

[Q&A](#)

Tell Tales: In Conversation With Juergen Teller

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Juergen Teller, fashion

photographer, requires no introduction. But there are less familiar Tellers. Juergen Teller, son. Juergen Teller, forest wanderer. Juergen Teller, escapee from the violin-making industry. Tonight, as he opens his small show, *Irene im Wald*, at The Journal Gallery in Williamsburg, Teller shines a bit of light on these hidden facets of himself. Commissioned as a supplement to the next issue of *The Journal* magazine, *Irene im Wald* has evolved into the first part of what Teller sees as a four-part series to be shot in the woods near the house in Erlangen, Germany, where he was raised. This first installment features photographs of Teller's mother, Irene, and written reminiscences that caption some of the shots. The mood is meditative and a far cry from the arresting Marc Jacobs campaign images for which Teller is best known.

Both Teller and The Journal have bigger, showier openings ahead: Next month, The Journal will launch its new 35,000-square-foot space in Williamsburg with a show by Daniel Turner; Teller, for his part, opens his Francesco Bonami-curated show *The Girl With the Broken Nose* at the Palazzo Reale in Milan on September 20. In the meantime, Teller talks to Style.com about sonhood, fatherhood, One Direction, and his lack of anxiety of influence.

—Maya Singer



Photos: Courtesy of the Artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery

I suspect that for a lot of people who know your fashion photography, this show will come as something of a surprise. But do you see *Irene im Wald* as being of a piece with the rest of your work?

What I do for fashion and what I shoot for myself, I treat it differently, and I also treat it the same. If I'm shooting a campaign, I have to photograph clothes, I have to photograph shoes, handbags, and spectacles. There are commercial needs. I find it difficult to do, honestly, the pre-production. But I think I'm good at it, the fashion stuff. And once I'm shooting, then I'm just shooting. And for me taking a picture is always about a relationship; it's intimate. So these pictures, they are intimate, too, but in a different way.

What inspired you to shoot your mom in the forest?

I was always drawn toward this forest—I played there as a child. And I've always had this urge to do pictures there. But when I tried, it never worked. I was trying too hard, I think. Then I moved to my house in Suffolk, in the country, and there I began to try taking landscape pictures again. And it was better, and that gave me the courage to go back to my mum's place and take pictures there. So I went, and when I went, well, my mum was quite keen to go out walking with me, and so we were out walking and talking and that's what happened.

The anecdotes that run with some of the photos—are those the things you were talking about? I mean, those are rather intense memories, like almost having the money your mother sent you in London stolen, when you were young and broke.

No, no. The things my mum and I talked about, they were banal. Like we were talking about my children. Normal things like that. But then when I came home to England and looked at the photos, these other stories came back to me. It's all a love letter to my mother. She's getting older.

What made you start taking pictures?

I was training to be a bow-maker for violins. This was when I was about 19. I come from a family that makes bridges for violins, and I come from a town where maybe half the people make violins, guitars, and so on. So I was training, and I started having allergies. Asthma attacks. It was psychosomatic, you see—I didn't want to make bows, obviously. My cousin liked to take photographs, and we took a trip together, to Tuscany, so I could have a change of air. Well, there he is, setting up his tripod all the time, and I found it boring. His photography slowed us down. I was annoyed. And then one day I thought, what is he actually *doing*? I mean if he's wasting my time I might as well know why, right? So I look through the camera and suddenly...it was clear to me, right away, this is what I want to do. I've been looking and looking at the world, but when I look through this square, where everything is contained and concentrated, I'm really *seeing*. Do you understand? Because also, you have to understand that this was before everybody took photographs, before digital cameras and mobile phone cameras were everywhere.

I see you have an iPhone. Do you take photos on your phone?

You know, I'm no good at it. I wish I could take pictures on my phone instead of carrying this camera around everywhere. [*Sighs.*] Although it's fucking annoying, isn't it? There are too many pictures around. Wherever you go, people are waving their phones at you, showing you photos of their fucking kids.

Your work has been incredibly influential. Does that affect you at all? Like, do you ever open up a magazine and see some photographer shooting in the "Juergen Teller style," and think, *Oh God*. Sure. But what am I going to do—find these people and shoot them?

But if you see enough, like, faux versions of your style, it doesn't make you feel like you need to move your style on?

As you can see from this show, my style moves on anyway. If I made a conscious effort to change, that would give these other people too much power. It bothered me more when I was younger. Now I just focus on my own work, and shoot what I want to shoot.

Is there anything or anyone you'd like to shoot but haven't?

No.

Really?

If I want to shoot something, I shoot it. I'm not going to say, oh, wow, I wish I could shoot Madonna or Lady Gaga or something.

What if somebody asked you to?

If they asked me to shoot Lady Gaga? First, I'd ask them, how much money? *[Laughs.]* Look, I choose my subjects carefully. And I look at someone like Lady Gaga and I see, this is such a finished product, what else can I add? On the other hand, maybe in two weeks from now if she calls me and I meet her, I might see something else, and get inspired. Or I might decide, OK, my daughter loves Lady Gaga and I'll do this for her. It drives my agents nuts—they have no idea if I will or if I won't do something. The other day, I photographed One Direction. People were like, what the fuck? I found them very nice.

And you shot them because your daughter's a fan?

She's 15. *[Shrugs.]* I wanted to understand the appeal.

Have you ever shot anyone you really disliked?

Of course. Some people are dicks. But they're also idiots. Because, you know, I'm very nice; I try to connect and be kind. But at the end of the day, it's my shoot. I'm in control.

You've said you see *Irene im Wald* as the first part of a forest series. What do you intend for the rest?

I will keep photographing the forest. Over four seasons—I've done a lot of summer pictures already, and I'm really looking forward to the snow. I want to show how nothing stays still. That's what inspires me now, simple profound things. Like the fact that time moves on. People get older. And they die. And, you know, blah blah blah.