System

Photographed by

Issue No. 24 – €35 / £30


System
Dior

System

Fei Fei Sun photographed by Zhong Lin

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Cover photographed by Luis Alberto Rodriguez

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Cover photographed by Malick Bodian

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Cover photographed by Nadia Lee Cohen

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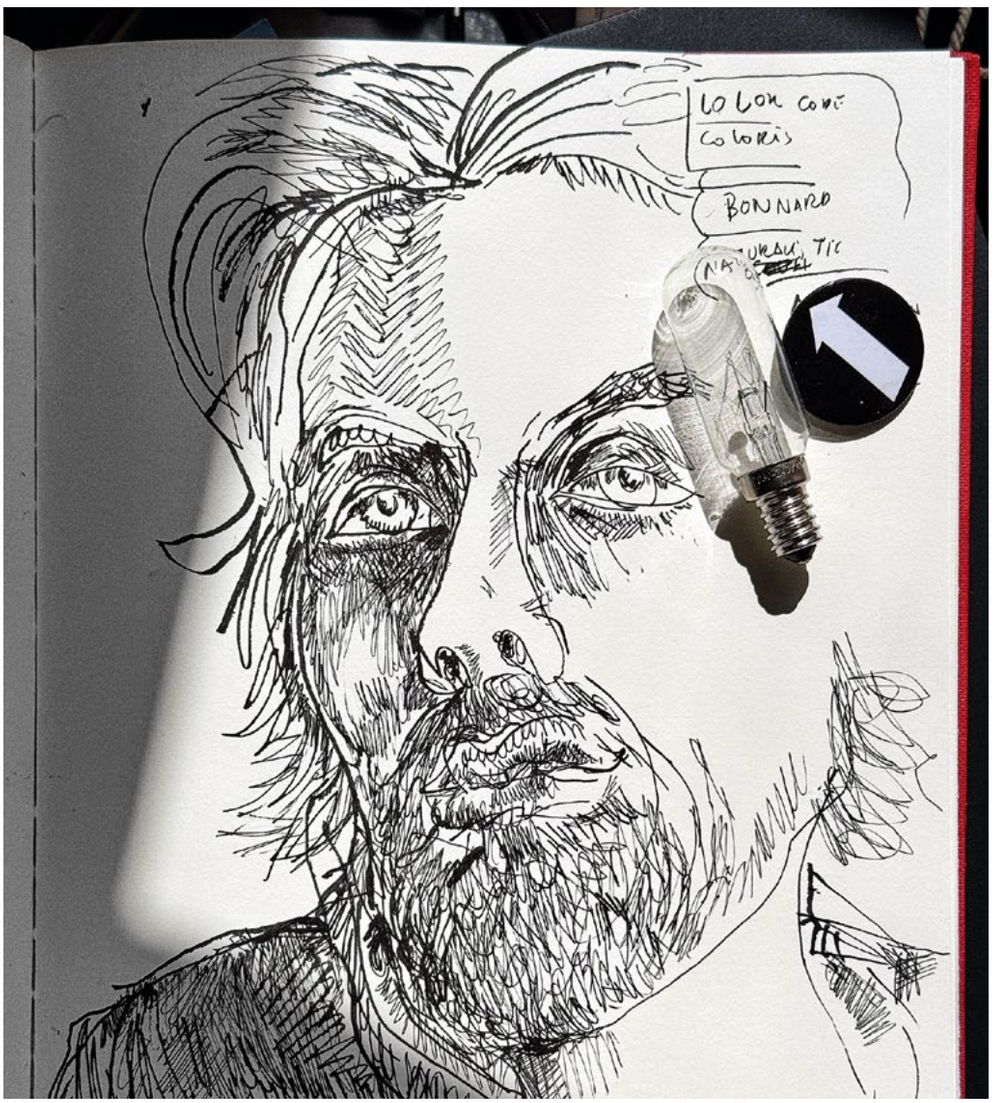

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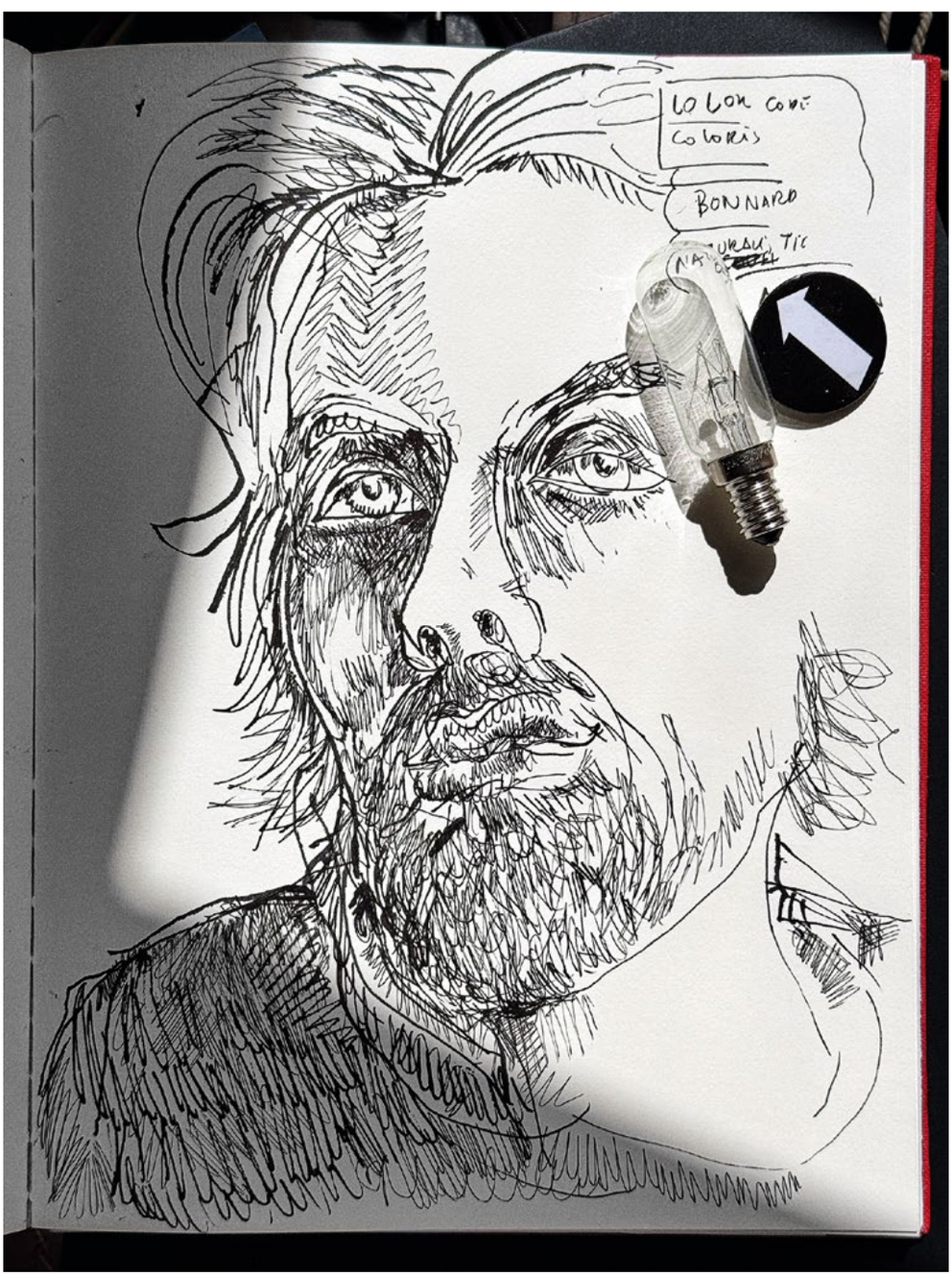

David Sims as seen by Mathias Augustyniak

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The Sorrenti family photographed by Drew Jarrett

GUCCI

The Gucci Portrait Series
Fall Winter 2025 by Catherine Opie

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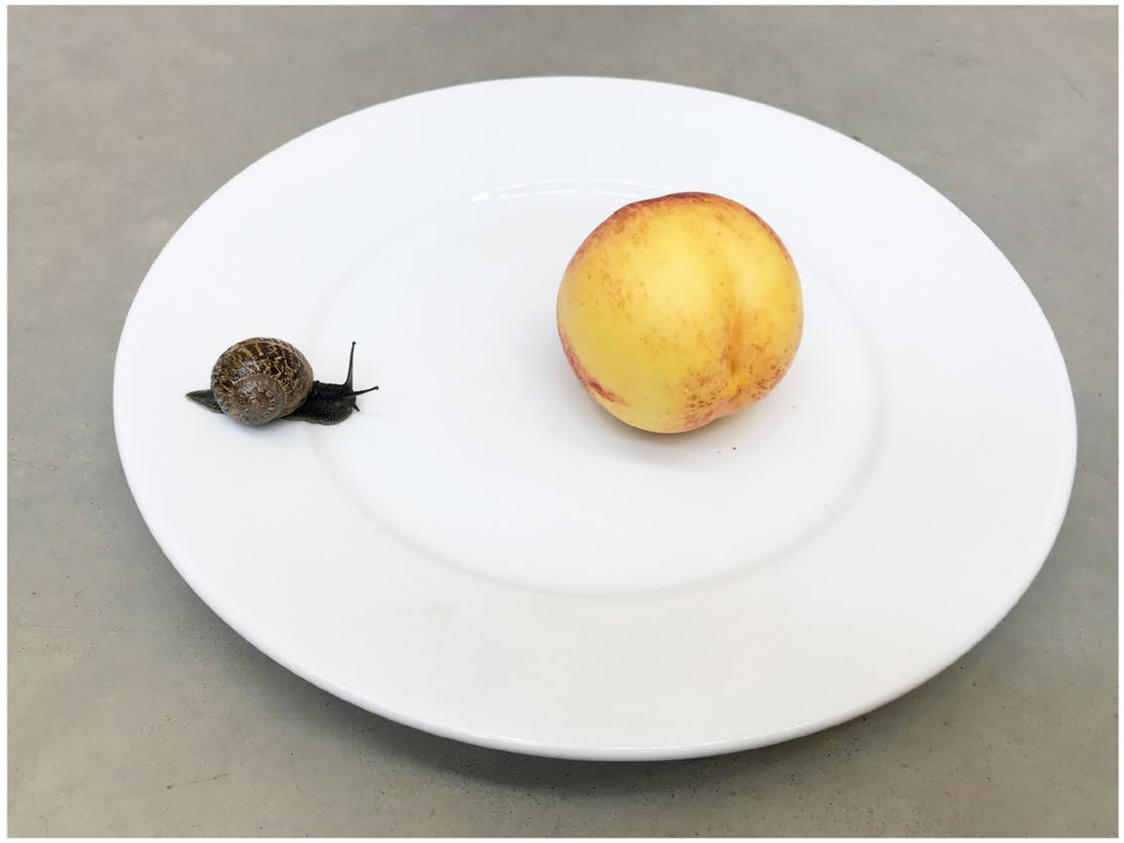

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Contributors

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Masthead

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Fashion has always been deeply invested in the task of seeing, and being seen. Every notable designer appointment sparks two parallel questions: 'What will the clothes look like?' and 'What will the imagery be?' More than ever, our relationship to fashion is being shaped by image as much as it is by clothes – arguably more so. Which is why, with the reshuffling of the creative director cards being played out this season, *System* chose to shift its attention towards fashion photography.

At the heart of this economy of attention are the fashion photographers themselves. Their field of expertise can be genuinely transformative, a powerful asset for designers and brands. Yet fashion photography's role, practice and status are naturally evolving with the times, and its rapport with the future will of course be shaped by technology and economics as much as identity and taste. With this in mind, *System* has spent the past months speaking with a range of fashion photographers to hear their personal stories and reflections on their work.

Among them, Juergen Teller, Inez & Vinoodh, Carlijn Jacobs, David Sims, Nadia Lee Cohen, Luis Alberto Rodriguez, Malick Bodian, Marili Andre, Zhong Lin, Nick Knight & Simon Foxton, the Sorrenti family, Tyrone Lebon, Angela Hill… Different voices, generations, contexts and creative expressions, presented side by side. A portrait of photography in fashion, so to speak.

In the case of Juergen Teller, we asked people from the industry – including some of the creative directors central to fashion's next chapter – to select and comment on images from his almost 40-year body of work. The exercise reminded us that Juergen's pictures, like those of all great fashion photographers, offer profound inspiration for both designers and audiences, providing fashion with personality, emotion, meaning, evocation and a legacy.

Photographed by...

Juergen Teller

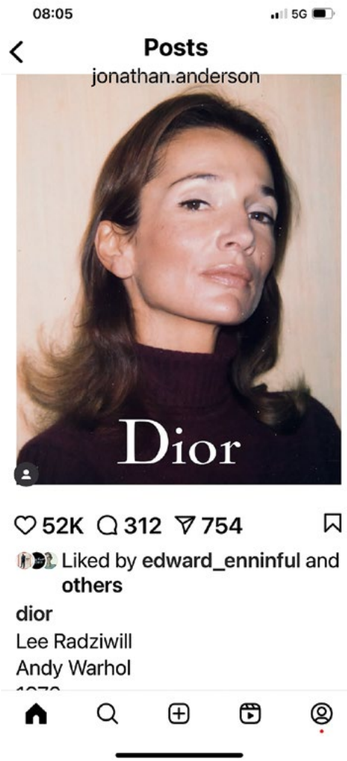
Dior Menswear Spring/Summer 2026, by Jonathan Anderson.

Photographs and layout by Juergen Teller; creative partner Dovile Drizyte
Styling by Benjamin Bruno

Cruz wears tweed jacket, bermudas, silk neckband and socks by Dior.
Neck ruff, ruffled cuffs and shoes from Royal National Theatre.
William wears embroidered shirt and jeans by Dior.
Neck ruff, ruffled cuffs and shoes from Royal National Theatre.

Teller / Plate Dimension 1,80m diameter
'Me hugging Bambi, Bubenreuth 2005'.
Trompe l'oeil plate by Dior (on the floor).

Cruz wears coat, waistcoat, shirt, bow tie and scarf by Dior.
Bloomers from Costume Studio.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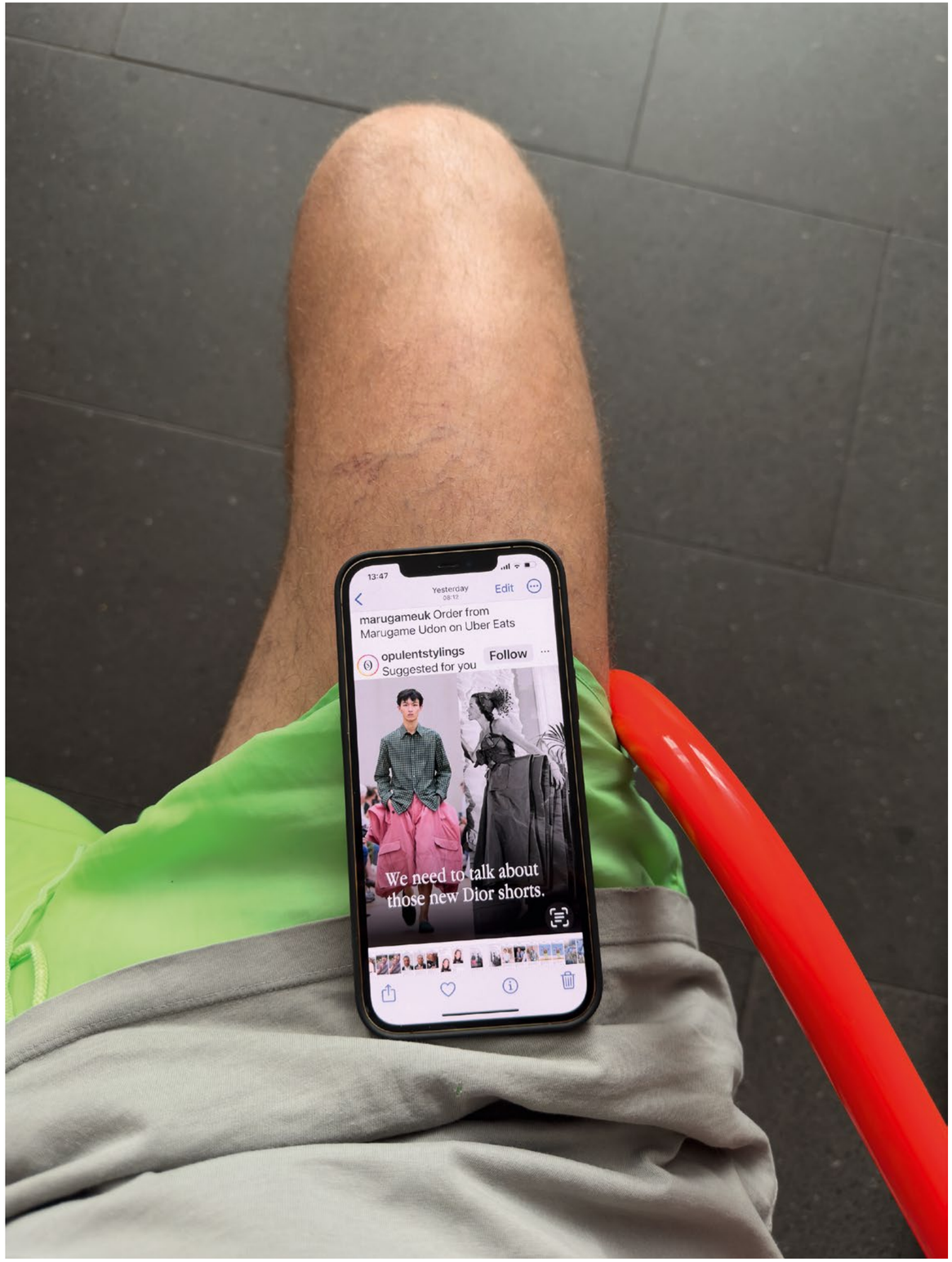
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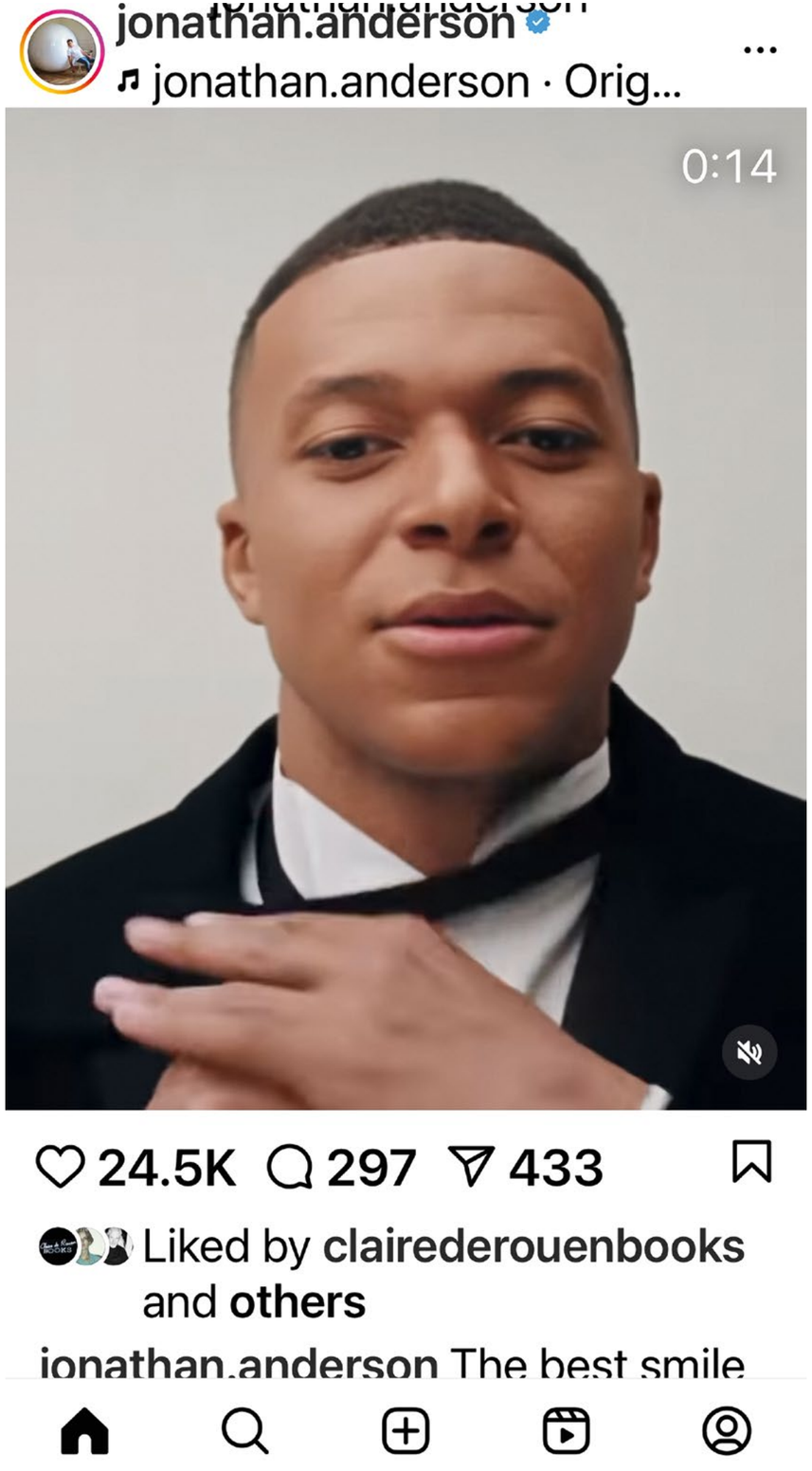
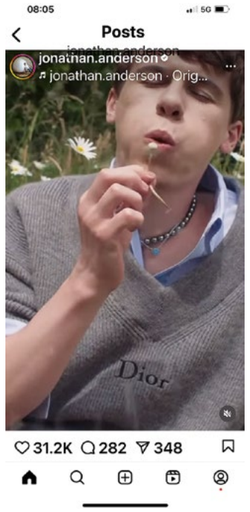
We need to talk about those new Dior shorts.

