



Still Life

Famed for pointing her candid camera at a gallery of “freaks”, snapper Diane Arbus did for photography what David Lynch did for cinema. Then, aged 48, she killed herself.

Fur: An Imaginary Portrait Of Diane Arbus sees Nicole Kidman portray the artist...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

On 26 July 1971, Diane Arbus swallowed a fistful of barbiturates, lay down fully clothed in her bathtub and slashed her wrists with a razor blade. Already a legendary and hugely respected figure in the world of photography, her suicide at 48 cemented her status as a celebrated American artist – and one who has captivated and baffled Hollywood ever since.

Mythologised as Sylvia Plath with a camera, she’s had everyone from Barbra Streisand to Diane Keaton fighting to make the movie of her life, with upwards of 20 scripts being scribbled over the years. But no one could get past one obstinate stumbling block: Arbus’ fiercely protective daughter Doon, who runs her mother’s estate. Doon has always opposed a biopic and almost never grants permission for Diane’s stark, intimate black-and-white portraits to be reproduced (including, it turns out, in the pages of *Total Film*). And it’s a bit of an issue when you’re attempting to make a movie about a seminal ’60s photographer and you can’t show her snaps.

Enter Steven Shainberg, the New York-born-and-bred son of Jewish psychoanalysts, hot off the kinky, S&M dram-com *Secretary*, and with a personal link to Arbus (his uncle Lawrence was her good friend). Keen to avoid the traditional biopic route (“When I walk out of a biopic, I never feel I’ve really gotten under the skin of that person”), Shainberg envisioned a fantasy approach to the life of a woman born to privilege – her Jewish father owned the biggest fur emporium in New York – who became a classic upper-class rebel, turning her back on her cosy life to strike out into hazardous and unfamiliar terrain.

“This is a movie that takes place before the Arbus that most people know,” says Shainberg, who convinced the producers holding the rights to Patricia Bosworth’s 1984 biography that his dream-like vision was the right way to go. “I was

taken with the fact that in 1958, a woman of 35 with two children, who was in some sense living a very straight life, set out to take photographs and became the person that she did. It’s a really mysterious and complicated transformation.”

Best of all from his producers’ point of view, Shainberg’s movie didn’t require Arbus’ work, building up, as it does, to the taking of her very first “art” photo – and a made-up one at that. “I looked at a lot of films that have photographers as characters and there probably isn’t anything more boring than seeing one actor raise a still camera and take a picture of another actor who’s pretending to be the subject of that photograph,” he says. “It’s just so unbearably dull! The thought of a movie with Diane running around taking pictures of weirdos... I mean, people had been trying to make that movie for 20 years and failed!”

Weirdos, freaks (“That was her word for them”) – Arbus photographed people from all walks of life, but her favourite subjects lived in society’s underbelly: giants, dwarves, transvestites, circus performers. In fact, anyone deformed, handicapped or marginalised was a target for her unique lens. Working with his *Secretary* co-writer Erin Cressida Wilson, Shainberg concocted *Fur*’s own fictional “freak”: Lionel, a man completely covered in hair who lives in the apartment upstairs from Arbus and eventually bewitches her. If it sounds like Shainberg’s been watching Jean Cocteau’s *Beauty And The Beast*, he has... “That film was the reference for *Fur*,” he admits, although Cocteau’s fur-man wasn’t his only inspiration.

“We considered everything you can imagine but there are problems with everybody,” says Shainberg. “If it’s a giant, you have to either do CGI effects or find a giant who can act, which is impossible. With a transvestite or transsexual, we’ve been beaten to the punch by *Boys Don’t Cry* and endless other movies. If it’s a dwarf, it’s a cliché. Diane Arbus grew up in the home of the biggest furrier in New York. She knew her father was going off to kill animals to make coats. When you look at a fur coat, there’s this



Unhappy snapper: the acclaimed photographer Diane Arbus.

‘People have been trying, and failing, to make a Diane Arbus movie for 20 years’

bizarre simultaneous impulse on the one hand to touch it, and on the other hand to recoil from the horror of it. And that dual aspect is part of what her work was: beauty and horror, ugliness and sensuality.”

When it came time to cast his hairy beast and porcelain beauty, Shainberg knew exactly who he wanted: Robert Downey Jr and Samantha Morton. “For me, it was always Downey, but he came with a lot of issues,” laughs the 43-year-old director, who had to convince his producers that the once drug-troubled actor wouldn’t sabotage



Snap Unhappy

Diane Arbus isn't the only photographer who found life behind a lens lonely and deadly...



