

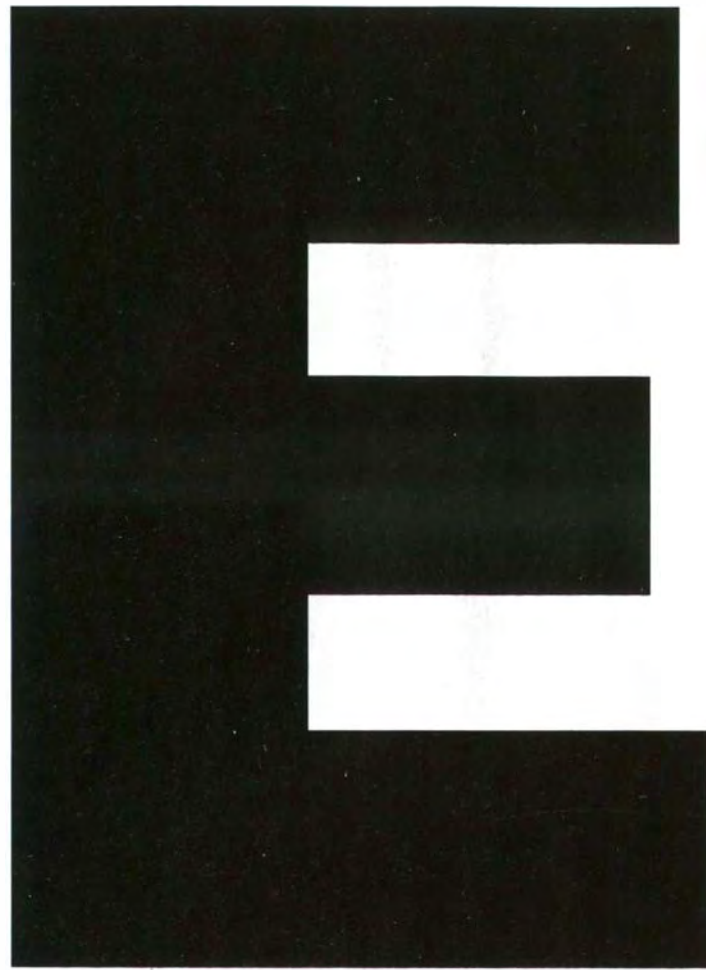
As next month's retrospective at Tate Modern will show, the US-born painter, photographer and filmmaker has lived artistic life to the full. Liz Jobey met him in the city he has long called home: Paris

WILLIAM

KLEIN

Above left *Painted Contact, Rant + White Rose*, 1955
Above *Candy Store*, New York, 1955
Above right *Lettrist painting for murals*, 1963-64
Far right *Drawing for Klein's 1969 film, Mister Freedom*





ven now, nearly a hundred years after Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald first stepped off a boat in Europe, there are young Americans who dream of following in the footsteps of the Lost Generation, living in Paris, meeting in bars, writing novels, or just reading them, painting in rooftop studios, fulfilling their idea of what an artist's life should be.

This was certainly the life that William Klein dreamed about as a teenager in New York in the early 1940s. Partly it was to escape his family destiny. His father had lost his money in the Wall Street crash and was reduced to selling insurance. His uncle Louis, by contrast, was a top entertainment lawyer, the Phillips in Phillips, Nizer, Benjamin, and Krim, whose clients included Charlie Chaplin, Mae West and Salvador Dalí, and who would, in the case of Benjamin and Krim, take over United Artists and eventually form Orion Pictures.

"Anybody [in our family] who could read and write would end up in this company of lawyers," said Klein, when we met last month in Paris, where he has lived for over 60 years. "My father was like



Jeanne Klein, née Florin, in the 1950s. She and Klein married in 1948, when they were both 20

Willy Loman, you know, he never really made it – and he was from a family where there were people who *had* made it."

We were sitting in Klein's apartment overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens, a beautiful sun-bleached room lined with books and paintings – his own and those of his wife, Jeanne, who died in 2005. They were married for nearly all of those 60 years, and as I'd waited for Klein to appear, the room had offered a palimpsest of their life together: layer after layer of papers, pictures, totems and souvenirs; books of every stripe, in English and in French, from Kerouac to Sartre to Moholy-Nagy. Eventually Nanou, their ancient tortoiseshell cat, strolled in following a beam of sunlight, and sank down, like a shade, apparently oblivious to my presence, and we waited together in the silence.