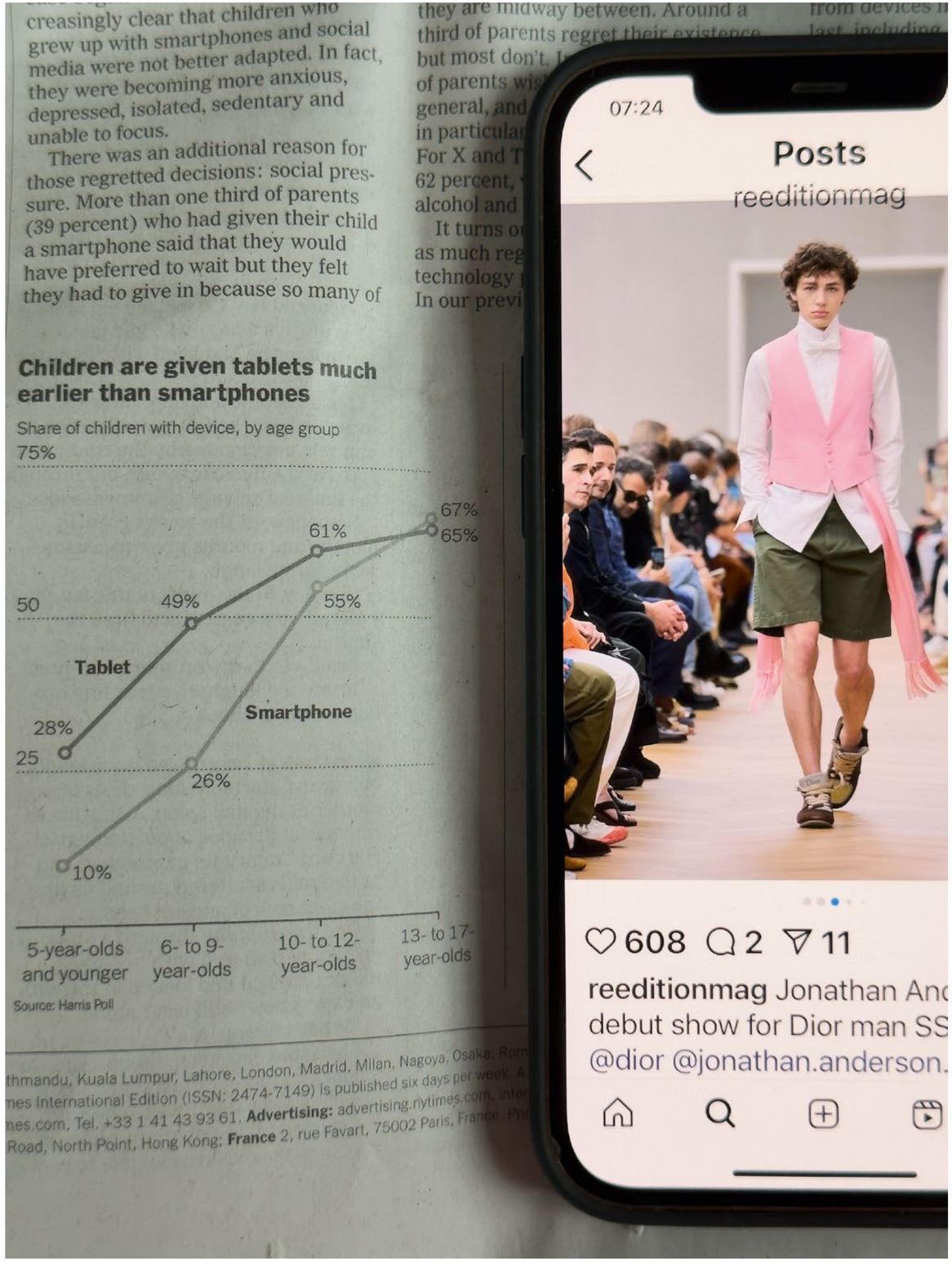
Cotton rib sock by Dior.
Wooden Clog from Royal National Theatre.

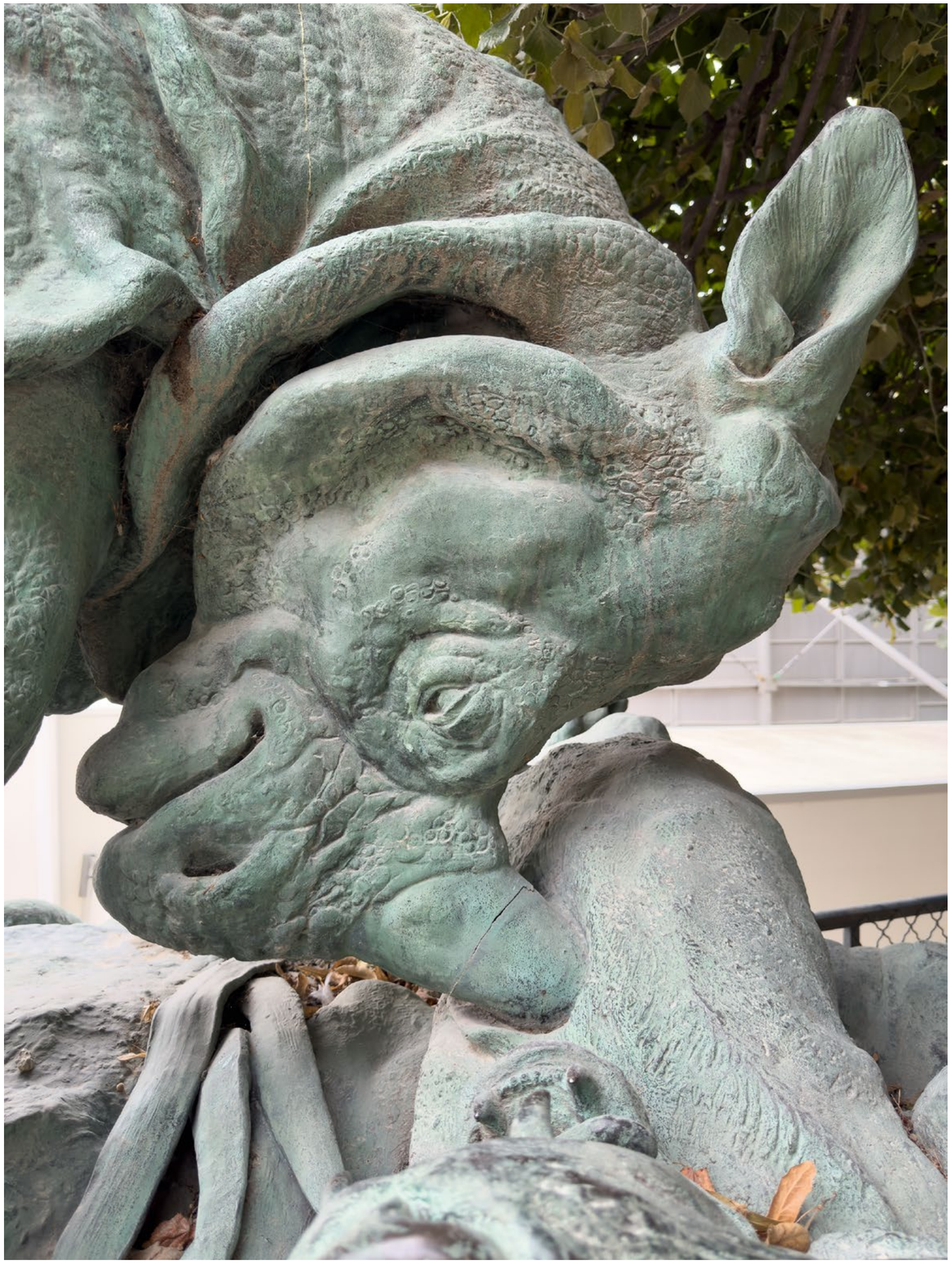
Cruz wears jumper, chino pants, neckband, leather sneakers and book tote in embroidered canvas by Dior.
William wears cape, jumper, pants, neckband, leather sneakers and book tote in embroidered canvas by Dior.



Upper left: William wears cape, shirt, waistcoat and pants by Dior. Feather hat and shoes from Royal National Theatre.
‘Les Musiciens’ oil painting on plaster model by Christian Bérard (circa 1937) property of Christian Dior Couture.
Upper right: Cruz wears cape, shirt, waistcoat and jeans by Dior. Feather hat and shoes from Royal National Theatre.
Bottom: Cruz wears shirt, tie, backpack, socks and sandals by Dior. William wears shirt, tie, backpack, socks and sandals by Dior.







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thefacemagazine After... more

Francois-Xavier Lalanne, *Mouton Transhumant*, (1988)
© Adagp, Paris, 2025.

Cruz wears bermudas, socks and boots by Dior.
Hat and ruffled cuffs from Royal National Theatre.
William wears bermudas, socks and slippers by Dior.
Hat and ruffled cuffs from Royal National Theatre.
Francois-Xavier Lalanne, *Mouton Transhumant*, (1988)
© Adagp, Paris, 2025.

Upper right: Cruz wears waistcoat, shirt, shorts, tie, scarf and boots by Dior.
Feather hat and embroidered cuffs from Royal National Theatre.
Bottom: William wears waistcoat, jumper, jeans, neckband and sneakers by Dior.
Embroidered cuffs from Royal National Theatre.

William wears jumper, shirt, tie and scarf by Dior.
Hat, neck ruff, lace cuffs and bloomers from Royal National Theatre.
George II silver plate, Mark of Edward Feline London (1743).
Francois-Xavier Lalanne, *Mouton Transhumant*, (1988)
© Adagp, Paris, 2025.

Suede ‘Roadie’ lace up boot by Dior.

William wears coat, pants, neckband and sandals by Dior.
Cruz wears suit, jeans, neckband and sandals by Dior.
‘Les Musiciens’ oil painting on plaster model by Christian Bérard
(circa 1937) property of Christian Dior Couture.

Book tote in embroidered canvas by Dior.

Cruz and Williams wear bag and socks by Dior. Feather hat, neck ruff, ruffled cuffs, bloomers and wooden clogs from Royal National Theatre.

Hat and lace cuffs from Royal National Theatre.

William wears waistcoat, shirt, jeans, neckband and boots by Dior.

Models: Cruz at New Madison, William at Ford
Casting director: Ashley Brokaw
Hair: Yuji Okuda at ArtList
Make-up: Satoko Watanabe at ArtList
Set designer: Vincent Olivieri
Production: Cinq Étoiles Productions
Producer: Lucas Lechevalier
Production manager: Jonathan Arapis
Photography assistants: Felipe Chaves, Mitchell Sturm
Styling assistants: Natasha Arnold, Shaun Kong, Winnie Rielly
Set designer assistants: Gaspard Desombre, Alexandre Henry
Production assistants: Louisa Kocher, Laurie Marx, Ulysse Lechevalier
Post-production: Louwre Erasmus at QuickFix

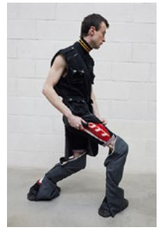
William wears white silk knot neckband by Dior.

Selected by...

System invited Juergen Teller's closest collaborators, friends and respected industry figures to select their favourite fashion photograph or series by him.

Jonathan Anderson, creative director, Dior, and Benjamin Bruno, stylist
Maggie Smith, Loewe Pre-collection Spring/Summer 2024 campaign, London, 2023.
I think it encapsulates the empathy and the silent dialogue and play between him and his subject. Maggie knew what Juergen was looking for in her and Juergen knew what Maggie was able to gift him. Tenderness, rawness, 'this is who I am', and a sentiment that celebrates vulnerability, grace, humour and humanity.

Jo Barker, editor, *Re-Edition* and *Replica Man*
Noomi Rapace, From the Hill of Crosses to The Hill of Witches, No.3, Lithuania, 2024.
Very very hard to choose a favourite picture or series by Juergen – he has given so many incredible portfolios for *Re-Edition* – but this one has a lot of meaning to me with our trip to Lithuania. Titled 'From the Hill of Crosses to the Hill of Witches' with Noomi Rapace, and with McQueen who agreed to this adventure, these kinds of trips are rare these days and I found it fascinating to discover Lithuania through Juergen eyes and in Dovile's home country. Locked in time, this Juergen series captures a different 'life' and history at the same time and I think that's what Juergen is so great at: 'capturing life' and humour, but with a comment always very poignant to the times we live in. And that's so important in these turbulent times today, he reminds us we're human! I will always remember this adventure in Lithuania...



Jodie Barnes, stylist and consultant
George Rouy, No.3, London, 2021.
We shot the story during Covid for *Fantastic Man*. I made a new collection completely from online purchases bought from Oxfam and it was modelled wonderfully by the artist George Rouy.

Victoria Beckham, designer and creative director
Victoria Beckham Spring/Summer 2024 campaign, Paris, 2023.
Working with Juergen is always such a unique experience – he captures fashion with an honesty and immediacy that few others can achieve. Our Spring/Summer 2024 campaign was particularly special because of the circumstances: we shot it just two hours before the show, in Karl Lagerfeld's former mansion, with Vilma. The entire place was in the middle of pre-show chaos – styling, production, everything happening at once – and somehow Juergen saw the beauty in that constraint. We slipped away into the garden, almost hiding from everyone, and he transformed the moment into something magical. Only Juergen could take that pressure and turn it into imagery that feels so raw, playful, and elevated at the same time.

Francesca Bellettini, president and CEO, Gucci
Legs, Saint Laurent Spring/Summer 2019 campaign, Lake Como, Italy, 2018.

Mariacarla Boscono, model
Mariacarla Boscono, Ibiza, 2012.
Not easy, probably the pregnant one as it was so special for me. I felt so vulnerable and I could and would never have anyone shoot me... But he really wanted it and I said, 'Fuck it, why not?' The most romantic / not romantic pregnant pictures ever have been taken almost like a painting... Still, from the Go-Sees and all the other shoots I ever had the luck to do with him… it's always been pure art. We Are Lucky to live in a world where we can admire Mr JT art.

Naomi Campbell, model
Naomi Campbell, London, 1994.
What I love about Juergen Teller is that he exists in his own world. You either fit into that world or you don't. He has a way of seeing things unlike anyone else, and that perspective is what makes his work so alluring.

The first time I worked with him, I believe it was for French *Glamour*, and he shot me like a boy. I remember being extremely nervous; after all, this was Juergen Teller, and so many people I admired had already worked with him. I wanted to strip myself down, erase myself, and be a blank canvas for his vision. Juergen is very direct and clear. He tells you exactly what he wants to execute, and it's up to you to interpret it. That's why I adore working with him – there's clarity, there's purpose. And once you step into the mode, it flows so quickly.

It's fun, *the real real*.

One of my fondest memories was shooting with him around Thanksgiving. We had dinner in London, then went straight to Winter Wonderland, shooting at the fair in Hyde Park and later in his studio. It was playful, full of energy, and that's what Juergen captures best: energy.

The image I've chosen from that time is very 1990s in my career.

Even though I looked like a girl, I felt very masculine, very stripped down. Again, it's about energy, the energy of the moment in time. So to Juergen, I just want to say: keep giving us those moments, keep giving us that energy. That's what we will always look at, and that's what lasts.

Cédric Charbit, CEO, Saint Laurent
Self-portrait with Charlotte Rampling, No.2,
Marc Jacobs Spring/Summer 2004 campaign, Paris, 2003.
Without staging, Juergen captures fragility and boldness – intimacy, beauty and power. The composition and the way they are with Charlotte stays with me. This is one of my favourite pictures of all times.

Comme des Garçons
Anna Pawlowski, No.8, *Six* magazine, Paris, 1991.
CDG loves this one.

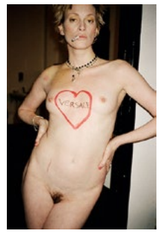
Alex Consani, model
Maggie Smith, Loewe Pre-collection Spring/Summer 2024 campaign, London, 2023.
This picture is so iconic. Who doesn't gag for Maggie Smith?

Sofia Coppola, filmmaker
Kurt Cobain, Berlin, 1991.
This is one of my favourite photos of Juergen's. It feels sweet and intimate. I have a print of it that I love that my brother gave me for my birthday.

Demna, artistic director, Gucci
Go-Sees, Desiree and Candice Neil, London, 22nd May, 1998.
For me the Go-Sees series is how I discovered his work. I was so interested in his conceptual approach to this series. To me, they redefined how we see fashion photography.

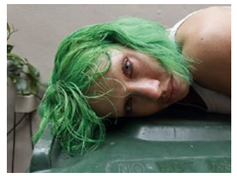
Honey Dijon, DJ
Honey Dijon, London, 2023.
Juergen took this photo of me for my takeover at the Southbank Centre. I was so honoured. It was the merging of art, music, fashion and queer culture. I will cherish it forever.

Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, designers and creative directors
Dolce & Gabbana Autumn/Winter 2022 campaign, Naples, 2022.
We chose to work with Juergen because we knew he would interpret our collections in an authentic and original way. Like all great geniuses of photography, he has a personal and unmistakable signature.



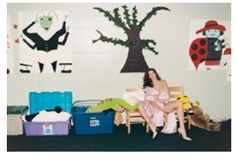
Dovile Drizyte, creative partner of Juergen Teller
Kristen McMenamy, No.3, London, 1996.
Photograph of Kristen with Versace heart, for me, is a symbol of what Juergen essentially is: free at heart, unconstrained by any limitation, vulnerable and full of courage. He's been like that then and he is like that now.

Edward Enninful, co-founder and chief creative officer, EE72
Kate Moss, No.2, Cornwall, 1996.
The year was 1996, a time when the industry was getting fatigued with grunge. Raw fashion photography devoid of artifice was starting to feel stale and Kate was no longer an up-and-coming face, she was now a supermodel. Juergen produced one of my all time favourite shoots; the most poetic and romantic stories of Kate Moss, shot in Cornwall. He showed the world through these images that grunge was ready to grow up.



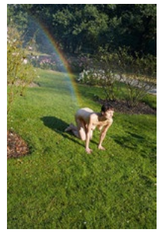
Isamaya Ffrench, make-up artist
Isamaya Ffrench, No.24, London, 2023.
I think I'd have to say the portrait series that Juergen took at my house for *System* a while back – it was a totally chaotic, spontaneous shoot which felt very connected to the way Juergen and I approach image making. There was a sort of consensual resignation to the chaos and a belief that something magical would ultimately come if we just let go of expectations, together.

