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Blumenfeld – beauty and mystery

By Jesse Hamlin | CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

He was a triple threat: a Dada collagemaker who mocked the morally corrupt world that brought forth the slaughter of World War I, an innovative fine-art photographer who reveled in the beauty and mystery of the female form, and one of the most influential and highly paid fashion photographers of the 1940s and '50s.

A German Jewish refugee who survived the madness of two world wars, Erwin Blumenfeld became famous for the elegantly original images he created for the covers of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and for advertising clients like Helena Rubinstein, Ford Motor Co. and Van Cleef & Arpels. He brought an artist's eye and imagination to fashion photography, as well as the darkroom techniques — solarization, multiple exposures, superimposed images, positive against negative — he'd mastered in the early 1930s in Amsterdam, where he

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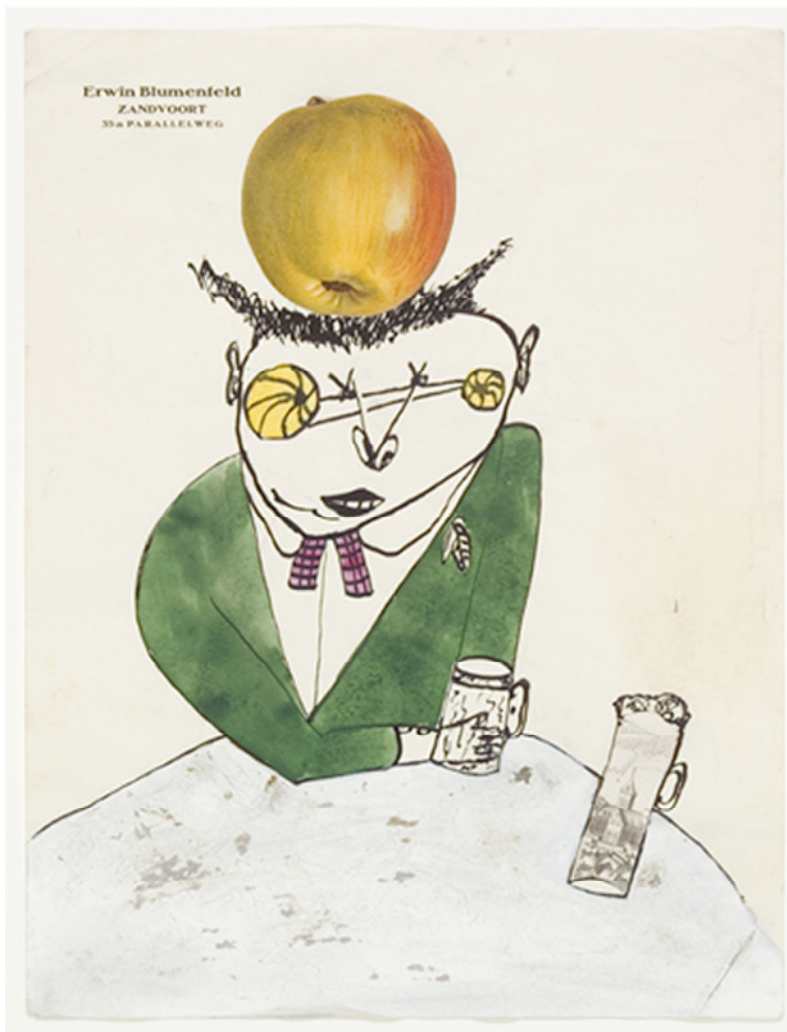
"Closed Lips" by Erwin Blumenfeld

Blumenfeld's work buzzes with humor, history and beauty

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owned a shop selling ladies' leather handbags. He discovered an old darkroom in the back of the store and found his metier.

Blumenfeld, who died in 1969 at 72, has been the subject of several books published in recent years, including William Ewing's 1996 "Blumenfeld: A Fetish for Beauty," and the artist's flip, bitterly funny autobiography, "Eye to I," not published in English until 1999.



