



Susan George

They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Actress Susan George does. But she prefers to do it with a Canon EOS 40D rather than a twelve-bore shotgun.



Photo courtesy of Susan George Photography

The eponymous Oscar-winning 1969 film that recalled the gruelling dance marathons of the poverty-stricken Thirties Depression starred Jane Fonda, but it could just as easily have been Susan - a film icon of the Seventies who starred in the controversial *Straw Dogs* movie alongside Dustin Hoffman.

Susan and her actor husband Simon MacCorkindale now own the Georgian Arabian Stud Farm in Exmoor and this diversion from her mainstream career has led to a metamorphosis for actress/film producer turned fine art equestrian photographer, Susan.

Although she wouldn't refuse to pick up the phone if her friend Steve Spielberg was on the other end, Susan said recently that she had become less enchanted with certain aspects of the film industry at one point in her life which led her to take on a very different challenge, that of breeding horses.

She told *The Daily Express*: "I was offered a lot of repetitious roles after *Straw Dogs*". She laughed, "I

used to thumb through every script to see at what point I had to take my clothes off. Eventually I decided I wanted to focus on something completely different and try to take that to the top."

Susan has been photographing her horses (she's got 58 on the stud farm) for nine years and has developed her equine photography skill at a steady canter.

She was approached by leading Mayfair gallery, Petley Fine Art, to showcase her work - the first time the gallery had ever held a photographic exhibition.

"I was a little nervous about the exhibition" she confesses. "But only because I was entering unfamiliar territory. In the event it was a great success. We exhibited 50 images, some of them 3' x 3' - and we had a fantastic nine day show."

Susan had worked with an etching fine art printer David Noble to prepare images for the exhibition.

She says: "David is a purist for the ancient art form of photo gravure. The etching process used is quite complex and precise involving making a copper plate for each image. They are then acid bathed, so the treacle like etching ink can take hold of the image. Paper thickness, density, opacity and colour are so important." And these were all hand chosen by Susan. "Each print is individually hand crafted. We were looking for perfection in every print - and if the completed image wasn't perfect it was rejected."

Apart from a little technical support from close friend and top photographer Brian Aris, who has been taking photographs of her since the Seventies, Susan is completely self-taught.

She tells *Focus*: "I am an instinctive person, performer and likewise photographer. It's all about gut feeling for the moment. I am an eternal optimist and I always believe that what I do will work, if I give it 100%."

She adds: "I have always had an eye for an image and throughout my life I have always loved taking pictures. I never thought of photography as something I might do professionally but that changed a few years ago when I discovered I could learn so much about my horses through the eye of a lens. I love movement, animation and spontaneity.

I understand my subject and I know instinctively when to pull the trigger. What I have always tried to do is capture the intrinsic spirit of Arabian horses, their beauty and their very heart and soul. I can pick up a moment in time and taste it, smell it, feel it.

I love evocative images. I strive for my pictures to have an enigmatic quality. I love light, colour and shapes – I look at horses as an artist would at shapes, movement and colours".

Susan has taught herself not to plan the way she is going to shoot an image. "If I start premeditating it would get in the way of my free style. Of course I embrace all the basics but the act of the shot itself is pure impulse. I don't want to study text book instructions – it would impede my instinctive spontaneity."

And she's not fazed by a lack of imaging technical knowledge.

"I am very aware of how important light is but I am not technically minded at all and, until quite recently when I bought the Canon 40D from Calumet, I hadn't been using the most up to date high quality cameras.

Susan's favourite shot from the Petley exhibition is the image entitled 'Pure Gold' (right), a shot of a stallion she bought years ago from the Paolo Gucci stud farm. "It's a truly emotive image this horse is such a special horse; athletic, full of passion and flamboyance and oh so handsome."

Horses of course by dint of their sheer size and power can be dangerous animals, particularly if you are up close and personal with a camera.

She recalls: "I am quite happy to get under them, around them and on top of them to get the pictures I need. I just trust that if I am in their path at speed they will stop jump over or around me. I've been kicked a few times over the years but it has never put me off. I love the challenge."

Susan believes that the discipline required for exceptional horse portraiture is no different to that needed by a landscape or wildlife photographer:

"Patience is key" she notes. "Sometimes it takes me days or even weeks to get just one shot...and occasionally I can capture the perfect picture in less than five frames."

She shoots using early morning or late afternoon light – and of course, never uses flash – or even a tripod. Most of her work with horses is handheld, on the move.

So after a successful acting and producing career that's spanned decades, the development of a leading Arabian Stud farm, the launch of a successful line of homeopathic horse treatments (called Susan George Naturally), and now her first photographic exhibition – what's next?

"Now I plan to photograph horses in the desert and

other exotic places. I've got a long term plan to travel extensively with my camera, capturing the relationship that horses have with humans in different cultures the world over."

She concludes: "I've spent my life giving to the camera and now the roles have been reversed."

Then again you wouldn't put it past Susan George to put in a call to Robert Redford and talk him into filming The Horse Whisperer 2.

Susan George: www.georgianarabians.com



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