

## [INTERVIEW]

Ian Leake was a landscape photographer who didn't like his own pictures. He knew they weren't very good and was searching for new inspiration. Then one day he went to a sculpture exhibition and everything changed. The exhibition was at the Royal Academy in London and the featured artist was French sculptor Auguste Rodin, famous for powerful nudes such as *The Kiss* and *The Thinker*.

'I had done some nudes before then,' said Ian. 'I knew that was the direction I wanted to go in, but really when I walked into the room of the exhibition at the Royal Academy and saw these incredible bronzes and marble statues, the amount of energy and power they had was just amazing. It was one of the few exhibitions I've been to in my life when I walked out not really being able to feel the ground under my feet.'

Ian began to specialise in photographing nudes and has now built up an impressive catalogue of work. His pictures are characterised by graceful lines, elegant shapes and a simple, uncomplicated style. One frame features an outstretched hand, others depict the curve of a back, or one foot resting lightly on another, or an arm locked around a knee, or hair tumbling down shoulder blades. The aim is to celebrate beauty and explore how shapes can reveal character.

Of course, artists have been depicting the naked body since ancient times, and have often fallen into trouble for it. Is it a problem for photographers working today?

'It's not a problem at all, partly because of the kind of work that I do. Everybody who sees the prints realises immediately that this is not – I'm not quite sure how to say it politely –'

Seedy?

'Exactly. It's not seedy. It's not glamourous kind of stuff. It's not manipulative. It's not taking advantage of people. It's never been a problem for anyone. The only problem I've found is in some parts of the US where magazines aren't comfortable with any form of nudity because their distributors get concerned about it. There are parts of the US where even what I do is seen as inappropriate.'

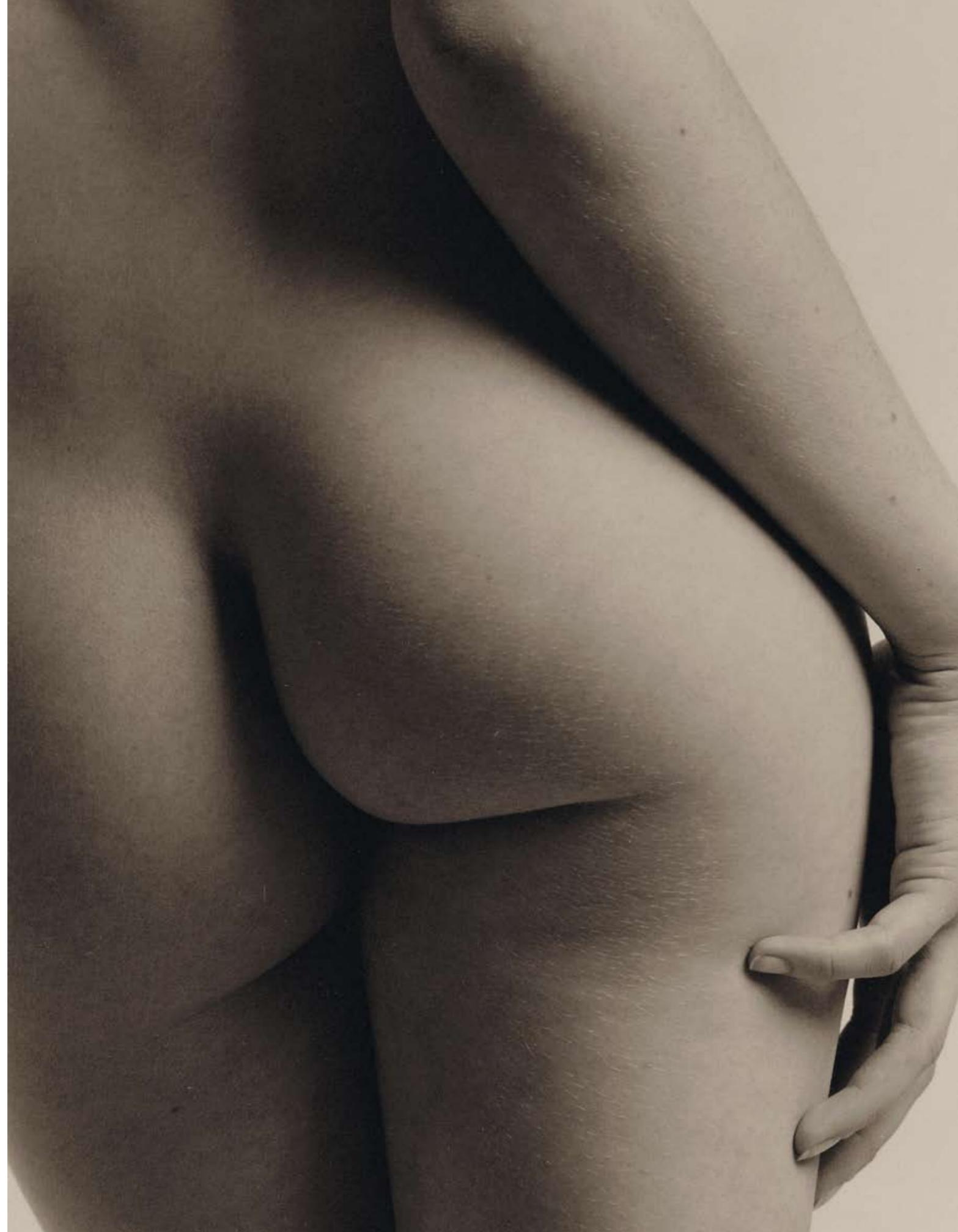
Ian, 40, only rarely takes landscapes now. He concentrates on nudes, typically spending three hours in the studio and working with the same model several times so that he can get to know her and search for a new perspective on her. 'It's kind of like exploring. I found quite early on that if you have a preconception it usually doesn't ►

