
The New York Times

The Rich and Boring Need Not Apply

By WILLIAM VAN METER

Published: July 30, 2010

THE photographer and blogger Todd Selby had just returned from Tom Sachs's studio in Chinatown.



Todd Selby in his East Village studio/office.

"It was awesome!" Mr. Selby said, still excited as he downloaded images of the artist's work space. "That was as close to an ideal scenario as possible."

Mr. Selby is in his East Village studio, underneath the front stairwell of a onetime tenement. He wears a blue T-shirt with "K-9" printed on it, denim shorts, black slip-on Vans and his trademark plastic-rimmed spectacles. Around his neck is a red string laced through a penny, a gift from Mr. Sachs, who has a press capable of perforating coins.

The shoot took months to arrange. "He didn't want to do it for a long time," Mr. Selby said. "Some people just hear some Web site wants to come shoot them, and they're like, 'Oh, great.'"

Theselby.com is certainly not just any Web site. Introduced in 2008, it generates up to 35,000 unique daily visitors. Part online interior magazine, part who's who of global hip, theselby.com is a window into the private realms of those Mr. Selby deems "cool."

The site is also the key to how Mr. Selby combined personal passion and business savvy to achieve a most enviable second act. With it he has transformed himself from a middlingly successful magazine photographer to an in-demand commercial lensman. He has also carved out a pretty fabulous life.

"He gets the personality and emotion of a place through the people," said Wendy Goodman, the design editor of New York magazine, who had him shoot the magazine's entire design issue last spring. "Being curious about people's lives is an incentive for Todd, and that's why those pictures are so wonderful."

Part of the charm of theselby.com is that fashion A-listers like Karl Lagerfeld and Olivier Zahm of Purple get equal billing with freelance writers and surfers. For the most part, the celebrities are roped in through word of mouth and Mr. Selby's expansive social web. Some, like the model Helena Christensen, came about as magazine assignments. Being featured on the site is like a hip badge of honor.



The Selby is in Your Place



Simon Doonan and Jonathan Adler in Manhattan. Credit: The Selby/Abrams

“There’s two requirements,” he said of his casting. “The person has to be interesting, and the space has to be interesting. I’m not interested in someone who’s just rich and boring or paid some interior designer to make this crazy house.”

Mr. Selby updates the site weekly, and the shoots are proudly small-scale. He does his own scouting and works without lighting or an assistant.

A typical shoot lasts about two and a half hours and is an intimate exchange between him and the subject. He asks for a tour of the home and usually requests a wardrobe change. Often they’ll have lunch. At the end, he hands the subject a packet of colored markers to fill out a questionnaire that will run alongside the photos.

Mr. Selby’s online gallery is also indicative of a trend toward a rawer, more photojournalistic approach to interiors, a movement typified by indie design magazines like *Apartamento* or the interiors blog *Homebodies*, which are less interested in the faux perfection of shelter magazines than in the effluvia of everyday life. The spaces actually look lived in because they are.

“An unfortunate part of the Web site becoming more known is that people are more nervous and clean up,” he said. “I hate that.”

Mr. Selby’s cramped studio is more modest than the interiors he shoots. Every inch of wall space is covered with magazine cutouts and trinkets, akin to a teenager’s bedroom. In the back is a darkroom left by the previous tenant. (Mr. Selby shoots only digitally and uses it as a closet.)

Dangling from a string is an image of a chandelier, mounted on paperboard. A similarly treated life-size likeness of a narwhal tusk leans against the door. The simulacra are remnants of his recent vitrine installation at the influential Parisian store Colette, for which he printed out totems from some of his favorite shoots and made a hodgepodge dream house. (The tusk image came from the home of the interior designer Jacques Grange.)



Todd Selby in his East Village studio/office. Credit: Robert Wright for The New York Times

Mr. Selby lives nearby with his girlfriend of four years, Danielle Sherman, a designer for Alexander Wang, but thinks that his studio defines him more accurately than does their apartment.

“She’s a minimalist — very tasteful, slick and understated,” he said. “Every one of those words you would use the opposite for me. I’m into funny, tacky and colorful. I keep proposing that we split our house down the middle, or I take one room, she takes another. But that’s not going to fly. She says, ‘The house is mine, and the studio you can do what you want.’”

Incongruous in the studio’s clutter is a pile of monogrammed Louis Vuitton luggage on the scuffed floor, a gift from the company. Vuitton commissioned him to photograph “The Journey of a Man’s Wardrobe,” a behind-the-scenes narrative of its fall 2010 men’s wear line, from design studio to runway.

Besides the Vuitton collaboration, he has, in the last year, shot campaigns for Nike, Habitat, Crate & Barrel, Converse and, new for fall, Cole Haan. He has shot for Paris Vogue, and mainstream interior magazines are beckoning.

In April, Abrams released “The Selby Is in Your Place,” the hardcover compendium to his site. The first printing of 12,000 sold out within the first month. The book is now on its third printing.

MR. SELBY, 33, did not set out to be a photographer. Growing up in Orange County in California, his artistic outlet was ceramics, and he went to a special summer camp to follow his pottery muse.

