

Amateur dramatic

A new retrospective show of the looks at the iconic and experimental work of pioneering fashion photographer **Erwin Blumenfeld**. **Oliver Atwell** takes a look

Erwin Blumenfeld's death was as strange and as unexpected as the art that formed his career's output. On 4 July 1969, Blumenfeld, then 71, repeatedly ran up and down the monumental 135 Spanish Steps in Rome, Italy. It was an act of exertion that induced a fatal heart attack. He collapsed and died in the company of Marina Schinz, his former assistant and lover, who also happened to be 40 years his junior.

Blumenfeld's act of athleticism was not a heroic attempt at record-breaking – it was an act of suicide. The old man had deliberately stopped taking his heart medication and had knowingly run up and down those steps in order to run himself to death. As far as acts of self-destruction go, it's fairly creative. But then this shouldn't be much of a surprise to anyone familiar with the work of a man who prided himself on creating works that were so striking, bombastic and ahead of their time.

A new show at London's Osborne Samuel Gallery is currently showing

a selection of Blumenfeld's black & white work, but this is no mere attempt to draw in crowds by throwing some classic images on the walls. In fact, the show is especially notable for the fact that it focuses largely on Blumenfeld's earliest works. Absent is Blumenfeld's most famous 'doe-eye' image that graced the cover of the January 1950 issue of *Vogue*. While some of his more commercial later work is present, visitors are mostly subjected to a vast array of relatively unknown avant-garde nudes, portraits and Dadaist collages taken in the earliest portions of his career.

What the exhibition selection is especially good at is revealing that Blumenfeld was an artist who never really let go of his experimental and Dadaist leanings. There's a clear through-line from his early to his later works. As can sometimes happen, rather than bending to the commercial whims of mainstream culture, Blumenfeld forced the mainstream to adapt to *his* methods.

There's a particular reason for this, it seems: Blumenfeld was uncompromising in his work. So often we see photographers striving to escape the realms of amateur work in order to adopt the armour of the professional. Not so with Blumenfeld. 'I was an amateur – I am an amateur – and I intend to stay an amateur,' Blumenfeld once said. 'To me, an amateur photographer is one who is in love with taking pictures, a free soul who can photograph what he likes and who likes what he photographs.' There's a lesson to be learned there.

Free from the constraints of a photographic education, Blumenfeld was able to interpret the medium of photography as he wished right from the outset. His work is strange, personal and unashamedly avant-garde. Even in



Left: Dada Dancers (Schule der Physik), 1924-6, Mixed media

his later years as a commercial photographer, Blumenfeld, who found the art direction of his contractors counterproductive and stifling, decided to forgo the interests of his commissions and develop his own ideas. It's a method that paid off. His work is unique in the truest sense of that word.

