

# David Bailey on love, life, tigers and daydreams

At the launch of his Sumatran Tiger installation at Fortnum & Mason, the iconic photographer spoke to Luxurious Magazine's Gina Baksa

## INTERVIEW

**“W**HO d’you think you are – David Bailey?” For those of a certain age, this catchphrase from a Seventies’ TV advert for Olympus Trip pretty much summed up the godlike status that David Bailey had acquired.

Born in North Leyton, he grew up in East Ham, left school at 15 and was conscripted into the RAF.

While posted in Singapore, he bought his first camera and was inspired to become a photographer after seeing Cartier Bresson’s enigmatic Kashmir.

He began working with fashion photographer John French in 1959, and left to carve out his own career, beginning with a portrait of Somerset Maugham for *Today* magazine in 1960.

East End boy made good, Bailey pioneered the sharp yet relaxed, street-smart lensmanship style that redefined the world of fashion and portrait photography in the Fifties and Sixties and led to half a century – and counting – of superb creative output.

British *Vogue* magazine hired him as a fashion photographer in 1960 and, with fellow creatives Brian Duffy and

Terence Donovan, he helped to put the swing into Sixties’ London.

Bailey still shoots actors, rock stars and models (Kate Moss is a frequent subject) and has also produced an outstanding oeuvre of portraits, films, documentaries, paintings, and sculpture.

He won the Lion D’Or at Cannes for his Greenpeace commercial, *Meltdown*, and has produced many books of his work – often with a reportage theme, including *Bailey’s East End* and *Havana*.

Bailey is supporting Greenpeace again with his creation of 400 hand-cast bronze tigers, each representing one of the remaining Sumatran tigers in the wild – now the smallest surviving subspecies on the planet.

The Sumatran tiger is found only on the Indonesian island of Sumatra off the Malaysian Peninsula.

Between 1985 and 2011, half of Sumatra’s 25 million hectares of natural forest was cleared.

About 80% of that loss was lowland forest – vital habitat for not only Sumatran tigers but also other critically endangered wildlife.

More than 100 bronze tigers have





already been sold, with 100% of the proceeds going towards Greenpeace to help fight the destruction of the animal's natural habitat.

I'm at Fortnum & Mason for the unveiling of Bailey's 400 handcrafted tiger figures.

In his collaboration with Pangolin editions, the tigers have all been placed in a Perspex box and displayed in Fortnum's window.

We're listening to the public relations people when Bailey himself suddenly appears in a pink polo shirt and green canvas trousers... rakish and yet surprisingly shy.

With roles reversed, he now looks like the prey with we journalists the hunters.

Oddly, no-one moves. It's as if the sight of this Sixties icon in the flesh has rendered us all immobile. I too, am in awe.

Seizing my chance, I take a few steps forward and say hello.

I'm nervous, but Bailey is immediately charming and also very witty.

Quite different from the irascible figure I've seen in the press, scowling at the camera.

In fact, despite the early hour, he's in a jovial mood and clearly passionate about bringing attention to the plight of the Sumatran tigers.

Once inside Fortnum's we make our way down to the wine-tasting room next to the crypt and have a chat over rather less intoxicating water.

I ask Bailey if he gets bored with interviews.

"Oh yes," he smiles. "It's not the interviews exactly, but the stupid questions I get asked!"

And he reveals the very banality that had irked him the week before.

When I hear it, I'm not surprised he brought that particular interview to an early conclusion.

Fortunately, my list of questions has been vetted and approved, so I'm in the clear, and I'm immediately keen to know what inspired him to join forces with Greenpeace to help save the tigers.

"When I heard there are just 400 Sumatran tigers left in the wild I was shocked," he reveals.

"Their habitat is being destroyed due to logging. They're beautiful tigers – smaller and much brighter coloured than other tigers.

"So I came up with the idea of making 400 small bronze tiger models and putting them in a Perspex box. As each one is sold, the conception gradually destroys itself. It also demonstrates just how quickly 400 tigers can disappear."

Clearly, it's the continued destruction of the tigers' habitat that's threatening their survival – forests cleared for the production of palm oil.

"The bottom line is over-population,"

Bailey counters. "There are simply too many people in the world. And there's obviously a point when resources will run out.

