

ABOVE

MAGAZINE

FOR THE EARTH

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WARMING

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Before she became an editor-at-large for *Above* Laetitia Cash was a contributing editor at *Frank* and wrote for *Harpers & Queen*, *W* and *The Sunday Times*. She was featured on the front cover of the *The Sunday Times Magazine* as “The New Tory Woman” in 2003.



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Born in Dusseldorf, Germany, Olaf Wipperfürth moved to Paris in the 1990s and began working as a fashion photographer. For this issue of *Above* he photographed Lily Cole in the Scottish Highlands.



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Dutch photographer Annemarieke van Drimmelen, says she's “interested in the way people relate to their environment and how the air between them dissolves.” She travelled to Boulder, Colorado for this issue.



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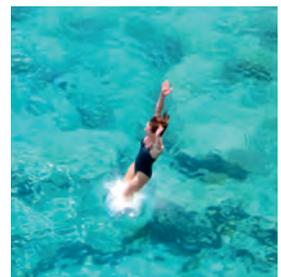
Stefanie Iris Weiss is the author of nine books. Her most recent is *Eco-Sex: Go Green Between the Sheets and Make Your Love Life Sustainable* (Crown Publishing/Ten Speed Press). Stefanie lives in New York City, where she keeps her carbon footprint small by drinking biodynamic wine and eating vegan cupcakes (preferably together). See more of her work at ecosex.net.



Photo FRANÇOIS ROTGER

LILY COLE

Currently in her third year reading History of Art at the University of Cambridge, multi-faceted Lily Cole is best known as a model and increasingly as an actress, having starred in Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009) and the soon-to-be-released *There Be Dragons*. *Above* is thrilled to publish her short story, *La Finta Nonna*, in this issue.



LISA SHIELDS

Lisa Shields is Vice President for Communications and Marketing for the Council on Foreign Relations, and she has served on the board of directors for Global Green, the US affiliate of Green Cross International. She wrote about Richard Branson in this issue of *Above*.

GREEN KNIGHT

SIR
RICHARD
TO THE
RESCUE

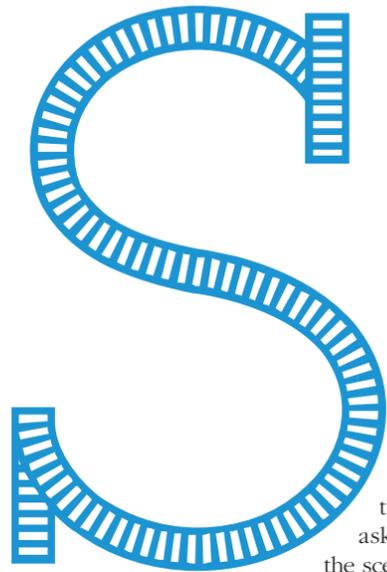
— From hippie entrepreneur in the '60s to eco warrior turning 60, **RICHARD BRANSON** discusses his determination to fight the Green fight.

By LISA SHIELDS

Photography ANTOINE VERGLAS

Photo Assistant CHRIS EWERS
With special thanks to CLAYTON HASKELL





peeding across the turquoise Caribbean, a red-and-white sail appears, zigzagging across the horizon. “Who’s that?” I ask our skipper, marvelling at the scene. “It’s Sir Richard. He’s kite sailing.” The man knows how to make an entrance. Having first burst on the scene as a cheeky adventure capitalist, Richard Branson has evolved into the Supreme Being of his own universe – directing everything in an entrepreneurial empire that has made him £2.2 billion and a major player on the world stage.

“With extreme wealth comes extreme responsibility,” he tells me over breakfast at his own Virgin Island, a private 30-hectare hideaway in the Caribbean. His piercing blue eyes look past the infinity pool at his house on Necker Island to the ocean beyond. “We live in a fragile world,” he says, “and anyone that is in a position to battle to protect it, should.” True to form, Sir Richard has taken on what he describes as “the biggest, most elusive, most pressing and most abstract problem of all: climate change.”

He has a very Zen vibe for someone facing such a formidable challenge. He is both pensive and playful, but at the end of the day, Branson seems at peace.

“Is there anything that keeps you up at night?” I wonder. “Let me think,” he pauses. “No, nothing,” he says, grinning.

Branson’s fundamental belief is that doing good is great for business. “I think that companies themselves should be a force for good in everything they do, and one day maybe it should be written into their constitutions,” he says.

“There is such a thing as enlightened self-interest, and we should encourage it,” he wrote in *Business Stripped Bare*. “It is possible to turn a profit while making the world a better place.”