Klein came in, explaining a calamity that morning. He'd set off to drive back from his studio in Montparnasse at dawn, found the car battery was flat and had to call for help. Always a handsome man, at 84 he is still a striking figure – tall, rangy, slightly stooped, dressed in an elegant muddle of old sweaters, with a mane of white hair swept back from his hawkish face. He arrived in Paris in 1947, at the age of 19, a beneficiary of the American GI Bill, which funded ex-servicemen to finish their education. He had served from 1946 in Germany as an army radio operator and when the offer came, he chose Paris and the Sorbonne. He had always wanted to be an artist. In New York as a schoolboy he had haunted the Museum of Modern Art, particularly the cinema, where he'd seen films by Eisenstein and Fritz Lang. After the Sorbonne he enrolled briefly with the painter André Lhote, who had taught a young Henri Cartier-Bresson 20 years earlier, before moving to the far more stimulating atmosphere of Fernand Léger's studio.

Léger encouraged his students to look beyond painting, to get out into the street, to work with different disciplines, particularly with architects, which is how, in the early 1950s, Klein came to make a series of small abstract paintings intended as maquettes for large-scale murals. It was only this year, after they were unearthed from a pile of old artworks in his studio by the directors of HackelBury, his London gallery, that the paintings were restored, and one of the geometric panels scaled up to full size, to be included in an exhibition that runs concurrently with the retrospective of Klein's work that opens at Tate Modern next month.

Painting, for Klein, was only the beginning. He soon moved into photography, and from there into filmmaking, gradually incorporating all three disciplines into a career that has been, and still is, a testament to his creative energy and a determination to do things his own way. From the 1960s onwards, he has used his income from fashion and advertising photography, TV documentaries and commercials to finance his own feature films, which have famously satirised the fashion world, been for the most part violently anti-American and, in some cases, been banned in France.

At the Tate, Klein's work – including his paintings, photographs and films – will be shown next to another exhibition of work by the Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama, a decade younger than Klein. Although their lives have been entirely separate, Moriyama has acknowledged the impact of Klein's work, particularly his 1956 book of New York photographs, which plunged the viewer head-on into a blurred, grainy, frenzied city that seemed



Above Abstract photograph, 1953. Klein used a camera to record the movement of the revolving screens he had designed for the architect Angelo Mangiarotti. Inspired by the results, he began to experiment with photography

Opposite Klein in Milan, 1952, with the pivoting panels he had painted for Mangiarotti. Below right Mural Project No 1, 1952-2012. Klein painted this image, intended as a mural, in 1953. This year, for the first time, it was scaled up to almost five metres wide

to vibrate with urban tension. Klein's book, *Life is Good & Good for You in New York: Trance Witness Revels*, remains, with Robert Frank's *Les Américains*, published two years later, one of the most influential books in the history of photography.

Showing Klein and Moriyama side by side is what Simon Baker, head of photography at the Tate, refers to as an "argument show", an in-house term for the kind of exhibition that brings two (and sometimes three) artists together. In this case, he says, pairing Klein and Moriyama "complicates the idea of photographers as artists". The aim is to consider their "mutual influences, their affinities and their contrasts". Last year, talking at the Japan Society in New York, Moriyama described the effect Klein's photographs had on him at the age of 22 or 23. "It was a huge shock, such a huge impact on me... When I was questioning what exactly is photography, that's when I encountered Klein's work... [The New York book] is the one photobook that still poses the question, 'What is photography?' to me. There is nothing like it. It is an incomparable photobook for me."

At Tate Modern, there will be two separate exhibitions: visitors will be directed first through Klein, then into Moriyama, but Baker promises that at the heart of the show "you will find a point of contact that is pivotal".

Klein came to photography entirely by accident. His early figurative paintings, which clearly show Léger's influence, soon gave way to geometric works and then to abstraction. In 1952, after an exhibition at the Galleria del Milione in Milan, the Italian architect Angelo Mangiarotti commissioned Klein to do a series of black-and-white abstract paintings that could be hung as revolving panels to make a room divider for the interior of a modern apartment. It was only then that he picked up a camera and, seeing the panels spinning on their axes, realised "that something... could be done with the blur in the darkroom. That was my first contact with photography."

He began to experiment, cutting out paper shapes and moving them about under an enlarger,

to make free-flowing "light-drawings" and dramatic geometric prints. Some of them inspired the cover designs he did for the Italian design and architecture magazine *Domus*. In 1953 his abstract photographs were exhibited in Paris, where they were seen by Alexander Liberman, the art director of *Vogue*, who asked him to move back to New York and work for him.

