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of a Red-Carpet
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Hollywood celebs love to pose for him, the tabloids love to publish him, and he always gets the best spot on the red carpet. But photographer George Pimentel—who says he likes working in Toronto because stars are more relaxed here—doesn't want to be just another paparazzo. He wants to be the next Diane Arbus



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WO THOUSAND PARIS HILTON FANS

awaiting their idol express joy with what sounds like a million raccoons bawling in God's garbage bag. Some brunettes, some boys—even a few supportive, weary moms—have made the trip to MuchMusic to catch a glimpse of Hilton, here to pimp her first big movie, *House of Wax*. But mostly, the crowd at Queen and John is filled with pale imitations of Hilton: distorted, less attractive versions of the real thing, who is somewhat unreal herself—a 24-year-old hotel heiress, unwitting Internet porn star and the lead in a TV show about Paris Hilton.

George Pimentel, who wears aviator sunglasses though it's almost 7 p.m., appears a little grumpy. This is not unusual. First, he complains about the set-up: "Classic Canadian disorganization. You should see the Golden Globes. They know how to do it." From the front row of a press-only three-tiered bleacher next to the red carpet, he surveys the crowd, then shouts, to no one in particular, "Look at this!



RED-CARPET TREATMENT: To get their attention, Pimentel calls out a celebrity's personal details. "Say their mother's maiden name or the name of their high school," he instructs. Above: Brad and Jennifer at the 2004 Emmys and Paris Hilton at MuchMusic in May

What's she famous for? Nothing! Without us, she wouldn't exist!"

The us in question is the dozen photographers flanking him. Most of them laugh off Pimentel's outbursts. *The Toronto Sun*, *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, *CP*—everyone is here. Pimentel whines but—and this is why he's good at what he does—it's a little comical, a little put on and thus, somehow, likable. *That's George*, say the eye rolls of the other photographers. *His bark is worse than his bite*.

Pimentel is the loudest guy on the riser, and he has the best spot, smack in the middle. An X on the carpet marks the place where Paris and the other stars of the B-minus horror movie will stop and pose. Not coincidentally, that X is right in front of Pimentel. The rest of the photographers squeeze together to try for a better angle. "Someone always gets screwed over, and it's not gonna be me!" Pimentel warns. He is always talking. "I marked the spot! I marked it!"

Pimentel is Toronto's most famous celebrity photographer. He covers the Toronto International Film Festival, the Oscars, Sundance, Cannes and other temples of celebrity worship. His red-carpet pictures appear regularly in the Canadian press, and in American magazines like *InStyle*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *Us Weekly*, as well as their international counterparts. Last spring, he landed a coup: a *People* magazine cover of Jennifer Aniston, wan-looking divorcée in the making, beneath the headline "Why She Gave Up."

A white SUV limousine is spotted turning up John Street. Above a rush of crowd noise, Pimentel frantically signals for the Citytv publicist running the photo op. Pimentel is freaking out. The *House of Wax* people plan to place the four teen idols (Hilton, Elisha Cuthbert, Chad Michael Murray and Jared Padalecki) in front of the photographers in a row: boy, girl, boy, girl. Pimentel has his own ideas: girls in the middle, please, because magazines won't care about the guys and will crop them out. He is shooting for WireImage, a wildly successful American photo agency that sells pictures of celebrities to publications around the world. The more outlets that buy his photos, the more money he makes.

"You'll get your picture, don't worry," the publicist assures him. Pimentel is tall and dark and looks a little intimidating leaning over this woman, barking something unintelligible. Then all of a sudden,

he gives her a friendly pat on the shoulder and throws his head back in a gap-toothed laugh. She beams.

Paris and her co-stars emerge from the limo and move toward the photographers. Pimentel has a strategy for this moment, a formula he's happy to share: First, to get their attention, wear something brightly coloured, like his sky blue Hugo Boss jacket ("I got it for free, and you can put that in. I'm a little princess. I don't wait in line. I get free drinks"). Second, to keep their attention and train their eyes to your lens, shout something surprising ("Say their mother's maiden name or the name of their high school. Everyone just calls their names. It's stupid"). Above all, control the scene ("Celebrities want to be directed. You have to direct them!").