"Politicians don't seem to be doing anything about over-population. The Chinese tried it with their one-child policy, but it didn't work. I guess you can't stop people from making love, can you?"

Bailey held his first sculpture exhibition back in 2010.

At the time, he said: "I'm not saying I'm a sculptor. I just make images. I don't take photographs, I make them. And now I'm making something else."

When I ask him what sculpture gives him that photography does not, he tells me: "It's the same thing, really. I never make photographs or sculptures to please people. Even if I did your portrait, you'd get what I want, not what you want.

"When I do Kate (Moss), for example, I just make her look like I want her

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to look. Even in advertising, you get a selection and that's it. If you don't like it, don't pay me.

"My whole life is about curiosity really," he explains. "That's why I do painting, sculpture or movies. I couldn't just do one thing.

"Remember, I'm dyslexic and dyspractic so I can only do visual things really."

I remind him that he's reportedly said that photography is "a sexual experience".

"Well, I suppose it is in a way," he agrees. "You get really close to somebody. They spill the beans."

Does he have a process for making clients relax and open up to him?

"I don't know really – it's easy for me," he laughs. "I don't even think about it. I've never been scared of anybody, or easily impressed. Everyone's the same to me."

Considering the roll-call of celebrities Bailey has shot, that's just as well. They range from The Queen to the Krays,

Andy Warhol to Jack Nicholson, Patti Smith to Beyoncé, Jagger to Johnny Depp.

Many of them have become his friends. Especially the women...

Bailey is just as well-known for his colourful love-life as for his art.

Married to Catherine (Dyer) since 1986 – they have two sons, Sascha and Fenton, and a daughter, Paloma – his previous wives included French actress Catherine Deneuve and model Marie Helvin.

It seems beautiful women have always had a starring role in his life... so what does he love most about the fairer sex?

Bailey pauses to think.

"I don't know, really. They've got a different kind of logic to them."

He pauses again.

"I like that they come from a different angle than men. Much kinder than men in a way, aren't they? At least superficially... but not all women, of course.

"Women usually have more empathy. But I'm not taken in by empathy. Most people are taken in by empathy, you know."

Have the women he's known taught him about himself and about life?

"I don't know... they've all been strong women," he tells me. "You know when those feminists used to have a go at me in the Sixties, they weren't feminists, they just hated men!"

"It's all swung around – now they all look silly.

"But, you know, all the women I've been with have all been feminists, whatever that means."

Catherine Deneuve, too?

"Oh yeah. Course she was."

Are they still in touch?

"Yeah, I'm friends with all my ex romances," he reveals. "I see Penelope (Tree) a lot."

Momentarily confusing Tree with another former flame, the model Jean Shrimpton, I ask if she's still in Cornwall.

"No, that's Jean Shrimpton."

Bailey frowns.

"Just testing!" I tease him. "You remember then?"

"Course I remember!" he laughs, humoring me.

I've read that Bailey loves dogs, especially his dog Pig.

"Ah he's just a hooligan!" Bailey laughs. "He's a Jack Russell, but his days are limited.

"He's about 18 now and he's not really a town dog, so it was easier to look after him when he was in Devon.

"I also have a Chow who's nice. I got him by default as one of my sons had him and they wouldn't let him keep him in his flat. So I ended up with the last dog in the world I'd ever buy, but ☐

he's a great dog. He's fascinating and completely different to any other dog I've ever had.

"They're like a separate species. You can only train them with kindness. If you try and use discipline they turn against you. They're smart!"

Our chat turns to other issues – I love his refreshing political incorrectness – and we agree the world's gone PC-mad.

We are all policing each other, I suggest.

"Worse," adds Bailey. "We are policing ourselves, which is terrible. We're all too afraid to say anything. It's awful."

Many of Bailey's paintings and some of his sculptures reveal a fascination

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I daydream all the time. That's how I dream, in fact. I dream awake. I'd be no good for Freud because I never remember my dreams.

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with death. Was this because he's a war baby?

"Yes, I stayed all through the Blitz in London."

Was it scary?

"No, it was fun! I was seven-and-half when the war ended. I spent most of it down the coal cellar, because the two shelters in the back yard were flooded. We only had one outside toilet.