Branson committed his first act of “creative destruction” at 20 when he and a group of friends conceived Virgin in a church crypt. “There aren’t very many virgins left around here,” laughed one of the girls, according to his memoir *Losing My Virginity*. “It

would be nice to have one here in name if nothing else.” His budding young Virgin not only survived, she thrived and proliferated across 29 countries and more than 200 companies that now bear her name. Branson titled his next book, *Screw it, Let’s Do It*. When I hear he has just launched the first-ever aero submarine – “like an aeroplane that flies, underwater” – named the *Necker Nymph*, I ask “What’s with all the sex?” “It’s what makes the world go round,” he says.

“Not money?”

“Well, it’s not as much fun, is it?” he laughs.

He wanted to name his most recent book *Getting It Up*, but the publisher balked. They agreed on *Reach for the Skies*.

I was invited to Necker by Sara Bronfman as part of a group that included her elegant mother Georgiana, former wife of Canadian billionaire Edgar Bronfman Sr, now married to Nigel Havers. Sara said her aim was to bring together people “who want to make the world a better place and ... have tons of fun!” It was a fortuitous chance to observe Branson in his own domain. Just a teenager when she first heard of Branson, Sara Bronfman told me, “The first Virgin Megastore opened in London and I remember hearing how he was not just creating spaces for people to buy music, but he was creating environments for them to spend time together listening, sharing and connecting over music. Necker for me is an extension of this same ethos. In my experience of Richard he cares deeply for people and I find this evident in all he does.”

The rest of the group – cohesive as it was diverse – included Bob Pittman, former CEO of the MTV and AOL Networks, his wife Veronique who designs eco-friendly jewellery with seeds from the Brazilian rainforest; Robert Zangrillo, the Pittmans’ business partner in the online music venture Playlist; and Carlos Emiliano Salinas, son of the former Mexican president.

Pittman first met Branson in the 1980s when both were in the music business. “Through all our discussions,” Pittman told me, “I discovered what an original thinker he was and how swiftly he moved





Branson's Carbon War Room in Washington, DC, is organised into "Theatres" targeting specific "Battle Areas" to attack climate change.

to make innovative ideas real. And he has continued doing that again and again in the decades since." When I wandered out of our villa early one morning, Branson was striding up the path, binoculars in hand. "Come, have a look," he said, focused on a flock of pink flamingos. "I'm reintroducing them to the Virgin Islands. We filmed the very first flamingo egg hatching, and the parents' reaction. It was lovely," he says, gazing across the lush saltwater pond he designed to make the flamingos feel at home.

Creating comfortable environments – for any species – is in Branson's DNA. He says he doesn't believe in God ("The idea that there is somebody sitting out there directing everything doesn't make sense to me") but he worships Mother Nature, and at 60, Sir Richard has settled into his role as her defender. The only thing a bit off about this picture is that Mother Nature's knight doesn't arrive on horseback; he travels via a fleet of planes, trains, submarines, and soon spaceships. In about 18 months Branson's space tourism company, Virgin Galactic, will start carrying "astronauts", customers who will pay a vast sum for six minutes of weightlessness. He disputes the suggestion that his programme is environmentally unfriendly. "On a NASA spaceship, you'll use up New York's electricity supply in a week. It's very, very carbon intensive. On a Virgin Galactic spaceship, we've got it down to less fuel than a roundtrip ticket from London to New York. Hopefully we can use all clean fuels by the time we're running it."

He named the spacecraft White Knight Two: ultimately, he believes technology will come to our rescue. "Space travel has also enabled man to make many, many, technological breakthroughs. We're going to put satellites into space for a fraction of the carbon output generated now because – instead of launching them from the ground – we're going to launch them from 18 kilometres up, and therefore a lot less energy will be used." He continues, "Then

you get to the moon. Some of the minerals and other elements on the moon, helium, for example, have got fantastic energy potential for powering the world. So I'm not embarrassed about space travel."

Branson has never tried to calculate his own carbon footprint, and acknowledges, "It's obviously not good." He has invested more than £70 million in Virgin Green Fund, a private equity fund looking for, among other things "fuels that put out no carbon and won't eat into the food supply." He cites the exciting prospects for algae and isobutanol. "In the next five years I think it's possible that quite a few aeroplanes will be flying on fuels that will not be damaging to the environment."

"I was sitting in the bath one day and decided to pledge at the Clinton Global Initiative all of the dividends we took out of our travel business into investing in clean fuels." In 2006 he pledged £1.6 billion. In 2007, Branson announced the Virgin Earth Challenge, a US \$25 million (£12.5 million) prize for a commercially viable design to remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere – because, he says, "there are enough intelligent people on this Earth to come up with an answer to these problems."

One such person is Ben Bronfman, son of Warner Music Group chief executive Edgar Bronfman Jr, who is on Necker with his fiancé Maya, the Sri Lankan singer known as M.I.A, and their toddler son, Ikhyd. Ben is a founder of Green Owl, an environmentally conscious record label and clothing line, and Global Thermostat, a technology company with a unique process for removing carbon from the atmosphere. "Richard understands what a pivotal moment in human history this is," Bronfman says.