Hilton, a twig of a woman in a white trench and orange dress, stops directly in front of Pimentel (he has photographed her several times). Twirling his finger between snaps, he gestures for her to turn and shouts, "Over the shoulder, Paris! Gorgeous! Beautiful!" She obeys him, dropping pose after pose like a kid in front of a mirror. Shinan Govani, the *National Post's* resident gossipist, is standing in the bleachers, too, and he leans over to comment: "She's only looking at George, of course. Amazing. Palm of his hand."

As Hilton moves away to placate the other photographers, Pimentel looks back at me and grins. He knows he has his shot already, and the event is only half over. "Did you see that?" he asks as we move to a second platform, where he will shoot them again after they've been interviewed by the VJs. He's excited now, giddy. "She recognized me—see that? Oh yeah, she definitely recognized me."

Leading the way through the vibrating throng at sprint speed, he tells me over his shoulder, quite protectively, to be careful. "One of these little bastards bit me at Usher last year," he says, referring to a particularly wild Much appearance by the R&B singer. Like that, affable George retreats, and he is cranky again.

Perhaps the biting incident reminds Pimentel that even though he rubs up against the rich and famous, the work is work, and work can be a grind. Pimentel himself is not unlike the world he documents: full of contradiction, theatricality, empty bluster. Within two minutes of conversation, he can boast of his successes with the pride of

an immigrant son made good, then circle back with a touch of insecurity ("Do you like these?" he asks when he's showing me some Juno pictures in *Flare*. "Do you think they're good?"), as if his best might never be good enough. The material rewards for this career are easy to measure: the Mercedes, the house in the Kingsway neighbourhood paid for flat out (and recently featured on the make-over show *Design Rivals*, confirming Pimentel's own low-rung celebrity status). But over and over, he claims that he is not in it for the money.

That big house contains books and prints of photographs by Mary Ellen Mark, Diane Arbus and Weegee, the 1920s New York crime photojournalist who is his idol. Pimentel wants to make art as beautiful as that of the world's best photographers, but he wants to make it out of people like Paris Hilton and Brad Pitt. His goal is to create a body of work that he will reveal when he's about 65 in a book and an exhibit. He is 38 now. For the next few decades, he intends to capture celebrities looking vulnerable, even ugly. He wants to make them real. But he is in an industry with little interest in anything real. Sometimes he loves the fantasy, then other times it makes George Pimentel a grouchy man.

DAYS LATER, FAR FROM THE MUCH-Music crush, gentler George has dominion in the cool, quiet basement of J.C. Pimentel Photography, an old studio in the heart of Little Portugal. Pimentel keeps boxes of his work down here, labelled by publication in black felt marker—*Maclean's*, *Flare*—while upstairs, Portuguese brides drop in to organize wedding photos.

The studio was started by George's dad, José Pimentel, 30 years ago. He brought his family to Canada from a village called Rabo de Peixe (meaning "Fish's Tail") in the Azores. Pimentel Sr. learned English working in hotels in Portugal, but his wife Maria's family business was photography: uncles, cousins, George's maternal grandfather—all were, and many still are, photographers. When they arrived here, José joined his wife's game and set up shop across from St. Helen's Church, on Dundas near Lansdowne, because he knew that a church would mean life-changing events, and life-changing events require a photographer.

José retired a few years back, not long after Maria died, though he still drops by and pokes around the shop once in a while. George officially took over the family business, but he's away often, and it's now managed mostly by Sam Santos, a family friend who grew up across the street. Small, gentle, a few years younger than Pimentel, Santos came in as a teenager 17 years ago to sweep the floors and never left. "George is a star," he tells me, trying to describe his boss while we're waiting for him to pull up in his Mercedes. "But George is a good guy. George is extremely ambitious and..." He pauses. "Intense."

It is Sam who does the daily work, shooting most of the First Communion pictures and restoring sun-bleached ancestral photos found in shoeboxes. But if a customer walks in and Pimentel is the only one in the shop, he will still take a person's passport photo (he also answers the phone in an uncharacteristically calm, polite voice: "Pee-ment-el"). "I love this neighbourhood, the smell of bar-

becued sardines. The people here are real people. I can talk to them," he says. "I can't talk to celebrities."