"There was no drainage for the air-raid shelters. People used to keep ducks in them... they'd swim!

"They were only symbolic, those shelters. What's a bit of tin gonna do when a bomb comes down?"

Bailey has said that death is a part of life. Does he fear departing this mortal coil?

"No, I don't fear death," he reveals. "Death is just like... finally I get some sleep!"

Will that be on his tombstone?

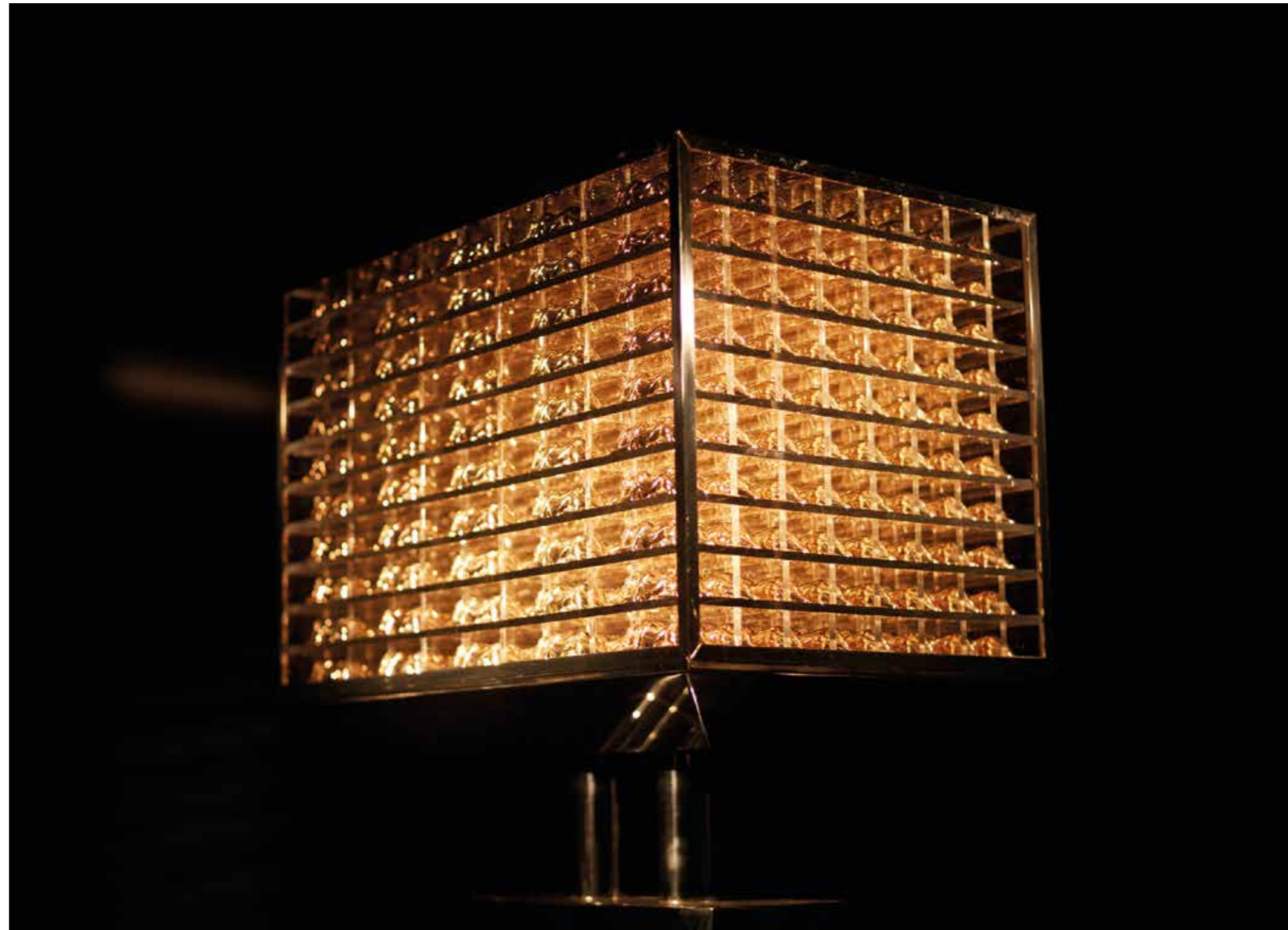
"No, it'll be 'I'll see you soon!'," he replies, sharp to the bottom of the glass.