# Lifting the mask

Ian Leake specialises in photographing nudes. He talks to **Mark Bentley** about exploring character and having respect for models

## Profile: Ian Leake

Ian Leake was first given a camera at the age of 11 when he was going on holiday. In his formative years he was influenced by photographers such as Charlie Waite, Joe Cornish and Edward Weston but he now takes inspiration from many arts, including sculpture, painting, literature and dance.



◀ work, especially if you haven't worked with the model before. When they arrive they are always different from the person on the portfolio or the person you spoke to in the real world. In the studio she's different.

'I tend to prefer to work with people who are not really professionals, because professionals have a standard repertoire of poses that they'll rattle through, knowing that the vast majority of photographers will be entirely happy with the same pose they've done 101 times before. It can be quite hard to get to the personal. Richard Avedon wrote an essay called *Borrowed Dogs* which was all about the mask that people put on when they go before the camera. It's a really interesting read. I wanted to get past that mask, to find

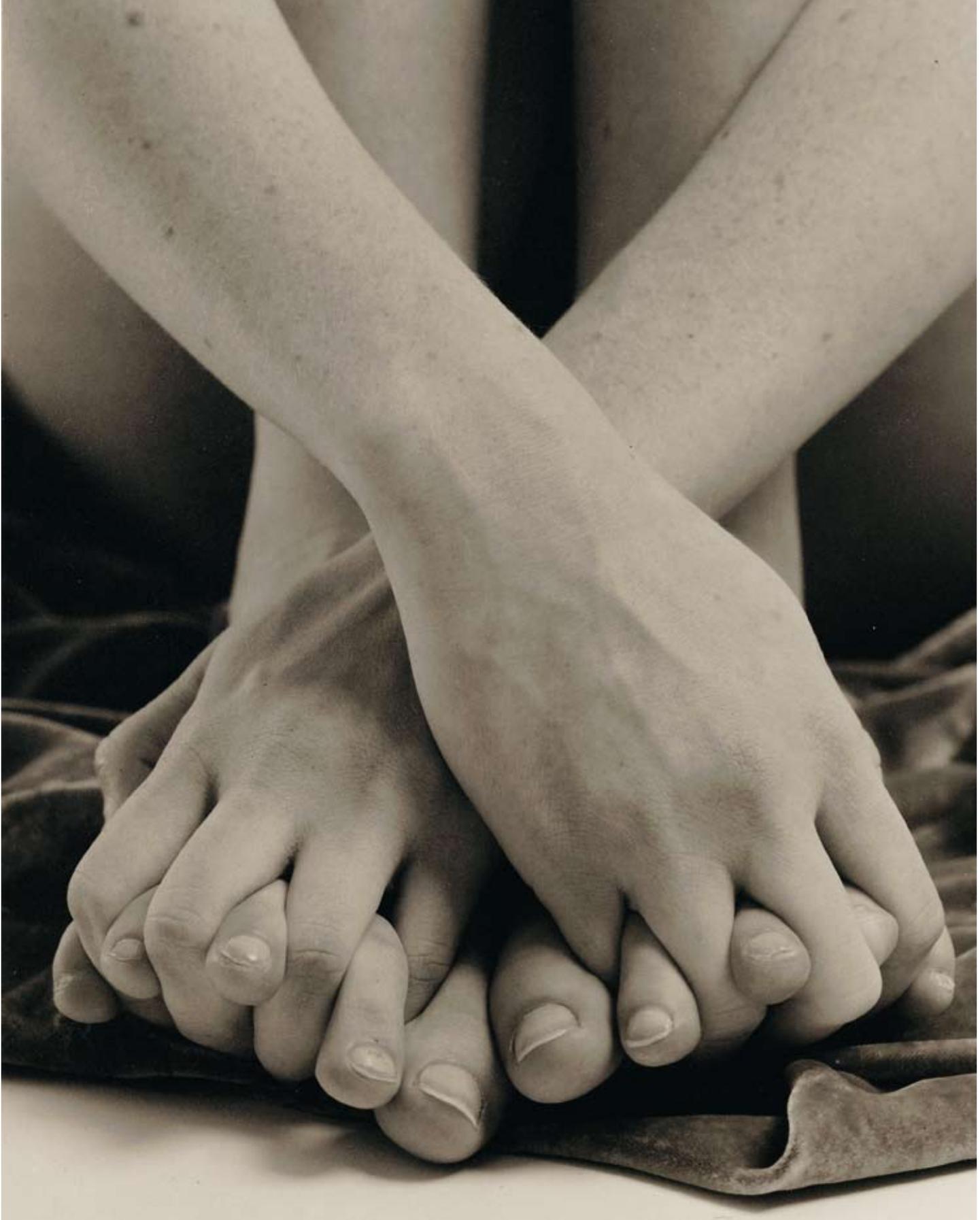
something that's personally unique. It's a very exploratory way of working. I try to look for mannerisms or things that are distinctive about the person and keep working around ideas until we find that magical thing.'

Revealing character, then, is a key element of what brings the pictures to life. 'Character is really important to me. I do try to find the person, the things other people don't see. One of the most thrilling experiences in the studio is when the model sees something about herself that she's never seen before. Sometimes it could be a scar, or the little nicks you get as a kid, or a mole, or when they see a picture and they suddenly realise just how beautiful they are and they've never really appreciated that. You get these

moments of almost revelation when they see just the right picture, that feels wonderful.'

Ian works slowly, using mostly a 10x8 large format camera and printing onto handmade paper using platinum and palladium – which he believes suits the tone of his pictures perfectly. He keeps the lighting simple and aims to create pictures which provide what he calls a glimpse of people.

'I'm a great believer in uncomplicated pictures. Partly that's come about through contact printing. My first contact printing was done with a 5x4 and if your final print is five inches by four inches you actually don't have the space to put a complicated image in there. And even with a 10x8 enlarger you ▶



◀ only have a certain amount of space to put an image in. Somebody said photography is all about editing; that taking out stuff is as important as putting stuff into a picture. I consciously try to simplify and find pictures that show the essence of someone.'

Does he have any tips for photographers

interested in taking nudes? 'Probably the most important thing is to get a good model. If you are learning, it's worth paying for a professional who knows what they're doing and will help you find the picture that you're looking for. Once you get familiar and find your feet then follow

what's in your heart today, not what's in fashion today.

'The other thing is always remember that your model is a person with their own world-view. They have the right to respect and be treated properly. Treat the model in the way you'd like to be treated yourself.'

## Link

● Find out more about Ian Leake's work by logging onto his website at: [www.ianleake.com](http://www.ianleake.com)