Irreverent drawings are a lesser-known part of Erwin Blumenfeld's work, on display with his exhibition at Modernism in San Francisco.

His art and fashion photographs have been widely reproduced. But far less familiar are the little Dada collages, with their comically irreverent jumble of photographs, drawing, text and other graphic elements, that Blumenfeld made in the 1920s, when he allied himself with other Chaplin-loving absurdists like Tristan Tzara and Man Ray. Many are on view for the first time, in an engaging show at the San Francisco gallery Modernism that also features some of his famous and lesser-known photographs.

In his early work, Blumenfeld "opened the door to the development of a new visual vocabulary for photographers and visual artists," says Modernism owner Martin Muller, a lifelong devotee of Dada and other early 20th century avant-garde art. He's taken by the "radical formal aspect" of these works and "their subtext of political content."

Sly Marcel Duchamp may be celebrated as the ultimate Dada artist, says Muller, who's publishing a book about Blumenfeld ("Erwin Blumenfeld"; Modernism Inc.), out this week, that will reproduce many of the collages for the first time. But the work of German Dadas like Blumenfeld and John Heartfield (ne Helmut Herzfelde) strike him as more dynamic, a combustible mix of media that "is filled at times with sarcasm, political commentary and often erotica."

Muller had never seen about 75 percent of these works until he visited the Cambridge, England, cottage of the artist's younger son, Yorick, a writer. He'd met him several years ago in San Francisco -- where Yorick's son, Jared Blumenfeld, is director of the city's Department of Environment -- and expressed his admiration for Erwin Blumenfeld's work. They discussed publishing a book, and Yorick Blumenfeld invited Muller to come to England to see his father's work.

"I was blown away," Muller says. "I thought, 'This could stand a show at the Met in New York.' It has so much range. You can approach it from so many different angles."

One of the most potent pictures in the show is Blumenfeld's 1937 portrait of Carmen, the model who posed for Rodin's timeless sculpture "The Kiss." She was 80 when the photograph was made, a weary-looking woman with sagging breasts and a down-turned mouth. Perhaps only Blumenfeld, who was fascinated by the transience of beauty and the passage of time, would think to track down the model a half century after she posed for Rodin.

"She's the model for one of the most celebrated sculptures in history, which is, by anybody's account, the definition of beauty," Muller says. "And here she is old, tired of life, like somebody ready to depart this world. ... I think the questions raised by these works are still very pertinent. We're in a time when it's not OK to look old, when everyone wants to look 20 forever."

Blumenfeld barely made it past the age of 20, when he was drafted into the Kaiser's army near the end of World War I and sent to the Western Front as an ambulance driver, or "a corpse carrier," as he put it in his autobiography.

On leave in Berlin, he planned to desert to Holland with his Dutch wife-to-be, Lena Citroen. But his mother, a patriotic Prussian Jewish snob, told a relative, who ratted him out. Blumenfeld

was arrested and nearly executed before being sent back to the front. His younger brother, Heinz, was killed in action at Jaulgonne on the Marne in the final weeks of the war.

He gave his life "for the German Fatherland, Jewish family life and a world gone mad," Blumenfeld wrote ironically in his autobiography, in which he sounds at times like a Dada Mel Brooks. He fondly describes his father, a manufacturer of high-end umbrellas and walking sticks who died of syphilis, as a self-educated gent who indulged in "first-class dog-Latin but "also spoke proper Latin: Mens sauna in corpore santo. Or Sic transit Gloria mundi -- Gloria leaves on Monday."

Blumenfeld was born in Berlin on the eve of the birthday of the Kaiser, whom he described as a "mustachioed Majesty (Court barber Haby marketed his patent mustache-trainer under the name 'Mission Accomplished') with the permanent expression of a child in a huff. In those days the whole world was in a permanent huff. A ham with a passion for dressing up, a partial cripple with the historic mission of brandishing his gilded field marshal's baton and leading the world toward the glorious days of Herr Hitler: mission accomplished!"