Typically, East End families were very close, so who among his family influenced him the most?

"I had an Aunt Mercy who lived up the road. She made her shelter like a little country cottage, all cushions inside.

"I used to get dropped off there when my mum went shopping. She was a tough old cow," Bailey adds affectionately.

"I had another aunt who was... can you say the word 'lesbian' any more? She used to be a scout mistress. And then my



uncle who I lived with, he was a sailor, he was gay. A very colourful family we were."

I suggest that neither his aunt nor uncle were truly "out" in those days?

"No, in the East End everyone knew but nobody cared," he replies.

"I mean they used to say he hates women and that was the end of it. No-one bothered.

"My Dad used to get worried with me spending time with my uncle. He couldn't see the difference between being gay and being a paedophile.

"He was a bit silly. The average East End geezer back then. That's really what he thought.

"He was my mum's brother. He

changed my life. He introduced to me all sorts of things like travel and he bought me my first record which was Frank Sinatra singing Stormy Weather. I played it on a wind-up record machine."

Has he still got it?

"No, it's long gone!"

"My uncle bought me my first pair of brogue shoes, too."

Who bought him his first camera?

"It was my mum's Brownie. Eventually it got nicked.

"Wasn't worth anything, of course, but had sentimental value to me.

"They nicked all my early cameras... burglars. I've also had assistants nick things."

Bailey must have shot every celebrity

on the planet, although he famously turned down Lady Gaga.

I ask him if there is anyone he'd still like to shoot.

"The rest of the world that I haven't shot!" he smiles. "Everyone's fascinating.

"I love doing books. I'm going to do a book on Essex. I've done Afghanistan and Sudan, which were kind of hard. So I thought I'd do something easy like Essex."

Was it easy?

"Actually, it turned out harder, because I had to get there – it meant going on trains for the first time in 60 years.

"But it was great. You can really get around on a train. If I try and drive even

down to Barking, there's too much traffic – it can take me two-and-a-half hours. When this new Crossrail line opens up, it will take ten minutes."

Does he ever work in Devon?

"How can I work in Devon?" he laughs. "Johnny Depp's not gonna come down to Devon, is he? 'Hey Johnny, good news – I'm gonna photograph you. Bad news is it'll take you five hours to get to Devon and five hours back'.

"I have a studio there, though. It's all right for painting but I haven't been down there much because I've been too busy."

Does he ever daydream?

"Yeah, I daydream all the time. That's how I dream, in fact. I dream awake.

I'd be no good for Freud because I never remember my dreams."

"I don't sleep that much. I usually read to around 2am then get up about 7am or 6.30."

What comes into his mind when he's daydreaming?

"Ideas, really. What I read the night before.

"I'm reading a depressing book now, Tolstoy's *The Death Of Ivan Ilyich*. Not a happy book.

"This is the first time I've read him since I was in the Air Force. I read all that when I was young. I was stationed in Malaya and Singapore, National Service. I had a great time during the

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I had a great time in the Sixties, too, of course. I've always had a great time. You have to make the best of what you've got, really.

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war. And I had a great time in the Fifties – even though it was a dull time.

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"I've always had a great time. You have to make the best of what you've got, really."

I suggest it's a choice whether we have a good or bad time. A question of definition and perspective.

"I'm not sure what a good time is. Or what happiness is," replies Bailey reflectively.

"It's a bit like love or art. I don't know what they are. I mean it's so subjective. I can say 'I love you but I don't like your socks'," he laughs.

"That can often happen. I see it with people. Luckily with Catherine (Dyer) we've been together 35 years or so."

I could chat all day with Bailey.

He's sharp, funny and is an astute observer of life – but the PR is motioning us to bring the interview to a close.

"She was quick and she asked intelligent questions for a change," Bailey tells her.

We laugh... and I seize the chance for a final question: What's the secret to taking a great image?

"Anyone can be a good photographer if they zoom in enough on what they love," Bailey replies sagely.

What a great maxim for life as well as photography.

I love this man's heart, his curiosity for people and his passion for his art.