By then Klein was already married. He has told the story many times, but it loses none of its magic. During his first weeks in Paris, thanks to the Red Cross, he'd been given a bicycle and was cycling round the city when he saw a beautiful girl. He stopped and asked her for directions. She gave them. He asked if she would meet him later. She said no, not that night, but she agreed to meet on the next. And that was that. She was Jeanne Florin, the daughter of strict Catholics, a French mother and a Belgian father, who was an architect. She became his collaborator, his muse.

"When I met her she was studying Russian and sculpture. And she was learning English, with a Hemingway book. I would pick her up at the little school where they were teaching English and she was reading 'Far Well to Arms' – that was the way she pronounced it."

They were married the following year. They were both 20. They lived on the outskirts of Paris, above a wine merchant. "There was a boulangerie on the corner, so we could smell the croissants being made. We had a big apartment and one of the rooms was my studio... very cheap. Living in Paris was something I always dreamed of. I saw myself hanging out at the Coupole and clapping Picasso on the shoulder... We had this apartment, my wife was incredibly beautiful, and people would stop her on the street. They would say, 'Why don't you go to *Vogue* and do photographs?' And she was from this semi-aristocratic family and she thought that was very vulgar, and being a model was not something she thought was cool."

Nevertheless, when they needed the money, she went to *Vogue* and worked as a model, and even then, fortune smiled. In the *Vogue* studios she met Richard Avedon, America's most famous fashion photographer. Klein chuckled as he told the story.

"He asked her, 'What does your husband do?' And she said, 'He's a painter.' So he said 'Can I come to the studio?' and he came, and... I was kind of good-looking at that time, and he said, 'You are the most beautiful couple I've run into, I have a commission to do a photograph of a couple kissing in front of Sacré Coeur, would you do it? I can give you \$500.' Five hundred dollars was a lot of money, and we did it and a couple of months later a friend called me from New York and he said, 'You folks are in the windows of every drug store in New York...' and it was [an advert] for some product, I forget what..."

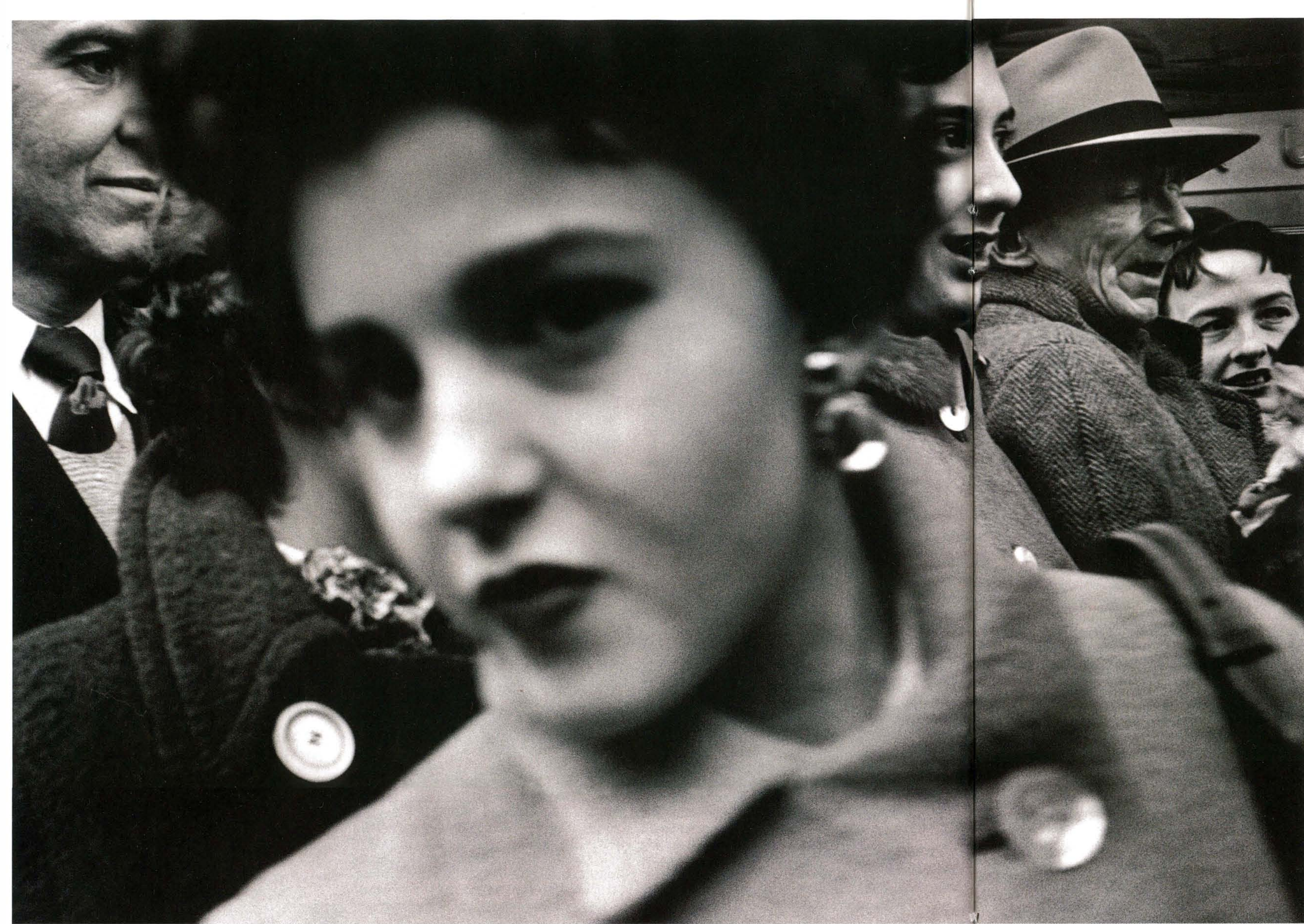
Klein has never seen the poster, but he has some of the contact prints from the session. "A few years ago, just before he died, Avedon sent me a note... 'I'm preparing a big retrospective, been going through my archives, and found this, remember?' He was very sweet, actually, and we got to be friendly."