A willful child who drew, read and took pictures, Blumenfeld seems to have picked up on adult hypocrisy early on. His mother spoke to his teachers about her "problem child," he wrote, and to his intense annoyance "studied Förster's psychopaedagogic masterpiece, 'How Should I Bring Up My Son Benjamin?', which was pointless, since my name was Erwin." Apprenticed to a haberdasher at 14, he had an eye for ladies' garments long before he made fashion photographs. He'd been seduced by the old-master paintings he encountered at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. They inspired the gauzy eroticism of his dreamlike photographs. "Completely unembarrassed, they displayed the naked beauty, rendered even more naked by their transparent veils, which my parents had tried to keep from me," wrote Blumenfeld, describing Botticelli's golden-haired Venus and Cranach's Lucretia. "Though still a boy, with manly resolve I professed the fetishes of my life: eyes, hair, breast, mouth."

He became a master of isolating and abstracting those forms of his desire, both in his fashion pictures and in the art photographs he made for himself. One of the most extraordinary is the 1937 image of a woman whose facial features have all been removed except her eyelashes and closed eyelids. They float mysteriously in white space. Blumenfeld made it during his fruitful Paris period, when the plugged-in British photographer Cecil Beaton championed his work and got him lucrative fashion jobs, and before he and his family were interned in a series of French concentration camps (they escaped the Nazis and got to New York with the help of an American consular official in Marseille who loved Blumenfeld's work). The picture has alternately been called "The Gaze" and "The Moment," and now hangs on the wall at Modernism, titled "Closed Lids."



"Liaison Eiffel" is Blumenfeld's iconic 1939 picture of model Lisa Fonssagrives leaning off the Eiffel Tower, swirling her dress.

"A work like this is absolutely unique," says Robert Johnson, the veteran Fine Arts Museums curator who wrote one of the essays in Modernism's new Blumenfeld book (the other is by Dada scholar Marc Dachy).

Some of Blumenfeld's architectural photographs, with their smart sense of Bauhaus/Constructivist geometric design, are also on view. He made portraits of famous men like Henri Matisse, Eugene O'Neill and Bruno Walter, but it was the nude female form that inspired Blumenfeld's best work. He loved all women, he wrote. "For fear of the little woman I took shelter in the Eternal Female."

His nudes are "very spare. They have a strange quality of elegance with a tinge of eroticism," Johnson says. "I'd say they're 75 percent elegance, 25 percent erotic. They could be shown in most states in the United States."

Humor, elegance and eroticism merge in the 1965 masterpiece "Holy Cross" -- a tight shot of a woman's buttocks and thighs forming the lines of a cross. "It's like Brancusi," Johnson says. Then there's Blumenfeld's famously haunting "Hitler," a photomontage superimposing Hitler's face onto a skull. The artist made this 20th century death mask on the night in 1933 when Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany. A decade later, the U.S. Army printed the image on millions of propaganda leaflets dropped from the skies over Germany.

Johnson was familiar with these pictures, but knew nothing of Blumenfeld's Dada collages until Muller brought them from England and hung them on the wall. "I find these artworks amazing because of their anarchistic passion," he says. "I like the iconoclasm, the sense of energy and anger."

Blumenfeld was not a skilled draftsman like his close friend and fellow iconoclast George Grosz. But he used his bold sense of design and color to create pictures that buzz with ideas and vitality. "Since I couldn't draw, I didn't want to draw," he wrote. "My style: futuristic Dadaism."

Gazing at Blumenfeld's iconic 1939 picture of model Lisa Fonssagrives leaning off the Eiffel Tower, swirling her dress like a wing, Johnson noted that in formally dynamic pictures like this, "there's no question that Blumenfeld influenced Irving Penn and William Klein and Richard Avedon."

One of the things Muller loves about Blumenfeld is that the artist never took himself too seriously.

"There's a spontaneousness, a restless sense of sarcasm and humor about the work which to me is critical," Muller says. "There's no pretense, no posing."

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