"Once," Branson tells me, "I heard somebody say that global warming is a worse threat than the First and Second World Wars combined, and has far greater consequences. And I thought, 'If that's the case, where is the war room to organise the attack against the enemy, which is carbon?'" So he set one up. The Carbon War Room in Washington, DC, is organised



VIRGIN PARADISE

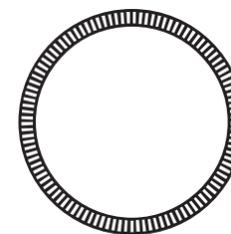
In 1978 Richard Branson went to the Caribbean looking to buy himself a Virgin island. He fell in love with the last one he visited, but his initial offer on the \$5 million property was rejected. A year later he bought the same 30-hectare island, Necker, for the knockdown price of \$180,000, on the the government-imposed condition that he develop it within five years; the work took three. The island became not only Branson's private retreat, but part of the Virgin Group's luxury hotel portfolio, and has two private beaches, a staff of 60 and accommodation for up to 28 people. The Balinese-style villas, incorporating local stone, Brazilian hardwoods, art pieces and furniture from Bali, are available for private rental, or you can visit as part of exclusive "Celebration" weeks. www.neckerisland.virgin.com





'Richard understands what a pivotal moment in human history this is.'

into "Theatres" targeting specific "Battle Areas" to attack climate change. "We're looking for gigaton-level solutions," says its energetic CEO Jigar Shah, who calls Branson a "catalytic force for change".



In the morning of our interview Branson suggests we meet on the beach. When I arrive down at the surf shack I find a team of tanned and toned staff readying a flotilla of sailboats, paddleboards, wind- and kiteboards, and a speedboat for a trip to another of Branson's private islands. "Want a paddleboard lesson?" Branson asks, wandering in. We drag the paddleboards into the ocean and climb to our knees. "Get some momentum, then just stand up." That's all the instruction he gives me. As the tide pulls me off course, I slip off the board, climb back on, slip off again. Branson paddles off in the distance. It was a lesson in survival of the fittest.

After a bacchanalian brunch, Branson urges our group to join him on a hike to the other side of the island where we can jump off a little cliff into the ocean. Eager to recoup some dignity after my pathetic paddleboard display, I'm eager to take the plunge. Wearing just sneakers and swimsuits we climb a thin path lined with an exotic array of cacti until we reach the crest. The "little cliff" turns out to be a gigantic boulder at least three-stories high. The rocks reflecting below seem scarily close to the surface. I hesitate. A friend yells, "Don't jump!" Branson calls out, "Be sure you push away from the edge!"

I'm thinking about his last lesson in survival when something he had scribbled on the back of one of his books pops into my head: "*The brave may not live forever – but the cautious do not live at all!*" I close my eyes and jump.

When I surface and wash up on shore, Branson is waiting and comes over and pats me on the head. He clearly delights in pushing people to the edge. "A

good leader is somebody who looks for the best in people," he tells me later. "Everybody flourishes under praise, and most people, almost everybody, shrivels up when they're criticised."

"I genuinely care about people," he tells me. "From a very young age my parents taught me never to gossip about people or criticise people. If I ever said the slightest negative thing about anybody, I was sent to the mirror and told to look in the mirror for ten minutes. That certainly stopped me from saying anything unpleasant about other people," he laughs. I ask him if he has a best friend. "My dad," he says. "I ring him up regularly." On the way back from the beach I pass two giant tortoises resting in the sun. I'm reminded of another famous British naturalist, Charles Darwin, and later, in an email exchange, I ask Branson about Charles Darwin and about the Galápagos Islands. "Yes, have been to the Galápagos recently," Branson replies. "Just wish the rest of the world was as protected and unspoilt. Swam with hundreds of hammerhead sharks. Saw thousands of turtles, nesting flamingos and obviously the Giant Tortoises. It seems appropriate that Darwin's theory of evolution was discovered there."

"As to my own evolution," he continues, "I hope to live on through my two wonderful children, Holly and Sam." His legacy looks secure. Holly, a doctor, left the medical profession to work for her father. Sam has crossed the Arctic a number of times, and published a journal about his experiences. He is now making a film involving 90-year-old scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock.

But no one expects Branson to be displaced by the next generation anytime soon. While I was on my way back to New York, Branson was off to Africa to meet with The Elders, a group he founded with Nelson Mandela, Peter Gabriel and Desmond Tutu, among others, to help mitigate conflict in the world.

I wouldn't be surprised if Sir Richard were getting ready for his next role: Elder Statesman. ○

Branson has reintroduced pink flamingos to the Virgin Islands. 'We filmed the very first flamingo egg hatching,' he says. 'It was lovely.'

