

## **Bassman's Allure: An Interview with Lillian Bassman**

From NEWWORK Magazine, Issue 5, Spring 2010

By Kate Quarfordt

Walking into the Upper East Side apartment where iconic fashion photographer Lillian Bassman has lived with her late husband Paul Himmel for nearly 50 years, I'm greeted by her assistant Stephen and her daughter Lizzie, who welcome me in and then usher me straight into the bedroom. Lillian sits in a chair by the window wearing a blue fleece jacket, backlit by a wash of sparkling sunlight. She smiles as I walk in, her eyes dancing with an impish energy that says, "I may be 93 years old, but I still know what fun is, honey."

Not only does it feel fitting (and, I admit, the slightest bit thrilling) to be interviewing the self-proclaimed "lingerie queen of New York and America" in her very own boudoir; it also strikes me that the easy familiarity of the scene speaks to a deeper essence of who Lillian is as an artist and a person. When I ask Stephen about it later, he says, "Every meeting that takes place here happens in the bedroom. It's like the center of the universe in this household."

It's a telling detail. In contrast to many of her male counterparts like Richard Avedon and Irving Penn whose trajectories evoke a prototypically masculine mythology of the creative life, Bassman's career is characterized by remarkable fluidity and integration, the spheres of her many lives—creative, professional, romantic and domestic—all overlapping with a deep sense of ease and *joie de vivre*.

Born in 1917 in Brooklyn to Russian Jewish parents, Lillian was encouraged from an early age to follow her instincts, in art and romance alike. At 15 she was allowed to move in with the love of her life, artist Paul Himmel; they married when she was 25. After immersing herself in the New York art scene as a model and dancer, Bassman became a star student in Alexey Brodovitch's prestigious Design Lab, then went on to work alongside him as art director at Bazaar and Junior Bazaar. With encouragement from Avedon, her friend and colleague at Junior Bazaar, she launched a highly successful career in fashion photography, developing a powerful and distinctly feminine aesthetic that helped define the allure of the New York fashion scene in the late 1950's and early 1960's.

Bassman's images from that time period—elegant, sensuous and richly atmospheric—reflect a deep love of fashion as well as an endless willingness to experiment, both during the shoot itself and later in the darkroom. Approaching each session as a kind of dance, giving her female models permission to be completely free in front of the camera, she created images that resonate with raw and intimate authenticity. These are images that crystallize the pre-dawn moment of the feminist movement, capturing the first glimmers of women's collectively expanding sense of self just before the glamour of the era was eclipsed by a parade of mod tunics and shapeless ponchos. Yet even decades later, the realness of Bassman's women still feels startlingly fresh. In the heightened, hushed eroticism of her world, the structured clothing of the era actually seems to give them more freedom, not less; her understanding of the dynamic between clothing and the body as a *pas de deux* between limits and liberation transforms even the most restrictive corset into an instrument of grace.

The same effervescent spirit Bassman brought to her early work with the models in front of the lens infused her own behind-the-scenes experiments in the darkroom. From the very beginning, she was fascinated with creating new techniques for bleaching, blurring and staining images, playing with a range of chemicals and processes to create dramatic luminescent effects. Her experiments yielded photographs that transcended the slick and easy consumerism of the era to pierce straight to the heart of a deep yearning for allure.

When the 1970's ushered in a new vogue of rampantly overblown sexuality and the meteoric rise of superstar models who weren't particularly interested in intimate artistic communion, Bassman abandoned her career in fashion photography abruptly, unceremoniously disposing of most of her negatives and stashing the rest away in the ground floor carriage house of the Upper East Side apartment building. Bassman spent nearly two decades pursuing other projects—a departure that mirrored her husband's decision to leave photography in order to study psychotherapy—before a chance discovery of a batch of her old negatives by her friend the painter Helen Frankenthaler coaxed her back into connection with her early work. Bringing the old images back to life, working first in the darkroom and now with Photoshop to create even more adventurous and mysteriously luminous effects than before, Bassman has launched herself into a sudden career renaissance. The last several years have brought a flurry of successful projects, including a show at the Staley-Wise Gallery accompanying the publication of a book of her work by Abrams, "Lillian Bassman: Women," and last November's joint retrospective at the Deichtorhallen Museum in Hamburg, Germany, at which her work was exhibited alongside that of her husband, Paul, whom she lost in February of last year.