Angelo Flaccavento, fashion writer
Yohji Yamamoto, No.16, Paris, 2019.
This is not exactly a fashion picture, but at its core it deeply is. Rick Owens and Yohji Yamamoto appear in their signature looks, which are also a summation of their respective aesthetics. Prompted by Juergen's proclivity for appearing in his own pictures, I chose this image for the following reasons:
- It is telling of that moment as much as the article it accompanied;
- I had the opportunity to see Juergen at work: he is swift and fast;
- I am in the picture, and as a Juergen admirer this is fantastic.



Dennis Freedman, creative director
Stephanie Seymour, No.2, Connecticut, 1999.
A devastating image for a 28-page series titled 'Home Alone', December 1999 chronicling the life of a supermodel stranded in suburbia.

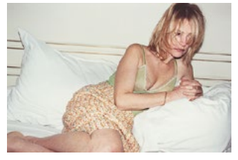
Eva Gödel, founder and owner, Tomorrow Is Another Day model agency
Barneys, No.7, Spring/Summer 2015 Men's Designer Book, Panama, 2014.
This shoot is from one of the Barneys campaign catalogues Juergen shot in Panama with our boys. For six years Juergen and his team always booked new boys from us to go on these amazing trips to surprising locations around the world. Those trips with Juergen have for sure been some of the best trips of their lives! I loved to hear about those shoots from the boys even before the amazing catalogues arrived. I also told the boys: not all fashion shoots will be fun like this.



Elizabeth von Guttman, co-founder, *System*
Saskia de Brauw, No.14, Parc de Bagatelle, Paris 2014.
This beautiful picture of Saskia, somewhere over (or under) the rainbow, conjures the best elements of Juergen's work: beauty, fragility, nature and nudity. The essence of life.

Lynn Hirschberg, journalist
Margaret Qualley, No.1, Los Angeles, 2019.
One of the many reasons why Juergen is brilliant is that he can instantly capture the essence of a subject. I have often passed people that he's never met. It never matters because Juergen is the quickest, most accurate student of character. Margaret Qualley was new to him and yet, he instantly saw why she was remarkable. The photo was true to her personality (she is a glamorous hippie, happiest in nature) and also her intensity. After this photo there would soon be countless photos taken of Margaret by lots of other photographers, but Juergen's image of her will never be topped! It is exquisite like the best art. Juergen's work is precise, evocative and timeless.

Cathy Horyn, fashion writer
Go-Sees, Lauren, London, 18th February 1999.
I have many favourite Juergen images, among them his personal work, like his fairly recent pictures in Sicily, but I'd have to single out Go-Sees. The images are such a direct, unfiltered view of some young people in the 1990s, isolated in an age and in a quest. Where are they now, I wonder? The pictures simply retain their power and wonder.



Isabelle Huppert, actress
Isabelle Huppert, Paris, 2002.
It was my first encounter with Juergen. A revelation. The assurance that one could be beautiful, brutal and vulnerable all at once. And then this certainty: with him, you're always moving toward boldness, but the photos convey something true. Proof: I look very angry, which is how I feel most of the time! I immediately had just one desire: to do it again.

Anne Imhof, visual artist and choreographer
Saint Laurent Autumn/Winter 2023 campaign, Paris, 2023.
My dear friend Sihana is one of the most beautiful people in the world and Juergen really captures this.

Marc Jacobs, designer and creative director
Sofia Coppola, Marc Jacobs Daisy Perfume campaign, 2001.
I just saw Juergen while in Venice with Sofia for the Venice Film Festival. It was so great to see him and be together, it reminded us all of the first images he took of Sofia for our fragrance campaign.

Kim Jones, designer and creative director
Judy Blame, No.1, London, 2009.
I love the idea of the relationship between Judy [Blame] and Juergen and Jo-Ann [Furniss] in this shoot and I'm sure there was quite a lot of backchat and laughter too!

Andreas Kronthaler, creative director, Vivienne Westwood
Vivienne Westwood, Autumn/Winter 2007 Campaign, London, 2007.
Juergen loves fashion, he's always aware of what is in front of him and always finds the best way of showing it. Whereby the person or the character is his priority. He's a specialist, he genuinely understands fashion, he knows what goes into it.

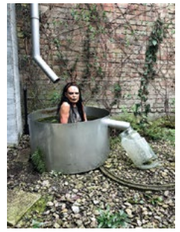
We have worked together for a long time and it has been, and still is, such a joy spending time with him and Dovile creating imagery.

I chose a picture of Vivienne from one of the first campaigns we did together a long time ago. It was his idea to make her part of the campaign which was, at that time, very unusual to do. She looks great and I'm still fond of what she's wearing very much. Thank you, Juergen.

It's very impressive how he mirrors his life in his work, how he combines all his interests and passions. He sees things no-one is aware of, you only discover this once you see the image.

I always love the moment when he knows he's got the picture. He always says, 'I got it'. He's happy and excited, kind of like a little boy really. That's so lovely to experience and very reassuring.

Inez Van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin, photographers
Stephanie in Sea, Miami, 2000.
We love these Stephanie Seymour pictures by Juergen. This series specifically, but all with her are so great. There could be no better match at that point in time. She is his perfect muse. It's left ambiguous as to whether she is in on the joke but her magnificent beauty surpasses all the possibilities of doubt.



Michèle Lamy, co-founder, OWENSCORP
Michèle Lamy, No.11, London, 2018.
You do throw me in buckets my dearest but how much do you help me all along to 'Hold fast to dreams, For if dreams die, Life is a broken-winged bird, That cannot fly.' (Langston Hughes) To survive and fight our fucked up world.

Helmut Lang, artist
Juergen is a story Teller.

It is impossible for me to pick one favourite image from Juergen's enormous body of work – it does not feel right.

We have known each other rather closely for over 30 years, so I can say with certainty that the outcome of his work is rooted deeply within him. He shoots as direct as he speaks and thinks – emotional, beautiful, satirical and humorous, nourished by a German-English dual life.

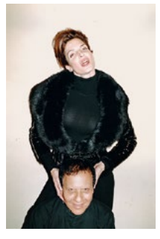
Fashion is only as interesting as any other subject for him. It is really about all the implications of that moment of life and what comes with it – a multilayered story in one shot about the person, the object, or the tender or raw moment.

Authentic like only the best and fearless – no risk, no photograph.

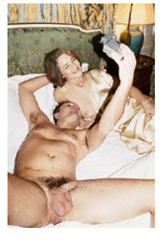
Duran Lantink, creative director, Jean Paul Gaultier
Walter Van Beirendonck Winter 1998 campaign, 1998.
For me, the *Believe* book he did with Walter Van Beirendonck was incredibly important. I remember buying it and becoming completely obsessed.

What struck me most was how these outerworldly characters were photographed right in the middle of the street, in suburban settings. It felt like reality had been overtaken by this incredible new kind of people. It was and still is very inspiring.

I also remember that both Orlan and Alexander McQueen were featured in the book, which added even more of its impact for me.



Thomas Lenthal, creative director, *System*
Stephanie Seymour & Azzedine Alaïa, 2007.
Juergen's images always say everything there is to say, from the most obvious to the most arcane. His work is like a book still being written: isolating a single image is as difficult as isolating a single sentence, and all images are ultimately connected in ways we may not yet fully grasp.



Christian Louboutin, designer and creative director
Self-portrait with Charlotte Rampling, Louis XV, No.5, Paris, 2004.
No one shows nudity like Juergen Teller: nothing is suggested, it is in your face, totally fully exposed. Despite this, it is never sexual or '*racoleur*', but always playful, remarkable and unforgettable! Bliss him!

Mathias Augustyniak and Michael Amzalag, M/M (Paris)
Parco Autumn/Winter 2016.
Werner Herzog made a revolution in the world of cinema – whether independent or Hollywood studio – by using documentary as an introspective and primary creative tool to anatomise the world.

Juergen Teller made a revolution in the world of photography by using documentary as an introspective and primary creative tool to anatomize the world of fashion – whether independent or shaped by the luxury groups.

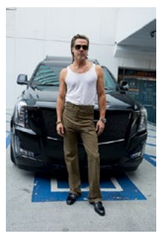
Juergen Teller the photographer continues, with the same freedom of expression, to tell the story of Juergen Teller the wanderer – him being fully dressed or completely naked.

In 2017, to create a series of posters for the Japanese department store Parco, we commissioned Juergen Teller to produce a set of photographs. At the time, he was teaching photography at the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg.

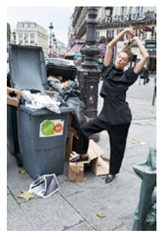
We decided to involve his students in the making of this campaign. Around a graphic flag giving its title to the campaign, the students and a model performed contemporary tales, which Juergen Teller then documented. This series of photographs became the new Parco advertising campaign.

No matter what, Juergen only tells the truth about Teller – and Teller only tells stories about Juergen.

Kristen McMenamy, model
Kristen McMenamy, No.40, London, 2025.
One of my favourite shootings with Juergen is the last one we did together. Juergen decided to shoot it at my house with my musician boyfriend, my 2 dogs, 4 cats and 50 plants. Juergen, the master of observation, recorded the true beauty in the chaos. He made me look both an indestructible woman and a little kid ready to fall apart at any moment. The photos made me see things in my own home that I've never noticed or had just taken for granted. It was such a stunning story of love, eccentricity and joy. Juergen at his best. The one photo I love the most from this story is a moment after the shoot where I was wearing my boyfriend's coat and hat and smoking a cigarette. It encompasses strength, frailty, confusion and passion. I look wrecked and to me, so beautiful.



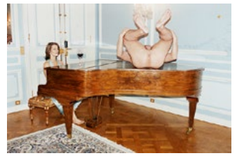
Sara Moonves, editor-in-chief, *W* magazine
Brad Pitt, No.1, Los Angeles, 2019.
It is so hard to choose as Juergen's work is so important and influential to me. After much thinking about older work and new work, I thought I would choose something personal, my favourite image from *W*'s Best Performances, the first year I was editor of the magazine. It is a picture of Brad Pitt that ended up being the cover, wearing Hedi Slimane's Celine. The pants were so small that they split up the back, but that didn't deter any of us from getting the perfect image. We shot him in a parking lot in West Hollywood. He was as cool as ever and embodied that moment in time: his lead-up to winning an Oscar for Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. We had so much fun shooting him.



Piergiorgio del Moro, casting director
Daria Werbowy, I Love Paris, 2015.
For me the series that I love is Daria Werbowy by Juergen Teller for *POP* magazine. I have always been fascinated by the beauty and the coolness of this fashion story. Those images are always a strong reference of beauty in my work as a casting director.

Kate Moss, model
Young Pink Kate, London, 1998.
I really love this picture. Juergen gave me a print of it recently, I was so happy.

Oliver Knight & Rory McGrath, founders, OK-RM
Vivienne Westwood, No.3, London, 2009.
The body of work created by Juergen during his 20-year collaboration with Vivienne Westwood includes many iconic images, exemplified by this portrait of Vivienne posing nude on her sofa. You don't just take a photo like this, it's only possible as a result of a deep trust and mutual respect, in this case built over many years. It's the slow iterative process of Juergen's work with Vivienne Westwood – in search of something deeper, meaningful and explorative – that catches our attention. We had the pleasure of working with Juergen to edit and publish the book of this body of work, having spent several weeks immersed in hundreds of pictures, we ultimately selected this image for the cover.



Rick Owens, designer and creative director
Self-portrait with Charlotte Rampling, Louis XV, No.10, Paris, 2004.
MY PERSONAL AGENDA HAS ALWAYS BEEN PLAIN AS DIRT – TO GLAMORIZE WEIRDNESS.

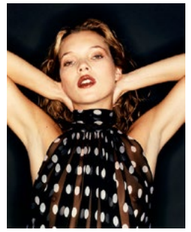
IN MY YOUTH, MY OWN WEIRDNESS SEEMED TO AFFRONT THE VALUES OF THE CONSERVATIVE COMMUNITY I WAS RAISED IN AND THE REACTION WAS HOSTILE.

I LEARNED TO ACCEPT THIS ATTITUDE AS PART OF THE GLORY AND DISAPPOINTMENT OF HUMAN NATURE BUT HAVE ALWAYS CONSIDERED IT MY MORAL DUTY TO COUNTERBALANCE THE BIGOTRY OF SMUG JUDGEMENT WITH CHEERFUL PERVERSITY. THROUGH AS ELEGANT A FILTER AS I CAN SUMMON.

I SENSE THE SAME URGE IN JUERGEN'S WORK. HIS SEEMINGLY BLUNT AND CONFRONTATIONAL IMAGES BELY A TENDER SENSITIVITY THAT PROMOTES LOOKING BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL AND SOMETIMES CRUEL STANDARDS OF CONVENTIONAL BEAUTY AND STATUS SYMBOLS. I KNOW I BREATHE A SIGH OF RELIEF AT SEEING SOMETHING RAW AND UNVARNISHED THAT FEELS IMPULSIVE AND HONEST. AND SOMETIMES BRACINGLY AND SHAMELESSLY GROTESQUE. BUT GROTESQUE BY WHOSE STANDARDS?

WE ALL KNOW A PHOTOGRAPH IS ALWAYS A BALANCE BETWEEN HONESTY AND ARTIFICE. JUERGEN HAS COMPOSED HIS OWN VERY SIGNATURE BALANCE THAT ENCOMPASSES GRACEFULLY STAGED REALNESS, UNGUARDED AWKWARDNESS, BLEAK AND WISTFUL EMPTINESS AND IRREVERENT WIT IN A COMPOSITION AS CAREFULLY AND ACHINGLY CONSTRUCTED AS AN IKEBANA FLOWER ARRANGEMENT IN AN EMPTY ROOM.

EVERY GENERATION HAS A NEW ENERGY THAT QUESTIONS AND PROVOKES THE GENERATION BEFORE – MOVING CULTURAL AESTHETICS FORWARD WITH WONDER, AWE AND SHOCK. AND I WANT TO BE SHOCKED – I WANT LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON, I WANT LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS, I WANT CHRIS BURDEN NAILED TO A VOLKSWAGEN. I WANT JUERGEN'S BUTTHOLE ON A PIANO.



Lucien Pagès, founder, Lucien Pagès Communication
Kate Moss, YSL Spring/Summer 1998 campaign, 1997.
For me, it felt like the first time in the 1990s that Saint Laurent truly resonated photographically with a new generation. Juergen Teller, then a rising star, brought a very modern, direct, almost brutal perspective—so different from the timeless elegance of the house in that period. In this image there is a sensual, almost melancholic tension, embodied by Kate Moss and this sophisticated polka dot Saint Laurent top.

Phoebe Philo, founder and creative director, Phoebe Philo
Daria Werbowy, I Love Paris, 2015.

Miuccia Prada, designer and creative director
Young Pink Kate, London, 1998.
I feel this is an iconic image of Kate by Juergen. It's so revealing of his way of approaching life and people, and therefore his photography.

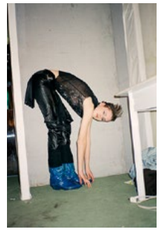
Jojo Qian, editorial director of fashion, *T* magazine China
William Eggleston and Charlotte Rampling, No.1, Marc Jacobs men's campaign Spring/Summer 2007, Paris, 2006.
This is the ultimate luxury campaign image. It borders on scandalous, yet sells with sheer conviction. They look like they have lived a wondrous life.

Carine Roitfeld, stylist, founder and editor-in-chief, *CR Fashion Book*
Raquel Zimmermann, No.3, *Vogue Paris*, 2008.
This shoot for *Vogue Paris* was a jean story with Raquel Zimmerman. Juergen was doing a book about a wooden violin, and he used it, as Raquel's name was almost a carpenter name in German! But the most iconic and unforgettable: Juergen invited the whole team to a dinner at his home... and he did the cooking for us! I remember delicious baby chicken in the oven.

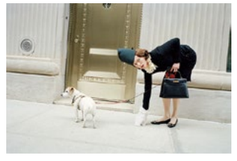
Martine Rose, designer and creative director
Björk and son, Iceland, 1993.
This image for me is one filled with intimacy and warmth. When this came out I was acutely aware of the relationship: indulgent, adoring, playful and loving, like a modern Madonna and child.

Daniel Sallstrom, make-up artist
Election Day, No.12, Vivienne Westwood Spring/Summer 2009 campaign, Los Angeles 2008.
This campaign was released when I was 23 and it totally blew my mind. My holy trinity: Juergen, Vivienne and Pamela. It's diabolical. I'm completely obsessed with it!

Peter Saville, art director
Paris Fashion Week, No.263-264, 2023.
The avant-garde is parked.
Peter Saville, 2025



Raf Simons, co-creative director, Prada
Stella Tennant, Helmut Lang backstage series, Spring/Summer 1994, Paris, 1993.
I just love this picture. Shot backstage you would expect Stella to be posing but instead Juergen captures her stretching. The raw realism of the situation makes it incredibly human.



Tilda Swinton, actress
Tilda Swinton, Social Studies, No.19, New York, 2008.
Our homage to John Waters and Divine… This image seemed to materialise in our minds at exactly the same moment: in the street on the Upper East Side, the suit, the hat, the pearls, the flat pumps – and the dog – all of a sudden, the only possible thing was to ask somebody to get me a plastic bag and to bend down and look into the camera…

Juergen Teller, photographer
Mounjaro, London, 2025.
I have regular conversations with *System* magazine of what should be the next cover story, as they are precise and know what they are doing. This time round I suggested not a fashion designer, rather, what struck me most in the entertainment and fashion industry is the change of people's bodies. Let's put Ozempic/Mounjaro on the cover. They just laughed.

For me, this is the most important fashion picture of now. The cars are money/power and the Mounjaro is thinness and vanity. For me this work is like what I did 25 years ago with Go-Sees.

Stefano Tonchi, editorial director, *Bazaar Italia*
Jigsaw men's campaign Autumn/Winter 1997, No.1, London, 1997.
This is the image. Cannot remember how and when this was taken – I would like to ask him. It has been with me as long as I remember and it always inspires me! Burn it!

Nadège Vanhée, artistic director of women's ready-to-wear, Hermès
Raquel Zimmermann & Charlotte Rampling, *Paradis* XVII, Paris, 2009.
The naked bodies of Charlotte Rampling and Raquel Zimmermann evoke the unattainable beneath the serene gaze of the Mona Lisa, an absolute symbol of immutable beauty. Like nymphs stepping out of a canvas or Aphrodite's sisters reawakened from their centuries-old pose, their nakedness – revealed at night in the world's largest art museum, behind security barriers – grants us a rare, spellbinding intimacy, inviting us to experience photography as a form of enchantment.

Lotta Volkova, stylist
Untitled, London, 2020.

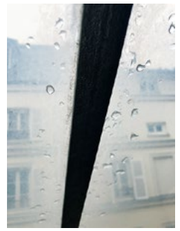
Brandon Wen, creative director, fashion dept., Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp
Ohne Titel: Juergen Teller, Cindy Sherman, Marc Jacobs No.18, 2004.
My first choice for this was obviously going to be Björk eating black spaghetti, because well, it's Björk eating black spaghetti. But in the end I chose Cindy Sherman/Marc Jacobs because of the way it highlights one of my favourite things about Juergen. It's a stunning shoot because it's somehow off-putting, captivating, overwhelming and quiet all at the same time. But what I love most is that Juergen has a childlike excitement of wild ideas and is unafraid to involve himself in his own work, in a way that is all too rare. For me, this sort of wonderful enthusiasm is the core of the Juergen Teller experience!

Liu Wen, model
Björk and son, Iceland, 1993.
When collaborating with Juergen, I'm always impacted by his unwavering passion for photography itself. He never stages anything deliberately – instead, he guides his subjects to shed their pretenses and facades before capturing their most unguarded moments. In the photo I selected, Björk and her son are revealing their most genuine emotions, giving us a glimpse into their relationship.

Juergen's captures are more like stills from films, where the backstory of a photograph holds far more than what we see at face value. You might only see a split-second fragment of a scene, but you can't help but wonder what happened in context, since there's a genuine realisation that you've missed an entire sequence of events. This kind of curiosity towards the narrative 'white space' stems directly from Juergen's personal sensitivity. He consistently transforms intangible emotions into tangible visuals, giving each photograph a storyline that can still be extended much further. For me, this is the most moving aspect of his work.

