, depending on whom would be receiving these: one was just a run-of-the-mill, out-of-touch fashion card; the next was a sporty one, half-clothed in the images; and the last: full-nude cute and virile male hotness. All the photos taken by Bob. They were pretty cheesy, and, again, super out of touch with the haute fashion sense of the time. Obviously, when they came to Bruce's attention, they were probably met with tittering snickers and mocking of said photos of *moi* by Bruce and colleagues. He must have seen the golden lacing in the sackcloth bag. And *voila* – off to NY we went. Bob paced around the photo studio like a scanning worried parent taking in this very professional setting, looking out of place in his Brooks Brothers business suit. I walked into this very hipster, uber-cool scenario wearing one of Bob's ill-fitted suits to my pumped-up frame, looking sheepish and excited at the same time. The group fawned over me immediately and relentlessly sent me into the regimen of hair, makeup, and the tiny little shorty shorts I was to wear for the shoot. The only shoot prior to this with a modicum of professional flair was the shoot with Jim. This was the height of heights in this world. I kept getting taken aside and told that I didn't need a manager, that I needed an agency to represent me as a model. A manager was useless to me without a full-time modeling career going. The sentiment crawled into my psyche like a worm squiggling around in my brain.

The day started off very exciting, with oohs and aahs – gorgeous Bruce, beautiful – it was shorts after shorts, posing and dancy moves. Bob had me studying ballet for the past few months and I showed off. Before the midday lunch break, Bruce asked if it was okay to do some nude shots, I didn't even say a word

or hesitate and stripped the last pair off my very muscular ass and down my massive thighs slowly, trying to be a bit sexy nonchalant. I was naked and super comfortable that way after my two long days of hot, oily, and sweaty for the *Colt* shoot. I had to focus so hard – pardon the pun – not to get a raging boner as Bruce clicked away. Rolls and rolls of film later, Bruce let out a big sigh, and an assistant called lunch and the sea of staring eyes fell away, and off everybody went to pick away at lunch, chatting and laughing, having had a lil nudey tease boy show for the past hour. I stalked over, a bit tired from jet lag and the arousing excitement of doing my first legitimate modeling job. I stood in line, talking with hair stylist, and grabbed some food – a pile up of delicious catered fare. I sat on a stool in the middle of the studio, just eating and chitchatting, naked as a jaybird, thinking nothing of my exposed bits. It just felt so natural and accepted. Funny to think what these folks thought of my silly naive me. Probably just what the crazy hotness is going on! Little did I know that was the launch pad to a 40-year career.

You've worked with some of the biggest names in photography – Greg Gorman, Herb Ritts, Rick Castro, to name a few. Is there anyone you haven't worked with but wish you had?

TW: I'm a bit sad that I never got to be photographed by the legend Sir Richard Avedon – I am knighting him, so there! What a great guy and gentleman. I went to his studio for a casting for a Calvin Klein campaign. I did not get the job, but we had gotten on really well. I was the last one in for the auditions that day. We continued talking for a good long while about the love of faces and capturing timeless beauty, as assistants were tidying up the studio lights and backdrops and such. He ushered me into his office and asked if I could give him a hand, if I would give him my thoughts on some photos. He was a bit stuck on the choice between multiple images of an A-list actress that he had just recently photographed. I vaguely remember maybe Kim Basinger, Michelle Pfeiffer, or such? Maybe Rachel Ward, not sure. Some celebutant of the time. Anyway, we looked, I gave my thoughts and favorite selection, he agreed, and went with it! Wow and cool! "I was thinking of that one myself," says he. Pinch myself!

The 1990s were a high point in your career – you were dating Madonna, featured in major campaigns for Cavalli, Chanel, D&G, Fendi, Hugo Boss, and attending the hottest parties. What's your favorite memory from that decade, and which photo shoot stands out the most?

TW: The *Sex* book – iconic images, good times, jealous times, sad times. Madonna had broken up with me a year or so before, and my heart was worse for the wear. We hadn't seen each other for a good long while, and she called me outta the blue. She asked if I would work on the book with her and Steven Meisel, and of course, sad sack me jumped right in. I said, "Oh, by the way, just to let you know. I've just shaved my head bald." She said: "Perfect!" That project was history in the making.

What's your take on the fashion industry and the modelling business today?

TW: An ex-model, don't remember his name, wrote a book called *Model* (not to be confused with the Book by Michael Gross, *Model, the Ugly Business of Beautiful Women*). This book *Model* was well researched and is the history of modeling – the origin story of the advertising industrial complex. It has it that actually the first model was a man, photographed in the early days of new print, for advertising catalogues selling farm machinery, tools, work clothes, household items, etc... this starting in the late 1800s to the early 1900s? Women came along later to sell the finer things and such – interesting and not surprising in the least. As the advertising industry fledgling years progressed, the mucky mucks realized the power of utilizing the selling advantage of the fairer sex to move merchandise. The ladies themselves became useful tools in the big money gaming of the exploding industrial evolution to move better, bigger, more, and faster. From the earliest days, these fresh-face pretty ladies were just part of the machination and machinery of the growing advertising industrial complex. The underside, the dark belly of that beast, wielded these lady props as blackmail agents, call girls, used to damage the reputation of powerful men in the government and political arena, judges, celebrated peoples, etc. All respect to the models and supermodels of later decades. But there were very successful models known by name and accomplishments from the glory days of the industry. All mostly forgotten and lost in a sweet powdery

poof of smoke and mirrors photoshopping. Life imitating CGI and now the ultimate AI... we have exited the cosmos and blasted off and through to the post-human useless human ethos. Advertising is one of the many grinder cogs that's whittled away at our humanity.