Over the course of the last seven decades, Bassman has created an artistic life full of transformations, unexpected intersections, instinctive leaps, and rich overlaps. Without ever consciously positioning herself as a trailblazer, she's nonetheless created a blueprint for a

multifaceted creative existence that balances art-making with life-long romance, raising a family and exploring a huge range of passions. As a contributor to a culture that remains gripped by the myth of the long-suffering lone-wolf artist, Lillian Bassman has proven herself an icon in more ways than one.

And despite her advanced—as she would say, “maturity”—she’s still sexy, funny, and cool as hell, as our conversation reveals.

Kate: I’ve been a fan of your work for a while now. It’s been fun to dig into some research and learn more about your process.

Lillian: [Laughs.] I have a process?

Kate: It sure seems that way.

Lillian: [More laughter.] Huh!

Kate: Reading about your way of working with models and your experimental darkroom techniques made me curious about what originally drew you to the creative arts.

Lillian: Well, first I wanted desperately be a dancer. Then I hurt the back of my heel so the dancing was out. It was during the Depression. I was 15 or 16 and the last thing in the world that I wanted was to babysit. That to me was the biggest nightmare in the world. Being in the dance world and meeting up with young artists I decided to become a model because that was the easiest way to get my 50 cents an hour, which was a lot of money at that time. [Laughs.] So I was around artists all the time and I was drawing and making my own messes. I continued that way, working, and then the WPA came along and I advanced to the Artists’ Project.

Kate: It seems that all the things you were involved with—the dance, and you were studying textile design and doing some painting as well— it seems that all those passions and influences come together in your photography.

Lillian: Yeah well, first they all came together when I was working as an art director. Working at Bazaar and Junior Bazaar. Then when Junior Bazaar was finished I went to see Brodovitch and he said, “What are you going to do now, Lillian?” and I said, “I think I’ll be a photographer.” So I started. Dick Avedon was going to Paris and he lent me his studio and I started to photograph... and then I became the lingerie queen of New York and America!

[Everyone laughs.]

Stephen: I’m gonna quote you on that.

Kate: Yeah, that's definitely going in.

Lillian: It seems like the most natural thing for me was to work with young women in their lingerie. In their bedrooms.

Kate: What felt natural about it to you?

Lillian: I think in a way it was close to dance. It was young. It wasn't dealing with high Paris models, it was dealing with my own age group more at the beginning and then later it blossomed into the older, the more mature. [Laughs.] That seemed to grow naturally. And then from there to fashion it was sort of a natural step ahead. I got tired of the bras and the girdles.

Kate: It's interesting to look at the clothing from that time and see what it says about the social situation for women. You start to get the first glimmers of the feminist movement on one hand but there's also this intense feeling of constriction in the way the clothes are still so structured.

Lillian: It's certainly nothing I would ever put *myself* in! The lingerie? Fine. But a girdle? Never! Never! I was born free. I stayed free! [Laughs.]

Lizzie: Although you did wear a sexy corset on the outside to go to the Oliver.

Lillian: That was for play.

Lizzie: She was way ahead of Madonna.

Lillian: I found a red corset that was cut very low and it was really very sexy. And I put on a big huge skirt and I wore it out New Year's Eve. I tell you, to go out in the cold like that, you have to be crazy, in a red corset and some big silk taffeta skirt I made myself. By the time 3 in the morning came around I was a nutcase. Oh whoooh.

Lizzie: You didn't drink enough with Dad to keep you warm?