Unlike most of the local studios, the interior of J.C. Pimentel is not decorated with posed babies in head ribbons and tiny tuxes. Though one of Sam's wedding shots is in the window, the walls are covered with Pimentel's elegantly framed black and white shots of Dennis Hopper, Brad Pitt, Sean Penn. For these pictures, Pimentel uses his father's old Hasselblad camera, a boxy 1970s relic with a certain retro-cool cachet in photography circles. Often when Pimentel goes to shoot a star, he has his digital on one arm, his Hasselblad on the other. When the digital work is done—the what-she's-wearing, how-he's-aging meat of celebrity photography—he takes out the Hasselblad and asks for a single black and white shot for his collection. Stars love it. That leathery box must appeal to their vanity, hearkening back to a kinder time.

In the best of these shots, the crystal-clear foreground and marginal chaos—the fans, publicists and security guards that crowd the celebrities—make stardom look beautiful, and unnerving. The im-

Pimentel claims the best position. "Someone always gets screwed over, and it's not gonna be me!" he warns. "I marked the spot! I marked it!"

ages are as much commentary on the machinery of fame as pictures of the famous themselves, and Pimentel talks about them tenderly, as if he's describing old friends.

Pulling photos from boxes, he tells me story after story: how Sharon Stone hugged him on the red carpet at Cannes because they'd been partying together on a yacht the night before; how he waited several hours behind Bistro 990 for Quentin Tarantino, who turned down his first request with "I'll be back, man" (he did come back, and Pimentel sold the photo to *NOW* magazine). He runs his finger over the background clutter surrounding Denzel Washington: "This tension is interesting. The entourage. The microphone is interesting. I want to show them as human beings." Next comes a classic hotel room portrait of Colin Farrell. "Who gives a shit?" says

Pimentel, tossing it to the side.

Though he uses the word "digital" with a little defeat, the technology has advantages. Within two hours of taking the Hilton photos, he had uploaded them directly from the Citytv offices to the WireImage Web site. Despite his disgruntlement at the shoot, he now praises City to the skies—"They're great over there! Great!"—boasting that he is the only outside photographer allowed to upload directly from City's computers.

"Everything is about relationships," he says. "If you get one thing about this business, get that. If Hilary Duff comes to town and my photo of her runs in *Rolling Stone* with MuchMusic's sign in the background, Much is happy and invites me back."

The WireImage site is set up so that photographers can see who—or whose "people"—view their photos. Pimentel posted 400 of Hilton, and dozens of organizations and celebrities took a peek, including Paris Hilton

FAMILY PORTRAITS: Pimentel's parents at their studio on Dundas near Lansdowne in 1992



herself, at around three o'clock the next day. The photos ended up in *Elle*, *In Touch Weekly* and *Entertainment Weekly*.

WireImage hired Pimentel in 2001 to cover the Toronto film festival, and he's been one of their senior photographers in Canada since. "George has always had the skill of being able to define that one moment," says Justin Kahn, VP and co-founder of WireImage, on the phone from L.A. "He even has the nickname One Shot, because if you gave the guy a camera with one frame of film in it and told him to get the picture, he'd get the right picture."

The relationship is not unlike that of an actor and his talent agency: WireImage represents Pimentel, setting up assignments, and then it promotes his work by selling it on its Web site. The commission is split 50-50.

WireImage is celebrity friendly, if not downright celebrity felling. Sometimes all Pimentel shouts is "WireImage," and the famous gravitate toward his flash, because they know a WireImage photographer isn't there to exploit that double chin or seek out a patch of cellulite creeping from beneath a miniskirt. A 2003 article in *Vanity Fair* reported that WireImage provided 36.2 per cent of celebrity photographs published in major American magazines. Kahn now insists the percentage is much higher. In exchange for playing nice, WireImage gets great access; Gwyneth Paltrow chose it as the outlet for her first public photos of baby Apple. "We don't try to tarnish the reputation of the celebrities," says Pimentel. "So you know, if

"His nickname is One Shot, because if you gave the guy a camera with one frame in it and told him to get the picture, he'd get the picture"

you didn't take a portrait of Cameron Diaz and Justin Timberlake making out, she might let you get the next photo of her at a movie opening, right? That's how it works." He repeats his favourite word: "Relationships."