All that being said, the model business took care of me like a wayward parent, a good mom, or a neurotic pill-popping mom and father that goes out for sugar one night and runs off with the stripper girl, only to return later with his tail between his legs with presents and promises in hand, only to run off with all the cookie jar cash, never to return. Teaching us a solid lesson in abandonment, rejection, and cheating, a caramelly, chocolatey, sweetly all squeezed tight in a silvery foil wrapper. The modeling industry is... It's a hustle. It used to be a well-paid hustle – not so much today. Sorry, just a bit sore and cynical about the whole deal. The biz provided for me for many years – for that I am grateful.

What advice would you give to aspiring fashion models?

TW: Get acting and dance training. Read books constantly. Exercise your mind constantly. Fuck drugs, all of them – they are useless. Your greatest asset is to be yourself. Always be respectful to everyone. Most importantly, be teachable. Ask for help if you are struggling with something. And for God's sake, shut the fuck up and listen. The person that knows definitively is an idiot!

You're also known as a dancer, actor, and artist. How do you balance all these creative pursuits, and how do they influence each other?

TW: I am one creator – not *the* one! Ha, I finally figured that one out. I dance between different mediums. I like the practice and meditation it brings. I like discovering new things I haven't played with before. I go deep – I'm driven by the desire to move, then in that motion fade away, disappear, dissolve inside a graceful little tinkling river of flow. I just see through eyes and moving hands, and bits of tools of task. Colors are exciting, as are shapes, bodies, faces, bits and pieces, sharp angles, cubes, numbers, dots, slashes, shade, emptiness, genitals, focus, de-focus...

What's your main focus now, and how do you spend your days?

TW: My job is a journey towards freedom from self...

Over the past decade, you've also worked as a photographer, creating a beautiful body of work. Can you tell us about your recent series of intimate photos of your partner IZ? It has a unique style that's all your own, but also reminds me a bit of Nan Goldin...

TW: Nan Goldin – Thanks for that compliment. Kinda cool to be thought of in the same neighborhood. But I never wanted to be like anyone else, or let myself be inspired by any other one creator. This is maybe an impossible task. I try, but we are so deeply mind-conditioned by this life experience, we are what we take in, in the most infinitesimal way. Pretty sure I cannot come close to grasping the whole awesomeness of my utter ignorance. And I love It! And I really liked Nan's photos a great deal, as well as Cindy Sherman, Araki, Larry Clark, and the *enfant terrible* Richard Kern. There are so many more... Raw, exposed, truthful perfect captures of time. I think perhaps it's possibly the only way to stop and hold time. A photograph. I love it... I met a scientist once who said he and his colleagues discovered a way to take an antique photograph, say from the 1800s, and they were able to find the essence of life from the actual time that the photograph was taken and make it into a motion image. To actually see the before and after moment in that 1800s moment in time... haha!

IZ. My sweet love, just knowing in the deepest bits of me my vibrating cells. I am you. I sense you. Shaking like a blustery wind-swept wintery leaf, cold blood raging vein rushing. Stolid bright green cat eyes, charcoaled wide and large, taking in a strange weird world. Nonsensical, blank, unimportant, ceaselessly comical and scary. Stray fallen chemically bleached curly tendrils spill out from under a low pulled hoodie overhangs ghostly crystal clear glowing windows of a soul survivor shadowed, steel and silver chains, cross talisman jangle and crash around a strangled neck at the slightest movement... I sit across the table and take in air, pulling the scent of many cigarettes lingering with a floaty swoon, my thoughts dance around trying to grasp vaporous trinkets of information – what is it I'm looking at? Why is

my heart aching so right now? Filthy shredded jeans, oversized Frankenstein beat to hell, new rock shoes, black stompies and laden with more clanging chains. Dirty skin, knees thighs ass peeking out of a life torn. Nervous laughter, great vampire's smile, gray vapor seeping over the upper lip as lazy wavery drifts pull into this creature's nostrils. Another laugh explodes and streams of white smoke puff out like an angry bull facing down a majestic matador standing erect, about ready to deliver the final death blow. Stumbling down a hot daylight street, caffeine and nicotine fueled, I follow behind silently like an invisible spirit entity, solid stiff and exhausted, just hearing clomping steps and chains crashing, a girly teenage boy's voice calls over: Do you want a shot of caffeine? Voice talking in my head says yes. My throat crispy dry crusty crumbly thoughts ricocheting the inside, the walls of my skull – Sure, I scratch out, barely audible. A quizzed look. IZ turns and stares into my eyes and I am slayed, I am the devil's dragon. I join the chains swinging on my creature neck. Heart defeated, laid low and held high. My matter is immediate dust. I've fallen like a heavy fog wispy misty aching lover, left wanting to be inside, to crawl into quiet serenity's embrace. This is what I feel when I think of my Love IZ. I shudder to stop this dream forever so I never forget.

What inspired you to start working as a photographer, and how has your creative process evolved over the years?

TW: I picked up a Canon AE1 in 1997. I'd been photographed by so many, I wanted to turn the camera on myself so I could see me what the fuck was going on in my eyes, face, body. I started with self-portraits, mostly jacking off. But not only ... haha. Once I started, I just kinda promised myself that I'd keep doing self-portraits until... you know, the end – I'd love to shutter the last frame as my last breath escapes my mouth. Nighty night. I love shooting friends, people I meet. I don't like to abruptly interfere in people's lives, but sometimes I just gotta get that photo. Just love portraits, with dark contrast, black and white. Fuckin gritty. Yeah!

What's next for you?

TW: Just the here and now! If one thinks outside of that, one is living in delusion. Presence is Now. I like to stay there.

What's your current mantra or affirmation?

TW: "How Can I Best Serve Thee, Thy Will Be Done." In other words: Stay out of the way of God's work.

To get the latest, please follow Tony on Instagram at @tony_ward_official & @mrtonyward