

Jeanloup Sieff was never a stayer. It was his gleeful boast that after securing his *baccalauréat* in Paris, he went on to the Ecole Vaugirard to study literature for two weeks and photography for three weeks, then continued his photography course at the Ecole de Vevey in Switzerland where he hung on for seven months, before returning to Paris to attend the Centre de Formation des Journalistes – for ten days. In 1955 he landed a plum job with *Elle* magazine, first as a reporter, then as a photographer, but resigned after three years. In 1958 he joined the Magnum agency, left that too after a few months, and moved to America where he worked for five years before heading back to France. He was, in short, a serious gadfly.

In his photographic work he had several distinct modes. His most characteristic and best-known images are of beautiful women in various stages of undress, yet his reportage work is as gritty as it comes, particularly in the series he did on a miners' strike in Belgium in the late 1950s and on street scenes in Rome after the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958.

Sieff was deeply influenced by painters such as Renoir and Seurat, and his first book, *Le Ballet*, featuring dancers at the Paris Opéra, contains some ravishing Renoiresque studies, while the pictures he took in Death Valley in California in the late 1970s are as bleakly beautiful as anything by Bill Brandt or Ansel Adams. Yet always the seriousness was undercut by a lifelong commitment to frivolity in general and in particular the blissful contemplation of the female posterior. Not for nothing was he an admirer and friend of Robert Doisneau, although his best work is superior to Doisneau's much loved but rather laboured whimsicality. If Sieff is to be compared with anyone, it would be the unquestionably greater Jacques Henri Lartigue, of whom Sieff wrote, 'He was the embodiment of Stravinsky's dictum, "Youth is a state of mind."'

Jeanloup Sieff was born in Paris in 1933, the son of Polish immigrants. He began taking photographs when he was given 'a black plastic Photax for my 14th or 15th birthday'. The gift determined the future course of his life, otherwise he might have become 'an actor, a film director, a writer or a gigolo...' When he was 17 he had his first picture published, in *Photo Revue*. It was of a lake veiled in autumn mist, and although the negative was lost long ago he claims he can remember it in perfect detail. In 1955, after returning from Vevey, he received a telephone call from *Elle* magazine which was looking for a photographer – everyone else, he noted laconically, was on holiday – and he received his first journalistic commission, a photographic article on a young poetess from the provinces.

The party, as he put it, went on for three splendid years: 'I had a girlfriend who made films and a green soft-top Austin-Healey...' Then, in 1958, he ran out of ruses to avoid military service, 'and I found myself in the colonial artillery in a grim barracks at Vernon'. Ever resourceful, he faked illness and had himself diagnosed as 'neuro-vegetative dystonic' and was thrown out of the army; he had been a soldier for three weeks.

Now, at the age of 25, he found himself unemployed and at a crossroads. 'I wanted to turn over a new leaf and return to the joys of journalism pure and simple; I was fed up with the frills and furbelows of fashion and that trilogy of the superficial: models, couturiers and hairdressers. So I took the holy orders of photography and joined the Magnum agency, an austere

club of the photographically/politically committed, presided over by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Marc Riboud, Ernest Haas and other warrior-monks, with some of whom I made friends. My membership was rather brief; it lasted a few months only.'

In his final book, a new edition of which has just been published, he notes he has left out his 'public' work, the Algerian war, for instance, or *les événements* of May 1968, since his interest in politics began when he was 15 and ended when he was 18, giving way to a scepticism which proved permanent. Addressing the question of why he decided to become a photographer, he says that in the early days he would answer that it was because of the camera he was given for his birthday, but later decided it sounded unserious, and 'began to offer a more metaphysical explanation, such as "to stop time flying".'

Left: *Kitsch Nude, Paris* (1956). Right: *The Seine in Spate* (1955)
Estate of Jeanloup Sieff/
Maconochie Photography

again, however, when he was in a position not to care whether he was taken seriously, he admitted that the real reason for taking photographs 'has always been sheer *pleasure*'. In this he certainly

resembles Lartigue, master of the pleasure-principle.

But is pleasure enough? This big book, which represents a summation of Sieff's long career, is a testament to his belief in the bearable lightness of being. He is an eclectic artist, and at times it is hard to believe that these wildly varying images are the work of one man. His nudes and, especially, his semi-nudes, can look disconcertingly like those 'naughty postcards' that disreputable uncles used to bring back from their trips to gay Paree. But then one flicks from yet another *oh là là* shot of

yet another saucy *mam'selle* showing off her suspenders to, say, the poignant beauty of his early-morning streetscape seen through the window of the Café de Flore, or the magnificent profundity of the 1962 portrait of Peter Lorre, which catches all the tragedy and sorrow of that genius manqué.

In the book Sieff declares his pride in being described as superficial and frivolous. His photographs, he says, are neither partisan nor objective; he does not 'bear witness to anything', has no message to deliver or monument to erect. He has spent his life in a Proustian search for lost time, in which photographs are the most vivid signposts. Like the lone fisherman standing in the midst of the Seine in spate, Sieff sets himself and his still camera centrally in the flow of things in order to save those moments that otherwise would be washed away.

'My childhood companion was solitude (a lost father, the wandering of wartime), but I came to accept it and the pain it gave me (it could not be helped). I ended up seeking it, as if the urge to grasp the thing that I could not escape were a form of revenge. What indeed is the meaning of my photographic quest for empty spaces – the happiness found in Scotland or Death Valley – if it is not to rediscover, consciously and deliberately, that child whose past anxieties I can then sublimate?'

Jeanloup Sieff died on 20 September 2002, or, as the brief note at the back of the book puts it, with Sieffian insouciance, 'He tiptoed off. Trying not to set the autumn leaves falling.' ●

The new edition of 'Jeanloup Sieff: 40 Years of Photography' (Taschen, £14.99) is available from Telegraph Books (0870 428 4115) at £12.99 plus £1.25 p&p