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# FASHION *forward*

LVMH CHAIRMAN

**Bernard Arnault**

AND THE ART OF LIVING.

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featuring  
*giving  
green*

# 24

## Bernard Arnault

Arnault may be surrounded by luxury on the Champs-Élysées, but his eyes are focused on creating a sustainable planet.



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# PICTURE PERFECT

Photographer **Ron Agam** believes the best discoveries are the ones that happen by chance.

By Danielle Sonnenberg  
Photos courtesy of Ron Agam

**I**t was not surprising that Ron Agam became a photographer—his father, Yaacov, is one of the planet's most famous kinetic artists. So, growing up, he was around art and artists all the time. This was the younger Agam's reality.

"When you have a father whose job in life is being an artist, it's very difficult for a young child to understand if your father has a real job," says Agam. He did, however, understand the process of creating art and often watched his father and other artists work.

The memories are vivid. Agam re-

members a very tall photographer, entering a mysterious dark room, when he was only 6 years old. The young Agam would stand outside the room day after day, curious, wanting to enter it. "I remember the small room in his studio that was totally black with a small door to get into. It took courage to go inside that room." Once he got over his fears and entered the room, a whole new world was exposed.

Inside the dark room, watching pictures develop, was thrilling, especially to a 6-year-old. "This is the first time I realized the magic of a photograph. Suddenly, I could see an im-

age appearing. I tell you, at 6 years old, it was the best magic trick," says Agam. From that day forward, he was hooked on photography.

Art created a bond between father and son. They shared an unspoken language. "It was basically, 'Are you going to the studio?' and then I knew I could ask if I could go into the [dark] room," says Agam.

During the weekends, father and son would visit galleries. Yaacov never pressured the emerging artist to become famous; rather, the excursions were about learning to create and exposing him to the art world.

## PROFILE *Ron Agam*

LIANTHUS (BI-COLOR)

RED RANUNCULUS

YELLOW RANUNCULUS



*In Full Bloom*, exhibited at Tyler Rollins Fine Art NYC.

So while other children were playing in the playground, Agam was in the dark room with a mentor teaching him everything he wanted to know. “I don’t think there is anything more charming than to teach a child who really wants to learn,” says Agam. As a result of having a professional photographer mentor him, he never received a formal education in photography.

Agam, a stocky man with a thick accent, was born in Paris and grew up between the City of Lights and Rehovot, Israel. He can trace his ancestry all the way back—seven generations—to the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi.

Agam’s family—including his parents, his sister, Orit, a psychologist, and his brother, Orram, a musician—was his first photography subject. “The people who are members of your family are the easier ones to take pictures of—they are there all the time,” he says.

HIS FATHER ENCOURAGED HIM TO COME TO NEW YORK to pursue a profession and sent him to NYU to study liberal arts and finance. Studying, however, wasn’t one of his strengths. “I was not a good student. I couldn’t focus on what the teachers wanted me to learn.”

He was further distracted by the different parties going

on every night of the week. It was, after all, the 1970s and the Studio 54 era. “I was not part of the crowd; I was mostly looking at the crowd observing what was going on. There was a huge element of creativity doing these parties. It was too fascinating to not be part of.”

Even though Agam spent a lot of time exploring the party scene and the characters in New York, photography was still his focus. One day while at Alkit, a photography store, he randomly ran into Roman Vishniac, the famous Russian photographer who captured on film all the Jewish ghettos in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. This meeting sparked his interest in the Orthodox culture. “That book, for me, was an eye-opener,” says Agam. What Elie Wiesel did in words, Roman Vishniac did in images. Where does one find these people in the secular world in which we live? One has to go to very Orthodox Jewish enclaves.”

He was soon taking thousands of pictures of every Orthodox group he could get access to by traveling to religious communities in New York, Israel, and Paris. Agam says that he would never have thought of having an exhibition if his ex-girlfriend, Debra Cohen, hadn’t suggested it. He eventually convinced the owners of the Magidson Art Gallery, on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, to exhibit his work. The May 1994 show featured 30 of Agam’s pictures

PINK RANUNCULUS



of the Western Wall and Meah Shearim, an Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem.

It wasn't easy, though. Initially, the gallery owner said he wanted the show to last only a few days. Even though he believed in Agam's work, he was worried that the show wouldn't sell and he wouldn't be able to pay his rent. To the owner's surprise, opening night drew over 1,000 people. The show ended up staying two months. "We sold many more images than he thought we would sell," Agam recalls.

An unusual sequence of events created a flood of interest in his work. During the show's run, Jacqueline Kennedy died. The funeral home was right next to the gallery, so hundreds of journalists and photographers found their way to the gallery and were exposed to the show. Then Madonna happened to see one of Agam's pictures in an apartment and was inspired to buy 10 of her own—and, since it occurred on the cusp of her interest in Kabbalah, the press attributed her newfound religious curiosity to Agam. Additionally, during the show's run, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the leader of the Lubavitch movement, died. "Because of this death, people were very interested in Orthodox life," says Agam.

Though Agam admits he is not a religious man, he believes in the idea of divine providence. "Those are things where you are not in control. When you have the most famous woman in the world who is suddenly interested in something you do and it has such a profound message about Jewish life, you must take time to reflect, 'Why is something like that happening?'"

Asking questions was always in Agam's nature, even as a teenager. One afternoon, he entered a classroom at a religious school he attended and immediately started grilling the rabbi. The response—do and then you will understand—changed his life. "I am not an intellectual," Agam admits. "Everything I do, I do out of a gut feeling, out of an

emotion of something I can't explain."

This instinctual response was how he created his latest exhibit, *In Full Bloom*, which consisted of six-by-six-foot images of solitary flowers set against monochromatic backgrounds. He never planned to have an exhibition focused on flowers; it began completely by accident. About three years ago, while trying out a new camera, he took some pictures of a rose he bought at a deli. Agam decided, "I could do a better flower; that flower was ordinary." He then arranged to get some flowers from Takashimaya, a high-end florist in New York. Before he knew it, he was thinking about flowers all the time. "I got almost religious about it. I became sickly obsessed with it. I wouldn't sleep because at night I was preparing myself to go to the markets and during the day I would shoot," says Agam, who shot flowers for over a year.

"The creative process is a small spark that becomes bigger and bigger; the analysis is secondary," says Agam. He says his best work was something he didn't plan. "It was like a discovery. You never plan to make a discovery, it happens by chance."

It was only after he completed the project that he realized its larger implications and how he was forcing people to question their role in harming nature. That is one of the reasons he decided to create flowers at such an immense size. "When I am showing these flowers at this scale, it is to stop people, to make them realize what this beauty means, what it means in our lives. This beauty can get destroyed quickly."

And, according to Agam and others, it is not only beauty at stake. "As an artist who has bought the power of nature as an art form, I am also very much encouraged about the ability of the United States to lead the rest of the world in changing our lifestyles. I think it is critical that we change our lifestyle in order to leave our grandchildren a safer world. If we don't, there will probably be a natural disaster."

His creations may be born from destiny or coincidence, but either way, Ron Agam the artist understands his motivations. "Many times in my life I did things thinking I was doing something spontaneously, and then realized that its deeper meaning and realization were coming from a crystallization of culture and traditions embedded in me from a heritage transferred through generations." To Agam, artists are messengers giving the larger population the bigger picture in life.

"I'm just a vessel," says Agam. **LM**