Jonathan Wingfield, editor-in-chief, *System*
Editor at Large, No.20, New York, 1998.
In 1998, *W*'s creative director Dennis Freedman coaxed Juergen over to New York to take a meeting at the magazine's office in the Fairchild Publications HQ on 34th Street. Initially, there was talk of shooting a big-budget fashion story in Egypt, the Seychelles or Jamaica. But Juergen, observing with wide-eyed disbelief the corporate surroundings, suggested shooting in the office itself.

I particularly like the way that Juergen's approach seems to oscillate between a series of practical steps to work through any given situation and a profound dismantling of what photography – certainly fashion photography – can look like or even mean.



Yohji Yamamoto, designer and creative director
Yohji Yamamoto, No.5, Paris, 2019.

Olivier Zahm, editor-in-chief and publisher, *Purple*
White shoes and tortoise, Paris, 2018.
Out of the huge number of iconic images by Juergen Teller – almost every fashion shoot or portrait he creates remains engraved in my mind – I chose this one, a seemingly simple shot for a *Purple* story: women's legs in white Balenciaga heels and a turtle making its way across a Paris street. It embodies everything I admire in his photography – combining mystery, humour, surrealism, fragility, realism, and glamour – crystallised into an enigmatic micro-story that captures a fashion moment.

This picture also highlights something singular in Teller's art: his ability to photograph, with the same forceful vision, models, children, stars, fruits, food, anonymous figures, and animals. That's why he transcends fashion photography and stands as a true artist, expressing a unique vision of life.

I am especially touched by the way he photographs animals: his legs with a giant snail, a stray dog on the beach at Ostia where Pier Paolo Pasolini was killed, his self-portrait astride a donkey, the cow facing Kirsten McMenamy in a Balenciaga story for *Purple*, or in another issue Isabelle Huppert in the streets of Belleville with rats. And here, this stubborn turtle, in the middle of the fashion scene, embodies a fragile and radical poetry: resistance to speed, to blindness, to indifference. An unforgettable image.

Paolo Roversi for Romeo Gigli Autumn/Winter 1988-1989 campaign.

Text by Alessio de' Navasques

There are fashion images so powerful that they appear both contemporary and ancient – born of encounters and exchanges, sometimes casual or merely commercial – that have become icons. Manifestos for a paradigm shift, belonging to a new kind of imagery in motion, extending even beyond fashion itself. These are images that not only tell of the garment, its creator, and the photographer's vision, but that succeed in capturing the spirit of the age, and often in anticipating it.

One such image is a photograph taken by Paolo Roversi for Romeo Gigli's Autumn/Winter 1988-1989 collection, featuring a young Kirsten Owen: the profile silhouette, with rosy complexion, emerges ethereal from a timeless, dark background. Her hair, gathered back, reveals a long neck; the framing is half-length, the garment only glimpsed in the transparency over the shoulders and the deep cut at the back. It is the allegorical evocation of an idea, of a new vision. In the hint of an imminent movement, one perceives a tension that disrupts rigidity. The encounter between two extraordinary sensibilities, Gigli and Roversi, gave form to a silent revolution in both fashion and photography.

We are in the second half of the 1980s, dominated by the exuberant silhouettes and sculptural forms of Jean Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler, Claude Montana, Azzedine Alaïa and Gianni Versace. The clear simplicity of this image, recalling Italian Quattrocento iconography, breaks with the context of its time, anticipating the conceptual and minimalist sensibility of the 1990s. Still recognised today as one of the images that best distils a pure idea of beauty, it draws upon the classical world to give form to the new.

Roversi and Gigli revive a Renaissance vision rooted in their cultural DNA, tied to Italy and in particular to Emilia-Romagna, where both were born. Kirsten Owen is portrayed in profile according to the 15th-century tradition derived from medals and Greco-Roman glyptics. Gigli has often declared his love for the painter Piero della Francesca, even using him as a reference for lookbooks. It is inevitable to think of the pose of the Dukes of Urbino, but also of the complexions and refined hairstyles of Pollaiolo and Ghirlandaio.

Romeo Gigli was already defined as 'The Master of Understatement' by his first Autumn/Winter 1983-1984 collections, as Holly Brubach remarked in the 1988 edition of American *Vogue*. His silhouette, like a gem in bloom, freed the female body from rigid forms, heavy make-up and forced hairstyles. It was an operation of subtraction, seeking the essence of form through journeys across distant times and worlds, onto which he layered decorations and embroideries.

This made him the only Italian designer close to the revolution pursued in Paris in those years by Japanese designers. Thanks to tailoring skills acquired in men's ateliers in New York, Gigli created layered, knotted, draped forms of which similar styles are found across Asia both historically and in the contemporary moment: a wrapping of the body that enhances movement and energy. He employed fluid materials such as Lycra or jersey – among the first designers to do so – or metallic fabrics produced especially for him, but also silks, linen gauze, chiffon, wools, velvets and brocades in tones of garnet, ochre, bronze, copper green, tobacco and his signature aubergine.

This was a new femininity, fragile and mutable, which Gigli himself defined as 'not asexual but modern,' and which Paolo Roversi knew how to shape. After some initial catalogues made with his assistant Marc Roger, the long-desired collaboration with Roversi finally began with the Spring/Summer 1986 collection, continuing until 1989; also with the brand Callaghan. 'Photography is not a reproduction, but rather a revelation,' declared Roversi, thanks to his discovery in those years of Polaroid film with a large-format view camera.

The meeting of the two visionaries became light that defined an idea, a new mode of communication that made catalogues and lookbooks resemble art books. To embody this new vision was the young Kirsten Owen, whose career began almost by chance. As Gigli recalled: 'It must have been in London in 1986 or 1987. Paolo and I saw a girl playing guitar in the street. She seemed very pretty, so we invited her to the studio and began taking photographs. That's how Kirsten's career began.' Thus these photographs were born, melancholic and eternal.

Backstage, Maison Martin Margiela Spring/Summer 2008 by Marina Faust.

Text by Natasha Stagg

Sometimes I hate fashion. There are many reasons to, one of them being that it is manipulative by nature. Martin Margiela's work, although the epitome of anti-fashion, doesn't quite get a pass. It, too, is *fashion*: the selling of clothing by putting on a show. The difference, of course, is that his pieces describe the mechanism. They say that it's not as simple as wanting what fits and flatters. It's also self-obliteration, stepping into an art historical context.

When clicking through Maison Martin Margiela's runway images on style.com in the 2000s, I was being taught a lesson in semiotics and the function of marketing. It was like learning about Malevich's black square or Koons' steel balloons. The models were wearing sunglasses shaped like the floating black bars that obscured identities on cop shows back then. Their jeans, a comment on the commodification of grit, so shredded they looked like lace.

Years later, working at a secondhand store in New York, I came across a pair of these exact jeans: white, with that blank, off-white tag sewn inside via four diagonal stitches at its corners. Excited, I showed my manager, who told me to pass on them because of a tiny rust-coloured stain. It was near enough to the crotch to make us look bad, buying in pants with what could possibly be blood on them. She told me if I bought them then and there for myself, we could surpass the policy. She priced them super low (like, so low I don't want to say), and the jeans were mine.

I've had them now for over a decade and only worn them to a couple of parties and a fashion show or two, never quite confident I'm pulling off the look. They're difficult to put on. They get more shredded with each wear and they're too loud of a statement for my current vibe. But unlike all the Gaultier, Cavalli, Moschino, Miss Sixty, Mugler, Blumarine and Lacroix I thrifted from that store back then, I won't sell them. They might be too damaged now, anyway. They're in a box somewhere, treated like a memento, as if someone special gave them to me. In 2018, I happened to be in Paris at the time of a Margiela retrospective (*Margiela/Galliera 1989-2009*, at Palais Galliera). It mapped out how he worked against fashion's expectations to create something even more enticing; a process that ironically defines high fashion. Each decision, though, was less calculated than instinctive – a backwards-facing homage to the designers, editorials and retail experiences he himself admired. The closer he came to a beautiful garment, the more he mistrusted the concept of beauty. Like any other modern artist, he turned it around to face itself: now shredded, obscured, unfinished or deconstructed.

I bought a postcard at the gift shop of the exhibition. It shows a backstage photo taken at a Margiela show of a model from the waist down wearing the white shredded jeans. I love them. And the image. It reminds me of the museum, of that trip to Paris and of my time working at a vintage store, where I learned more about fashion than I did working for a magazine, for a branding studio and directly for brands. It reminds me of the first time I saw the fashion world in a different light, on style.com decades ago, which set me on the path I'm now on, loving and hating fashion intermittently – which, I think, is how most people feel about it. It reminds me that fashion is interactive, both artistic and commercial, spanning time, space and personhood. It is that link on the desktop computer of my childhood home and the reddish stain that got some girl to sell her own designer jeans for basically nothing, the attempt to document a very ephemeral movement, the fashion shows to which I wore that idea of bourgeois grunge, appearing simply grungy.

I'm reminded, by the postcard depicting a runway's backstage, that I have those jeans somewhere, I think. And even if they are lost, MM6, Margiela's diffusion line, recently reissued them. I can get them again, and they're not outrageously expensive.

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Lisette Model, *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1946.

Text by Vince Aletti

Some of the best – the most arresting, nuanced, and unexpected – fashion photographs weren't taken by fashion photographers. Julia Margaret Cameron, August Sander, Walker Evans, Bill Brandt, Diane Arbus, Roy DeCarava, Francesca Woodman, Sally Mann, Dawoud Bey: whether they intended to or not, practically anyone who made a picture of a person in clothes made a fashion photograph. Often a terrific one.

Maybe because they came into their own in a period when fashion spreads were beginning to look like snapshots or reportage, contemporary photographers like Nan Goldin, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Cindy Sherman, Collier Schorr, and Wolfgang Tillmans slip more easily between fashion and personal work and often exhibit them side by side. It's the work that was made without any conscious concern for fashion that seems especially eloquent and revealing about the essence of style. Look closely and fashion photographs are everywhere, but they have nothing to do with models or designer credits. Captioning an image 'This Is Not a Fashion Photograph' alerts the viewer to its casual complexity and the potential for a more layered reading.

Of course, context helps. The photograph here opened the editorial section of the February 1946 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*. It was taken on Fifth Avenue by Lisette Model, whose work for *Bazaar* was usually photojournalistic. From 1941 she reported on settlement houses, Bowery bars and circuses with work that legendary art director Alexey Brodovitch often printed in diverting, tumbling overlap, like spreads from a Sunday newspaper supplement. Here, Model's photo fills a page and introduces a remarkable portfolio of other images of the New York street.

First, step back and consider the even larger context. Postwar New York was bustling; America was enjoying an economic boom while Europe remained wounded, devastated. Later in the same issue, Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph of a child wandering alone and overwhelmed in a displaced persons camp brings that point powerfully home. Model's woman, striding confidently into a future that, for the first time in years, seemed nothing but bright, kicks off *Bazaar* like a casually chic chorus girl.

But the woman in the photo is hardly oblivious to the world at large. Black and white keeps *Bazaar*'s celebratory mood subdued, despite the American flag flapping in the background. Model's work was not always subtle but it was complex, and Brodovitch gives her space to prove it. The pages that follow that opening spread are devoted to her now-famous images of reflections in shop windows that shimmer and shatter into abstraction. The first, an almost panoramic frieze of eight women on a New York shopping street (half reflected ghosts, the others no less ephemeral), looks like a Cubist version of a spirit photograph. With all the hats and coats and fur collars on view, it's another fashion photograph. Accidental, but wonderfully rich and descriptive. No pedestrians stroll by in Model's third image, but the reflection of a framed Picasso painting of two nudes floats above a stone façade like a collector's dream.

Under the direction of Brodovitch and editor Carmel Snow since 1934, *Harper's Bazaar* published the work of a number of photographers and artists who fled Europe just before and during the war. Model and her husband Evsa arrived in 1938 and joined a group that included Martin Munkácsi, Man Ray, Erwin Blumenfeld, George Hoyningen-Huene, and cover artists A.M. Cassandre and Marcel Vertès. Bill Brandt and Brassaï, both contributors to the February 1946 *Bazaar*, filed from London and Paris, respectively, and more regularly after the war. Even before its American contributors are taken into account, this was an extraordinary mix for any magazine, and it set a standard for fashion magazines that *Vogue* was challenged to match.

Model's running leg was the inspiration for one of Richard Avedon's most kinetic early *Bazaar* covers – the March 1948 colour shot of a woman stepping into a crosswalk in front of glinting cars. Although seen only from the knees down, her back leg nearly lost in a blur, she's instantly recognisable as a New Yorker in a hurry. But she doesn't have the iconic impact of Model's stop-motion leg or its implicit promise of a future worth running toward. Maybe the more important difference here is that Avedon's cover was made as a fashion photograph (the shoes get a credit) and Model's was not. We can claim Model for fashion, but she can elude our definition, lose nothing, and move on.

Alec Soth, from ‘Perseverance’, *W* magazine, April 2007.

Text by Adam Murray

This portrait of Dana Williams standing pensively in the dry air of a freezing Minnesotan winter, is from ‘Perseverance’, a 26-page fashion editorial published in the April 2007 issue of *W* magazine. Photographed by Alec Soth, the story features portraits of 18 young people, their full names in bold accompanying each image, all cast from the state, wearing a blend of their own clothes and luxury fashion styled by Camilla Nickerson. Alongside the portraits, pages are given to photographs of provincial scenes: a massive sculpture of fictional lumberjack folk hero Paul Bunyan, a table tennis table in front of a biblical mural, and a wall-mounted deer skull draped in furry dice and metallic plastic beads.

At the time, Soth was a prolific blogger, regularly sharing his work online and subsequently engaging with audiences in comment boards. Explaining the origins of this story, Soth wrote on his blog: ‘Dennis Freedman approached me about doing a project. I’ve been doing a ton of travelling and was eager to work near home. I suggested Minnesota.’ As creative director of *W* from 1993 to 2010, Freedman had radical ideas for what constituted a fashion editorial, regularly commissioning photographers who would not ordinarily shoot fashion, such as Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Tina Barney, to build a visual archive of the American experience with a fashion tilt.

Freedman identified his influences in a 2004 interview for the book *Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990*: ‘I had been inspired by the work of people like Stephen Shore, William Eggleston, Larry Sultan and Joel Sternfeld – photographers who recorded the commonplace events of life.’ Commissioning Soth, arguably a modern contemporary of these photographers, seemed almost inevitable, with the editorial sharing striking similarities with Soth’s seminal debut monograph, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. Published three years prior in 2004, the work is a long-term photographic study of Middle America post-9/11.

Soth’s working method of solitary road trips across America photographing the people and places he encountered clearly needed to shift with this *W* commission, not least the necessity to include certain items of clothing from the season’s fashion collections. The credits for Dana’s portrait alone list garments by Rena Lange, Azzedine Alaïa, Comme des Garçons, Wolford and Y-3. ‘I got to work with the legendary stylist Camilla Nickerson,’ explains Soth. ‘She completely understood my process. So, she worked with understated clothes or masked the more flamboyant pieces in terrific ways.’

The tight deadline also required Soth to collaborate with a casting team, led by casting director Jennifer Venditti. Reflecting on this process, Soth notes: ‘I remember years ago reading about Avedon doing *In the American West*. He would send out assistants to find subjects for him. I found this outrageous. But I’m not so sure anymore. I think if you are working with someone who really shares your sensibility it can actually open up doors.’

‘It was the first time Alec had worked with an outside person to help him find subjects,’ explains Venditti, via voice note from New York City. ‘It was a real collaboration because I had relatives in the area where we scouted. I was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota. It was a meeting of my two worlds: my artistic, work world, and my origins and family.’

In the same manner that Nickerson was able to incorporate styling into Soth’s oeuvre, Venditti was able to interpret the intentions of Soth through casting. ‘Photography is a visual language, and with any type of language, there is an energy to it; it’s communicating and speaking for the person behind the lens. I think that part of the gift of what I do is that I’m a translator of that language, I become a conduit to find the people that can help communicate that language. It’s not solely becoming the eyes of that person, it’s also combining your vision with theirs. There’s an alchemy between that.’

‘We were scouting at a high school near the Red Lake Reservation in Minnesota,’ recalls casting assistant Eléonore Hendricks. ‘I don’t remember exactly spotting Dana, I just remember this group of shy girls, they were giggly and nervous, it was beautiful to see them. But I do remember being profoundly affected by spending time in this community.’

‘Perseverance’ offers a take on America at the juncture of the vernacular and the surreal, providing the reader with an experience similar to that felt by Hendricks. Put together by a team of creatives with real connection and understanding of the landscape and community, whose emotional ties are palpable in these serene and familiar scenes which have endured and ripened in the 18 years since its publishing. As so often with her writing, Susan Sontag, in her book *On Photography*, provides perhaps the most succinct summary of what makes these photographs so compelling: ‘They trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information.’

Steven Meisel, Naomi Campbell, *Vogue Italia*, July 2008.

Text by Robin Givhan

In the photograph, Naomi Campbell reclines on a seafoam settee whose languid curves recall a more formal, monied era. Her arms stretch gracefully over her head and her gaze is directed off to the side. Instead of confronting the viewer with ferocity, inquisitiveness or hauteur, she seems to be in a *reverie*. She isn't just at rest, she's also in a state of heightened self-awareness, as if quietly considering the circumstances of the moment. And the moment when this photograph was taken was historic – a fact that was both rousing and exasperating.

The photograph was part of a portfolio of images created by Steven Meisel for the Black Issue, *Vogue Italia*'s celebration of Black beauty. The late editor Franca Sozzani, noting the lack of diversity on fashion's runways, decided to feature only Black models in the July 2008 issue of her magazine. It was a paean to the beauty of Black women, a dare to the industry to embrace diversity and a *mea culpa* for all the previous issues of so many fashion books that had relegated Black models to the background. It was a glorious issue; yet it was sad that such a thing was necessary.

Naomi. The world has long been on a first name basis with her as part of the klatch of models whose influence gave rise to the modifier: super. Over the years, the term has been recklessly applied to other women who have made their living standing in front of a camera but whose impact on our understanding of beauty, glamour and identity pales in comparison to Naomi's. And yet, despite her stature, it was as though Naomi, in this issue of *Vogue Italia*, was being seen with mesmerising complexity for the first time. This was because she was not alone. The nuance of her beauty, the specificity of it, was more pronounced juxtaposed with that of so many other captivating Black women.

Other images from this portfolio highlight her physique: the long dancer's legs, her trim waist, her breasts, her sultriness. But in this one, Naomi is regal, elegant and grand. She wears an ensemble of black guipure lace by Prada and Alaïa heels. Her hair is swaddled in a black turban. She's draped in vintage Lorraine Schwartz diamonds and a Donna Karan velvet opera coat is tossed casually at her feet. The colours in the frame are muted; her skin has a natural glow. The blush of her cheeks and her rose-hued lips stand apart in an image filled with cool tones.

For me, this photograph has become more than a celebration of great fashion. It also speaks to a particular kind of audacity. Self-satisfaction and control are embedded in this image of Black leisure. The simple fact that Naomi reclines – glamorously, coolly, indulgently – is a rebuke to Western history which often assigns this kind of leisure to White women, but rarely to Black and brown ones. In the annals of European art, ivory-skinned beauties are typically the ones privileged to admire their countenance in their dressing room mirror or simply rest by the sea, in a park or on a divan.

The composition of the image reminds me of artist Mickalene Thomas whose portraits elevate the beauty of Black women. In a storm of paint, photography and paillettes, Black women come alive with personality and verve. I see Amy Sherald's temperate viewpoint in the hazy, dream-like palette and Derrick Adams' devotion to the power of ordinary moments in the lives of those for whom normalcy can be elusive. I'm reminded of John Singer Sargent's women, too, and all their luxuries.

That issue of *Vogue Italia* was received with a sense of wonder. After an initial printing of 120,000, it was reprinted for Britain, Germany and the United States, which at the time comprised 40 percent of the magazine's readers. Skeptics viewed it as a gimmick. They worried that featuring all Black models in a separate issue was akin to forcing them into a 'ghetto'. But Sozzani noted that other months had been dominated by Eastern European models and no one derided those editions as such.