OUR APPETITE FOR IMAGES OF THE FAMOUS IS NOTHING NEW. IN 1867, the English public snapped up 300,000 "carte" portraits—pocket-sized photographs—of an earlier Princess of Wales and her child. At the end of the 19th century, the Lafayette Studio in London became famous for its cozy relations with royalty, Indian maharajas and the European elite. Unflattering pictures were often locked up and marked with the stamp "Not to be published," a very WireImage attitude. In 1893, Lafayette sold photographs of the Duke and Duchess of York's Buckingham Palace nuptials to *The Illustrated London News* and *The Gentlewoman* magazine.

Less than a century later, filmmaker Federico Fellini used the word *paparazzo* (Italian for "buzzing insect") to name the young photographers recklessly racing their Vespas through Rome in pursuit of a scandalous shot. For the next few decades, "the guys in the bushes," as Pimentel disdainfully describes the paparazzi, could make a killing invading privacy. But after the other Princess of Wales died in a paparazzi car chase in 1997, a rash of editorials accused the celebrity press of murder. At the same time, carefully orchestrated, publicist-sanctioned photos were suddenly in demand with the rise of fame-friendly magazines like *InStyle* and fashion magazines that put celebrities on their covers instead of models. Stars, used to being caught unawares in compromising positions, found that to get positive press all they had to do was to sit for a luxurious shoot and recommend their favourite hair products in a

slobbering profile. WireImage and other agencies, such as Insight News & Features and the Celebrity Photo Agency, were invited to get the good pictures at the good parties into the good magazines.

But in the past couple of years, newer glossies like *Star* and *In Touch* have re-embraced a tabloid mentality, showing stars in unbecoming poses—"Best (and Worst!) Bikini Bodies"—or, more popularly, caught living the ordinary life, shopping or jogging or scratching themselves. To service this insatiable market, celebrities are being targeted more than ever. This summer, after one of the paparazzi crashed into teen starlet Lindsay Lohan's car and a handful of photographers mobilized to capture the moment, a coalition including Cameron Diaz and Reese Witherspoon asked L.A. police and prosecutors to open a criminal investigation into paparazzi behaviour.

Still, if the resulting photos are dramatic enough, then the fiscal benefits of running down Lindsay Lohan may not dissuade the ambitious. Last spring's famous shots of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie on the beach in Kenya are reported to have sold for \$500,000. Event photographers like Pimentel have to work harder than the bush dwellers because there are so many of them on the red carpet, all taking the same shot, which might sell to a magazine for \$150 to \$300. Then again, while these "space rates" don't sound like much, if the photo is a full body shot of Scarlett Johansson that will be reprinted around the world, the money can add up. Meanwhile, a name photographer can earn thousands from a sit-down session in a hotel room with Colin Farrell.

Hence, technically, Pimentel is not a paparazzo. His wife, Fernie, warned him against participating in this profile because she worried that people might think he's one of them. Though I never accused him of the P-word, Pimentel checks off on his fingers why he is not one:

"I never photographed anyone without their permission. I never did kids. I never used long lenses." He breaks out the third person: "Pimentel has integrity."

To illustrate his point, he says that he recently saw Bruce Willis and a woman having dinner at the Four Seasons downtown. He could have "blasted" them, run out and made at least \$5,000 for the photos, but he didn't do it. Pimentel does not see himself as parasitic or exploitative like the paparazzi, but he knows that on some level, he, like them, is a hunter-gatherer of sorts. The method is different, but the prey is the same, and this doesn't always sit well with him.

He sighs deeply. "I did a lot of soul searching," he says, setting off on a slightly defensive verbal ramble as if he's trying to convince himself of something. "I make people happy by taking their photo, and there's nothing wrong with it. It's a job. I have that little power, and it's pretty strange. I have my camera with me all the time because I feel like I'm going to miss something. I go to all the parties and I stand out because I have my camera, and they all kiss my ass—everybody kisses my ass. George Pimentel, blah, blah, blah."

PIMENTEL WAS BORN IN 1967 IN WILLOWDALE, WHERE HIS FATHER HAD bought the family a brand new house upon moving to Canada. George was a jock and a terrible student, always talking, always angling for attention, always getting kicked out of class. He remembers sometimes feeling out of place as the only Portuguese kid at Earl Haig Secondary School. On weekends, he came downtown from the suburbs to Little Portugal, where he helped his father do weddings. He remembers holding the flash as the dancers swarmed around him.

