

INTERVIEW

## We talk to Jonathan Becker, the taxi driver who picked up Andy Warhol from Studio 54 and ended up photographing the King of England

The photography legend is in luck: the Katonah Museum in New York is holding a retrospective of his impressive career, which includes everyone from the Duchess of Alba to Isabel Preysler.



Jonathan Becker, one of the photographers with the most story to tell. / GETTY



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Jonathan Becker (New York, 1954) has photographed so many legends that he has ended up becoming one of them. It is not surprising that the retrospective of his work at **the Katonah Museum in New York**, which can be visited until January 25 and has been curated by Mark Holborn, has been a real success and the launch of his book, 'Jonathan Becker: Lost Time', published by Phaidon, follows the same path.

Exactly, in Becker's path, following the reference to Proust in the titles of both tributes. It is not difficult to come to the conclusion that 'Lost Time' refers to 'In Search of Lost Time'. But, although **the photographer is happy about all these tributes** from the comfort of his home in Bedford, a town of colonial-style mansions near the Big Apple, he knows that his life has not been exactly like that of the famous Duchess of Guermantes of the French writer, even though he has ended up surrounded by reflections of the fictitious but exquisite lady of French society.

Son of William Becker, a theatre critic, financier and exporter to the United States of films by directors such as Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, François Truffaut, Luis Buñuel and Akira Kurosawa, his father was for Jonathan, in the words of Capote in 'Music for Chameleons', **a gift, but also a whip**. "He was difficult with me. I imagine he wanted something else for me," he confesses.

His mother, on the other hand, was always a moral support. Patricia Birch was a disciple of Martha Graham, the famous American choreographer, and one of the great stars of Broadway. However, the teenage Jonathan Becker **was not very clear about what would become of his life**. He was - again, the reference to Proust - lost, without a path to follow.

And, aboard a Volkswagen he inherited from his grandmother and amid his father's complaints about his fate, he followed the advice of a good friend and signed up for a summer course at Harvard on Surrealism. He was 19 years old. "I was always interested in that interwar period. I found it very romantic. I was amused by everything that had happened in Paris at that time," he says on the other end of the phone, before travelling to the French capital to become the photographer for Le Bal .



Nicole Kidman at the 2000 Vanity Fair Oscar Party in West Hollywood. / JONATHAN BECKER

The gala, which was held on November 30th, was the scene of the debutantes of the international scene, and which is organised every year by Ophèlie Renouard , the best-connected public relations woman in Paris and one of the ladies with the best taste in the city. This year, Eugenia de Borbón , daughter of Luis Alfonso de Borbón and granddaughter of Carmen Martínez-Bordiú, and Apple Martin, daughter of Chris Martin, from Coldplay, and Gwyneth Paltrow have become the big stars.

Returning to Becker, during his postgraduate studies on Surrealism, he wrote an essay about the photographer Brassai, a witness to the fascinating Belle Époque, which reached the hands of the Hungarian.

**The almost eighty-year-old Brassai**, whom Becker describes as a "very shy" man, was so impressed by Becker's work that he sent him a letter congratulating him.

They became friends and Jonathan even travelled to Paris, where the veteran was living. His father seemed to be proud of the young Jonathan's new direction. "He was responsible for finding me a room there. It turned out to be that of the **actor Jean-Pierre Léaud**, who was leaving because he had argued with his discoverer, François Truffaut."

After a stint in the French capital as a photo correspondent for the fashion magazine W, for which he photographed film director Louis Malle among other movie stars, he returned to the United States and shot his flash at the best parties for the same magazine that had given him his first opportunity. However, his premise was always not to do advertising and, even photographing Fran Lebowitz, King Charles of England in several of his estates or Donald Trump in his three-story penthouse in Manhattan, he had to manage to make ends meet.



Charles, Prince of Wales, and Camilla Parker-Bowles at Buckingham Palace in London in 2001. / JONATHAN BECKER

That's how Jonathan Becker decided **to become a taxi driver for three years** , while he was trying his hand at the big city. One day, while waiting in line outside Studio 54 - "I've never liked clubs," he says - he picked up Andy Warhol , for whom he later ended up working. "He was very seductive and demanding. And if you didn't have a direction in your life, it became dangerous, but luckily I knew what I wanted. Or at least what I didn't want," Jonathan confesses. "I've never been interested in celebrities for the sake of it, but in interesting people," he says.

That job as a taxi driver was not a waste of time, but rather a metaphorical one. “One day I went to the home of fashion editor Diana Vreeland and took a photograph of her in her iconic red living room. She recognised me as the taxi driver who had driven her home one day,” says Becker with a certain pride. Then came his golden age working for Vanity Fair under the legendary Graydon Carter, where he landed thanks to the recommendation of Bea Feitler, iconic art director of Harper's Bazaar and Rolling Stone.

His colleagues included Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Helmut Newton and Bill King. His subjects ranged from Gloria Vanderbilt to Carolina Herrera, Gloria von Thurn und Taxis, Bianca Jagger, Peter Beard and Basquiat. But Jonathan also did so during **the golden age of Spanish publishing**, with Lourdes Garzón at the helm, and photographed Carlos Falcó, Isabel Preysler, Baroness Thyssen...

**You have collaborated with industry greats such as stylist André Leon Talley, writer Dominick Dunne and journalist Bob Colacello. Who did you enjoy working with the most?**

André was great. Dominique was terrible. And Bob is adorable. A brilliant guy.

**And with his fellow photographers: Slim Aarons, Annie Leibovitz, Helmut Newton, Avedon...**

I only met Avedon once. Annie and I have parallel careers and we have seen each other vaguely, over time. And Slim was very competitive, but when he retired we became very good friends.

**She has been to Clarence House with the now King Charles and Queen Camilla...**

Yes, I was impressed that someone was in charge of putting toothpaste on their toothbrushes every night. They have excellent service. In any case, I greatly admire the king because he has dedicated his life to the Crown.



Cover of the book *Lost Time*, by Jonathan Becker. / EDITORIAL PHAIDON

**She met King Juan Carlos after his abdication when it was rumored that he would settle in the Dominican Republic...**

I couldn't admire him more. He's made some mistakes, but he's still a man. We all make mistakes. He created a fantastic modern country. I love Spain. He's a very warm man.

**Hot?**

Yeah.

**Caliente means “horny,” Jonathan.**

Oh, no, no. I didn't mean that. I meant warm, close. But yes, it is very manly, even if it is not politically correct to say so now.

**He also photographed the Duchess of Alba.**

Yes. She had a great sense of humor. I asked her if I could portray her as La Maja. She replied: “Of course, but not as a nude.”

**Imagine you were a taxi driver again, where would you go?**

Let's explore the city together. Will you pay for it?

**How much does it cost?**

Taxis are very expensive. We'd rather take my car around. That would be cheaper.