In 1954, having accepted Liberman's offer, they set sail for America. One of the other advantages of the GI Bill – aside from the money, was, "if you got married to a European, she got a visa and a free trip to New York. So we went on the Queen Mary, paid by the United States government." ▶



'We had a big apartment and one room was my studio... Living in Paris was [my dream]. I saw myself hanging out at the Coupole, clapping Picasso on the shoulder'





Above *Woman in Crowd*,
New York, 1955
Right *Blacks + Pepsi*,
Harlem, 1955



Left *Bikini*,
Moscow, 1959
Above right The model
Barbara Mullen in *Hat and
Five Roses*, Paris, 1956
Right *Nina and Simone*,
Piazza di Spagna,
Rome (Vogue), 1960

It was in New York that Klein's career as a photographer took off. He began working for *Vogue*, but more importantly he began to make a photographic record of his return. "I felt like a Macy's parade balloon, floating back after a million orbits," he wrote later. "My priority was coming to terms with myself, and keeping a diary of what it felt like to come back home... I realised that whatever culture shock I felt would wear off eventually, so I went to town and photographed non-stop with, literally, a vengeance. I'd hit a vein, I had to do this book, mix everything I had learned as painter with my own New York craziness and let loose... I had neither training nor complexes. By necessity and choice, I decided that anything would have to go. A technique of no taboos: blur, grain, contrast, cockeyed framing, accidents, whatever happens... the rawest snapshot, the zero degree of photography."

Thanks to Liberman, Klein's supplies of film and paper were paid for, and his pictures could be processed at *Vogue*. He could also use the Photostat machine and experiment with enlargements that only emphasised the grain and the blur.

As Klein explained, "It wasn't as if my book was a revolution - well, it was kind of a revolution - it was, I mean, grunge and I had no photographic training and didn't know the rules and didn't care. But if I had a negative and I could put it in an enlarger, I figured I could do anything with it." He took his inspiration for the layout from the *New York Daily News*, with its grainy pictures and heavy graphics. "I saw the book as a tabloid gone berserk, gross, over-inked, brutal layout, bull-horn headlines. That was what New York deserved and would get."

Did he really feel so anti-American?

"You know, my father thought New York was the greatest place in the world and America the greatest country. And if I ever criticised America, they would say [adding a parodic hint of a New York Jewish accent], 'Your cousin Norman has this business in Tokyo and when he comes back and gets off the boat he kisses the ground...'

"I remember one of my uncles came to Paris and he took me to lunch at a place where he hung out, it was called *Chez Louis*. And he pronounced it "shezz". And he said, 'Hey Shezz, you wanna meet my nephew, he lives in Paris, he's an *aa*artist.' He had taken over one of the most prestigious movie outfits and didn't know shit about films."

