

RAPHAËL NEAL

Meet Raphaël Neal: Photographer, writer, actor, film director, and St Leonard's resident who shot Glenn Veness for our wonderful front cover.

1. What is your background? Where did you grow up, study etc?

I was born and raised in France, in a village an hour south of Paris. I didn't pursue further studies and left school as soon as it was legally permitted. I started taking pictures around the age of 17. I asked my friends to model and often used myself as a model to try things out.

2. And what drove you to become a photographer?

To me, photography has always had a strong link with cinema. As soon as I started fiddling with photo cameras, I tried to recreate movie posters or produce imaginary movie stills, like the ones that used to be displayed in theatres.

3. What brought you to this area? And when did you move here?

I moved to St Leonards in January 2022 after a long, dark period. I needed to leave the city to be closer to nature, especially Sussex. I lost my father in 2020 - he was from Brighton. I was grieving while also coping with a disastrous professional experience on a toxic French movie

set. It was during that time that I produced *Hollywood Nightmares*, a collection of self-portraits that pay tribute to the glamour of 1930s and 1940s cinema, but with a horrific twist.

It's very moving for me that this book is now being published, with a French and English text written by novelist Alice Zeniter. (*Hollywood Nightmares*, Raphaël Neal, ed. Le Bec en l'Air, 2024).

4. What equipment do you use?

I try to use my analog medium format camera (a Mamiya RZ67 Pro II) as much as my digital Sony one, but the costs of using film make it more and more difficult. Film has become a luxury, though something more experimental too, which is fun.

I like to shoot in the studio with artificial light but I also take photos outside with natural light almost every day. I do have a preference for my three old Fresnel lamps; as opposed to a flash, these tungsten lights produce continuous lighting, which you can easily model, put filters on and create shadows, while seeing the end results directly. It's like being on a movie set!

OPPOSITE
Photographer's
Portrait,
'Hollywood
Nightmares'
series,
Raphaël Neal,
St Leonards-
on-Sea 2022



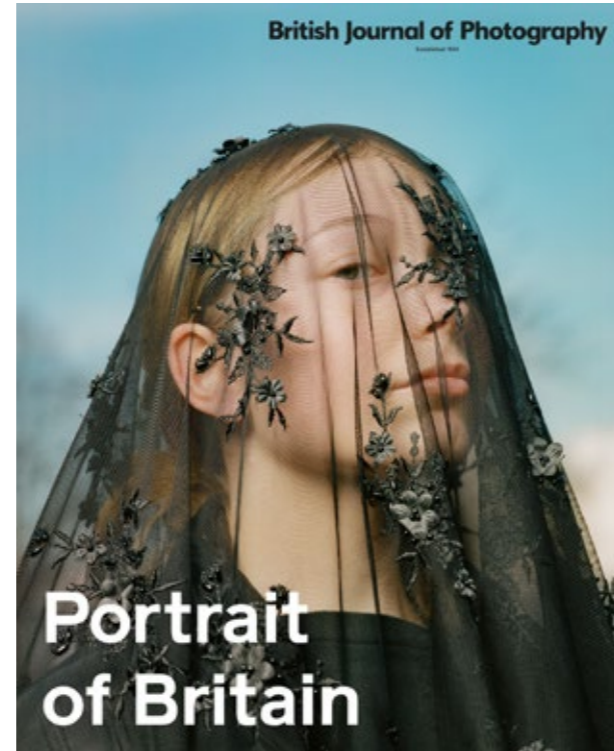


FEVER
POSTER;
PORTRAIT OF
BRITAIN 2022,
portrait
of Lara,
Crystal
Palace

5. How does your creative process usually work?

Before I come up with an idea for a photo series, there is often a chaotic period where I am just looking around and shopping for ideas and reading books. It's like compulsive eating after a fasting period. I like to look at other people's work, from early 20th Century photographers to movies, or paintings and drawings.

A theme usually emerges then, but it's only after a few playful and spontaneous shoots that I start understanding what I am working on exactly. I tend to prefer to find out things this way rather than settling for a concept in an intellectual way, which could make the whole project too scholarly. I do hope though that the idea of the series hasn't been explored before, which is unlikely: everything has been done before. I also try to make sure that I am not recreating something I have made before - even if I then found a successful "recipe". I see each new project as the contradiction to the previous one. If I have shot a very personal series, I usually then want to look outside again and, for instance, photograph other people and investigate societal



topics. I regularly switch between the more inward-looking photo series, that I call "In", to the "Out" ones, which simply look at the outside world with a renewed curiosity.

Once I know where I am going, I often draw sketches and take notes, I look for clothes and props in charity shops, and annoy my friends by talking about my ideas 24/7. But I also always make sure that when the shoot happens, especially if I am photographing someone else, there is space for improvisation and surprises. I'm always after some sort of magic, something that cannot be predicted.

6. You take pictures, act, write and direct. Which is your favourite and why?

Taking pictures is irresistible, it's so immediate and easy. Writing and directing a movie necessarily implies working with a team, asking for approval, waiting... This is why I enjoy working on my own so much. But again, it's important for me to switch between the In and the Out, because I easily get tired of myself and need others' inputs to make sure I'm not just repeating myself endlessly!

7. Do you have a dream location for a film or photography project?

The studio is my favourite place. I love creating a fake landscape, the wall of an imaginary bedroom, a continuous sunset light that remains unchanged for seven hours!... Sometimes, being in this artificial environment feels like a comforting and inspiring shelter. Also, fake flowers never die!

