

FOREVER THE MOMENT

Graham Shearer captured the essence of Australian beauty and all its authenticity. Now, he sees a world that has finally opened up to all kinds of diversity.

WORDS Anna Harrison

You remember. A fresh faced, bushy-browed Alison Brahe. A tousled haired, big-toothed Kristy Hinze. A steely-eyed Sarah Nursey with burnished cheeks-for-weeks. In the 80s and 90s *Dolly* magazine was as young and quintessentially Aussie as we were – its bright, beachy cover girls as sticky in our memories as a melting Calippo running down our sandy fingers. Graham Shearer's images captured us, Australia – how we were and how we would like to imagine we were. Born and raised in Perth, WA, Shearer's natural ability to visually define that classic Australian sensibility catapulted him from *Dolly* to *Vogue*, and pretty soon he was shooting major international editorials, advertising campaigns and celebrity portraits. A 30-year career as a fashion photographer will take you places, show you things, and having shot beautiful women in beautiful and bizarre locations around the globe, Shearer has a story or two to tell. He chats to RUSSH about getting bogged on remote beaches, fighting off wild baboons, and setting fire to Chanel.

Your career has spanned over 30 years and is still going strong. What initially drew you to photography, in particular fashion photography?

I started shooting small Super 8 films and stills when I lived in Bali in the 70s, where I met my French wife Pasha who had a huge influence on my career. She was a fashion model at the time and had been working in Tokyo. We travelled to Japan and I started working as a model, mainly to pay for new camera gear and my travel. That was where I learnt a lot

about the fashion business watching and working with some great Japanese photographers. I loved the whole process of creating an image; starting with the concept, getting a team of makeup and hair artists and fashion stylists, choosing the model and following it through to the finished product. I was hooked.

How has the industry changed over time?

I find that the fashion industry has stagnated lately, dictated by economic reasons and not as free creatively as before. It's for that reason I've started doing my own projects which are ironically mostly landscapes or nudes.

You started out shooting on film. How did you find the transition into digital and what do you prefer shooting on?

When the light is right, nothing beats shooting on medium format film. But I'm not a purist – a good image is a good image, no matter what medium it's shot on. The digital era has made photography accessible to the masses but it's now a saturated market, and together with Photoshop, has made the playing field much more even. I come from an era where everything had to be done on camera and the lighting had to be perfect, because film has no latitude and there was no room for error. I find I am now highly suspicious if a shot is over retouched!

You're responsible for some of the most iconic shoots and covers for Australian magazines in the 80s and 90s that really capture that authentic Aussie-at-heart feel. How does the spirit of a place, particularly your home country, inspire and influence your work?

I was born in Perth, Western Australia, the most remote city in the world. I think that as Australian we are not bound by traditions – we grab what we like and discard the rest. I was influenced by anything and everything on my travels around the world and gradually developed my own style.

If you were to describe the essence of your style in three words what would they be?

It's hard to describe your own work. I'm not so good with words, which is why I take pictures. Three words ... Timeless, evocative, pure.

You've worked for many international clients over the years and traveled extensively – aside from Australia, where is your favourite place to shoot?

Pink Sands, Harbour Island in the Bahamas is one of my favourite places where I have done many photoshoots. It's a mix of pastel coloured wooden bungalows, turquoise water, friendly locals and the beach is an amazing light pink because of the coral in the sand.

What is your idea of beauty?

I see beauty in everything. It's a fleeting moment: the way a girl crosses her legs or the flick her hair, a shadow, a reflection ... A great photo is when you can capture that moment. Being a commercial photographer is like a good craftsman being able to get that elusive image where all the elements work together: hair, makeup, lighting, clothes, mood, background all work as one and you are drawn to notice this image as a whole not just the single elements. It captivates and transports the onlooker. Holds their attention.