His photographs, then, were a sort of revenge. "I came from Paris and I saw these underdeveloped slobs and I thought I could do what I want with them. And nobody objected to my taking photographs. What people don't realise today is that in those days - in 1955 - there weren't people walking around with a camera taking photographs. If anybody asked me what I was doing, I said, 'I'm 'The Inquiring Photographer' - the *Daily News* had this guy who photographed people and asked them questions - and people said to me, "Oh, when is it coming out?" And I said, 'Tomorrow.' 'Tomorrow?' You're kidding?' 'No, it's coming out tomorrow.' I know these people and I knew how dumb they were. I thought I had the run of the city and I could do what I wanted."

But New York didn't want his book. Despite Liberman's support, Klein couldn't get it published in America. "I showed the pictures to editors who saw no reason to print them because [they said] New York looked like a slum - they said, 'they're ▶

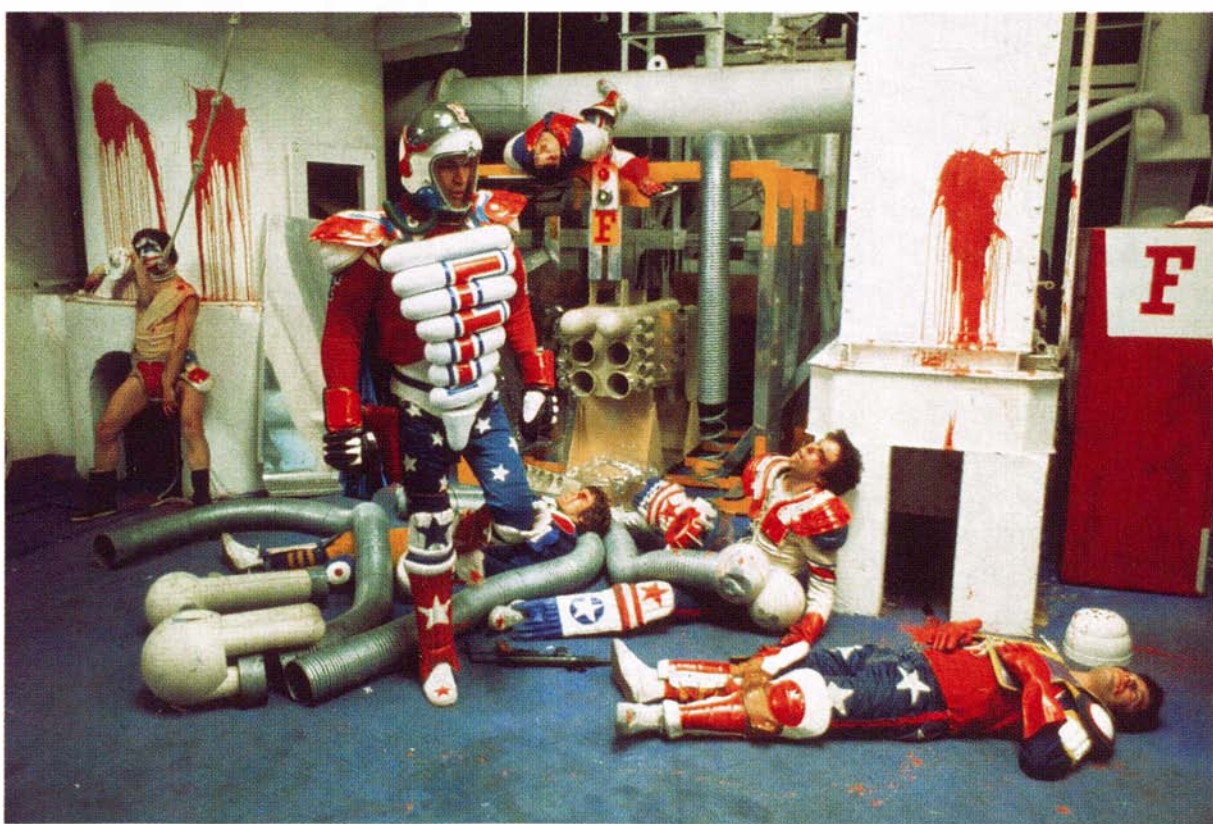


'I photographed non-stop with, literally, a vengeance... A technique of no taboos: blur, grain, contrast, cockeyed framing, whatever happens...'





Left Models backstage in Klein's 1966 film *Qui êtes-vous, Polly Maggoo?*



Left Mister Freedom surveys the death of freedom fighters, from *Mister Freedom*, 1969
Opposite page, top *Painted Contact*, Tokyo dancers, 1961

◀ so anti-American'. And I said, 'What do you know about New York? You live on Fifth Avenue. You go to the office on Madison. What do you know? Have you ever been to Queens or the Bronx?'"