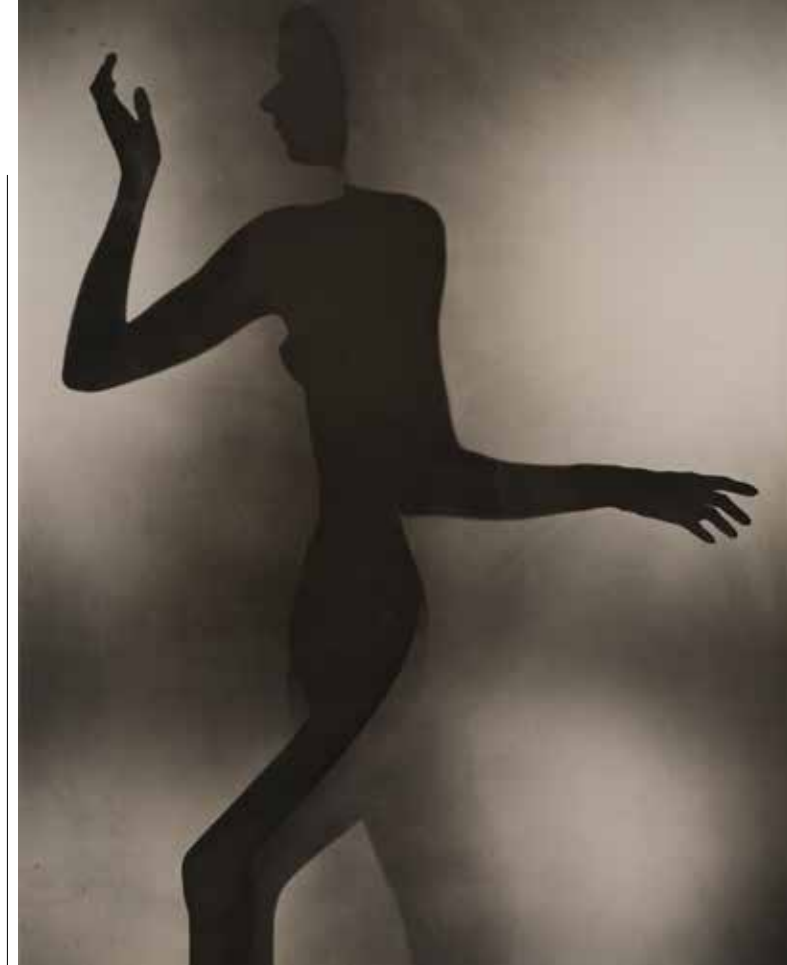
Works on show

The exhibition spans the period from 1916-1967, and traces the development of Blumenfeld's

experimental photography practice from his early collages through to some of the most iconic fashion imagery gracing the covers of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. He pushed the boundaries of the medium of photography and continues to influence photographers working today. Flick through any fashion magazine and you can see traces of Blumenfeld's work everywhere. As can often be the case, a lot of these contemporary photographers aren't taking new photographs – they're

Top right: Gestures, New York, 1942, silver gelatin print

Above: Kaleidoscope for Dayton's Oval Room, New York, 1964, silver gelatin print



just refreshing your memory.

Blumenfeld's work draws obvious inspiration from the agitprop and schizophrenic works of the Dada movement, a group of artists who exploded onto the scene in Zurich, Switzerland, in around 1916. These Dada-style collage works by Blumenfeld were actually not meant for public eyes and were simply intended as gifts to be included in letters to his loved ones and colleagues. Whatever the original intention of these works, they certainly inform an important part of the photographer's work and, as such, they are essential viewing. Another big influence was Man Ray, particularly in his use of the solarisation and double-exposure techniques.

Living history

Blumenfeld received his first camera in 1908, and from that point on considered himself a photographer, despite an array of careers that followed. He underwent many years of various jobs, including a dressmaker's apprentice, an ambulance driver for the Germany Army in the First World War (he'd planned to desert but his own mother had him arrested), a lingerie shop assistant and then eventually set up his own shop in

Amsterdam in the Netherlands, specialising in women's handbags. It was in this building in 1932 that he discovered a fully equipped darkroom. This inspired him to start taking photographs of his female customers, often without clothes, but eventually the shop went bankrupt.

Just a few years later Blumenfeld found himself swamped with commissions to take portraits of a variety of artists. He also married and had three children. His work caught the attention of photographer Cecil Beaton, who helped Blumenfeld secure a shoot with French *Vogue* in 1937. Soon enough, Blumenfeld was working regularly – until he and his family were interned in concentration camps during the Second World War.

Eventually the family were reunited, and they escaped to North Africa and then the USA, where Blumenfeld was put under contract with *Harper's Bazaar* in New York. In the years that followed Blumenfeld worked for American *Vogue*, *Flair*, *Life* and *Look*. His legacy and work were secure. In fact, in 1950 Blumenfeld was reportedly the highest paid photographer in the world. Not bad for a man with no formal training in photography.

The exhibition, Erwin Blumenfeld: From Dada to Vogue, is on show at the Osborne Samuel Gallery, 23A Bruton Street, London W1J 6QG, until 29 October. For more information visit www.osbornesamuel.com.