His father told George over and over: work hard, make money, be secure, take care of your family. In high school, Pimentel would at-



SNAP JUDGMENT: Quentin Tarantino at Bistro 990 in 1995; Jack Nicholson at Cannes in 2002; Al Pacino at the Uptown Theatre in 2000; Sharon Stone at Cannes in 2002; Kim Cattrall at the Golden Globes in 2003; Robert De Niro at the Elgin Theatre in 1993; Elijah Wood at the Toronto film festival in 2002; Sean Penn at the Sutton Place Hotel in 1995; Gwyneth Paltrow at the Elgin Theatre in 2000

tend sporting events and take photos of basketball players and other star athletes, printing them into 8 x 10 glossies at his dad's studio. Then he sold them out of his locker for five dollars a pop. "I fed their ego," he says, grinning. "And I made a little money."

When he saw a photographer from the *Toronto Star* at a big game with his enviably long lens, he would badger him with questions about how to make a living taking pictures. Once, he complained that he didn't have enough film, and the guy reached into his bag and handed him several rolls. Pimentel was stunned; what generosity, what riches. He still thinks about that moment.

He tried to get into Ryerson three times and was rejected twice for bad grades. Third time lucky, and he entered the photographic arts program. At a party, he met Fernie, a young fellow Portuguese

Canadian studying broadcasting. Here's a guy who fills up a room, she thought, and that's good. They have two children—Jacqueline, who's six, and three-year-old Sebastian—whom Fernie takes care of while managing Pimentel's freelance books.

In his early 20s, Pimentel supported himself through the studio, doing weddings and baptisms. He visited Portugal for the first time on his own, using photography to try to make sense of his parents, his heritage. In the tiny ancestral fishing village, strangers came up to him and said, "Your grandfather photographed my wedding." Pimentel documented the quotidian, taking pictures of funerals and "the killing of the pig," a ritual slaughter in a backyard. At night, he would walk the streets and watch men courting women by open windows. The resulting black and white photos, which were shown

in a student exhibit, look as if they were taken 100 years ago.

The trip sparked an interest in travel, but by then, Pimentel was in line to take over the family business. His three older siblings had gone their own ways (one is an art consultant, one a television producer, one an engineer).

"There was a little bit of guilt, like if it's not for me, what will happen to the business?" says Pimentel. "I always wanted to see the world, but my dad was getting old and he couldn't shoot weddings anymore. I couldn't just walk away. My whole thing was I've got to kill two birds with one stone. I will come in and do the family business, the weddings and all that stuff, and on the side I will do my personal work that's important to me, and we'll see how it goes."

Pimentel liked movies—especially anything about the mob—but he was hardly celebrity obsessed. One of his good friends is a lifelong autograph hound, though, and during the Toronto film festival in 1993, he told Pimentel to come down and try to get a photo of Robert De Niro. Those were the days before the film festival was run like a military operation. Pimentel had no accreditation, but the camera in his hand was enough to get him ushered to the red carpet. A silver limo appeared, and De Niro stepped out. "He had just finished *Cape Fear*—he had the hair, the jaw," says Pimentel. "My heart started racing, security all around him, and all I did was I called out one word: 'Bobby!' Because, that's what his friends call him."

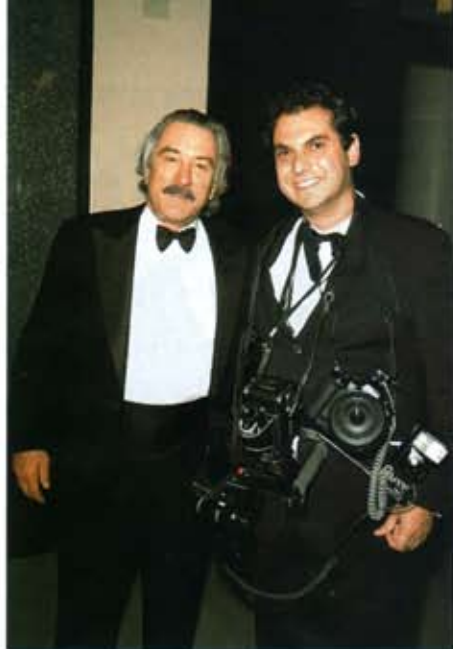
But after De Niro disappeared into the theatre, Pimentel knew he hadn't taken a clear photo. The rest of the media with passes went inside and he was shut out. As the crowd dispersed, he stood there feeling, he says, "like a lonely puppy left on the corner." Then, all of a sudden, the doors opened and De Niro and his entourage popped out, mistakenly anticipating round two. Pimentel shot once and that was it. In the photo, De Niro is smiling, which is rare. Pimentel tried to sell it, but no magazines or newspapers wanted it. As a favour to an usher at the Elgin, he gave it to a now defunct tiny arts magazine called *Harvest Quarterly*. No charge.