Ultimately, that July 2008 issue became a collector's edition. It was beautiful and meaningful in the sweep of fashion history and in the industry's two steps forward, one step backward march toward greater inclusivity. That quiet image of 'Naomi in repose' continues to speak eloquently about the nature of progress – and how much work must be done before everyone has the luxury of rest.

Nigel Shafran, *Spice Girls*, 1997.

Text by Lou Stoppard

Everywhere I look, I see happy little ghosts of my youth. She passes me on the street in a halter-neck top that I'm certain my mother bought me from Jane Norman Milton Keynes in 1999. She's gossiping in Y2K skinny sunglasses, bumming a cigarette in low-rise jeans. This was always coming. Fashion reliably works in 20 year cycles.

Perhaps it's the stupefying nostalgia (and terrible sense of one's own ageing) that comes when your teenage fashions reemerge as a trend, but when asked to name a fashion image that has shaped the medium I thought immediately of Nigel Shafran's picture of the Spice Girls, shot for the cover of *The Guardian Weekend* in 1997.

Amusingly, given his influence on the current landscape of fashion photography – the vogue for the everyday – Shafran dislikes the tag 'fashion photographer'. You could say that he is a photographer who works in fashion. That subtle difference is pertinent to this image, which is both completely a fashion image and not a fashion image at all. It's a portrait: a photograph commissioned specifically to showcase personality and likeness. And yet it does this through clothing, not faces, thus breaking the norms of a celebrity portrait.

Despite the removal of their faces, the women are not erased: quite the opposite, their individuality and recognisability – the Baby one, the Posh one – is made the point, eschewing the norm within much fashion photography for rendering women blank canvases for garments or narratives. However, by putting the focus on each outlandish ensemble, the image draws attention to the process of the band's stylisation, the carefully engineered costumes used to create marketable, relatable characters. It therefore implies the limitations of the individuality it purports to celebrate, inferring the canny manoeuvrings of a music industry keen to attract as many young consumers as possible.

Fashion photography has long fetishised and commodified the female body, breaking women down into parts: the lips, the breasts, the legs. By bisecting his sitters' heads, Shafran seems to nod to, yet upturn, the violence of that legacy, playing again with the codes of women's visual representation. It's a provocative, joyful and genre-defying photograph that comments on celebrity, fame and imagery itself.

The context for the shoot was an anxious moment: the Spice Girls were trying to break into America, about to perform on Saturday Night Live. And seemingly, because this was when the whims of publicists had not totally subsumed the freedom of magazines, *The Guardian* sent the great punk feminist writer Kathy Acker to conduct the interview, and, fantastically and bizarrely, the Spice Girls agreed.

'The main complaint, or explanation for disregard, is that they are a "manufactured band". What can this mean in a society of McDonald's, Coca-Cola and En Vogue?' writes Acker in her profile, which presents the Spice Girls as great fun. Reading Acker's words now creates a wondrous bafflement that this was the world of my youth, a world when En Vogue and fast food were the apex of capitalist excess and fakery. It seems almost quaint, so far from the gluts of today: the reality TV president, the Tik-Tok trends, the videos of makeup tutorials next to those of genocide, the Amazon same-day delivery, the weight-loss injections, the billionaires in space, the AI images all over our screens, which I, like everyone else, am addicted to.

But the magnetism of Shafran's image is not to do with wistfulness. Its allure is how it seems to subtly prophesise all of what was coming: the technology, the speed, the rampant individualism, the omnipresent commitment to performance and choreography, the bland marketable feminism, where concepts such as solidarity are bandied about vaguely ('Nelson Mandela said that you know when someone is brilliant when having that person next to you makes you feel good,' says Geri). The expanse of floor, as if the girls are being sucked further and further away from us, suggests a looming detachment from reality, an isolation from anything grounded. The sitters' postures suggest a normal gaggle of girlfriends, but the manicured, glittering finger reaching towards a popcorn basket – part of a rider of fruit platters – suggests their rarified status.

What an irony, Shafran laughed when we spoke, that out of all his images, it will likely be this one that runs alongside his obituaries. It is already in the collection of London's National Portrait Gallery. And yet it doesn't fit with his usual signatures – it uses flash, and it's a celebrity portrait, when he purports to be uninterested in celebrity. But to me that irony seems an extension of the image's message. A validation of Shafran's commentary on the perverse power of fame, and the values of the industries that fuel it.

Courtesy HackelBury Fine Art, London © William Klein Estate.

William Klein
‘Dorothy + Light Coat’, *Vogue*, 1962.

Text by Ken Miller

To start with the obvious: there is no coat. To continue with the less obvious: there *is* a hat. I think? Well, I was reasonably sure until I wrote this and now I’m slightly less sure – but it also doesn’t matter. Because they both are, in fact, there in the photograph.

Fashion is an image of our selves that we project onto ourselves. Which is why fashion photography has always been essential when selling fashion. A fashion photograph doesn’t just show us an item of clothing we might buy. That would be pretty boring. A fashion photograph creates an *image* of an item, and in doing so, the fashion photograph performs a frequently surreal and sometimes hyperreal function. It invites the viewer to understand and aspire to the idea of what fashion might do for them.

William Klein began his career in the 1950s, an American in Paris at the dawn of ‘mass media’; an era in which daily life would quickly become inundated with a tidal wave of commercial imagery. While Klein initially gained attention for having created many of the most striking ‘street’ documentary photographs of the 1950s, his work is also remarkable for the degree to which he created images *about* images that reflected the plasticity of a newborn culture in which images would come to define us. Which is to say when you buy the clothing in the photo, you’re actually buying the image – something we all take for granted now, but at the time that Klein was shooting for *Vogue*, this was still a fairly new and radical idea.

Because the production of luxury has generally needed fresh raw material to keep consumption compelling, the fashion industry is always searching for a new trend, visual reference, subculture or taboo to be repackaged at an improved markup. (Ideally after some skilled reworking and remixing, though we all know not always.) And fashion photography has attracted the most innovative practitioners in the medium for this same reason. New sells. As does the ‘shock of the new’.

Klein’s work captured this energy. His dismissal of ‘correct’ techniques, his stylistic boundary-pushing, and the frisson of his ‘street’ photographer reputation made Klein a perfect match for *Vogue*’s editor at the time, Jessica Daves, who was championing ready-to-wear designs by American designers at the apogee of the mass market youth culture frenzy that was reshaping global culture. Klein got a monthly contract and a license to experiment.

Klein had, unusually, begun his career with a facility across multiple mediums, not just within photography but also in painting and sculpture. His understanding of physical materials and the plastic arts, and his ability to incorporate experimental techniques into commercial work, meant he both had a remarkable comprehension of the photographic object, and shared the acquisitive approach to visual culture that was coming to define fashion.

For this 1962 *Vogue* shoot, with model and longtime collaborator Dorothy (sometimes Dorothea) McGowan, Klein superimposed two pictures into one. First, photographing McGowan against a blank backdrop, and then having her hold her pose as he turned off the studio lights to take a second photo using a flashlight to ‘paint’ onto the photograph. This bit of inspired illumination created an image that was and is ‘iconic’. Literally. As in: it looks like an icon, those premodern visual artifacts notable for their transcendent grace and onto which value was projected in the faith of attaining some higher state.

Visual language has always been a key communicator of aspiration. And while projecting a better version of yourself onto yourself can look very different to different people, I generally think that exercise helps build up some useful social muscles, both individually and collectively. Or, to put it kinda cheesily: aspiration is good! Klein’s images, despite being incredibly varied, all share that dynamically ambitious energy, making them particularly appealing in our morbidly enervated era. Klein quite famously rejected the notion of a perfect image, and the relative serenity of ‘Dorothy + Light Coat’ feels almost like a moment of grace in contrast to the kinetic immediacy of most of his work, which inundates viewers in an overwhelming volume of the surfaceness of images.

By accepting that the photograph is its own reality, that the photograph is real and thus everything in it exists, Klein revealed the potential of the ‘fashion image’ as we understand it today. If this sounds like it’s not a big deal – it’s just a hat and coat (and/or light) after all – well, take a moment to look around, not just at the pages of this magazine or the screen of your phone, but at the visual reality this experimentation helped create. It doesn’t matter if the coat is real. It exists in the photograph, which means that Klein made it real while enticing us to wrap ourselves in it. And we’ve been wearing it ever since.

Louise Bourgeois wearing her latex sculpture 'Avenza' (1968-69) which later became part of Confrontation (1978), New York, 1975. Photo: Mark Setteducati; © The Easton Foundation/Licensed by ADAGP, Paris, 2025.

Louise Bourgeois wearing her latex sculpture *Avenza*, New York, 1975.

Text by Charlie Porter

The image is simple. One day, in the spring of 1975, the artist Louise Bourgeois fashions a latex sculpture on her body as a garment. She is standing on the street outside her home in Chelsea, New York. Her hair is combed back. She wears no obvious make-up, no visible jewellery. She's also in blue jeans, brown leather shoes. Just visible at her left shoulder is the white shirt she wears beneath the sculpture. She is 63 years old.

The sculpture is *Avenza*, made six or seven years earlier. It is a cluster of various spherical forms, different sizes and shapes, protruding from an earthlike base. When worn on her body, it covers her from neck to below the knee, arms included. It looks like a manifestation of inner turmoil, psychological states, bodily torment, how we feel about ourselves – all suddenly revealed.

Bourgeois had fashioned *Avenza* on her body before. She'd been photographed in the sculpture in 1973, then again for an exhibition announcement in 1974. The sculpture is part of a series produced in the late 1960s with the rounded protrusions sitting on a horizontal plane. The only time it appears vertically is when it is worn as a garment. This is what makes it a fashion image. *Avenza* was not made to be clothing as art. Bourgeois has fashioned it on her body. The photograph captures a moment of fashioning.

It was a time of change for Bourgeois. In 1973, her husband Robert Goldwater died unexpectedly. That 1974 exhibition had been her first solo show for 10 years. She was showing regularly in the new wave of feminist group shows in New York, including the important 1972 exhibition *13 Women Artists*. Three years after the photograph was taken, in 1978, Bourgeois staged the performance piece *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, with protagonists wearing latex garments with similar lumps. She was pushing outwards in what her art could be. The performance was staged within her installation *Confrontation*, part of which was this *Avenza* sculpture, laid flat.

With Bourgeois, profundity, daring and psychological excavation comes alongside mischief, lightness and play. It is as though she is amused by wearing *Avenza* as a garment. Her *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts* is hilarious. The protagonists vamp it up, while a commentator mocks the whole fashion show social structure.

But the manifestation of psychological states worn on the body is very serious to Bourgeois. Her 1946-7 drawing *Femme Maison* has a naked woman standing, waving, the entire upper half of her body, down to around the navel, consisting of a house. It's an idea to which she would return. In 1982, she made a sculptural *Femme Maison*, this time from a plastic doll, like a Barbie, its body from hairline to upper calf taken over by a long rudimentary house of clay.

This photograph is an example of street style: how garments (and the human wearing the garments) interact with the world around us. There are other photographs of Bourgeois outside her house wearing *Avenza* as a garment, this time with others. In one image, she is standing at the top of her stoop, two shaggy dogs sitting in the doorway, a kid sitting on a step holding one of the dog's leashes. In another image, a kid comes into the shot, standing at the bottom of the steps. Other images show Bourgeois posing at the bottom, passers-by entering the frames in their winter coats.

Her seriousness, as well as her lightness, can give us a roadmap for navigating art and fashion. This image is of an artist wearing her art, but the act of wearing the art, in this instance, is not an artwork in itself, nor is this photograph. She can play with her art through fashion.

Steven Meisel, from ‘Fashion Marathon’, *Vogue Italia*, March 1997.

Text by Alessia Glaviano

There are periods in history when you’re living inside something extraordinary without realising it. In the 1990s, I was in my twenties, living in New York, taking my first steps into the world that would later define my life. The city pulsed with possibility; the air was charged with creativity. Everything seemed open.

The image I’ve chosen comes from ‘Fashion Marathon’, the cover story of *Vogue Italia*’s March 1997 issue, photographed by Steven Meisel. It drew inspiration from Sydney Pollack’s 1969 film *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, in which Jane Fonda stars in a devastating portrait of the Great Depression. The premise – a group of desperate young people enduring punishing dance marathons for a cash prize – offered a metaphor for ambition, survival and the commodification of endurance. Meisel reinterpreted it through fashion’s lens, staging a competition at once glamorous and cruel, a spectacle where beauty and exhaustion were entwined.

By the late 1990s, Meisel was already the undisputed master of fashion narrative. To me, he remains the greatest fashion photographer of all time, alongside Richard Avedon. His voracious cultural appetite let him move between homage and invention, absorbing references from painting, cinema, art, current events and social issues, and transmuting them into something wholly his own. Each month he reinvented himself, with only one constant: perfection.

Vogue Italia was my North Star. Without social media, the magazine was a primary portal to visual culture; you didn’t scroll, you anticipated. And when it came, you studied it until the next issue arrived.

The 1990s were a cultural crucible. Artists collaborated with fashion houses in ways that felt radical: Cindy Sherman with Comme des Garçons, Vanessa Beecroft with Gucci. Fashion borrowed art’s theatricality, art borrowed fashion’s boldness. There was a hunger to learn, to cross disciplines without asking permission.

Fashion photography was also shifting. The gloss of the 1980s gave way to a more varied language. Magazines featured photographers such as Corinne Day, whose intimate style, shaped by Nan Goldin’s influence, brought rawness and emotional proximity. Editorials could now be gritty as well as aspirational.

Meisel existed both within and beyond this shift. While most photographers could be categorised – glamorous, documentary, minimalist – he was something else. Chameleonic yet unmistakable. He could inhabit any style, from fantasy to stripped-back realism, without losing his signature: absolute precision in every detail.

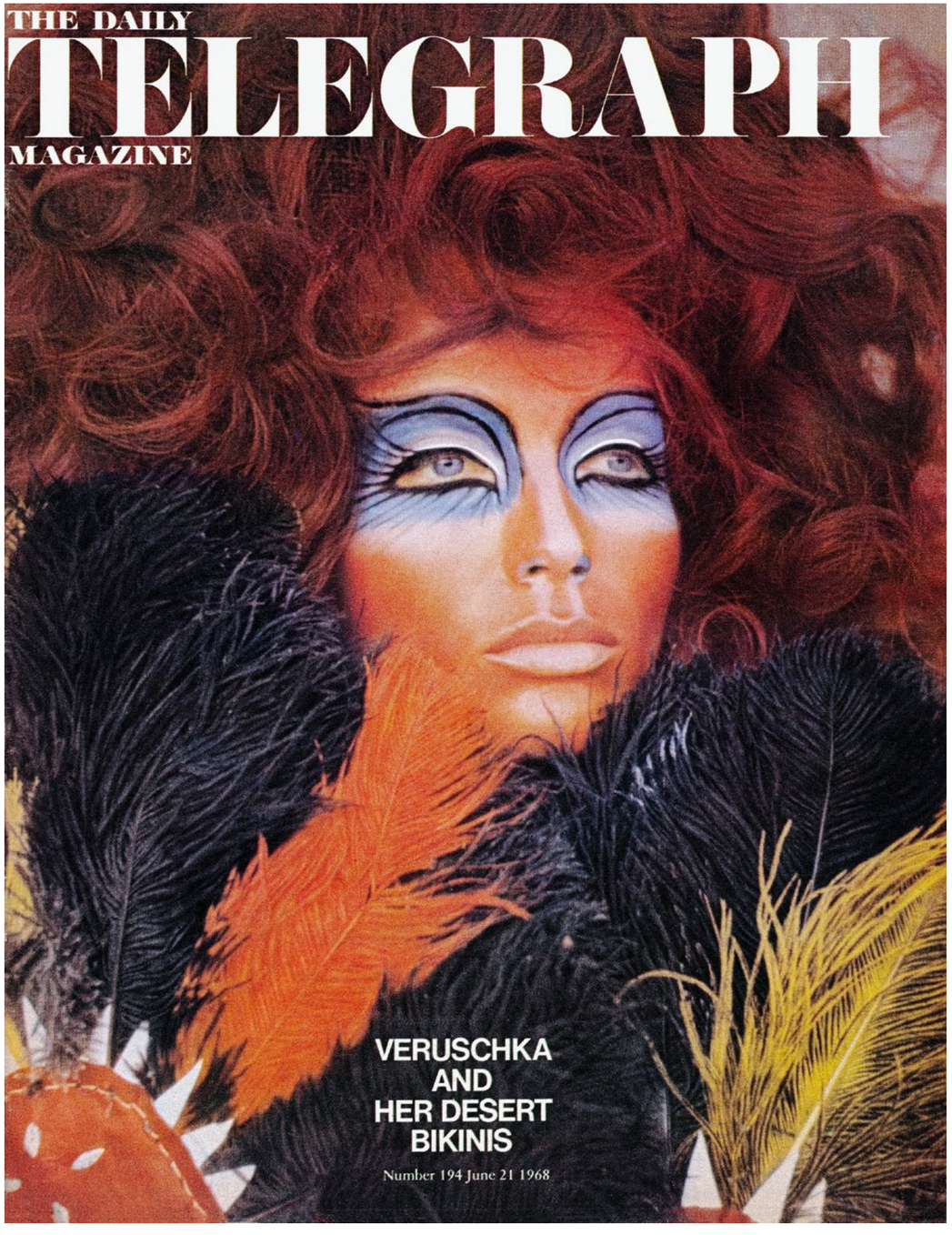
The ‘Fashion Marathon’ cast (Vincent Gallo, Amber Valletta, Carolyn Murphy, Karen Elson, Kristen McMenamy and Naomi Campbell) embodied both individuality and the era’s collective language. In Meisel’s hands, they became characters in a drama speaking as much to cinema and social history as to seasonal trends.

Seen now, the story feels like a parable. The marathon as an allegory for fashion’s pace, relentless and competitive, was prescient. The late 1990s already accelerated toward the 24/7 cycle that defines today.

Pollack’s film also inspired Alexander McQueen’s Spring/Summer 2004 collection, where couples danced to exhaustion in a dust-floored ballroom. Like Meisel, McQueen reframed cinema’s despair into fashion’s theatre, where the runway became both stage and battleground.

In 1997, I could not have known that four years later I would join *Vogue Italia*, where I would remain for over 25 years. At the time, I was a photographer’s assistant at Pier59 Studios, immersed in shoots, light tests and model castings. I understood mechanics, but *Vogue Italia* (and Meisel in particular) showed me how mechanics could be elevated into cultural commentary.

The enduring power of ‘Fashion Marathon’ lies in the way it operates at once as an homage to cinema, a mirror to fashion’s pace, a document of the 1990s at its creative zenith, and an allegory that remains legible decades later. By reframing 1930s despair through 1990s fashion, Meisel collapses historical distance and reminds us how spectacle and survival intertwine then, as now. The image endures not only for its beauty but because it is intellectually alive, demanding to be read as much as admired.



Veruschka by Franco Rubartelli, *The Daily Telegraph Magazine*, June 1968.

Text by Philippe Garner

This striking, extravagant, explosively colourful cover of *The Daily Telegraph Magazine* for 21 June 1968 captured and fired my imagination when I first saw it as a teenager. It has maintained its place of honour among my inspirations.

The weekly colour magazines published first by the *Sunday Times* newspaper in 1962, followed in 1964 by the *Observer* and the *Telegraph*, were a wondrous, eye-opening pictorial resource for me in the mid-to-late 1960s. I absorbed them avidly for their features on the many aspects of the arts that engaged me – from architecture to dance, interior design to haute couture. This cover image and the feature it so dramatically introduces have remained an emblematic reference point in my lifelong fascination with our culture's ever-evolving ideals of female allure. Over half a century later, I am delighted to share it with a new audience and to revisit the context in which it was published

We are confronted by Veruschka, who enjoyed a unique status among the foremost models of her generation. She was more than a model; she was a phenomenon, a singular figure who, in the late 1960s, achieved high visibility as a radical, exotic, performative manifestation of style and fantasy. Her given name is Vera von Lehndorff. She was born into the Prussian nobility on the eve of World War II, and her early years were marked by the traumas of the war. Her officer father was executed for his part in the failed 1944 bomb plot against Hitler and her family lost everything. Thus, the seeds of her nomadic and determined spirit were sown. She started modelling at 20, working at first within the conventions of the business, but her destiny was to reinvent herself as a figure beyond fashion. *The Telegraph* evokes her aptly as 'a spiritual Bedouin'.