It was only when he returned to Paris and took his photographs to Editions du Seuil, where he'd heard about a young editor called Chris Marker who was in charge of a travel imprint, that the book found a fan. Marker saw the photographs and decided on the spot. Apparently he put his job on the line – "This is going to be a book, or I quit."

"Marker was like their wunderkind," said Klein. "He was a writer, he did films, he was the house genius... so they went ahead."

Through his friendship with Marker, the now legendary filmmaker who died in Paris last month on his 91st birthday, Klein met Alain Resnais and other directors of the French new wave, who encouraged him to move into films. Fellini, who admired the New York book, invited Klein to come to Rome to work as his assistant on his 1957 film *Nights of Cabiria*. During delays in the filming, Klein took the photographs for his second book, *Rome*, and in 1958 he returned to New York to make his first short film.

Broadway by Light is often described as the "first pop film", and to watch it now is still an exhilarating 11-minute roller-coaster ride through the neon of Broadway and Times Square. Klein invented his own kind of visual jazz – violent, vulgar, seductive

and beautiful, with a soundtrack to match. The camera moves ceaselessly in and out of the alphabet of signs as the bulbs bloom and fade into abstract blobs of pure colour: Coca-Cola, Budweiser, Rock Hudson, The New York Times. Fascination. Continuous till 4am. Orson Welles said it was the first film in which "colour was necessary".

In 1959, Klein went to Russia, for his third book, *Moscow*, published in 1960. That year he worked as artistic director on Louis Malle's film *Zazie dans le Métro*, and was then invited to Japan to begin work on a book about Tokyo. "I went because I thought that Japanese photography was something very far from me, Zen and cool, and then I found that the Japanese were sick of the image of Zen photography and they wanted real vulgar, brutal and dirty photography."

In 1962 Klein and his wife appeared in Chris Marker's most famous film, *La Jetée*, a film about memory, in which they play a couple of the future. If you watch the film dubbed into English, the voice of the narrator you will hear is the voice of William Klein.

"You wanted to know about movies?" he said, picking up a book of his photographs that he had put together for the Tate and flicking through it. Instead, he began a running commentary, picking out each of the models. "My favourite model was Barbara Mullen" – he shows me the picture of her dragging on a cigarette beneath a rose-covered

hat. "She was a tough, Irish-American living in Brooklyn and she had a foul mouth, she was not at all [well bred]."

"And this is Polly Maggoo [Dorothy McGowan, the star of his 1966 fashion film *Qui êtes-vous, Polly Maggoo?*] She's all over the book."

He stopped at one of his most famous fashion photographs, of two models in black and white dresses passing one another on the pedestrian crossing of the Piazza di Spagna in Rome.

"That's a girl I discovered, Simone. You know I was up on the steps with a telephoto lens and I asked the girls to walk back and forth and do double-takes and the men thought they were hookers."

"Here's Fellini. I said to him 'Federico, come and be a model,' and he turned up. All these women were more or less society women. The guys are from Cinecittà. They're extras, I dressed them up. I like to mix up these real aristocrats with two-dollar..."

