

CLICK ART

PHOTOGRAPHY, FASHION AND ART COME TOGETHER IN RAPHAEL MAZZUCCO'S SENSUOUS WORKS. BY WOON TAI HO.

If you discern a slick stylishness about the photo art of Raphael Mazzucco, then you won't be surprised to learn that the Vancouver-born one-time Guess model is also an acclaimed celebrity, fashion and ad campaign photographer.

A self-taught lensman, Mazzucco has won recognition within a relatively short time for his large, arresting photo canvases – typically, a photo print artistically enhanced or collaged with various materials like wood, resin, acrylic or oil paints, even cloth and Polaroids.

There's also a pop sensibility, a raw sensuality and a contemporary dash of the wild about New York-based Mazzucco's works. In *The African Collection* series, now on show in Singapore at Gallery Reis, that sensibility turns earthy, primally sexy.

Indeed, sexy has given Mazzucco quite a reputation. Renowned for sleek yet steamy photos showing lots of skin, he shot the covers of five consecutive *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* issues, as well as books like *Sports Illustrated: Exposure* (highly prized by collectors) and *A Second Decade of Guess Images*.

Perhaps his most memorable photos are the 2006 swimsuit issue cover of eight lovely women in the handbra pose – in which the model is topless, but shields her breasts with her hands or arms – and his 2007 handbra photo of busty model Marisa Miller with only an iPod covering her privates.

As a celebrity photographer – shooting actors such as Matt Damon, Adrien Brody, Benicio Del Toro, Susan Sarandon and Antonio Banderas in his signature close-up style of portraiture – Mazzucco has been hailed by critics as one who is defining the look of popular culture.

He is also a regular contributor to such upscale glossies as *Vogue*, *Marie Claire* and *L'Officiel*. Victoria's Secret collared him as one of the three top photographers to shoot its third coffee-table book, *Sexy*, and he has also shot the top lingerie label's catalogue, as well as successful Guess ad campaigns.

"I don't think 'commercial' is a dirty word," says Mazzucco, who sees nothing wrong in giving the market what it wants. "Beauty is beauty, whatever the context,

and people can make up their own minds and create their own opinions about it."

In fact, *Beauty* was the title of his very first photo art work – a mixed media piece – that had critics sitting up and taking notice. "It's a simple piece I worked on many years ago using orange paint. Later, it became defining for me. Now, orange is my favourite colour.

"I see photography as a tool with which I can express how I feel as a visual artist," he adds. "Though I am known mostly as a photographer, I use photographs as a base and my art emerges from them. People often ask me which comes first, photography or art. Actually, they are almost always one and the same. I see them as a collective artistic whole."

Mazzucco's varied interests infuse his work with its unique stamp – a random, intuitive mix that is raw, edgy and strong. By incorporating different materials onto his photo canvases, he not only makes them unconventional, but also creates the emotion he wants to convey.

With or without human figures in them, his works have a signature look, much like that of a fashion brand, which is at once recognisable – an enviable feat for an artist who is only in his mid-40s and whose works are known mainly in the US and Europe.

Alicia Zarou Scanlon, an art collector living in Singapore, was determined to change that when she first saw his works in 2004. "I could have just bought his art and been



Opposite: An acclaimed fashion photographer, Raphael Mazzucco is now making waves as an artist.

