

ALEXIA SINCLAIR IS AN ARTIST WHOSE VISION IS SUSPENDED NEATLY BETWEEN THE ANCIENT WORLD AND CYBERSPACE. BY COMBINING TRADITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND DIGITAL TECHNIQUES THIS YOUNG AUSTRALIAN PHOTO-ARTIST CREATES LUXURIANT, COMPUTER-MANIPULATED COLOUR IMAGES THAT DISTIL THE LIVES OF BOTH HISTORICAL AND MYTHICAL CHARACTERS AND PRESENT THEM WITH AN ALMOST BAROQUE SENSIBILITY. **ROBERT MCFARLANE** SPOKE TO THE ARTIST AND DISCOVERS THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THESE EXTRAORDINARY AWARD-WINNING ARTWORKS

MAGGICAL MONTAGE



: CHRISTINA OF SWEDEN

Alexia Sinclair is probably best known for her recently created suite of colour photographs of regal women throughout history. It's a defining series of work that brilliantly recreated the lives of twelve of history's most influential women – from Sweden's enigmatic Queen Christina to the Greek siren who ultimately captivated Julius Caesar – Cleopatra – and was first exhibited this year at Sydney's Australian Centre for Photography as part of the *Phantasia* show.

Sinclair's career currently divides evenly between exhibiting as a respected photo-artist and also winning awards for her elegant, inventive advertising imagery. In 2007 Alexia Sinclair was chosen as the overall winner in the Harpers Bazaar/Canon Fashion Photography Award while her artworks are held in private and public collections across the country.

We met in one of the more rustic corners of Sydney's Centennial Park – an appropriately timeless landscape we both chose for her portrait for *Driven*. Sinclair is thirty-two, and bears more than a passing resemblance to women chosen by Botticelli to model for his most timeless paintings. 'People have mentioned a similarity to Botticelli's *Venus*,' Sinclair reluctantly admitted, adding as a deflecting afterthought, 'he often used the same model, especially for works commissioned by the Medici family.'

Sinclair's highly detailed portraits are constructed from dozens of different photographs. The model, background setting, costumes and accessory pictures are almost always photographed at different times and places – to be then retouched and merged by

Sinclair into her final, completed image using computer software such as Adobe Photoshop.

'I start with an image in my imagination and work towards it,' explains Sinclair. 'When I decide on a series of images it's almost like receiving a gift. I then deconstruct it to decide from where I will source the elements so I can create what's in my imagination. That's always what drives me.'

'I also adore incorporating elements of gothic architecture into my work – they are so decorative. There were masters at work then... creating things that were beautifully made – I love anything from carved stonework to swords. My great-grandfather was a master stonemason and I grew up admiring flying buttresses rather than a stone I might find in the street. Things then were finished to perfection.



: MARIE ANTOINETTE

'I chose these women as subjects because they lived their lives so differently to anyone else. When I was travelling in Europe on my Masters' scholarship from Newcastle University I began to hear about lots of interesting women and wanted to find out how they survived in those times. What also interested me were the light and dark sides to their characters.'

After deciding on Ancient Rome's murderous but ultimately doomed Empress Agrippina, for example, Sinclair went to extraordinary lengths to create an appropriate, if ironic setting for the final picture.

'I decided to include a traditional, triumphal Roman arch I had once photographed in Volubilis, Morocco and one other classic symbol of Rome – a lion – in my photograph,' says Sinclair.

'Back in Australia, Lennon Brothers Circus was in town and I was given permission to

photograph a two-year-old lion that had not yet grown his mane. I just adore animals and when I was peeking into his cage, the lion tamer saw I wasn't afraid, so he let me crawl in and get some intimate portraits of the lion. The handler protected me to a degree but ultimately I had to get close to get the picture I wanted.'

The finished image by Sinclair is freely seeded with symbols from the distant epoch inhabited by this most remarkable woman. Agrippina, sister of Caligula, mother of Nero and ultimately a victim of her son's calculated matricide, is portrayed lost in a serene, even golden moment. The empress is depicted relaxing next to a Roman lion, while sitting amongst a patch of lethal looking, orange toadstools.

'Agrippina was notorious for poisoning her opponents,' says Sinclair, 'so I decided she should be surrounded by the weapon of her

choice,' adding 'I like to show a sense of the truth and the untruth – the sun and the moon, if you like – in my characters.'

But in creating her bright, elegant interior tableaux of France's equally doomed Marie Antoinette, the female monarch who, says Sinclair, epitomised excess, the photo-artist relied more on instinct to get to the first stage of constructing her image – that of photographing an appropriate background.

'I was in the Palais des Ducs Dijon in France and was attracted by a shard of light that led to a room – a large ballroom. I went in and put my camera on the floor and I took just one frame before I realised my medium format camera had a very noisy mirror and shutter so I quickly got out of there before anyone noticed me. I didn't know if I had anything until after I returned to Australia. With other backgrounds



: AGRIPPINA

I had photographed I arrived back with a hundred rolls of medium format film.'

But for Sweden's enigmatic, cross-dressing Queen Christina, Sinclair portrayed the androgynous monarch alone in a forest practicing archery, a sport normally reserved for men in the 17th Century.

'I wanted her to personify [the Greek goddess] Artemis,' states Sinclair, 'which is why I love images of the hunter and the huntress. Archery was Queen Christina's favourite sport,' declares Sinclair.

'She was raised as a boy and at her coronation actually took her oath as a king – not a queen.'

In portraying a monarch who spent much of her youth conditioned as a male in both dress and behaviour, Sinclair's photograph suggests the beauty and ambiguity of Christina's life that was to follow. She would ultimately abdicate

the Swedish throne and escape into Vatican exile in Italy dressed as a man.

'She eventually became only one of four women to be buried among the Popes in the Vatican,' declares Sinclair.

'I also love playing with the sensuality of colour and things that are rich but not overpowering. And I do love fashion. I had hoped to include Catherine de' Medici who arrived in France complete with her Italian chef. De' Medici also invented high heels,' Sinclair adds brightly.

'She was a small woman and had to find a way to tower a little.'

Sinclair's next project will cover the lives of twelve male regals, beginning with Genghis Khan and ending with Napoleon.

'I've already been to China and photographed the Great Wall as a background. But my Mongol emperor won't be portrayed in glamorous

robes. Mongol warriors lived in the saddle and even drank the blood of their horses in order to stay alive.'

'Ultimately I suppose I am interested in popularising history,' reflects Sinclair. 'I have always thought of history as the gossip of the past and I enjoy losing myself in the beauty of each period.'

'In ten years I would like to be successful enough not to have to struggle to source elements for my work. I would like that freedom, to keep sourcing things from my imagination. That's my goal. I am ambitious to the point of sometimes needing to slow myself down because there's never a time that I switch off from my art – it absolutely consumes me.'

'I would love to make a book of my work. I want people to be able to own the images and to be able to look at them whenever they please.' [•] www.alexiasinclair.com