

# BEYOND the SEA

FAMOUS FOR  
HIS BEACH  
PHOTOGRAPHY,  
Massimo Vitali guides us  
through a coastal shoot  
and explains why, under  
the surface, his scenes are  
much more than just fun  
in the sun.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN



The 71-year-old Italian photographer Massimo Vitali began his fine art photography career at the age of 50, quickly finding success with beach images, such as this one, *Pan di Zuccheru Masua*, from 2014.





**I**talian photographer Massimo Vitali is renowned for his large-format panoramas of sun-drenched pleasure takers on beaches around the world. From Sicily to the Italian Riviera, Coney Island to Rio de Janeiro, his images give viewers a front-row seat to what might be called the theater of the strand. His camera has focused on human behavior in clubs and other public venues, but the luminous beaches have best lent themselves as the backdrop for sociological commentary and have become his signature works.

Born in Como in 1944, Vitali became hooked on photography as a child when he received a camera as a gift. After high school in Milan and art school in London, he worked in Italy as a photojournalist and movie-camera operator. At the age of 50, he launched a career in fine art photography. His beach scenes quickly achieved commercial success, particularly among US collectors including Sacha Baron Cohen, Cameron Diaz, Courteney Cox, and many museums. He continues to add to the series even as he embarks on a new project that addresses illegal immigration to Italy's shores. Via Skype, from his studio in Lucca, Vitali offers insights about the meaning and the making of his celebrated pictures. ▸



*Opposite: The photographer.  
These pages: Butterfly Valley, 2008.*





**Don't some people object to being photographed?**

No, not really. I never had problems with people on the beach. Despite the fact that I am on top of big scaffolding with a huge camera, people don't take any notice of me. They are more aggressive if you go around with a small camera and you look a bit nosy, but I am high and far away and nobody really cares. It would be more difficult if I took pictures with my iPhone, but no one knows what a plate camera is anymore and you can tell them anything. Sometimes one of my assistants says that we're measuring the speed of swimmers! We can say the most stupid things sometimes.

**Which cameras and lenses do you use?**

I always have digital and large-format film cameras side by side. I have an 8 x 10 Phillips, made by a guy from the Midwest who stopped making these cameras about 10 years ago—just disappeared, nobody knows where he's gone. And I have an 11 x 14 Deardorff from the '50s, a classic American camera that is a fantastic format, a big chunk of film and you get a lot of detail. The digital is an Alpa with a Phase One back with 80 million pixels. The lenses correspond to a bit more than a 50 mm on a smaller camera. I don't like to use wide angles. You get the perspective of the wide angle and it's very fake. You have a huge foreground, huge sky, and what really interests you is too small because everything is pushed farther back. I prefer normal to slightly longer lenses without the awkward distortion. I tried a panoramic camera, but that again is something really contrived. I don't like special cameras. I try to use cameras that see in a way that everybody could see with their eyes or a little camera. Even the lenses should be very normal, otherwise you lose all the matter-of-factness that I like my pictures to have.

**How do you compose a shot?**

I don't direct the people. I just choose a position, locate the water line, and put the camera on level, and the picture is normally there. You don't have to move around or change. It should be something really matter-of-fact. We drop the lens and shoot straight on, never looking down because it changes the view. The pictures should allow you to invent your own stories, like I do when I take the pictures. That's why I have a certain number of people in the pictures. If you have 10 people it just doesn't work. If you have 10,000 people it doesn't work. If you have 30, 60, or 100, you have bread for your brain. You can invent things and there is participation from the viewer. Collectors always say, "Massimo, every time I go in front of your pictures I see something I hadn't seen before." That's one of the reasons I take a picture.

**How many exposures do you make?**

I shoot very few pictures. If I have problems I shoot more, but if I'm sure that I have a good picture I shoot maybe only two of a particular subject. In the last 19 years I've shot 4,700 negatives or digital photos. Digital doesn't cost anything so you can take more, but it clogs your hard disks and then you have to go back and you waste a lot of time choosing, correcting, and raw developing. So with a digital I take maybe 10 or 20 pictures in a day. A normal day it's about 10 film negatives and maybe 20 digital. But it's nothing compared to a fashion photographer. What I shoot in 20 years he would shoot in a day. I've printed maybe a couple of hundred subjects, but most get editioned in six, so I have thousands of pictures around in collections. ▶

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*Catania Under the Volcano*, 2007. "The people are on these planks because in 1600-something there was an eruption from Mount Aetna and lava went all over the city, so next to the city they don't have beaches," says the artist. "This picture is really strong. It's the geometry, the force of the volcano, that the lava came down and men built this thing with pieces of wood, which is ridiculous, but it makes them happy."

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**Why do you always print on such a large scale, often more than 6 x 7 feet?**

I want to be able to look not only at the whole picture but also at the faces of the people, what kind of sunglasses, what time is on their watch. I want the viewer to be able to move in and out of the picture, to get close and follow the story and see the details, and then move out and see the whole image. Sometimes people make prints that don't have a reason to be that large. With mine I think there is a very specific reason. I sometimes print the film negatives directly with the enlarger, but if things must be corrected I have a guy who makes huge scans that I print on a Lightjet that uses a laser beam to expose photographic paper. I prefer photographic paper to inkjet prints because the color is inside the paper. With inkjet the dye is little balls of color on top of the paper. I've seen a couple of pictures of mine printed with those machines and I really hate them.