Pimentel had never experienced that kind of rush taking a photo before. He felt as if the red carpet was there for him. More than that, he was fascinated by the screaming crowds and the way so many people seemed deeply invested in De Niro, a stranger. "I was thinking, Why are people screaming? Why are we so fixated on this?"

For 12 years, this question has rattled in his mind. He travelled to L.A. for months at a time, sneaking into Elton John's Oscar party, hitting the film openings. But he discovered that Toronto provided better access. "In Toronto, it's easy because they're just out and about. In L.A. they're all in their cars."

He returned to Toronto and used what he calls "street connections" to get his pictures. Doormen, limo drivers, bodyguards—all tipped him off to who was staying where or dining out or coming soon. He never pays for this information, says Pimentel, again separating himself from paparazzi. In exchange, all his contacts want are pictures of themselves with the famous.

Pimentel sold his work to local magazines and papers, beating out other photographers by appearing on a publication's doorstep early the morning after an event, negative in hand. *Flare* magazine



JUST SHOOT ME: Pimentel in L.A., at the American Film Institute tribute to Robert De Niro in 2003

gave him his first big break, running a spread of his film festival photos over a decade ago. (Showing me some of the *Flare* pages, where his work continues to appear, he says, "You always have to make sure your name is bigger than the writer's.") He received a National Magazine Award nomination, and more work came to him—and more access. "Everything I do is to get closer," he says.

The relationship runs two ways: celebrities need to promote their product, and photographers need to make a living. Pimentel has noticed something else, too; most celebrities like to be photographed. He claims that 90 per cent of the time, when he asks, they say yes.

On the WireImage Web site, if one punches in the name George Pimentel, a gallery of photos of him with stars appears. There's George with Jack Nicholson, and George presenting a weeping Kim Cattrall with a photo of herself winning the Golden Globe. He looks happy.

Also, in a picture from a Pimentel exhibit at the Roots store on Bloor Street a few years ago, there is a shot of a beaming George towering over his little, smiling father. I ask George what José makes of his son's glamorous life. "He doesn't get it," he says. "He's an immigrant, you know. He just wants me to be safe."

On the phone from Willowdale, José Pimentel speaks with a heavy Portuguese accent and a bouncy laugh. I ask him if he is proud of his son. He pauses a long while and says, almost shyly, "Yes, of course. All fathers are proud of their sons." And what about his success as a celebrity photographer? He doesn't pause this time and speaks more assuredly. "It's great, of course, but not the type of work I would like him to do. I would prefer him to have a big studio and pose people, not going to L.A., to France, not travel a lot. It's too much on him, I find. George has two lives. He has his life where he works with the famous people. When he's out of that, you have someone who really knows how to laugh, say jokes, play with his kids." George, says his father, is a complicated man.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE GOING TO CANNES FOR MACLEAN'S, PIMENTEL IS IN the basement of the studio. He tells me more about his plans for a book of the Hasselblad photos. He wants to get one shot of everyone who matters before he'll show his work to the world. Michael Jackson is next on his list. After he gets the shot, he says, he never needs to photograph the star again, and he won't, except digitally, for work. Even though he is frequently tired of his profession—the endless travel, the time away from his family—he is trying to be patient.

"To do this properly, you've got to get access. I have to live it. I have to age as a photographer, keep getting better. I don't want to be a freak. I don't want to be just a fan. It's about producing a body of work," he says. He takes down a box from a shelf. Gingerly, slowly, he pulls out some old movie magazines, pointing to elegant black and white photos of Doris Day and Clark Gable in 1958. They are posed to unattainable perfection. On another page is a young Elizabeth Taylor at a dining table with friends. She is smoking, oblivious to the camera, head tossed back in a scary cackle. She is un-beautiful, and you can't take your eyes off her. "Look at these," says Pimentel. "Who are these photographers? They're me. I'm part of history. I participate in fame."

END