8. Explain the thought process behind your self-portraits?

I tend to work on a new self-portrait series every 4 or 5 years. Maybe I am documenting my aging process? My self-portraits are very much linked to cinema, in the sense that they allow me to be both the director and the actor - the totalitarian kind of ones! I can ask a lot from myself, physically and psychologically, without having to be polite.

It's very rare that the self-portraits are about me or even represent myself. In many of them I embody lonely people looking at the world from behind a window or a screen, waiting. Boredom is a topic I am fascinated with; to me it's the most controversial subject, it's the enemy of capitalism. We are all supposed to have fun, all the time, but I sense a lot of loneliness and staged happiness all round, and I find the denial about this very disturbing.

9. Who has been your favourite subject matter to date?

I'm very excited about the photo series I am working on these days: a new collection of portraits of men of all ages and walks of life, photographed in my St Leonards studio in a style reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite stained glass. I am now in the second phase of the project, during which I am adding paint and ink on top of the prints themselves, by hand, in order to create ornaments, almost like illuminated manuscripts - though the portraits are pretty sensual.

But again, I love getting commissions, for instance, from the French newspaper *Le Monde*. I get sent to meet people or see places I would have never thought of. Recently, I photographed the last veterans of D-Day, many of whom were



100 years old and being celebrated for the very last time. I saw some of them dance and cry. It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life.

10. Is there anyone you would love to photograph?

My dream is to be able to photograph each person I find beautiful or fascinating, whether it's in the street or on the bus. Unfortunately, I am either too slow to take the picture, or too shy to ask them to pose!

11. Do you prefer to be art directed, or left to do your own thing?

It's good for me to be challenged. Because I tend to work alone, I sometimes feel a bit claustrophobic and need to collaborate. I also find that restrictions can be inspiring. They force you to come up with solutions.

In that regards, working with musicians or standup comedians is a dream, because it's a conversation with an artist. They have their own world, their

Ambiguous
Loss,
'Hollywood
Nightmares'
series,
self-portrait
London 2021

own aesthetics and personality. The encounter often pushes us to create something new.

One thing I don't enjoy and find very threatening, are mood-boards. We live in an age of mood-boards, which are just like zombies: they look alive but it's absolute death. Most of the time, they are made by uncreative people who ask creative people to recreate a "vibe". It's not artistic. It's more like fashion, which I absolutely hate.

12. Who or what are your influences?

Many of my favourite photographs were taken in the 1930s - I've only recently realised this. I think it's because in those days, cameras (especially the large format ones) attained technical perfection but on an artistic level, photographers were keen to experiment; so much was to be explored. It was also the age of Surrealism, of psychoanalysis, of cinema. I love people like Madame Yevonde or Angus McBean, who were searching for beauty while experimenting and having fun. It's not pretentious nor trying to be clever. Their photos are amazing because they were themselves amazed. At people, at life, at the possibilities.

Yet whenever I realise that I am too influenced by someone or a specific style, I challenge myself to make sure I produce something new. Sometimes to the point of hurting myself: my *Hollywood Nightmares* series is precisely about ugliness and violence. It was an attack on beauty, in that I deliberately damaged what I held as the pinnacle of magnificence: portraits of actresses and actors of the Golden Age of Cinema. Deconstructing this has been very painful, yet salutary in many ways.

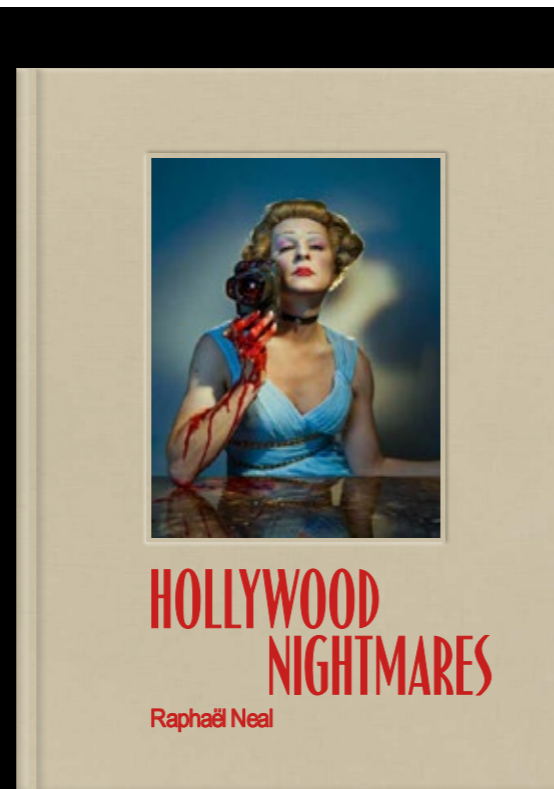
13. What projects / commissions do you have coming up?

I'm working regularly with musicians and I'm hoping to do more press photos and album covers soon. The new visuals for pianist George Fu's album will be out soon. I've shot the recent Fern Brady poster, on which I also appear as a priest, drinking milk squirted from her breasts! I'm based in St Leonards, so it had to be oat milk, of course.

I've also started writing movie scripts again, which I'm very excited about.

I'm presently in touch with several institutions and museums regarding my portraits of men, whom - by the way - were mainly from Hastings and around. All of them were non-professional models who generously agreed to sit for this project about masculinity and vulnerability. I can't wait to show these pictures, in which I reconciled myself with beauty and history, after the dark period that led to *Hollywood Nightmares*. It's about faith and finding the light again.

FIN



OUT NOW

Hollywood Nightmares
Raphaël Neal
raphaelneal.com