Lillian: No, it didn't matter how much I drank. The colder the night got the tighter the corset got. [Laughs.] I was always stupid enough not to take... you know, I didn't want to cover up.

Kate: Would you say your upbringing was fairly bohemian? It seems you were given a lot of freedom as a young girl.

Lillian: Yes. Very, very. My sister and I were nudists and we marched around the house nude all the time.

[Everyone laughs.]

Lillian: We slept on couches on the floor covered with batik covers, you know, very bohemian, very village. Pre-village, I think. We had only one thing that we had to do. Iron our own uniforms and wash our hair on Saturday. Otherwise we could be as free as birds.

Kate: Was that true of your women friends at the time?

Lillian: No my friends were very proper Bronx girls. That's where we were living at the time. They came out of religious homes that I couldn't understand at all. But my mother always had loads of friends that would come and stay and dinner was always a great big salad that grew and grew depending on how many people appeared at the table. It was a very loose upbringing.

Kate: What was it like to work in a high fashion context with that level of freedom that you were bringing to your creative process? Did that create tension for you at all?

Lillian: No. I must have lived a charmed life. Nobody ever bothered me. No one ever made demands.

Stephen: You rarely even worked with art directors on the set, right?

Lillian: Right. Never.

Stephen: Incredible.

Kate: You felt confident in your artistic background.

Lillian: Well, you know, my whole background really was living at the Metropolitan, so that every gesture, every thrust of the neck, every beat of the bosom... [Laughs.] I'd remember these early Italian paintings. I really had no schooling except for what Paul and I gave each other by going to the Met all the time. We had no money so we would walk up to the Met and spend our day there.

Lizzie: We've talked about fashion a lot together and I think that comes into play here, too, though. It's true, Mom, you used to go into a room with the model and create your art, yes, absolutely. But I think you also have an immense sense of elegance and style. I mean, you intrinsically go to the right part of the dress. I remember when you were working with German Vogue and Franz and other designers have said this—Goeffrey Beene has said this—that you create the essence of what the dress means.

Kate: So the work that happens in that spontaneous creative place, first with the model and then in the darkroom, almost transcends the clothes—but at the same time it captures their exact essence, their soul.

Lillian: You're giving me a lot of credit! [Laughs.] Look, aside from the work I did for haute couture, I've been given some of the worst clothing in the world. Mrs. Snow always said "Lillian can give this some grace." It could be the worst piece. But there's something within me that finds within the *worst* something that gives the body some allure. Some way of moving. Some way of shifting of the shoulder. And of course we were past masters of pinning dresses! We could make them look elegant when they were really like house dresses. It's a real undying love of fashion that shows through everything I've tried to do, and the way that the body moves within the fashion.

Kate: I had an experience recently directing a play with teenagers in the South Bronx, a period piece. I went to the costume shop with the young woman who plays the lead; this is a girl who had never worn any kind of structured clothing before in her life. She put on a corset and hoop skirt, and it was just astonishing what happened. Her whole body completely transformed, how she carried herself, even her voice and diction! It was a real reminder to me of what clothing does to the body, the gesture, the sense of self.

Lillian: Right! Amazing, isn't it?

Kate: We've gained a lot as women as time has gone by, but I'm wondering if you feel like we've lost anything, too, as fashion has changed?

Lillian: I think we've lost a tremendous amount. First of all, there's a pet peeve of mine—your experience was a theatrical one, which is fine—but in general, I find that showing fashion that costs 3 and 4,000 dollars on a teenager, on a 17, 18 year old is ludicrous. It doesn't fit. It doesn't gel. To me it just destroys the whole illusion of allure, of knowledge, of knowing how your body works.

Kate: Do you think that women are losing touch with that as fashion shifts and as tastes shifts?

Lillian: Absolutely.

Kate: You were talking earlier about allure and grace. What does grace mean for you?

Lillian: Well, it could be an Italian primitive. It could be any painter. It's the knowledge of where the shoulders go, where the foot goes, where the nose goes. Where the hand moves.