A significant pointer of the direction Veruschka's career might take – and a prototype for the *Telegraph* cover – is to be found in a shoot for the British magazine *Queen*, published on 1 November 1965. Veruschka and British model Jill Kennington travelled to Kenya for an extended fashion story with photographer Peter Beard. Veruschka features on the cover in a tight headshot. Her eyes are made up in a bold mauve and black Nefertiti style, while within the feature we find her standing, statuesque, painted a glistening black to show off a purple swimsuit. She is already using Leichner theatrical greasepaint. Self-assured and provocative, Veruschka asserts her untamed individuality.

The following year she was cast, as herself, in Michelangelo Antonioni's masterful film *Blow-Up*. Her sultry, haughty sensuality caught the attention of a new audience with the film's release in 1967. In one scene, she wore a statement snakeskin-fabric catsuit that she adopted as a second skin, a perfect metaphor for her metamorphic ambitions. By then, she had established a close personal and working relationship with Italian photographer Franco Rubartelli, who shot the *Telegraph* cover and feature. They worked in tight harmony, with Rubartelli bringing a flexible, intuitive sensibility to Veruschka's process of self-discovery and self-expression. The duo was soon in great demand.

1968 proved a crucial year in establishing Veruschka as an icon, notably through a trio of magazine features published that summer. *The Telegraph*'s was followed by a spectacular commission from Diana Vreeland, shot in the Arizona desert for the July issue of American *Vogue*, and by the remarkable cover-led portfolio 'Voyage au Cœur d'Afrique' in the July-August issue of *Vogue Paris*. In each case, Veruschka's make-up and styling ideas were enriched by the fantastical contributions of the young stylist Giorgio Sant'Angelo.

The *Telegraph* story was commissioned by the magazine's inspired fashion editor Cherry Twiss, who had cut her teeth working for *Vogue* and *Queen*. It is significant that her new role was not with a fashion magazine, but rather with a general-interest supplement to a prestigious newspaper. This gave her the editorial freedom to conceive and fulfil picture stories that would engage a broad audience. She had the vision, and the budget, to commission adventurous portfolios from some of the best photographers in the business, among them Cecil Beaton, Robert Freson, William Klein and Helmut Newton, as well as from promising young talents including Hans Feurer, Sarah Moon and Sacha [van Dorssen]. Twiss loved to travel and dreamed up storylines to interpret in Mongolia and Greenland, Bahrain and Jamaica, Cyprus and Arizona, as well as Paris and Rome. For the now-historic Veruschka shoot, she chose the Algerian desert. The resulting images will outlive us all.

Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin

‘At this point in time we have been together longer than we have been separate because we started working together so young. There’s almost no recollection of the time before we started working together. It’s so deep and constant, and it’s now so innately who we are, that we can turn it into a *performance* and into an image.’

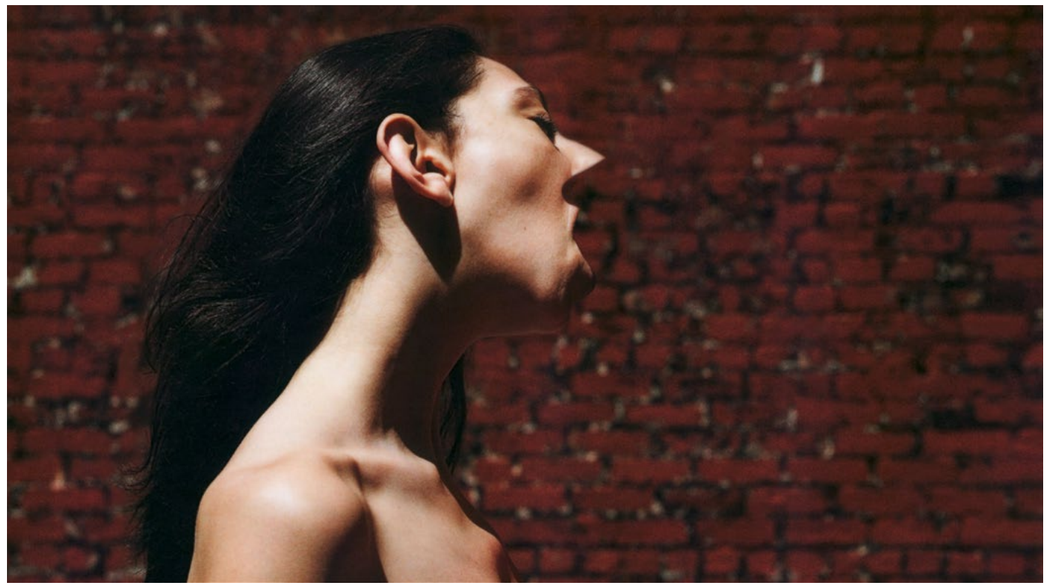
Interview by Donatien Grau

Can Love be a Photograph?, 2025.

Me Kissing Vinoodh (Lovingly), 1999.

ME, 1998.

Left: *Exclamation Mark: Inez*, 2005.
Right: Inez van Lamsweerde, *The Gentlewoman*, 2010.

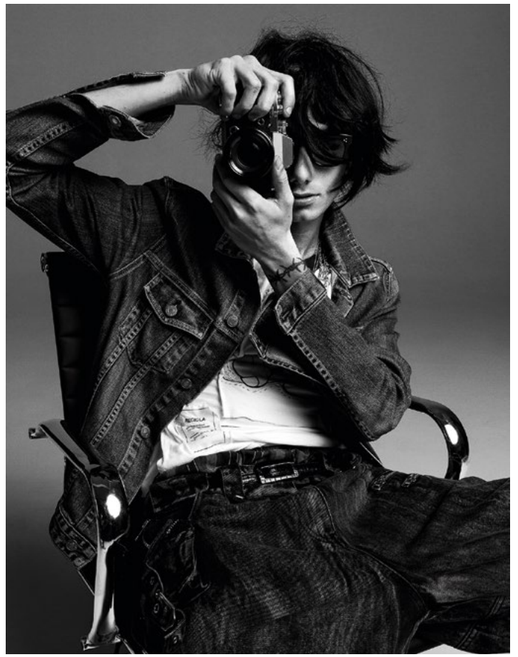


Me Kissing Vinoodh (Passionately), 1999.

Left: *Gaga as Inez with Vinoodh*, 2011.
Right: *Gaga as Inez with Inez*, 2015.

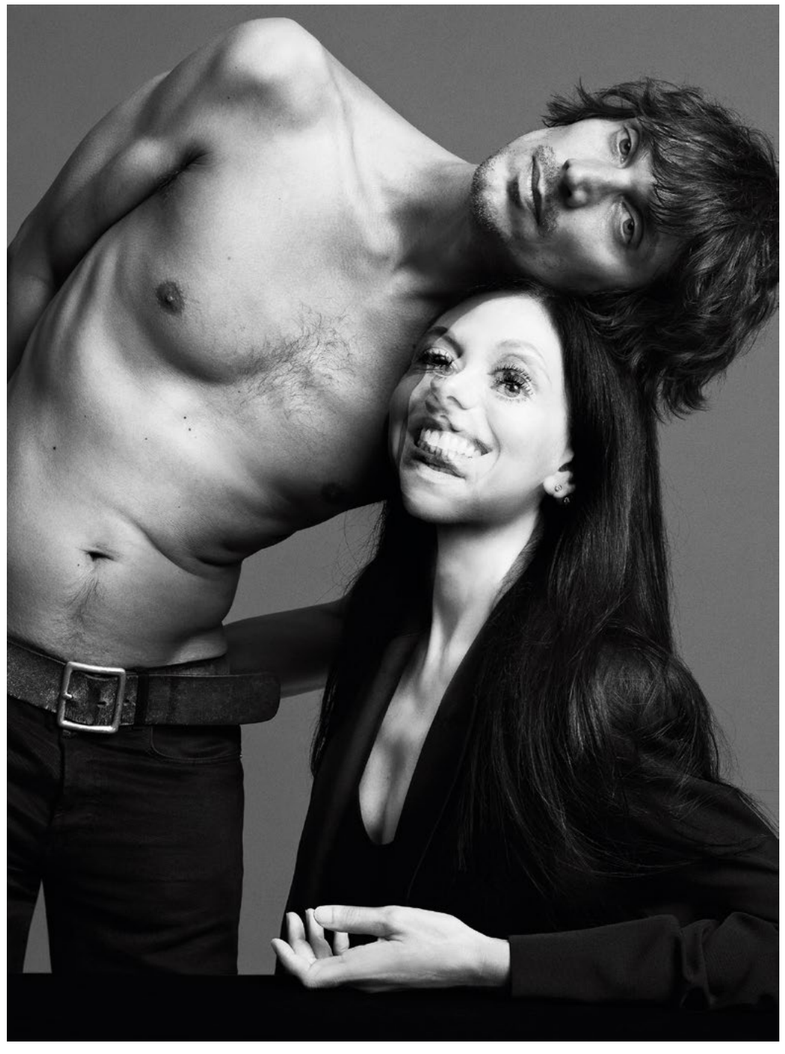
Me Kissing Vinoodh (Eternally), 2010.

Left: Vivienne Rohner, 2021.
Right: Vivienne Rohner for Chanel, 2021.



Left: *Charles Appearing as Inez*, 2024.
Right: *Charles Appearing as Vinoodh*, 2024.

Joan via Inez, 2005.



Vinoodh and The Gentlewoman, 2013.

When I first met Inez and Vinoodh over 15 years ago, I was struck by their presence. They are at once very profound, yet peaceful. You feel that they may have once had contradictions, tensions, with and against the world, but they have now been overcome. I was struck by how attentive and precise they were. Inez in her own metaphysical way, as if she had flown through the air and landed with us, right here, right now; and Vinoodh's mischievous smile immediately struck me, as did his way of looking at things. Both in contradiction and in the understanding of what is. I loved how free they were, even though they were at the heart of commercial culture, working for decades in collaboration with some of the largest brands there were and had ever been, and photographing some of the most famous pop figures of our time.

'I was always mesmerised by Inez's presence. I met her when she was 21 and was struck by the way she talked to people. Her opinion was important to them.'

When I met them, I was already close to Mathias Augustyniak and Michaël Amzalag of M/M (Paris), the art direction duo with whom they had developed many now-legendary collaborations. This shared friendship meant Inez and Vinoodh welcomed me as one of their own. Now that I come to look at it, they all share quite a bit. They came of age in the 1990s, thus their work is rooted in independent culture and radical art. They do not come from commerce or from any form of industry, and performance has played a key role in their work, as well as so-called 'relational aesthetics'. In their view, there is no singular format. Art can be expanded. Their work does not limit itself to a mere 'art versus fashion' discussion, for they have developed strategies to engage with both of these very different spheres of creativity, both separately and together. They know what they are doing when working for someone, yet their work is always uniquely theirs. An Inez and Vinoodh picture, whether produced for a campaign, for themselves or for an exhibition, always carries with it something uncanny. Nothing is ever a given, and everything is an opportunity to change our perception of the world.

Differently from Mathias and Michaël, however, Inez and Vinoodh are a couple not just in art, but in life. Everything they do is therefore tinted by their love towards each other and towards the people that find their way into their work. Love can take many forms. It is a force of attraction towards someone, looking to that person as an ideal of the physical world. A year ago, I published a book entitled *Un Autoportrait*, with its cover created by M/M (Paris). It manifests the same outlook on life as Inez and Vinoodh: I did not write 'I' in it once, yet it is a mapping of my life through the figures who made me. So when *System*'s creative director Thomas Lenthal told me Inez and Vinoodh wanted me to interview them – on the topic of self-portraiture in their work – I immediately jumped at the occasion.

Donatien Grau: One of the things that strikes me about you is that you break the mold of 'oneness' as a couple, both in life and in your art.

Inez van Lamsweerde: For us as a couple, but also as photographers, there is a lot of fluidity. We feel we are one and at the same time multiple – it is not so defined. This is the root of how we've been able to work together, live together – and have a child together – for 40 years now. We do not really see a separation, it's more a fluid mass that moves constantly between us.

Vinoodh Matadin: I also think the world has become so complex that it's now reached a point where you can't always do it alone. You need multiple people. The other great thing about being two is that you can pause things. You can say, 'Let me think about it. I will come back to you, but I have to discuss it with my partner.' When you're alone, you don't have that excuse. Nowadays, it may be crucial to be quiet and not say anything. Just listen, think about it, and then come back.

I'm thinking about an early photograph of yours, with the two of you getting together and manifesting your love. You both had your separate creative lives, and then you got together.

Inez: At this point in time we have been together longer than we have been separate because we started working together so young. There's almost no recollection of the time before we started working together. That time was just like a little episode in our life. It's so deep and constant, and it's now so innately who we are, that we can turn it into a *performance* and into an image.

Vinoodh: It started with us, but then it transformed to other, multiple people. We are the starting point for that idea.

Inez: The title of our forthcoming retrospective exhibition at Kunstmuseum The Hague, which opens in March next year, is *Can Love Be a Photograph?* It refers to this idea that we try to hold on to everybody we photograph. There is this need to collect people, and I think that's the act of photographing someone. Seeing someone, letting go of your ego and flowing towards the other person. That moment comes through the lens and becomes a photograph. As we have been constructing this exhibition containing 40 years of our work, we understand that it is all about everyone around us that we're trying to hold on to. Simultaneously, it reinforces the idea that every picture we take is essentially a self-portrait. We project ourselves onto the other. The image that comes back is a self-portrait by means of other people's features and bodies.

You describe the world around you as a reality. Yet you rework your images quite a bit – you're by no means realist photographers.

'It's Vinoodh's struggle and his beauty that is so uncompromisingly him. In Holland, people ask him, "Who are you? You don't belong here."'

Vinoodh: That's a good point. What is reality? For me, reality is always personal. For every person in the world, it's always personal, it's different. We have a collective idea of what is real and what is not real, but ultimately it's very limited to each individual and we are now able to subvert the idea of a collective outward reality. We can show an intense internal state manifested in physical form by using digital manipulation.

Inez: That is the sheer luxury of cutting through the 'decisive moment'. After we've taken a picture, to then go in and digitally alter things, play with the idea of time and ignore this old concept that a photo is a vision of reality, while the notion of reality has become so challenging. Digital interventions are able to cut through, heighten things in people, accentuate things, elongate things, change things around in order to visualise exactly what we're trying to say about this person, this moment or this idea. I feel our privilege as photographers to use digital manipulation is the same as that of a painter who uses paint or a sculptor who uses raw material. When we started that was a big thing, and people questioned the fact that we would actually alter a photograph which was supposed to be a reliable reflection of reality. Now the discussion seems obsolete.

Vinoodh: What's more, the viewer never knows exactly what we did, they have to guess. Sometimes they guess completely right and sometimes it's completely off. They tell us, 'Oh, you changed the hands.' No, we did not. I like the fact that David Hockney talks about his Photoshop [iPad] works as 'photographic drawings'. They are not just a painting nor just a photograph, they are another form of reality.

When you change the initial image to become your photograph, does it reflect your reality?

Vinoodh: Yes, it becomes that. I think the works that really succeed are not easy to be pinned down: they could have been made 30 years ago, or today. When you look at the self-portrait we did for the cover of this issue of *System*, you could think we changed God knows what and yet, we didn't change anything. The lighting, the proportions, everything is natural. We just added a little ladybug on one of the flowers.

This new self-portrait references Picasso's *La Vie* (1903) and Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1966), doesn't it?

Inez: With this new work, the dark silhouette of our son Charles guards our artistic life, love and legacy and is the passage through to the world of his generation of artists. Instead of the inward-looking perspective of artists in our generation, the younger generation is looking outward. They are concerned with the world and their influence on it and feel a deep sense of need to find new ways of being a part of and working with nature. Is he planting or offering flowers? Is the hand gesture a blessing with a heart of light landing on it like a butterfly? Is his other arm hurling him towards a new world while protecting us from it? This is now not a portrait of our child, it is a self-portrait of hope for the future. His eyes are on us. We rarely choose the picture with the averted eyes. Awareness is always there, it might make our works less accessible, more confrontational – a harder sell. But we cannot deny the relentless magnificence of eye contact.

When you think of the self-portrait, do you think of one artist making a portrait of themself?

Vinoodh: It's a portrait of two as one. We have been working and living together for so long that our brains are in sync. It sounds a bit silly, but it's true. We literally think the same most of the time. It is already present in our early work, but it reflects the current discussion that, in the digital world, gender will disappear. In today's world, you can be anything you like: female, male, anything. It doesn't matter, since you assume a persona online and true

physical contact doesn't exist. We avoid defining this separation, and talk rather about dissolving into each other. It's more like a dance. It's not male-female, or two artists and their egos.

Inez: We always say that when we take a picture, we eliminate ourselves as much as possible in order to get a pure version of the person through the lens. It's really a way of covering that up. When we take people's pictures, they often say 'Oh, I feel so good. I wish I could hold on to this moment' because of the attention that they're getting. It's such a concentrated moment. Most portraits, as you know, are done in 15 minutes. But it's a very intense 15 minutes of pure concentration on the sitter that becomes a hypnotising experience for them. It's this idea of truly seeing the other person. The finished work, in our minds, hopefully shows them as the most heroic version of themselves.

In an image from your early series [*Me Kissing Vinoodh (Lovingly),* 1999], the separation between masculine and feminine is arguably still visible. Your womanly side is quite visible, Inez, and you, Vinoodh, are fully dressed in red. It's almost an image from a movie.

Inez: Red is the colour of blood – of life, of death, of everything at once. This image shows the cycle of life that we feel circulates in-between us, there in the negative space. In the third portrait [*Me Kissing Vinoodh (Eternally)*, 2010], Vinoodh is wearing a black jacket and my body is painted as if my skin's been ripped off. It is so much about being vulnerable when you love someone, with all the layers of protection gone. In the red, there is the vibrancy of flesh, body, everything's alive, and yet we're looking underneath it. One is about being deeply involved with someone and the other about how one can be destroyed by it.

The way you describe it is very symbolic. The very illusion that painting was a mere depiction of reality was challenged from the beginning, but it seems you're contradicting this and producing something with much more narrative.

Inez: Even if we don't intend it at the outset, it still creeps in. We're noticing it now, as we're putting this new exhibition together. We are curating this show with the museum thematically. We are happily being forced to look at our work in such a divided way, to look for the symbols and overarching ideas that are there, even though most of the time that wasn't the original plan on set. We're noticing elements in each photograph that symbolise certain things and keep coming back, whether it's just a hand gesture or a lot more, somehow it doesn't seem to be able to escape us.

Vinoodh: When we started, we were outsiders and we embraced it. We said, 'Maybe the best thing is to stay independent, not fit in,' which also gives us a more honest opportunity to be a viewer and observer because we're not really within it. You just feel how the world is, and this is your commentary. Whether it has to do with what kind of shoes this person is wearing in the photograph, or what face they're making.

You talk about commentary, but in your case, reality is heightened. How do you balance commentary and fantasy?

Vinoodh: It's never such a conscious thing. It happens. We plan a shoot in order to let go and improvise. Even when we do a project with somebody, we think about it, and then the moment the person comes in, we might see something else. There is always room to play. Somebody said, you should plan everything 80%, so you have 20% to improvise, to breathe and be flexible.

Can you tell me about what the encounter means to you? Encountering people, encountering yourselves, and how important that word is, if at all?

Vinoodh: It is important, because it's always a discovery. Discovering a new person and seeing how they are and how they react. It's always a two-way street. It doesn't matter whether it's a commission, whether it's a fashion photograph, or whether it's a portrait. It's not about conquering the other person or stealing their image. We give something and we get something back, and I think within one or two minutes of encountering the person, when it's someone we haven't met before, we know exactly what the image should be. It's like being in tune and picking up on certain elements that float around the person. It's not so much whatever they're saying but about meeting them intently. What's been so addictive for us is this constant encounter of new amazing people, interesting humans – even difficult people.

Inez: It also has to do with our identity as photographers. If someone says to us, 'Oh, tomorrow you're photographing Dua Lipa.' Imagine we have never met her, and then they ask: 'Do you want to come and see her in concert tonight, then meet her backstage, and tomorrow do the portrait?' We would always say no, we'd say we want our subject to enter our world as our first encounter with them. We feel we are our best in our studio, our territory, our world. When someone enters our studio, steps into our realm, it's a much purer exchange than going backstage. We treat everybody the same, famous or not, there is no difference for us. A human is a human.