**You face-mount the prints onto acrylic sheets using the Diasec process. Why do you like that?**

Because it gives weight. It turns a piece of paper into an object. I used to have just a white border around the image, but now I put on frames as well. Normally I make the prints in Milano and have them put under Plexi and framed in Dusseldorf. It's funny, all the famous photographers go to the same Dusseldorf lab and Diasec place—Grieger—and the same framer. A lot of photographers send their assistants. Jeff Wall sends an assistant who can stay, like, three days on one picture, more than I can spend. Now they are all printing on a machine that is called a Latex printer, much nicer than the usual inkjet printers, and the paper is, like, 3 meters wide. It's the only machine you can print that wide. The only limit is the size of the Plexi, and this lab has 3 x 5 sheets of Plexi made expressly for them.

**How long do you and your crew stay at a location?**

The trips are never more than maybe one week or 10 days. Otherwise the assistants get nervous, they get bored, and I want to go home. We have a good dinner, and always try to find good restaurants, so everybody's happy. Everything is like a ritual, and everybody knows exactly what you have to do.

**Shooting beaches must provide a lot of opportunity for good seafood...**

Absolutely! Our favorite fish is from Lampedusa. There's nothing like it in the world! It's just unbeatable. Whatever fish you get there is so flavorful. It's in the middle of the south Mediterranean and you have the current that goes out into the Atlantic Ocean and it's just super tasty. If I eat the fish from the Atlantic it makes me laugh.



**Do you swim and sunbathe?**

Absolutely, even when I don't take pictures I spend time on the beach. I just like to lie in the sun, go into the water and swim. For me it's very important. Happily I live, like, 15 miles from the beach, a horrible beach, but I'm not fussy. I can go for a lunch break for a couple of hours and come back and work in the afternoon. It doesn't have to be on holiday.

**You've also photographed clubs and sporting events. Is that because you used to go yourself?**

I was doing the beaches in the summer and I thought, "What do I do this winter? Where do I get people who are relating to one another?" So I tried the clubs and then a few concerts and festivals, which worked out OK, but it's really tough. You have to place lights everywhere and when I used to do the clubs they could still smoke inside. You would go and put up equipment around 6 o'clock in the afternoon, go out for dinner,



and wait until midnight when they open. Then people wouldn't leave until 5 or 6 in the morning, and you have to wait until they go away to take down your lights and strobes, so you get home at 8:30 in the morning, and everything you have stinks of smoke. Now they don't smoke, but still, it's a bit too much. I'm older. I prefer to be outside.

**Do you think you are going to stick with beaches, or are you going to switch to another subject?**

I will always take a few beaches, but I am also doing other projects. Now I am doing a project about photography and the people that are photographed. Maybe I exploit the people who are on my beaches, though I don't think they feel so exploited. But sometimes—I'm talking especially about photojournalism—there are really poor bastards in terrible conditions, maybe in a war, and as if they don't have enough problems, they also have to be in a photograph with nice light on the body. I really wanted to do something with illegal immigrants from Africa and the Middle East who come to the Italian coast. It all starts or ends on the beach anyway. And so I am going to photograph some of these people and have the buyer donate to a charity that is helping these immigrants.

**What else have you been working on?**

I've also done a series of what I call "the little diptychs," where you have one sublime picture, a beach or something like a beach, and next to it a small shot taken from the Internet of some disaster that has something to do with the place. I took a beautiful picture of the beach in Lampedusa, which has been the place where all the migrants used to try to arrive. And next to it is a small picture of a tuna net, a circular holding pen for caught tuna, where they left, like, 30 immigrants hanging in the middle of the Mediterranean. The boat people, from Libya I think, told them to get out of the boat and hang on the net until they come for you. They hung for like three days in the middle of the sea until someone picked them up. So there is my picture where everything is beautiful, the sea is fantastic and everyone is swimming, and next to it is a reminder that not everything is like this. Another beautiful picture of a beach in Greece is next to one with police being hit by petrol bombs in an Athens riot. Greece is not just sand and blue water. I have a number of these things that I'm putting together. This was the first more concerned series where I put together photographs that I get from news agencies or the Internet. I just buy the picture, and combine it with my own picture. Why am I doing this? I would like to be more clear in my work. Sometimes people understand what I'm doing, like the woman who said, "This is tragic." And sometimes people just don't get it, so I have to be a bit more obvious.

**Do you sell more in Europe or the United States?**

Most of my market is US. My US gallery is the top seller, but I've had at different times lots of sales in Belgium, Germany, and a few in England and France. In Italy I'm not so popular, but then nobody buys pictures in Italy anyway. My best clients are in the States. They are mostly people that have them in their house. Some have two, three, or four, like Elton John. Tony Podesta bought a picture of Venice for the Guggenheim in New York. Some collectors buy them and put them in storage and don't see them for 10 years, but I have a lot of fans who look at them every day. >

*Top: CEAGESP Market Sao Pãolo, 2012. Left: Picnic Allée, 2000.*



Why did you leave her gallery?