Whiskey-dipped photojournos with death-wish issues are ten a penny. But few can claim to have helped change the world. At the height of Apartheid, however, four cavalier South African lensmen pushed the ethics of their profession way beyond the realm of leering, lucre-frenzied paps. **Kevin Carter**, **Greg Marinovich**, **Ken Oosterbroek** and **Joao Silva** stalked the townships and beyond, looking for trouble and rarely being disappointed. With a certain swagger, they named themselves the **Bang-Bang Club** and their stark, unflinching pictures went a long way towards exposing the brutality of the regime. [They were the first to photograph the practice of 'necklacing' — igniting a gasoline-filled tyre that had been forced around a victim's chest and arms.]

Some of their imagery was so potent, it led to accusations that they were becoming complicit in events, rather than just documenting them. Carter won the Pulitzer Prize for his notorious picture of a young starving Sudanese girl being stalked by a vulture (above left). Unable to flush away his remorse at not having helped the child, he committed suicide in 1994. If all of this sounds like someone should make it into a film, someone already has. Dan Krauss' ace, Oscar-nommed documentary *The Life Of Kevin Carter* is coming to DVD soon. Snappy days...

Andy Lowe

the project. Job done, he then had to persuade Downey Jr that spending hours each morning having hair glued to his skin wouldn't be too daunting. "Lionel has to be felt through his eyes — he has to be really tender, really vulnerable and really moving. All of that is in Downey's face. He's just a phenomenally captivating person."

As for Morton, Shainberg says that when *Fur*'s moneymen balked at her salary, she bolted, and the director — figuring he'd spin his wheels for months trying to replace her — almost jokingly suggested Nicole Kidman. Coincidentally, her film with Russell Crowe, *Eucalyptus*, was on

'Kidman is one of the smartest, most intuitive actresses in film history'

the verge of collapse, and moreover, the Oscar-winning actress knows a multifaceted character when she sees one.

"The story is a metaphor for so many things, in terms of a woman finding her creativity, the way in which we're attracted to the unknown," says Kidman. "Lionel unleashes things in Diane and helps her to unravel in a way that she never would have if she hadn't encountered him."

"I truly believe that the right person for the part ends up in the movie," says Shainberg of his fortuitous casting swap. "I think Samantha's

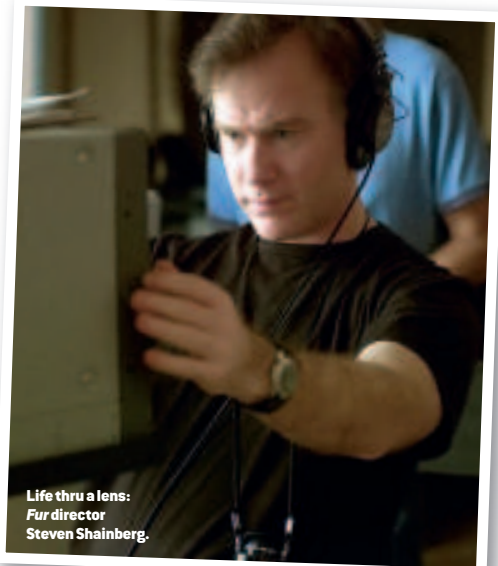
a total genius, but this one wasn't meant to be. And Kidman brought a quality that nobody else would have. It's a movie about somebody heading off into the world to discover things that had been living inside her, but that she was afraid of. And I think Nic wanted to have that experience. We are all shut off in our lives to some extent, there are doors that we want to go through, and you feel that living in Nic's performance."

Even though his two stars didn't meet until the day they turned up on set, they swiftly formed a mutual admiration society, which made it a cinch to generate the sexy, soulful vibe that Shainberg wanted crackling between Lionel and Diane.

"Robert was perfect for this film because he's so seductive and unpredictable," coos the Aussie actress. "It's an unusual role for him because normally when he's performing he's verbose. But in this film he's left with very little to say, just his heart and his presence. And he was very open towards me, which I still appreciate because it was extremely necessary for a film like *Fur*."

"Using an *Alice In Wonderland* metaphor," echoes Downey, "Nic really pulled one out of her hat. I've always admired her, but at some point during the shoot, I realised I was working with one of the smartest, most intuitive actresses in history. Easy on the eyes too..."

Back to Shainberg, who premiered *Fur* at the Telluride Film Festival this past September, to a varied "spectrum of response" that he says he anticipated. "Look, there are people who have a hard time grasping the non-literal approach to a real life," he says. "Because on a conceptual



Life thru a lens:
Fur director
Steven Shainberg.

level, it's daring — there are people who don't get it." But, he insists, it was the only way to do justice to Arbus' eccentric talent. "She went into dark, dangerous, wild — some might say outrageous and perverted — places and she made extremely personal pictures about her own experience of that world. And that threw open the photographic world and said, 'You can go after anything.' That's what makes her special..."

***Fur: An Imaginary Portrait Of Diane Arbus* opens on 10 November and will be reviewed in a future issue of *Total Film*.**