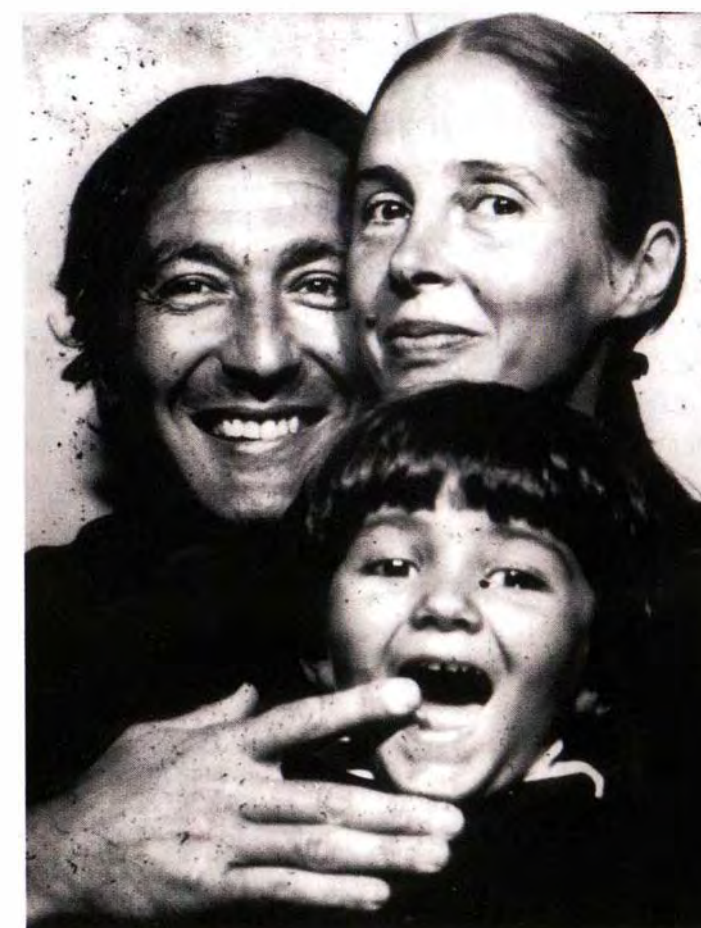
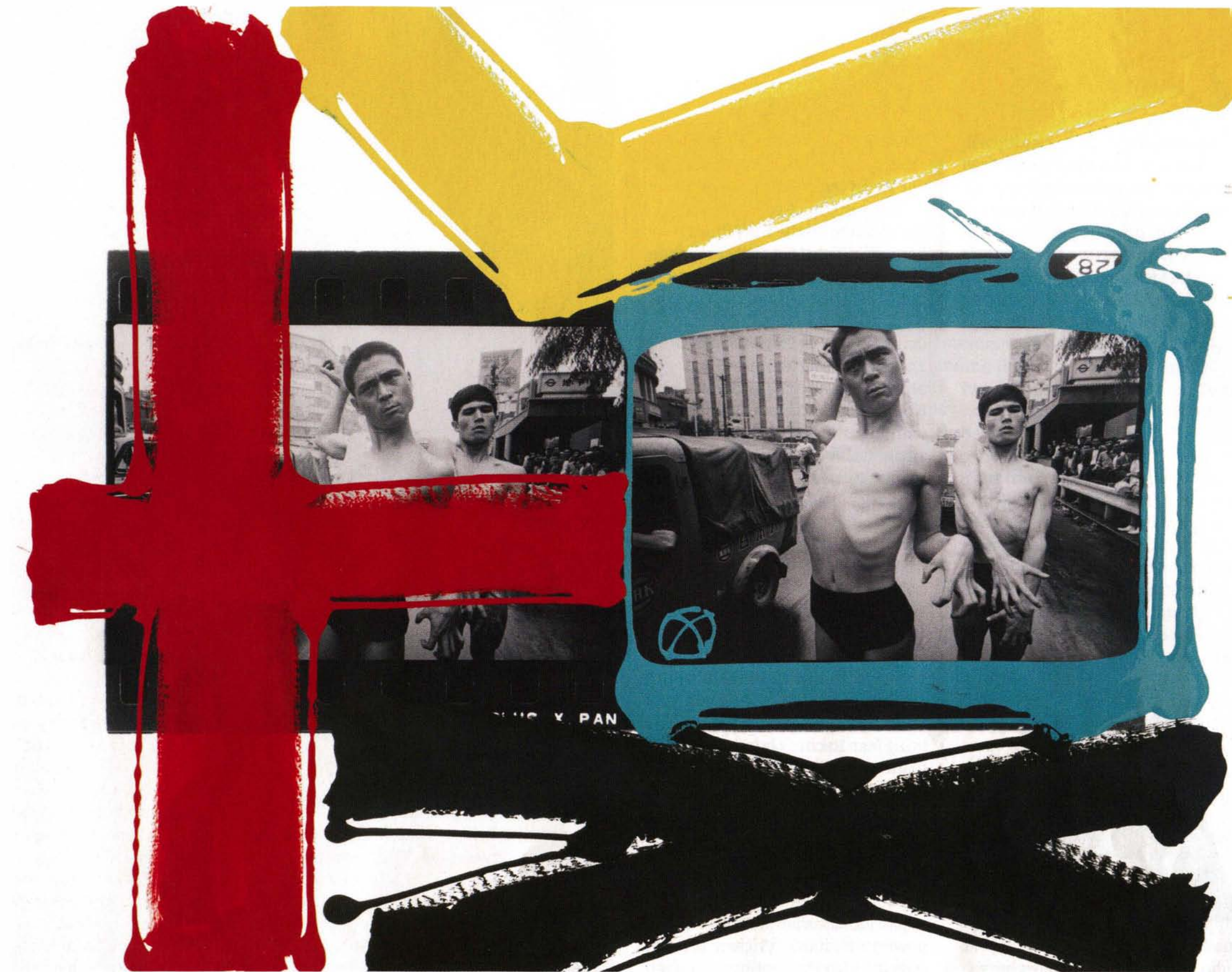
"And this is the mother of Uma Thurman..."