Kate: Sometimes your photographs are talked about as having a veiled quality that gives your female models a place of safety. I also feel you create a lot of freedom and openness for the women in your images. It seems like you work with your models to create both of those things. Can you talk about that?

Lillian: Well, that feeling of creating a kind of... maybe I shouldn't say, but... cocoon... a kind of spatial entity for every model aside from a realistic background... that happened in the dark room. I developed it in the taking of the photograph and then I took it further in the dark room, where I worked with different chemicals and brushes. Sort of "paint designery" on a sheet of photographic paper.

Lizzie: I was thinking part of your question has to do with the fact that my mother is really seductive. I've noticed this my whole life. She has this quiet quality that allows someone else to enter into the frame and take over. People just naturally try to be symbiotic with her. She gives models freedom because she's never negative. [Laughs.] OK, maybe she's negative in a lot of other areas as an art director, but when she's shooting it's always this immense merging. I've watched it a million times. It doesn't matter if the model knows her, doesn't know her. She always says it's just about girls being friends and talking about their husbands or their children or their lovers. But what I find is that there's this aura that you want to be in her sphere and that whatever she wants to play with, you want to play with. You know.

Stephen: She's the cool kid in class.

Lizzie: Right, exactly.

Lillian: The what?

Lizzie and Stephen: The cool kid in class. [Everyone laughs.]

Kate: You have a special charisma, Lillian.

Stephen: You're magnetic.

Lillian: Oh! [Laughs.] I always said that the lingerie models would try to seduce the male photographer. And there was not that kind of seduction going on with me, it was one woman to another.

Lizzie: But still, there was seduction. It was still sexy.

Lillian: Well, OK. Yes.

Kate: Will you tell me a little bit about the time you spent away from this work focusing on other projects?

Lillian: Well, at some point I always got tired of doing the same thing. Almost as far back as I could remember I would take a year off and sometimes two years off and go on a totally different tangent. I did a series of cracks in the street. Which I thought were very sexy in my own way. I could read all types of things into that! [Laughs.] I did fruits and vegetables on mylar,

photographing into the mylar and getting a very juicy kind of feeling from them, and in some cases sort of a monumental feeling, I thought. I did a year or more of photographing friends in reflection, then a project on muscle men. I've always found that if I stayed with fashion or if I stayed with the models too long that I needed some kind of distance.

Lizzie: You designed clothes.

Lillian: I was just gonna say.

Lizzie: She loved it, except not the business. She was real successful really fast but she hated the business.

Lillian: I had a terrible business partner who made the mistake of staying in bed till one o'clock and then the showrooms would open and she would just about be putting her hair together. Anyway, we had a couple of successful years. Bergdorf Goodman carried the clothing. But it was on a very small scale. I never took it very seriously. I enjoyed it until it got to be business and not fun.

Kate: What has it been like to reconnect with your photography work? With the old negatives?

Lillian: Well, now I can do whatever I want. I've always had a good time, but now... well...

Lizzie: Now it's not just about the dress and the model, but it's about a period of time. A moment. She's just recreated it.

Kate: So when you came back to working with the old negatives you got to spend most of your time in the darkroom. I've heard that you loved being in the darkroom as much if not more than actually shooting pictures.

Lillian : Yeah I did. It was like I was painting.

Lizzie: My whole childhood she spent her life in the dark room. She did all of her own final prints. I mean nobody can print for her, it's impossible. Because the print is the work. For a lot of photographers it's just the shoot, and that's it. For her, the shoot is just the starting point.

Kate: And in recent years you've transitioned to using the computer? Using Photoshop, right?

Lillian: Well, the stuff doesn't exist anymore.

Stephen: Yeah. The paper that she likes and the chemicals. Everything's gone.

Lillian: Actually I find that working on the computer in a way is very much like working on those prints in the water that I used to doctor. Noodle. [Laughs.]

Kate: Noodle?