We stopped working together because we both had strong personalities and we argued too much. Looking back on our relationship, I learned a lot from her—how to mount and frame and to think of a picture as an object. I had shows in Germany, Belgium, France, then I arranged a show at Bonni Benrubi in New York and she started selling like crazy. When Bonni died and a couple of photographers left the gallery, I thought, “It’s better to be a big fish in a little sea than a little fish in a big sea,” and I stayed. Benrubi has sold a lot of pictures and helped me move up, so I am going to stay with them. Under Rachel Smith’s direction, they have a new space in Chelsea, and I’m excited about the direction they’re going. I’m pretty busy and I sell enough to have two or three assistants, a good studio, and time to think. It’s more important to come up with new ideas than to spend time stressing about my galleries.

Are you interested in Instagram?

Yes, I post one image a week. And you see pictures taken by so many people, some professionals, artists, some by people that really should not be taking pictures. You have to try to understand why someone took that picture. It’s a mental exercise, like cycling on a stationary bike—you don’t go anywhere, but your mind goes.

Which do you feel are your best works, where you really got what you wanted?

A lot of the new ones I like, and a few from the past. Obviously one or two from Rosignano are definitely best. I like the diptych from Miami ... the Catania under the volcano, the people on that structure on top of the lava. And then I like all the new series: Palermo, Scala dei Turchi in Sicily. In Turkey I like the *Sacred Pool Russians*, a hot water pool with pieces of Roman columns on the bottom. And I like a few of Brazil, and a few of the last ones that were done in Sardinia that are really nice. So, I have like 15 or 20 favorites. But at the show in Verona at Studio la Città there were very few beaches—a diptych and two single beach scenes, and like 16 or 17 other photographs. I want to go in that direction. Beaches were very good because I was recognized as *the* photographer of beaches. The beach aura is working very well, but I am photographing other things.

You mentioned the project with the immigrants. What else are you going to do?

Another thing that I would like to do is to have a more curated book. And this could imply maybe museum shows because when you sell that many pictures, there’s no time for museum shows. You have to produce. Anyway, I’m glad that I have the money and I have time to think.



Has financial success changed your life?

I’m totally unaffected. I do the same things, buy the same things, eat the same things. I made myself a house like all photographers do. I bought an old church in Lucca and made it into a home and I’m really happy. But I could have done it or not; it wouldn’t have changed my life. The studio is separated from the house.

[He pauses to call his wife to say he won’t be home for dinner.]

My wife has to have dinner at 7:30 and nothing in the world can interrupt this. She still cannot understand that it’s not such a big deal for me to have dinner two or three

hours later. “Are you sure?” she asks. “Are you feeling all right?” She’s German and this is very German, but for me it’s normal! We’ve been together for maybe 25 years. I met her in Pietrasanta when she was visiting her brothers who were working there. We have a 16-year-old son, and I have other sons from previous marriages and a daughter and five grandchildren who all live in Rome. They come and see me in Lucca and we meet here and there. Today I had one of my grandchildren here to visit me.

Do you spend all of your time working or do you have hobbies?

I used to cycle until they stole my last bike. I had five bikes stolen recently. Lucca is a fantastic place. It’s very quiet, no crime. I leave the door open, no problem. But the moment there is a bike around it goes like that. There’s no point in buying a Mercedes because it’s so much better to go around with a nice bike. I have my van when I work, and the rest of the time I have these beautiful bikes. They’re like \$3,000 or \$4,000, and I felt so bad when they stole my last that I have to wait some time before I buy a new one.

Why not get a cheap one?

They steal the cheap ones, too. Don’t worry. This last time I even know the guy and tried to get it back, but it didn’t work. They fill up trucks and sell them to Romania or something like this. I have one bike that no thief wanted, but it’s so uncomfortable. Maybe before the summer I will buy another.

You have a good life. You go to the beach, you travel, you enjoy your work and family. It must be very fulfilling...

I quite enjoy my life. I enjoy the fact that every day I think about something new. I cannot complain. And I try to keep the prices not too crazy, so I have lots of people when I go to fairs who say, “Oh, Massimo, I have your picture!” Everybody’s happy. Otherwise, you can become a bit too tough. I don’t know how much I can go in the direction of being really hard and serious. I always say, “It’s only photography.” Sometimes I see people saying, “Oh my god, we have to send this picture immediately!” Come on! We’re not in a hospital. Nobody’s going to die. Nobody’s going to get hurt. It’s only photography, nothing terrible. Everybody is enjoying it. ♦



Top: De Haan Kiss, 2011. Left: Sacred Pool Russians, 2008. “This is in Pamukkale, Turkey. This place became inhabited from like 2,000 BC because they had hot water,” says Vitali. “I don’t know if you see it, but that large Russian on the left, she is riding a column from a Roman temple. She is not riding a horse, she is riding a Roman column that fell in the water! I love that this is a mixture of tourism, antiques. I love also the flowers on the left. It’s another world.”