You talk about the human. For me, there is a tension in your work between the human and the posthuman.

Inez: We have an endless fascination with malleability, with the possibility of reinvention, of change, of using the physical side of humans to visualise something deeper. This idea of 'posthuman' just breaks through the limits of our body or our face. The exciting part about making that kind of work and visualising these ideas is that there's no border. In a photograph all we have is the surface, we try to go beneath it by digitally cutting through the surface in the most literal way.

Vinoodh: People always have an idea of who they are, but it's always based on comparisons – to your father, your family, you're a copy of them. Nobody knows where it came from, but people just accept that. They behave the way they do because of tradition. For them that's reality, but they don't have to be like that. Their life can be totally different but a lot of people never escape it. They just follow the path their ancestors started and never diverge from it. We always say: 'You don't own your child.'

Inez: We are interested in these blends, part-human, part-machine, something that is unnerving yet alluring. What is described in the uncanny valley theory [1] is very attractive for us. We had this discussion recently with our son. We were talking about a certain group of artists that are in the techno music scene and the kind of imagery that they put out, which is generally a childish idea about the future: robots, half-human, half-machine – generally also with a message of re-creation. Most of the images may be very first degree or very kitsch, sort of the first thing that comes to mind. It is all based on the fact that the new generations grew up playing video games, which has become their reality. People who create video games have established aesthetics for the generation that our son is a part of. Personally, it fascinates me, because I am interested in visions of the future. And I'd like to be someone who partakes in imagery about the future or what the future could look like physically for humans. What's been put out there is fascinating. Not always amazing, mostly kitsch, but I'm still drawn to it because I want to find exciting ways to imagine the future. We identify with the idea of transformation by presenting a world in which everything becomes a temporary construct.

Vinoodh: I try to understand where the good part is, what part says something about the future that has softness to it. I think that what I keep looking for is gentleness. You always want to ask better artists to create this future world for these games. In most people's minds a robot is the future, whereas I'm thinking, 'Where is the softness? What is the gentle, kind, natural part of the future?' Instead of a robot offering you a rose or whatever. In this society, I sometimes think we should all sit down and do nothing: not speak, not have an opinion, nothing; maybe just walk in the forest.

Do you think there can be a kind part to the future? The current path to the future is more apocalyptic…

Vinoodh: Kids get trained to see that way because they play all these games, so they think it's part of humanity, that the future is a dystopian society. Whereas I have so much hope for the world. That is the premise for this image we did, in which we are protected by our kid, symbolising this idea of hope. A kind spirit of nature, sitting still on the moss in our garden and just looking.

Inez: If everyone would wake up before sunrise and watch the sun come up, owning your day, we feel the world would be different. We are disconnected from the planet we walk on, and we have to go back to it. Now we're just floating around in our own bubbles. Scared, thus greedy.

I want to ask you about your relation to the other arts. The relation to performance is very clear, but also to painting, to sculpture.

Inez: People often ask us, 'What is typically Dutch about your work?' We don't even think about it, but it's true that we grew up every week looking at Rembrandt, Vermeer, Van Gogh, Mondrian, those works that are part of Dutch heritage. It is all there in our work, and those are our earliest memories of what art is. Also, there is the idea of

'We always say that when we take a picture, we eliminate ourselves as much as possible in order to get a pure version of the person through the lens.'

'Within two minutes of encountering the person, we know what the image should be. It's being in tune and picking up on elements that float around them.'

not being interested in reality as a given, which has to do with the malleability of a photograph in our hands through the computer, but also the malleability of a human body even in just positioning the lighting camera angle. It's something you find in painting as well. There are certain style signifiers that you find in our pictures that you'd find in painting. People say, 'Oh my God, here they come again with their hands!' There's always a hand gesture in our pictures. Some people tell us, 'We don't want the hands?' Then we have to really restrain ourselves, not to give the hands the importance we normally do. This ends up being an exercise: how to ignore the hands. Then, do we still make an image that in our mind speaks to a certain kind of iconic, heroic person? We feel the gesture is such a big part of it…

Inez: Yes, they are ours, they belong to us. I feel like we all want to be the other, don't you? When you look at those pictures, it is Gaga as me with me, Gaga as me with Vinoodh…[2]

Vinoodh: Gaga wanted to be Inez. Madonna got the long black wig, and said she wanted to look like Inez. Inez is such an incredible person.

Inez: There's something about Vinoodh that is so uncompromisingly him. It is his struggle and his beauty. When we go to Holland, people there ask him, 'Who are you? You don't belong here.' It is the way we have positioned ourselves in the worlds we operate in, the art world and the fashion world. We've positioned ourselves as outsiders, independent, in both worlds from the beginning. We move in these worlds without fully playing the game.

Vinoodh: That self-belief does not mean we don't listen to others. We pay an enormous amount of attention to other people's input. We love the people we work with. We love working with Mathias and Michaël [of M/M (Paris)] because we feel that with our four brains, there is no limit. Teamwork is the result of all these different inputs and ideas. Everyone brings something, whether that's the hair and make-up artists, stylists, the model…

Inez: When we're on set, we see these arrows of energy go to that one person, which makes them grow and light up. It's the most beautiful thing to see. That's why, from day one, when we started to shoot digital we refused to have a screen on set. A lot of people work with the camera tethered to a screen. It results in everybody that's part of the team sort of huddling around the screen and not looking at what's actually happening on set and being present with the subject. The energy shifts completely and it has diminished the role of the photographer to a point where they could just be a human tripod. The artistry, the magic of what happens in the camera, has disappeared. It's like being behind a painter's back with all of us sitting behind him and commenting: 'Do you think that eye is too big? Do you really want to use the red? Maybe you should use blue now, or make the head smaller.' This way of behaving has changed the way people see, in the fashion world at least, the role of the photographer. We say, 'No. We're creating the magic, we are making this image,' and that's how you get to something more than just a registration of a person.

'We're outside, but we're not trying to be niche. We know we operate in pop culture. Subverting things from within is more fascinating than fighting them.'

You talked about being Dutch. I also think that a key factor about you is that you are a multicultural artist couple, which, in the 1990s, was quite rare. How do you feel about that?

Vinoodh: It is true that it put us in a space of foreignness at the beginning. Being together came from feeling the same. We're like magnets to each other, we could see and feel that we were dealing with the same stuff.

Inez: That's something we feel in the people we surround ourselves with. They're our family, our tribe. It's a bit like your book [*Un Autoportrait*], which is a self-portrait of you defined by the others you surround yourself with, but without having them be disguised as you.

While in your self-portraits, they can be disguised.

Vinoodh: I was always mesmerised by Inez's presence. I met her when she was 21 and I was struck by the way she talked to people. Her opinion was important to people.

Inez: I think it's about being convinced, right? That is what I always tell young artists: you have to be convinced of what you're making. Otherwise, forget being an artist. It's about being so convinced and so inspired by the thing that you're making or want to make that you pull everyone into it, whether it's with the image itself or during the process of making it. I definitely learned that from Lady Gaga, from Björk, from Marina Abramović. It's this complete belief in, and excitement about, what you're making. No matter what headspace or level the people around you are on, you just pull them in with you.

Have you ever felt limited working in the fashion world?

Inez: No, because we know what we're doing, and why we're there. We're there to make the product look incredible so that someone else wants to buy it and in exchange we get paid. It's a very clean set of rules that is a wonderful limitation at times. It can feel restrictive when you know it could be better but your client doesn't think so. It's sad sometimes, but it's not the end of the world. We always say compromise is our friend.

Do you manage to get some uncanny into these scenarios?

Inez: We do most of the time, but I guess we're lucky. We've been at it for so long now that they know what they are looking for when they come to us. They know how to use us to the best of our ability. The ideal way is when we are involved from the beginning with the designer, when we watch the collection and the show being made. It helps form our ideas about the imagery that will be made after a show, when we really think about the strategy of the brand: who is the woman that they're trying to portray? We like treating it almost like a film script. I create the story around her and then, from there, all the images come. We had that kind of relationship with Virginie Viard at Chanel. It was a beautiful five years doing that with her for all the prêt-à-porter collections. We had it with Yohji Yamamoto, with Nicolas Ghesquière at Balenciaga.

Vinoodh: There were some great moments in those relationships. It was the case when Calvin Klein came to us and said, 'You have to make me relevant again. Whatever you do, make me relevant.' He wanted to sell the company. In these moments, they know they're going to get the best out of us.

For artists who have been working a lot with technology, like yourselves, is AI bringing with it a crisis?

Vinoodh: For me it's like a great calculator that needs a lot of energy. It can be handy, but you don't have to use it. It's a tool. It's like what kind of camera you use. If you just use it as a tool, it's totally fine, but it's not the end of photography. AI is great, but it also makes a lot of mistakes. It is as if we had summarised an entire world of possibilities into two letters: 'A' and 'I'. It's useful to do research, but we haven't really used it to create things and we're not too interested in it. We're obsessed with the process of making our work. The idea of writing a prompt and having an image spat back at you is not appealing to us because we love being with people. We love the team, we love the exchange with the sitter in front of us, we love every aspect of the physical making. So this thing of putting in a really sophisticated prompt and receiving your final artwork is not how we want to spend our lives.

Are you still outsiders at this point?

Vinoodh: We still feel that we are observers. We still try to reinvent ourselves, and learn new things. We're communicating through images, and if they reach the level of pop culture, great!

Inez: There is always something about the human creeping into our work. We are always looking to the future, fascinated by new solutions, and not scared for images to be 'pop'. We're outside, but we're not trying to be niche. Thinking about the future influences us, but we know we're operating in pop culture. Subverting things from within is more fascinating to us than fighting them. From day one we decided we were going to be outsiders and not commit to one side or the other. It meant that we had an opportunity to view things from different angles. Our work was shown at Matthew Marks Gallery in the '90s, and critics said it was too fashion. And then the fashion world at that time was like, 'Oh, this is too arty.' Now people look at things differently and see that it all comes from one thing. We don't necessarily try to be one thing or the other. That may be where the uncanny comes from. People ask themselves the question: 'What am I looking at? Is this art? Is this fashion? Is this a portrait? Is this a new person?' We just love living in dubiousness.

One last question, what's your newest reinvention?

Vinoodh: My first answer would be to disconnect. AI will also force people to disconnect, and I'm curious about it, because there will be a new underground and a different way of living, and I think that's important. No one talks about it, but people should focus on that. Maybe it's good when nobody talks about it. The moment people name something, it's over. The moment you're on Instagram, immediately you are a star, everyone has seen it, and everyone moves on 15 minutes later. I believe very much in this idea of the unseen, unknown, undiscovered. We're not criticising social media but I feel we all need the quiet space where things are reinvented. That's why I am so fascinated about the other side that will come up. I think the word gentle is the word of the century to come and Inez, you are a gentle woman.

1. The uncanny valley theory, proposed by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, suggests that as an artificial entity becomes more human-like, our affinity for it increases, but when it reaches a point of near human likeness, our positive feelings shift to unease.

2. Lady Gaga was photographed by Inez & Vinoodh dressed as Inez twice: once with Vinoodh in 2011 and, four years later, with Inez for the cover of *V* magazine's 99th issue (Spring Preview 2016) which was guest edited by the singer. Lady Gaga was wearing a long black wig reminiscent of Inez's hair.

Photographed by...

Zhong Lin

‘Emotional honesty is non-negotiable. I won’t create something that feels empty just because it looks ‘pretty’. The image has to carry a feeling, a truth, even if it’s subtle, surreal or strange. If it doesn’t move something inside me, I can’t fake it for the sake of aesthetics.’

Interview by Leslie Sun
Photographs by Zhong Lin
Styling by Austin Feng

Fei Fei wears a dress by Tom Ford.

Cardigan and vest by Chloé,
bra by Miu Miu,
and tights by Valentino Garavani.

Coat by Junya Watanabe.

Dress by Marine Serre
and bracelets by Givenchy by Sarah Burton.

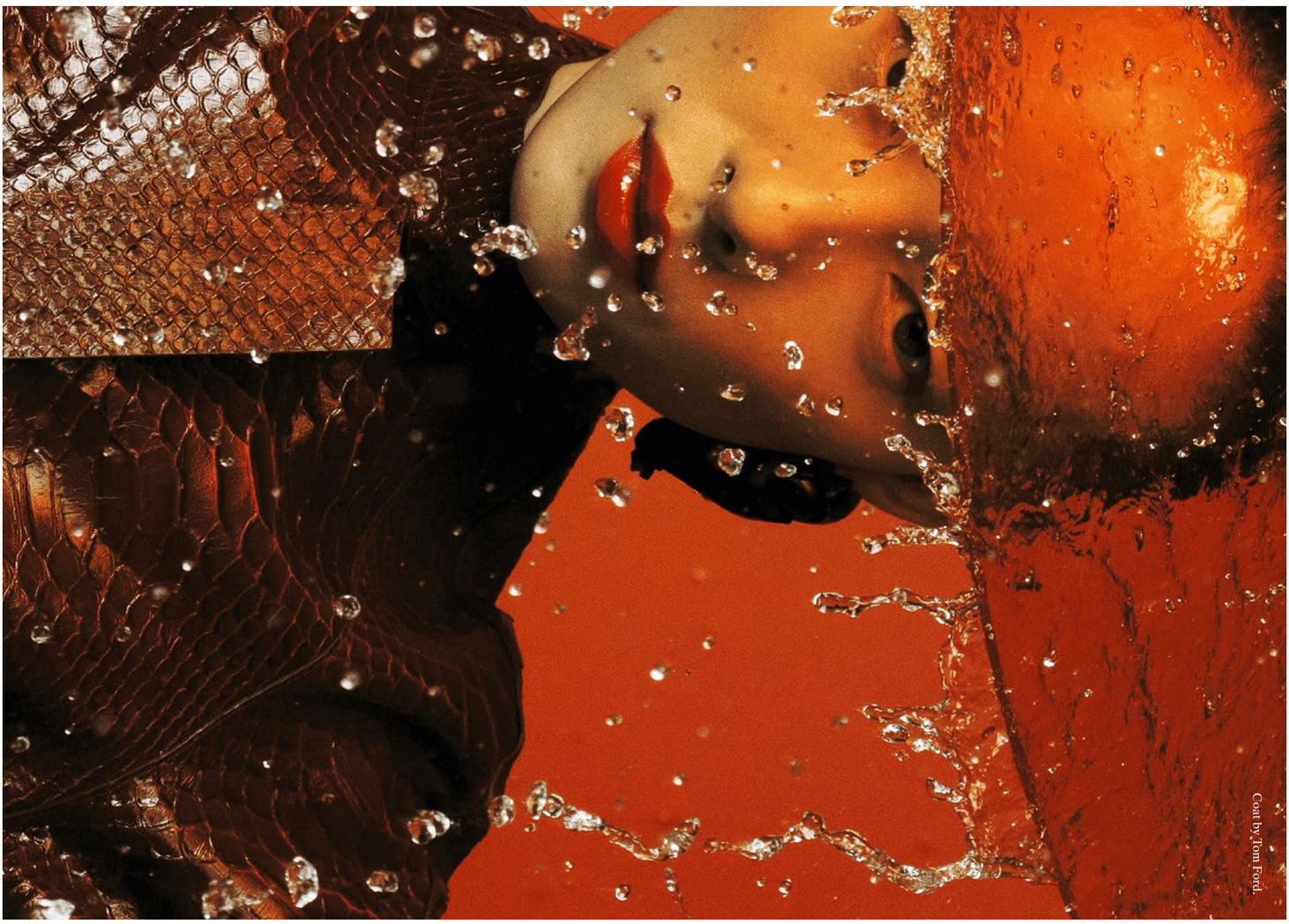
Coat by Junya Watanabe,
top and trousers by Qiuhao,
and gloves by Sportmax.

Top, jacket, belt, gloves, and skirt
by Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.

Dress and necklace by Chloé,
earrings, ear cuff and ring by Schiaparelli,
and shoes by Courrèges.

Dress, gloves, belt and shoes by Tom Ford,
headwear by Alaïa,
and bracelet by Zhuchongyun.

Vest and jumpsuit by Gucci,
shoes by Courrèges,
bracelet and ring by Louis Vuitton,
and earrings by Givenchy by Sarah Burton.



Coat by Tom Ford.

Model: Fei Fei Sun at Elite Management. Hair: Minghu Zhang (HairPro). Make-up: Yooyo Keong Ming. Set designer: Sisi Zou. Producer: Zhang Qiran. Photography assistants: Yuanling Wang. Styling assistants: Sean Liu, Kaiyin Li, Jiaying Xi. Set designer assistant: Nini.

Corset by Jean Paul Gaultier.

‘I’d watch Bollywood movies while eating my mom’s Chinese food, with my dad’s Malay songs playing in the background – it was a beautiful cultural clash.’

‘I wanted to do fine art photography, but as with all typical traditional Chinese families, my dad wanted me to combine art with commerce.’

Zhong Lin and I have known each other for eight years. We first met on set in Taipei in 2017, during the early stages of her career. She was the photographer and I was the subject, long before I became an editor and she rose to international acclaim. Zhong Lin was one of the first photographers I worked with after joining *Vogue* Taiwan in 2020, and we’ve since collaborated closely and witnessed each other’s professional growth. Together, we’ve created some standout covers and stories, including ‘Heat Wave’ from the January 2022 Sustainability Issue, and, more recently, Tilda Swinton from December 2024. It’s also been meaningful to be part of key moments in her career, including the development of her now-famous project 365: a challenge to create and publish a new original photo on her Instagram every day for a year, starting from scratch each day during the Covid pandemic.

Working with Zhong Lin is always a treat – she has that rare ability to transform big ideas into visual poetry, and I’ve always been fascinated by the inner workings of her mind. Although Zhong and I see each other often, we had never truly sat down for an in-depth conversation until now.

Leslie Sun: I think this interview satisfies a lot of my curiosity towards you, even though we’ve known each other for a long time. We met around 2017, and that’s when you first moved to Taipei, right?

Zhong Lin: At that time I was still travelling between Malaysia and Taipei, and starting to pick up my career as a photographer.

So that was the beginning of everything. Wow, I’ve known you since the beginning! That’s cool. I know that you’re a self-taught photographer. What motivated you to teach yourself photography?

I majored in advertising and took some basic photography classes during my university years. I wanted to do fine art photography, but like all typical traditional Chinese families, my dad thought fine art would starve me to death. So he wanted me to choose something that combined art and commerce. At the time, I thought it was a pretty good deal, as I was willing to do anything just to get closer to art. None of my family members or relatives work in or even near the creative field; I think I’m the first. They all come from business backgrounds, so in many ways, my path probably felt foreign or risky to them. I first learned black and white photography using analogue film, and when I developed my own prints in the darkroom I instantly felt drawn to the medium. The desire to become a photographer came naturally, though not necessarily as a career at the time. I just knew I wanted to get into the world of photography. When it comes to being self-taught, I think it was more about realising how you develop your own identity and visual language. That’s something I’m still exploring to this day.

Your style has developed into such a distinct one. Can you tell me about your process of self-discovery? How did you come to establish your own aesthetic and creative voice?

I didn’t really follow a formula. I’m more of an intuitive person and let things come naturally. In fact, I didn’t even realise I had a style until people started pointing it out to me, saying my work inspired them or had a certain feeling. I’ve always been open to change and try not to put myself in a box. I follow what excites me and stay receptive to opportunities that move me. I have asked myself before, ‘OK, who am I? What is my style? What is my aesthetic?’ without realising that I already had one.

And since then, have you started to recognise it?

Not really, to be honest. It’s weird.

I actually think that’s great! Often when artists and creatives start noticing they have a distinct style, they tend to become confined by it. So it’s liberating that it’s still ambiguous for you, that you’re not trying to chase a specific aesthetic or overanalyse it.

True. I used to chase it. At one point, I was eager to find a distinct aesthetic, like when you look at Tim Walker or Guy Bourdin, you instantly know it’s them. I always felt like I didn’t have that. I think it’s because I grew up in such a culturally diverse environment. In Malaysia, I could be watching Bollywood movies on TV while eating my mom’s home-cooked Chinese food, with my dad’s Malay songs playing in the background. It was a beautiful cultural clash. I was exposed to so many styles and conceptual elements, and in love with so many of them, that choosing one distinct style felt difficult. So, I just let inspiration come to me naturally. Eventually, I realised, you know what? You don’t have to force yourself to define anything. It’s all you and part of your evolution.