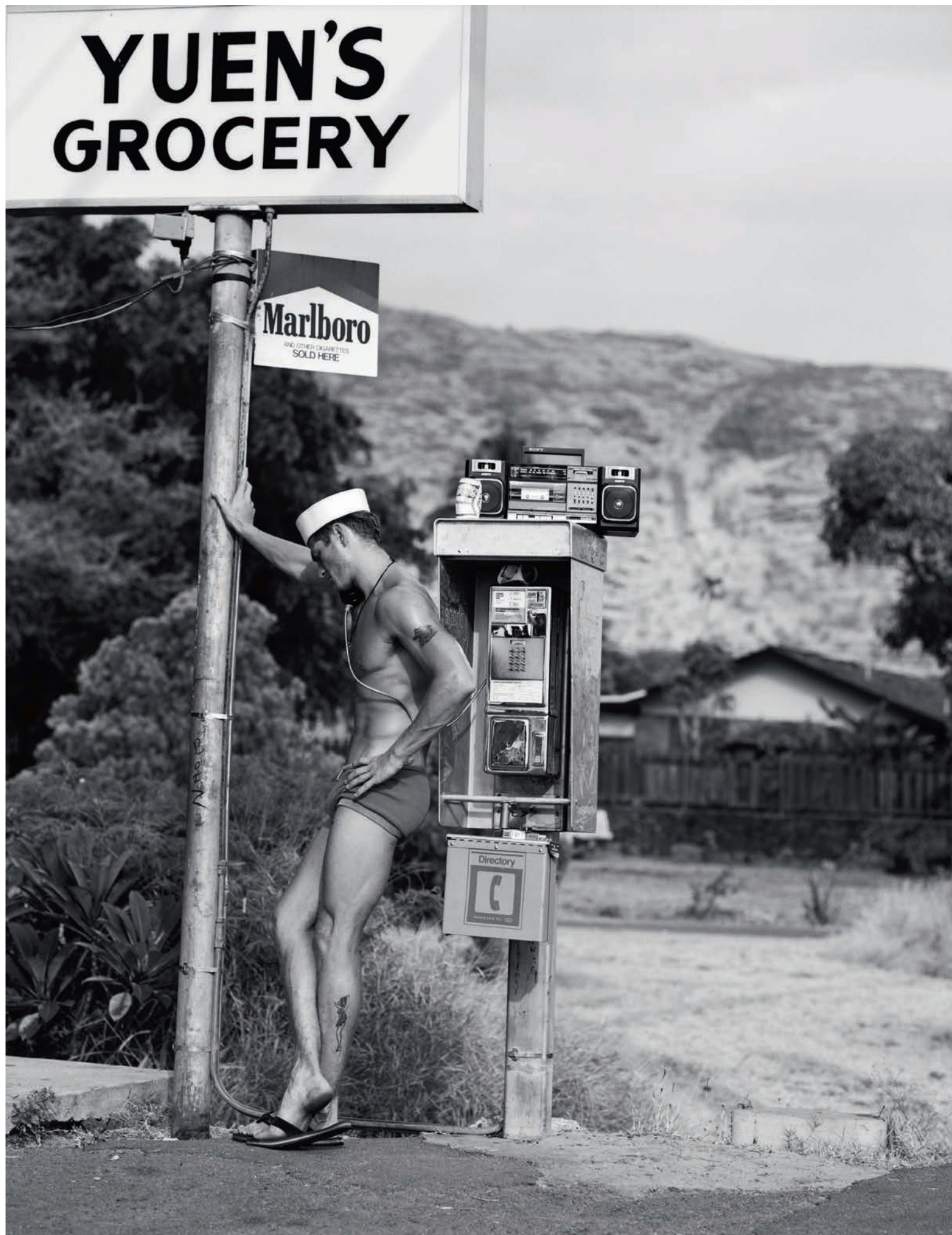


ABOVE Kristy Hinze, *Madame Figaro*, 1998.



ABOVE AND RIGHT *Elle Macpherson, Vogue Australia, Broome, 1989.*





ABOVE *Follow Me Gentlemen* magazine, Hawaii, 1989.

The most memorable moment? “Being bogged on a remote beach in Broome, WA, with the tide coming in and having to swim a crocodile infested river with Elle Macpherson to get help.”

How do you think the overall cultural perception of beauty has evolved and changed over the last three decades?

Over the years, Australia has evolved into a multicultural society and come a long way. When 30 years ago when we tried to get an Asian girl on the cover of *Dolly* magazine (Annette Quay), it created much controversy. Even getting an African American (Lorraine Pascal in Australian *Elle*) or Aboriginal girl in a magazine editorial in the 80s and 90s involved much heated debate. I love how the world has opened up to all kinds of ethnicity. Beauty is so much more diverse than it used to be.

If there was anything you could change about the industry, what would it be?

I worry about magazines disappearing completely – I would like to keep the print form of magazines from going totally online. Now everything is so instant and it’s gone just as fast. Nothing permeates.

Having been in the game for as long as you have you must have some great stories. What are some of your most memorable moments on set?

Shooting Nicole Kidman in Malibu in the 90s for *Elle* magazine with Tom Cruise supervising closely, bare chested and hair in curlers.

Being bogged on a remote beach in Broome, WA, with the tide coming in and having to swim a crocodile infested river with Elle Macpherson to get help.

Demanding huge blocks of ice to be delivered to Icebergs pool in Bondi in the middle of summer with Rachel Hunter (then married to Rod Stewart). It was extravagant, but I got away with it at the time. Shots weren’t that great!

Shooting in Sicily with Megan Gale while dodging the paparazzi.

On the roof of the Printemps building in Paris shooting couture dresses for the *Madame Figaro* – we discovered that the model was afraid of heights.

Accidentally burning a priceless Chanel dress on location in the sand dunes where the background was set on fire and I made the mistake of putting too much petrol on the canvas. I was banned from shooting *Vogue* for three months after that – good shots though!

Having to drive a topless kombi (no location van in those days!) in a game park in Kenya for an English magazine that had no budget whatsoever, so we had no guide or protection, and having to fight off a family of wild baboons from getting into the roof of the van.

Working with Tyra Banks doing a swimwear shoot near the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. She was wearing those pink Chanel bikinis and the locals were going wild. It was freezing and about to snow and they offered us mint teas and pipes of hashish.

For one of my first big editorial shoots for Australian *Vogue* we did a crazy trip

around Australia in a week. It was a game changer at the time, using more of an Australian outside feel, a much looser way of shooting with lots of movement, different to how things were being done at the time. It created some controversy – the editor resigned after that.

Who would you absolutely love to shoot that you haven’t already and why?

I would love to photograph Kate Moss. I saw her in the streets of Paris once and she looked just like any other kid, nothing special, but she has that amazing ability to transform her look and adapt to each situation. She is unique and has a strong presence in front of the camera. There have been very few models with that ability.

And lastly, why do you continue to do what you do? What keeps you going?

I am not a person who stays too long in the past or looking back at what I have done, that’s probably why it has been hard to find the right images for this article. I will always look forward to the future with some optimism. But saying that I guess I will have to have a retrospective exhibition sometime soon. But looking back at my body of work I feel I was incredibly lucky to have grown up in a business in its infancy, developed my own style and contributed to the iconic Australian fashion look. I will always look forward to the future with some optimism, and still get excited by putting together a good team and doing a shoot in some exotic location. 🍷