"Why did I take fashion photographs? I thought it was fun. And there was a lot of money. I really had a lot of money. I had the highest page rate in *Vogue*. This is a girl called Anne St. Marie... It's like a family album. This is a girl called Rosemarie, she ended up a concierge in Paris, she's dead now."

"I like these tough girls, they're very tough."

After *Broadway by Light*, he made a string of films, many of which fall under the late critic Gilbert Adair's definition of "scattershot satire". *Qui êtes-vous, Polly Maggoo?* mocked the absurdities of the fashion business, making no concession to the fact that he was still working for *Vogue*; *Far from Vietnam* (1967) was an anti-war film made by a series of directors, among them Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Claude Lelouch and Agnès Varda. *Mister Freedom* (1969) was his hilarious cartoon take on American imperialism, which was banned in France for six months. The government thought it was a satirical assault on the French and Klein was almost thrown out of the country. *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest* (1974) took footage from Klein's 1964 film about Cassius Clay and film of the Ali-Foreman fight in Zaire. *The Model Couple* (1976) anticipated *The Truman Show* and attacked the state's invasion of privacy. A young couple are selected to share a modern apartment under national surveillance and their life is broadcast on television. It is in his films that his contrary, absurdist, political side really comes through, though they're rarely screened at the cinema and are hard to find on DVD. In 2008, the US film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum showed *Mister Freedom* to a group of his students, after describing it as "conceivably the most anti-American movie ever made". They loved it, he wrote afterwards. "Maybe it took a George W. Bush – a full, real-life embodiment of Klein's ridiculous anti-hero – to drive home the satiric point."

By the 1980s, though, Klein's photographs were being discovered by curators who wanted to exhibit his pictures, which had rarely been printed up for galleries until then. Going back over his contact sheets, he began to study the strips of images he'd outlined with waxed pencil as his best shots. This inspired a new series of works he called *Contacts*, for which he enlarged the selected frames, then reproduced the strokes of the pencil with wide slashes of glossy paint in primary colours.



Photobooth portrait of William Klein, Jeanne and their son Pierre, c1969

ALL IMAGES © WILLIAM KLEIN/COURTESY OF HACKELBURY FINE ART, LONDON

For his most recent film, *Messiah* (1999), he invited different choirs to join the professionals and sing their way through Handel's oratorio. They included the Sugarland Prison choir in Texas and a drug addicts' gospel choir from New York. Mary Blume, in the *International Herald Tribune*, called it "a robust threnody for our times."

Last year he was in London to photograph the crowds at the wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton. When we met, he had just finished a fashion shoot for American Harper's Bazaar. He pulled out one of the layouts. He'd used a familiar method, in which he blows up one photograph to create a backdrop and superimposes another photograph of the model on top of it. In this case the backdrop showed a group of male sky-divers in a cloud-flecked blue sky with the model, in an evening dress, floating in their midst.

He'd been much amused by the Queen's parachute leap with Daniel Craig from the helicopter at the opening of the Olympics.

"Do people in England still like the Queen?" he asked. I nodded.

"Incredible." People seem to love her more than ever, I said, particularly because this is her Jubilee year, they want to pay tribute.

"I think it's obscene." He leaned forward, suddenly combative. "I don't know how you support the monarchy. How can you do that?"

"But you came to photograph the wedding..."

"I was photographing the street," he said firmly. The Queen would make a great subject for a movie, I suggested, only half-jokingly.

He raised himself up in his chair. "No. Way."

When I asked for the bathroom he directed me to the back of the apartment, along a long, black-painted corridor on which is arranged a family album of photographs. Here was Klein as a child, as a young soldier in uniform sitting on a white horse. Here was Jeanne, as a lovely young woman; then Klein in the studio, surrounded by huge abstract photographs, his baby son Pierre – now a filmmaker – naked at his feet; then Jeanne again, older, working in her studio, and a still from *La Jetée*, showing the two of them in semi-profile, the beautiful couple of the future.

When he had talked me along the wall of pictures, he came to an empty space.

"I haven't completed it," he said. "Some kind of superstition..." He shrugged. "Who knows?"

"*William Klein, Paintings etc*" is at HackelBury Fine Art, 4 Launceston Place, London W8, until December 20. The accompanying book is co-published by *Contrasto*, HackelBury Fine Art and *Howard Greenberg Gallery*, New York, £40. "William Klein + Daido Moriyama" runs at *Tate Modern*, London SE1, from October 10 to January 20 2013. "William Klein ABC" is published by *Tate*, £25