“If you see pictures of me as a kid,” he said, “I’m the same I am now — nerdy glasses, hot pink shorts and animal print shirts. I wasn’t cool. But I didn’t know what cool was.”



Meryl Smith in Manhattan. Credit: The Selby/Abrams

He applied to the Rhode Island School of Design with a ceramics portfolio but was declined. He attended the University of California, Berkeley for Latin American studies and moved to New York in 1999, eventually landing at Details as a photo assistant. In 2001 he took a photography night class at the School of Visual Arts. Then, as now, he photographed his friends in their apartments.

Despite getting work for magazines like Spin and Dazed & Confused, his success was middling. He wanted to do a more personal project; he just wasn't sure what.

“Usually professional photographers will have a show at a gallery in Chelsea,” he said, “or a photo book from a small art press. That was the traditional way to do it.”

Instead, he took advice from his friend Mark Hunter, who runs thecobrasnake.com, the wildly successful behind-the-scenes party blog.

“I pride myself on marketing,” Mr. Hunter said, “and knowing how to reach an audience and build a following. What I thought would be great for Todd was to create something people would want to share.”

On the Internet, he told his friend, you don't have to be as selective as at a magazine. Share 20 images instead of one. Break the rules.

Within two months, the site had become so popular that Mr. Selby made it the center of his professional life.

“This is something photographers haven't caught up to yet,” he said. “When I started in 2001, it was very clear. You start working for magazines, work your way up to the best magazines, the art buyers and art directors see those great magazines and hire you to shoot an ad campaign. Now it's a totally different game. People who are making decisions about ad campaigns aren't looking at magazines for inspiration. They're looking at the Internet.”



Jeff Johnsen in Los Angeles. Credit: The Selby/Abrams



Fashion stylist Sofia Achaval and Thibault De Montaignu in Paris. Credit: The Selby/Abrams



Ozzie Wright and his son Rocky River in Sydney. Credit: The Selby/Abrams

Teresa Iezzi, the editor of the *Creativity*, an *Advertising Age* sibling that focuses on the creative process of the industry, doesn't argue.

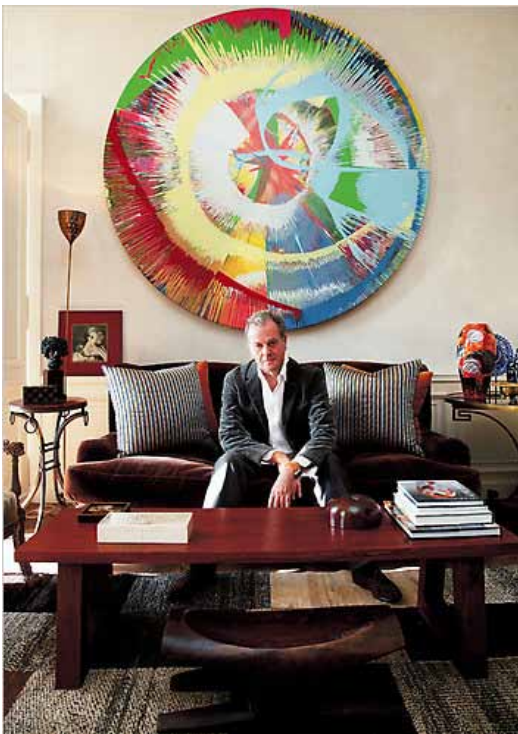


Olivier Zahm in Paris. Credit: The Selby/Abrams

“Agencies are looking at what their audience is looking at,” Ms. Iezzi said. “They’re interested in taking part in popular culture and getting past the notion of making an ad. They want to create something talked about and that people want to share.”

Increasingly, an online presence is necessary to gain a following. Even A-list photographers like Terry Richardson, Nick Knight and Hedi Slimane have blogs. (Mr. Slimane often publishes images from his shoots online months before the magazines hit the stands.) And fellow bloggers, like Scott Schuman of the *Sartorialist*, have won campaigns with Burberry and DKNY.

Four days after the Sachs shoot, Mr. Selby is photographing the hairstylist Gerald DeCock at his Chelsea Hotel apartment. Mr. DeCock’s small studio has a hot-pink ceiling and orange floor. The brick walls are covered in gold leaf, and electric artificial cherry blossoms glow faintly. Myriad colors blend into one another, and the whole vibe is reminiscent of a harlequin outfit put into a blender without the lid.



Jacques Grange, Paris. Credit: The Selby/Abrams

“Some people describe it as the inside of a kaleidoscope,” Mr. DeCock said of his abode. “I used to have beanbag chairs, and it was more ’70s. Now I’m more into the psychedelic Victorian vibe.”

Mr. Selby and Mr. DeCock climbed the ladder in the kitchen to the roof deck. It is about five times the size of the apartment, with a captivating view of the city. A mockingbird Mr. DeCock has christened Julietta landed on her usual perch on a spire and looked on. Mr. DeCock sat on a chair and added splotches of color to an abstract painting he’s been working on. Mr. Selby quietly snapped away and then murmured, “Isn’t my job the greatest?”

A version of this article appeared in print on August 1, 2010, on page ST1 of the New York edition.