



In her large sunny house on a tree-lined street in Santa Monica, swarming with kids and assistants, Tierney Gearon was busily preparing a new series of photographs for a show at the Phillips de Pury gallery in London, which took place last month.

At 45, Tierney still has the long, swan-like lines of a girl who has strutted many a catwalk, caterwauled at the tables of many a nightclub. She began modelling in Europe and quickly ascended to the heights of that august profession. **It was boring at the top**, so she began styling the other waifs and making Polaroid look books to help them get more work. It worked.



IMAGES © TIERNEY GEARON

Following the supermodel silk route, Tierney then retired, married an investment banker and quickly had two children. Life as a bourgeois housewife began to sap her creative juices; the trend in photography was to the raw domestic disturbances of artists like Nan Goldin, filled with drugs and drama. However, the Polaroids had generated a lot of interest, especially with an English tastemaker named Phil Bicker, then creative director at The Face. Bicker encouraged Tierney to take pictures, and when he showed her Tina Barney's photographs of her upper-class American family and friends, something clicked. "I realised that anybody's life could be interesting; it didn't have to be drugs and sex necessarily, you just have to tell your own story."

Besides, she didn't know anyone like the people Nan Goldin or Nick Waplington were photographing. "But I had always

taken pictures of my family. So I got a bag full of cameras, all formats and styles. I took tons of pictures with no real idea of what I was doing." Her native talent started to get her work right away. Tierney shot campaigns for Keds, Kate Spade and other clients. She was also constantly taking pictures of her children. How did the kids feel about being photographed? "They didn't care," she says. "They never cared, because I'm not someone who carries a camera around all the time taking pictures of them. They are like any other kids, they get bored with it."

While living in London, Tierney sold some pictures to adman and collector Charles Saatchi. He put her in I Am a Camera, a big photo show he was organising. The adman, who knows a little about media manipulation, obviously saw the



► scandal value of pictures of naked children. He announced, ominously, “I’m going to make you famous.” Tierney wasn’t prepared for what happened next. “I knew the picture of my son peeing might be controversial, and then Charles said it was going to be the cover of the catalogue. I had no idea that these ‘snapshots’ of my kids would blow up like that.”

When the show opened, it made Tierney an overnight star in the art world and in the British tabloid press. She appeared on the talk shows, was suddenly mentioned in the same breath as Tracey Emin and the Chapman brothers. “It was exciting but scary. I was in the papers every day!” The authorities strongly disapproved, but the quirky British public, instead of judging and condemning Tierney as a child pornographer, somehow grasped the essential innocence of the work. “It was

amazing, the whole country stood up for me. It certainly wouldn’t have worked that way in the United States. But I got caught up in this sort of false VIP art world. I was an overnight success, but I hadn’t finished saying what I wanted to say. My kids were getting hassled in school, my son had learning disabilities and I was too caught up in the scene. So I basically dropped everything and moved to LA.” And eventually finished her book, titling it *Daddy, Where Are You?*, after a particularly poignant poem of her mother’s.

Two film-makers, Jack Youngelson and Peter Sutherland, had followed her around while she was making the book. The result is a stunning documentary called *The Mother Project*. It has been incredibly successful, except, Tierney says, in England, where for some reason it has been frozen out, with no festival

showings and little apparent interest. She is ambivalent about the film, which is a brilliant examination of an artist at work. It also amplifies and reveals the intensity and depth of her relationship with her mother and her children.

What helps to make Tierney such a good artist is that she seems to know instinctively when something interesting is going to happen, or rather before it happens. She can sense the “decisive moment” coming like a train. In the film, we see her setting up scenarios that frequently yield a resonant image. She agrees there is plenty of good material, “but if they showed me taking every single picture, it would have destroyed any mystique. The film could have been so much better. I was in a very naïve period. I exposed myself to an incredible degree. I would never consent to do something like that now”. But the

fact that she does reveal herself only shows how the best art is made from the most brutal moments of intimacy, which might sometimes look more like blatant exploitation.

“I gave them this incredible opportunity to look inside my life and my head, and I was worried that they would waste it! I wanted them to go deeper. I didn’t care that they were there, over my shoulder. Jack Youngelson, his wife had a baby during the course of filming, and somehow this caused him to become very attached to us and much more sympathetic.” Tierney is much less generous toward the other film-maker, Peter Sutherland. “He was more interested in showing my technique and not the thought process behind it.” In fact, the film only deepens the visceral emotional impact of the photographs Tierney made of her mother and her kids. It’s obvious she is ►



► working out many of her personal demons in the viewfinder. Several images might be considered exploitative. What about this strange picture of a grandmother breast-feeding? “That was a vision that I had,” she says, “the weirdness of it – when we were teenagers my mom let us all suck her nipples – we were 17 years old... There is no way I would let my teenage son or daughter suck my nipple... That was pretty strange. I guess I was revisiting that. And now, in LA, I’m surrounded by friends in their fifties who are having babies or becoming surrogate parents, all these older women with little babies, it echoes that image somehow.”

The film depicts a loving but aggressive relationship between Tierney and her mother. “I have to yell at her at times. She plays up, has tantrums, just to get one picture is

exhausting. She behaved the same way when I was a child. I’d have to clean up the whole house to get her to take me to the end of the road. These pictures [in *Daddy, Where Are You?*] are about me as much as my mom, but although I wanted to show her mental state – the messy house, the windows covered up with blankets – I didn’t want to take pictures that simply documented her decay, deterioration. I wanted to show her beauty, too.” Which she does to great effect in a series of outdoor portraits of her mentally ill mother, taken against the background of a bleak upstate-New York winter.

Last year, the art dealer Simon de Pury asked Tierney to do a show, which is how she arrived at this new body of work: double exposures made in a large-format camera. At first she did more nude images, but didn’t feel comfortable

with them and felt they were not that interesting: “I realised I didn’t need to be in the picture. I am looking for dark spaces in the frame, matching them up with light.” She had recently been travelling a lot, shooting street scenes in South Africa, Italy and Mexico. In the new work, the disparate people and places she has captured seem to merge, perhaps even sometimes collide, to cross from one world into another.

At the end of our meeting, dropping names like dinner plates, I mentioned the wonderful English painter Cecily Brown. “Oh, I knew her father. I have a great picture of him,” said Tierney. She brought out a gorgeous colour print of the late art critic David Sylvester. Seated at his desk, he gazes into the camera, surrounded by books and art, including a portrait of himself painted by his daughter. Tierney’s naked

and voluptuous body is wrapped around him like a scarf of flesh. It’s a brilliant picture, but as with many of her photographs, there are numerous interpretations. Her story or the true story. I’d love to know what he was thinking. “I told him to keep his hands to himself,” she says, and I burst out laughing. He was probably thinking something arty, like *LHOOQ*. “Everyone thought we were having an affair,” she adds, “but of course we weren’t.” We love you, Tierney. Sylvester passed away some months after the photograph was taken. “When he died they wouldn’t let me go to the funeral.” A delicious narrative threatens to unfold. Maybe she will tell that tale another day. ◀