Lillian: Like with a paintbrush. [Gestures, making invisible curlicues in the air.]

Lizzie: She's really good at Photoshop.

Kate: You're a whiz kid, huh?

Lillian: Yeah. [Grins.]

Lizzie: She doesn't follow the rules. Like she didn't follow the rules in the dark room. You never follow the rules! [Laughs.]

Kate: Speaking of not following the rules... there are a couple of images that seem like the result of some unconventional choices, given the fashion context you were working in. I'd love to know some more about how you made them. I'm curious about... what did you call it, "Butterfly Girl"? [a photo of model Barbara Mullen, *Paris: Dinner at Nine*.]

Lillian: Well, I did this photograph, it was a boring dress, all this chiffon... and Mrs. Snow came in and said "Lillian, what dress is *that*?!" And she said "My dear, that was a column of chiffon, not a butterfly!" [Laughs.] And what do you say to that? She said, "I didn't bring you to Paris to shoot the butterflies!"

Lizzie: No, she said she didn't bring you to Paris to shoot art!

Lillian: Oh yes. Art, right. [Laughs.] Look, it was a boring dress!

Lizzie: True. This is far more enticing.

Lillian: I mean... agghh, I had all this *chiffon*!

Stephen: Right? And what are you gonna *do* with all that?

Lillian and Kate: You make a butterfly!

Lillian: Yup, so that was my run-in with Mrs. Snow. "I didn't bring you to Paris to make art!" [Laughs.]

Stephen: [Doing Mrs. Snow's voice.] "Where is my dress?"

Lizzie: But you liked her.

Lillian: I loved her.

Lizzie: She drank a lot.

Lillian: She was a business woman.

Lizzie: What was that story about how she went to mass? She went to church in Paris? She sent a telegram? You didn't want to go... something?

Lillian: The model didn't show up. So she took me to church.

[Everyone laughs.]

Stephen: You must have died in there!

Lillian: Oh no, I love church!

Kate: What did you love about church?

Lillian: I loved every piece of artwork.

All: Oh yeah!

Stephen: Stained glass.

Kate: Good lighting? The windows.

Lizzie: Fabulous lighting. She dragged my brother and me to every church in Mexico. Way before we went to temple. Stained glass. Thorns, bleeding. Madonna. Ah, I loved it.

Kate: Ha! Lillian, I love how you just go with whatever moves you. I'm curious about how you created Wonders of Water, it seems like there was some of that impulsive energy at play there. Can you tell me about the process of making that image?

Lillian: Actually I was given the assignment, you know Brodovitch always had his own agenda. He said, "I want you to do a layout where the swimmer goes across the top of the page." Well, I did what he wanted and then I discovered that underneath the swimming pool there was another floor which had a window where the instructors were watching the swimmers. I had the girl come down and greet me down at the bottom. And this is the result. I just decided that I'd done what he wanted, and then I did this for myself.

Kate: What is it about that image that speaks to you?

Lillian: Well, it's how the way in which the water dances with her body and the slant of her body and the shape of her body. The other one is rather static, her going across.

Lizzie: Have you seen the Hamburg catalogue? [Opens catalogue to Lillian and Paul's recent joint show, flips to reveal the original shot of the swimmer Brodovitch had asked for.]

Lillian: See, this one is quite beautiful, but it's totally different. This [Wonders of Water] has a lot more vibrancy to it.

Kate: Yes, definitely. [Flipping through the catalogue.] Wow, this is incredible. How was Hamburg? How was the exhibit?

Lillian: Fabulous.

Stephen: Rockstar. There were maybe 500 people at the opening. Everywhere in Germany there were posters in the subway, billboards, all over the place.

Lizzie: It was a wonderful show. She even liked it.

Stephen: She did interviews on German TV. She even ended up on YouTube!

Kate: You felt like a rockstar?

Lillian: Oh yes.

Kate: Did you wear your red corset?

Lillian: No, no. [Laughs.] It was way too cold.

