



# The Surreal Deal

IN A CAREER RICH AND STRANGE, **ISABELLA ROSSELLINI** HAS ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TO THE UNUSUAL. SHE TELLS **PAUL KAY** WHY HER LATEST PROJECT MAY BE HER ODDEST YET

**P**LAYING A SEXY snail, it's fair to assume, is not at the top of most actresses' wishlists. But then, most actresses aren't Isabella Rossellini. The former supermodel, best known for her memorable performance in David Lynch's classic neo-noir *Blue Velvet*, has always had a penchant for the peculiar. But it's safe to say her most recent project, *Green Porno*, is in a league of its own.

Produced in association with Robert Redford and the Sundance Film Festival, and directed by Rossellini herself, the series of short films sees the actress donning unlikely costumes to graphically depict the mating rituals of snails, bedbugs, earthworms and all manner of other creepy crawlies. If it sounds bizarre, it is – but it's also wryly comic, genuinely educational and strangely compulsive viewing. (See the series for yourself at [www.sundancechannel.com/greenporno](http://www.sundancechannel.com/greenporno)).

Taking a break from filming the third season in Paris, which will focus on the unusual maternal habits of insects and other creatures, the 60-year-old Rossellini is in high spirits. "The pleasure of growing old is you're now doing what you like and what you enjoy," she says. "Everybody talks about wrinkles and the problems, but nobody talks about the great freedom that comes with it."

The daughter of Italian neo-realist auteur Roberto Rossellini and Swedish-born Hollywood legend Ingrid Bergman, Rossellini found fame as a model in her late 20s. She was photographed by the likes of Bruce Weber, Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton and Irving Penn, eventually becoming the face of Lancôme. A dead ringer for her screen-siren mother, it was only a matter of time before Rossellini made the move into films, particularly

given her brief marriage at the time to director Martin Scorsese; she would later have significant romantic relationships with cinematic visionaries David Lynch and Gary Oldman.

Rossellini's filmography is an intriguing collection of offbeat curios and solid art-house fare. She is, she says, attracted by the surreal. "There is probably an affinity to something – an emotion that can be expressed a little bit away from reality, as if that attraction allows a wider concentration in the feeling you want to portray," says Rossellini. "That was the case when I worked with David Lynch – where we recognise it emotionally, we recognise that this is attractive, this is suspenseful, this is tender, this is mysterious. But we don't quite get it; we're confused or we're slightly unnerved."

This inclination towards the surreal is hard to miss in *Green Porno*, but it's also on more subtle display in the advertising campaign accompanying her recent collaboration with Bulgari, for which she helped design a handbag. Shot by Annie Leibovitz, who has been shooting Rossellini since the 1980s, the ads pay visual tribute to surrealist-influenced 20th-century British painter Meredith Frampton and have an alluringly dreamlike quality. "What they wanted to convey was a feeling of classic elegance and a certain simplicity," says Rossellini. "Not a flamboyant baroque elegance – just a simple, classic elegance. Annie and I particularly like Meredith Frampton because there is a calmness and a sophistication without being over-the-top."

Despite having worked with Leibovitz before, Rossellini says she was astounded by the iconic photographer's attention to detail. "When I arrived at Annie's studio to take the photos, I was really taken aback by the amount of research that she had done. She had all photos of me from my three-year career as a model and references to film and other things as well. I said to her that I always forget that there is no secret to the greatest, just research, and a lot of work and preparation."

Rossellini's recent collaborations with Bulgari began in 2008 when she participated in the brand's Rewrite the Future campaign in aid of

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#### AT A GLANCE

**COVER GIRL**  
Rossellini has appeared on the cover of *Vogue's* various titles an impressive 21 times, most recently in June 2012's Italian *Vogue*

**PARENTAL GUIDANCE**  
Rossellini is intensely proud of her parents' achievements, and produced a short film and a book to commemorate what would have been her father's centenary in 2006. She also plans to mark her mother's centenary in 2015

■ PORTRAIT: JODY SHAPIRO

## FACES

charity organisation Save the Children, but her connection to the brand runs much deeper. “Bulgari is one of the very few designers that are based in Rome, and so is the Rossellini family. So the Rossellinis and the Bulgaris knew each other; they were family friends.”

The two famous families prospered in tandem. Bulgari opened its flagship on Via Condotti in 1905 while Rossellini's grandfather, Angelo, built Rome's first cinemas, thus igniting his own son's passion for the movies. Rossellini recalls borrowing her mother's Bulgari jewellery as a child, and accompanying her to visit the brand's Via Condotti store.

“I remember when I was very little,” says Rossellini, “just going and sitting there while my mother bought a new ring or watch, or brought them to be repaired or remounted. I remember how wonderful it was to enter. There is extraordinary jewellery everywhere, but then you reach these little private rooms, like little living rooms.” She continues, “So it's very private and very intimate, and I remember how much I loved sitting there – still today – sitting in these little cubicles and discussing your wedding ring or your ring for your engagement. I remember the ceremony being so extraordinary, so elegant and refined.”

The idea to create a bag came from a discussion Rossellini had with Veronica Bulgari and the brand's director of accessories, Cristina Cortesi. “We brainstormed about what would be an accessory to Bulgari,” says Rossellini, “and so the idea

*“Everybody talks about wrinkles, but nobody talks about the great freedom that comes with growing old”*

was that it should reflect the theme of the jewellery. You don't buy the jewellery every season, you buy the jewellery for the design, for preciousness, for something that will remain and that you might leave to your children when you die – quite opposite to fashion. You don't buy a sweater to last your lifetime. So we were talking about accessories that should be classic, in the sense that you can always use them.”

Never one to do things by halves, Rossellini travelled to Florence to visit Bulgari's leatherwork atelier and see how the bag would be made. “I imagined it in my head as being like the factory in *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin,” she giggles, “but when I arrived it was very much like a photographic studio. It was an old factory, but now all painted white. And maybe 20 people were

**LOST IN TIME**

A 14-year-old Isabella Rossellini accompanies her mother, Ingrid Bergman, to Bulgari's store at Via Condotti in Rome in 1966

working at these bags, artisans all sewing them by hand, painting them. Everybody knew that one person was more specialised in the clasp and the other one was more specialised in the cutting, but they were all working together. This is in the backbone of Italy, artisan-style. Some of the artisans I think have been there for three or four generations. Their grandfathers had started to work with Bulgari 150 years ago, and their children are learning the skills. This is unheard of anymore in our society.”

Suitably impressed, Rossellini began working with the brand's designers to create the Isabella Rossellini Bag, a deceptively simple and exceptionally sophisticated piece that reflects its namesake's easy elegance. About as far from *Green Porno* as you could get, one would expect. Not so, says Rossellini.

“The link between *Green Porno* and Bulgari is that, when we did the lining, we decided to use some of my drawings. If you look at the lining at the back, there is a drawing of a little snail. I selected the snail because the snail carries her home with her, and I always felt that my bag is a little bit of my home with me as I travel. As I leave my apartment, I know that I have my little home with me in my bag.” Safe to say, we'll never look at snails the same way again. **T**