

Courting controversy

INTERVIEW

Jan Saudek

The Czech photographer tells CLAIRE ALLFREE about his desire to portray humanity and the physical form

Ask the Czech photographer Jan Saudek whether he considers his work pornographic and he replies in typically ambiguous fashion. 'Yes – it is pornographic. The problem is I don't know what "pornography" really means. I'm fascinated with our primal, basic, primitive instincts. That's all.'

Looking at the photographs in his lavish new book, Saudek, it's difficult to argue. One of the most admired photographers to have emerged from the post-war Czech Republic, Saudek is known mainly for his playful, anarchic nudes. His ribald presentation of naked and semi-clad men and women is so subversive that often the results are more disturbing, even plain amusing, than erotic.

His subjects may appear in sexually intimate couplings but their bodies are adorned with props seemingly sourced from a burlesque dressing up box: hats; feathers; rifles; musical instruments.

They recall a bawdy, sexually transgressive send up of the studiously formal pictures taken in old Wild West photo booths; their theatrical absurdity compounded by Saudek's love for lurid colour tints and acknowledged debt to the surrealist art of Salvador Dalí.

More unsettlingly, his subjects are invariably members of his own family: himself, his wives, his various lovers and most provocatively, his children.

'I've been longing to have a family for all my life,' he explains from his home in Prague. 'I've never really had any. I've got children but they are rarely gathered all in one room. Now, near to my 72nd birthday, I'm expecting another child – and I foolishly believe that I will have a family at last. My relationships to others are as complicated as possible. I guess everyone's are.'

Saudek was four when the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939 and he spent a couple of years in a children's concentration camp eating grass and toothpaste before the country was liberated in 1945. He barely talks directly about that experience but is frank on its effects.

'Freud said we all are determined from our childhood. No matter that I had my twin brother by my side and loved him dearly; I consider my childhood, and perhaps all childhoods, as the worst part of life: helpless, vulnerable, beaten up at each step.'

He first picked up a camera after seeing a catalogue of The Family Of Man exhibition, curated by Edward Steichen in 1955. Steichen's intention had been to demonstrate photography's capacity to reflect humanity in the wake of the destruction of World War II.

Saudek was inspired to acknowledge something similar in the people close to him and his images from that period have a tenderness that his later ones lack: sepia-tinted pictures of his young son that capture the loneliness of childhood as well as its innocence; loving shots of his heavily pregnant wife; even a 1966 picture of him holding his newborn child, which so closely resembles the ubiquitous 1980s Athena image of a man holding a baby that it surely directly inspired it.

If these images celebrating paternity, the wonders of childbirth and the vulnerability of childhood border on sentimental, then little else that follows does. After a spell in the US, where he became enthralled by the pop art scene, Saudek settled for concentrating on the physical body.

His shots may often be comically grotesque, but they are also painfully honest: one famous sequence is a triptych of photographs tracing the physical changes of his lover Veronika over ten years.

'When Veronika saw her second portrait taken five years after the first, she cried for two hours. But to me she was more loveable after having a child – and more attractive. I adore women. They all are beautiful. I prefer heavier ones – for



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Ribald presentation: Saudek's image of a woman, taken from his new book

Picture: Jan Saudek/Taschen

I starved at the end of the war. They represent "abundance" for me.'

Inevitably, his work plays constantly on stereotypical notions of femininity.

'People love to play another role from their daily one – last week, the best ballerina of The National Theatre felt great in a biker's outfit, with a 12mm revolver in her elegant hand. But of course I protest too, against the contemporary idol of beauty, so I show the lady, close to death from anorexia, 172cm high

and 64lb and I declare: This is the idol! We should all be like this!'

Saudek is not a political photographer – he dismisses the suggestion that he should depict the post-war suffering of the Czech Republic. What has happened to his country has also occurred in other countries, he notes.

Nonetheless, suffering is inherent in his work. One recurring motif, for instance, is a hanging woman: Saudek explains that his second wife

committed suicide this way, as did some of his lovers. His work is a frightening dreamscape of desire, unhappiness, playfulness and love. He thinks again about whether they are also pornographic.

'I guess pornography is something you can watch once – and then never again. But a good picture, regardless of what is shown, you can look at forever.'

Saudek is published by Taschen, priced £34.99. www.taschen.com