Were there any photographic influences, whether Asian or Western, that informed you as you began to establish your aesthetic?

There were so many influences it’s impossible to name every one, but a few that stood out were films like Wong Kar Wai’s *Fallen Angels,* Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira*, Satoshi Kon’s *Perfect Blue*, and the magical worlds of Hayao Miyazaki.[1] They taught me about mood, emotion, and storytelling through visuals. In photography, I’m drawn to Guy Bourdin’s striking use of colour, Helmut Newton’s provocative boldness, Irving Penn’s still lifes, and Nan Goldin’s intimate documentation of diverse communities.

I want to get into your process next. We’ve been working quite closely together for a couple of years, and the covers you’ve shot for *Vogue* Taiwan have always been very well received. I truly believe you’ve been a big part of our success. It feels so comfortable working with you. Usually, I’ll throw out a big idea or a message I’d like to convey, then we’ll discuss it with the team. You’ll come back with your thoughts and ideas, which are almost always spot-on with the visual messaging, and of course, the end result always tells a compelling story. What is your personal process from concept to image?

My process is quite fluid. It shifts depending on the project. But usually I like to start by giving the shoot a title, something personal, even if the project already comes with a name. That title helps me create a mood or direction, and from there I’ll often write a short script or a narrative, just to get a feel for the emotional tone. Research is a big part of my process. I collect all kinds of references, but I tend to avoid looking at fashion photography or other photographers’ work. I pull from illustrations, objects, design, architecture, even food imagery. It helps me stay connected to something more intuitive and less expected. I always make a moodboard. I adore moodboards. Sometimes I’ll go back and look at them long after a shoot is done, just to reconnect with the feeling. It’s like flipping through a visual diary. But once I’m on set, I let go. I like to leave space for chaos, for the unexpected. That’s usually where the real magic happens. I love exploring new forms of visual expression and creating what hasn’t been seen before. I think the key to so many of our successful cover collaborations is our mutual trust; there is room to be experimental and try new things.

Which cover story is your favorite?

I think it would have to be the ‘Heat Wave’ issue from January 2022. It wasn’t the most glamorous, but it really meant something. It felt necessary.

That was my favourite too. I think it was so impactful in terms of what a single image can convey. We talked about climate change and pollution with an unknown girl holding a popsicle.

What made it powerful, to me, was the decision to cast someone unfamiliar, Peng Chang. She wasn’t a celebrity, nor a public figure, and that was exactly the point. We wanted the viewer to imagine what happens when we keep creating waste and ignoring the warning signs. Working with someone anonymous gave space for reflection and allowed people to see the bigger picture instead of focusing on a personality. When you told me you wanted to approach the story in a way that created real awareness beyond recycled or eco-friendly materials, it challenged all of us to think deeper. Fashion is a major contributor to waste, so if we’re going to talk about it, we have to do it consciously. No artificial sets were built, all of our backdrop was authentic to the natural environment, and we used recycled materials to create props like the mermaid tail and fin. Everyone on the team worked with purpose. We cut down what we could, stripped things back, and focused on emotion, not excess. That was the heart of it for me, using a visual language to ask viewers: ‘What kind of world are we leaving behind?’

What I found rewarding was that the cover sparked so much conversation with no supermodel or celebrity involved.

It was also Peng’s first cover which made it even more special. There was something raw and honest about it. On a personal note, the popsicle was actually part of an art project I came across a few years back, created by a collective from the National Taiwan University of Arts.[2] They collected polluted water samples from 100 locations in Taiwan, froze them into popsicles, and preserved them in resin. The result was disturbing

and beautiful at the same time. I saved the images back then, not knowing I'd one day draw from that memory. But during the development of this shoot, it came back to me, like dots connecting. At the end of the day, I know I'm not saving the world with fashion, but I do believe we can send powerful messages using the tools we have. This cover, for me, was one of those moments. A way to do a little more than just make something look beautiful.

Then, of course, there's Tilda Swinton, who you shot for *Vogue* Taiwan! [December 2024 issue]
That's another cover that I'll never forget, for obvious reasons. It's Tilda! The whole shoot was outdoors on a brutally hot, humid summer's day in Taiwan, and Tilda was wearing Chanel in the background while we shot. The music gave the whole experience this strange, poetic tension: Tilda in Chanel surrounded by the raw texture of Taiwanese street life, created a beautiful clash. And I could tell she loved it. Both of these covers reminded me of why I do what I do. In fashion, you're not saving the world, but when you do it right, you can make people pause and feel something.

Let's go back to talking about your career trajectory. There seem to be violent and abrupt ways that people's careers can take off in the fashion industry, right? It could be from just one collection or one cover shoot. What would you consider to be your breakthrough moment?
Project 365 was definitely one of the most memorable breakthroughs in my career. The world had come to a halt because of the pandemic and I happened to be stuck in Taipei at the time. I was forced to stop moving and travelling, but I definitely didn't want to stop creating. I remember that we were still allowed to do shoots in Taipei, thanks to Taiwan's early detection and prevention measures during the pandemic. So I told my assistant, 'Let's finally do this project I've always wanted to try.' I had attempted it once before and failed, but this time felt different, it felt like the right moment to refocus. This project broke me though. [Laughs]

I remember one time you were shooting a cover for us, and when we wrapped late at night, you were like, 'OK, I have to go and do the 365 now.' I thought you would just shoot something on the spot but then realised you were going to build a new set and work with a separate model to go with the concept you came up with on that day.
For me, 365 was about showing up, practicing discipline and diving into self-discovery. Sometimes we wait for inspiration to come, when inspiration is all around us every day. It wasn't about perfection, but more about the day-to-day commitment. In the end, there was a lot of honesty in those photos, which meant a lot of imperfections and unplanned surprises too. Things that I learned to embrace.

And there was no cheating! You couldn't say, 'I'm too busy tomorrow so I'm going to shoot two images today.'
No, there was absolutely no cheating. Part of the rule was that I needed to post an image on my Instagram account every single day, and that was a big challenge in itself because I'm not much of a social media user, but I stayed consistent with it all year because of 365.

'I start by giving the shoot a title, which helps me create a mood. From there I'll write a short script or a narrative, to get a feel for the emotional tone.'

I'm curious about how you choose your projects now. What do you look for when considering a project?
Again, I'm very intuitive. It's about my gut feeling. If someone draws me in, I'm immediately curious and want to reveal a different side of them, especially if they're already known in a certain way to the public. I'm intrigued by the contrast between their public image and their more intimate, unseen self. Sometimes I'm drawn in by a concept, sometimes by the person themself, especially if it's someone I admire. But ultimately it's about connection. I choose projects that feel like they're connecting the dots back to my own life. It has to click.

Your subject matter nowadays ranges from local models to Hollywood superstars. What are the differences in approach, if any? Are there compromises you have to make when working with high-profile talents?
I approach everyone the same. Whether it's a first-time model or a Hollywood name, I treat them as human. My goal is always to connect, to find that one honest moment between us that tells a story. That doesn't change. Of course, with high profile talents, there are often more layers to navigate: image control, larger teams, tighter schedules and sometimes an invisible weight of expectations. Time becomes precious and there's a lot of negotiation around what can or can't be shown. But even with all that, I still try to create space for spontaneity. I don't believe in overdirecting or forcing something to happen. The challenge is just finding that truth a little faster, a little more gently, within the framework they're willing to step into. It's like a dance between strangers, and finding that connection along the way. Again, I love to photograph the unseen side of people. I think it's really interesting. And I especially love when someone well-known is open minded. There's this confidence and trust from them that also allows you to be fearless about pushing their limits. I really enjoy that.

We all know that the unexpected often outweighs the expected on set. How do you navigate unexpected chaos on set?
I embrace it. Chaos is part of the creative process, it's not the enemy. It's often where the magic hides. I come prepared, of course, but I never hold on to my plans too tightly. I trust my instinct and let the moment lead. I tell myself, 'That could be the shot you need.' Things always happen for a reason. Sometimes, the most powerful images are born from what wasn't supposed to happen.

Yes, I can see a lot of that spontaneity in your photographs.
Sometimes when things go too smoothly the pictures turn out very expected.

What about the different entities that commission you now. Do you feel different dynamics at play between an editorial commission and a commercial shoot for a major brand?
I remember crying for hours after my first commercial shoot because I had no creative control. What the client ended up wanting was so different from what we had originally discussed. When I tried to talk to them about it, the producer said, 'It's commercial, don't risk making the client unhappy. Just take your money and go.' For a long time I saw commercial work as just a money job. But things changed as my career grew and my aesthetic became stronger. Now, brands come to me because they want my visual language, my style. I've learned that commercial work doesn't have to lack passion. The dynamic is still different from editorial. Editorial feels like my own world, built with a team I choose, where freedom is limitless. Commercial work, on the other hand, is their world; their boat. But I'm the sailor steering it toward their destination. There are lines I have to respect, but there's still room to play within them. And sometimes, if I'm lucky, I can convince them to push beyond those lines with a better idea. That's when commercial work becomes exciting, not restrictive.

'I cried for hours after my first commercial shoot because what the client ended up wanting was so different from what we had originally discussed.'

Are there any boundaries or parameters in your creative process that you will not compromise on whatsoever?
Emotional honesty is non-negotiable. I won't create something that feels empty just because it looks 'pretty'. The image has to carry a feeling, a truth, even if it's subtle, surreal or strange. If it doesn't move something inside me, I can't fake it for the sake of aesthetics. Another thing I won't compromise on is the people I work with. I won't collaborate with anyone I don't feel comfortable around. I believe energy shows up in the final image, and I choose to surround myself with sincere, grounded people – people who truly love what they do and treat everyone on set with respect. That kind of environment allows creativity to breathe. No ego, no politics, just real connection, mutual trust and shared passion. That's the kind of space where the work becomes magic.

What are the biggest challenges you've faced so far in your career?
I think one of the biggest challenges is figuring out how to keep moving forward, especially in an industry that constantly resets the bar. You achieve something and for a moment it feels like

you've made it, but that feeling fades fast. You can't stay in it too long, or you risk getting stuck. For me, growth has to stay active – emotionally, mentally, creatively, but also by consciously making time to achieve it. Another challenge, personally, is socialising. I don't really do parties or big industry events. I find it hard, even exhausting, to communicate in environments full of strangers. Let's be honest, you're not really going to have deep conversations in a room like that. I'm not wired for surface level talk. So I choose to stay grounded, keep my circle tight and focus on doing the work, because that's the part that brings me clarity, purpose and peace.

I can totally relate to that. I also find big social situations tough. Are there any challenges that excite you?

'Technology makes things efficient, but we're losing something in the process: the emotional layers, the quiet tension, the slow burn of building a narrative.'

The challenges that excite me the most now are the ones that ask me to go beyond photography: to push myself out of my comfort zone and build something bigger, more long-term and more meaningful. That's the mountain I want to climb. For example, exploring different creative mediums such as film or collaborating with people from outside of the creative disciplines. Challenging the known and exploring new ways of seeing, thinking and working.

How do you see the role of a fashion photographer today? And how do you think it has shifted since you first started?

A lot has changed, more than I expected. When I first stepped into this world, I envisioned time to think, space to explore and the luxury to build a story from the ground up. But now everything moves so fast. We're living in a scroll-driven culture, and that pace has reshaped the way we work. There's much less time for deep brainstorming, proper preparation and meaningful collaborations. Shoots that used to take days now get squeezed into hours, and while technology makes things more efficient, I do think we're losing something in the process: the emotional layers, the quiet tension, the slow burn of building a narrative. Today, being a fashion photographer is no longer just about making beautiful images. It's about adaptability, speed and, often, strategy. In the world we live in now, anyone can be anything. You can basically call yourself a photographer if you own a camera, or a smartphone. I used to feel frustrated by this, but now I've started to embrace it. In a way, it's actually cool and kind of amazing. We're living in a time where you can build anything, as long as you have the drive and the passion. It used to feel like a challenge to stand out, but now I think the real challenge is curation. You can have thousands and thousands of photographers, but what we need, and what I think we're lacking, are great curators. People with taste. People who know how to select and elevate the right voices, the right work, and show it to the world. That role is more important now than ever.

I couldn't agree more. What do you want your role to be in this industry?

To be honest, I don't have a fixed answer for that. I've never really sat down and said, 'This is what I want to represent in the industry.' But I do know that what I care about most is finding the right audience – or maybe 'audience' isn't the perfect word. It's more about finding people who feel the same things, or who understand the kind of emotional world I create through my work. That connection is important to me, not for validation but because it reminds me that I'm not alone in the way I see or feel the world. I'm not here to please everyone or to avoid criticism. I'm here to reach my kind of people. That's why I don't love overdefining or overexplaining my work. I believe the right people will just get it, visually or emotionally. And when they do, it gives the work more meaning.

Do you consider yourself a photographer or a fashion photographer?

I honestly don't mind being called either. I think it's up to people to define it however they see me. I don't like putting myself in a box.

Do you think there's a difference between the two?

Yes, I do. To me, being a fashion photographer isn't just about shooting clothes, you need to have a certain love and passion for fashion itself. It's about understanding the narrative behind a collection, the vision of the designer and how to translate that into an image. It also requires the right attitude, not just creatively, but professionally. You need to know how to build a strong team around you – stylists, make-up artists, hair, set – everyone plays a role in shaping the story. I think fashion photography is deeply collaborative. You can't do it alone. It's a shared rhythm.

Finally, why did you choose Fei Fei [Sun] as your subject to represent you in this issue of *System*?

The reason I chose Fei Fei is because she's someone I've always quietly admired. I shot her once for *Vogue* China, and that experience really stayed with me. What I love about her is that she's incredibly selective. You don't see her on every cover or in every campaign. There's something powerful about that. She chooses carefully, and that makes every appearance meaningful. When I spoke to her, she was so humble and real, not pretentious at all. I'm really drawn to people like that. I love working with people who are sincere and grounded, especially in an industry that can feel performative sometimes. And here's a secret! Fei Fei was the first Asian model I ever loved, way before I even knew I'd be part of the fashion world. I used to quietly hope that one day I'd get to photograph her. She has no idea about any of this, of course. But now that I've had the chance, I really want to create something more personal with her again for *System*. Something intimate, something that speaks more to who we are beyond the surface.

1. Hayao Miyazaki is a Japanese animator and co-founder of Studio Ghibli, known for films such as *My Neighbour Totoro, Spirited Away*, and *Howl's Moving Castle*. His fantastical worlds and humanist themes have shaped global visual culture and inspired generations of artists.

2. 'Polluted Water Popsicles' was a 2017 project by three visual communication students from the National Taiwan University of the Arts: Hung Yi-Chen, Guo Yi-hui and Cheng Yu-Ti. It received wide critical acclaim across the globe for its stark and impactful representation of water pollution in Taiwan.

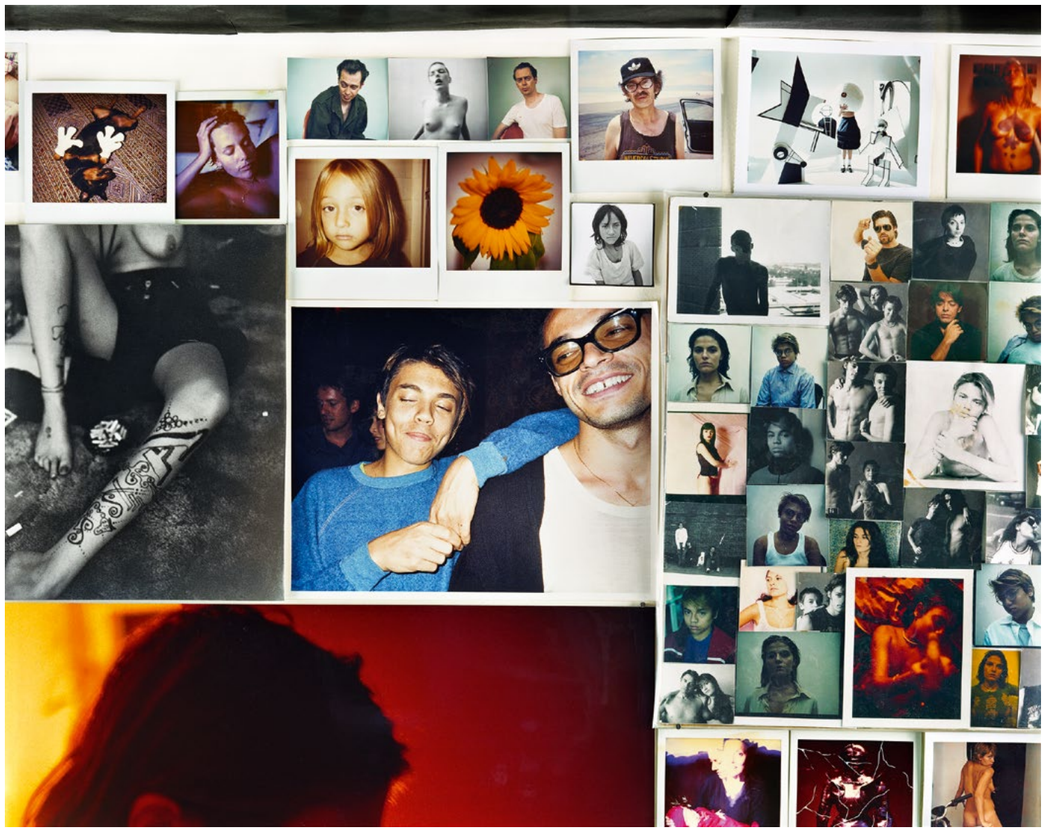
3. Keelung is a port city in northern Taiwan, known for its fishing industry, night markets, and humid, rainy climate.

The Sorrentis

Francesca, Mario, Vanina and Gray. The photographic dynasty that spans three generations.

From left to right: Gray, Vanina, Francesca and Mario.

Interviews by Neville Wakefield
Portrait by Drew Jarrett



Davide and Mario (centre), surrounded by family and friends.
From Mario's 2013 book *Draw Blood for Proof*.

I moved from London to New York in the early 1990s, a time when rent was still cheap, drugs plentiful and untamed creative energy seemed to be shaping every aspect of art, architecture, society and fashion. The young photographer Mario Sorrenti was living in a loft in downtown Tribeca. Between the darkroom and the street, skating, graffiti, art and fashion, his was a world shaped as much in life as in its image. His photographs of then-girlfriend Kate Moss became the defining moment of an era. Raw and tender, vulnerable and defiant, they brought the tight-knit intimacy of extended family to the photographic stage. Passing in and out of this world were his mother Francesca, her boyfriend Steve [Sutton], Mario's younger brother Davide (who tragically passed away in 1997 at the age of 20) and sister Vanina. The feeling was of a family – one which had its roots in Naples but had been transplanted to New York – in constant dialogue with itself. Photography was the shared prism through which relationships to art, fashion, each other and the outside world were refracted across spectrums of interest. Mood and tonality were particular to each but there was also a common language united by a shared belief in the transformative power of the image and the sentient potential of fashion.

Now, with the additional voice of Mario's daughter Gray – herself one of fashion's fastest-rising image-making talents – the family conversation spans three generations and a range of experience from more than half a century. Reflecting on a world that began downtown with Francesca in Max's Kansas City alongside the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Andy Warhol, and continues to this day in Harlem with Gray documenting the bike life scene, I'm struck by how much more than a photography dynasty the Sorrentis represent. Thirty years on, for me and so many others like me, the impression they have left and continue to leave is an indelible part of everything New York. Finally, and gratefully, I feel old.

Neville Wakefield

Francesca photographed by Vanina.
Sorrenti & Sutton studio, New York, 1999.
Vogue Germany, 'New York Women' series.

'Let's admit it: we are a family of voyeurs. Curiosity is part of our nature, it's in our DNA.'

Francesca Sorrenti in conversation

Neville Wakefield: So, everyone wants to know the origin story of the Sorrentis – this photographic dynasty that now spans three generations.
Francesca Sorrenti: After high school I ran away to Manhattan from Queens and started working in a club called The Scene. It was like a revolving door of bands coming in from London and LA. It was wild, and I became friends with people like Jimi Hendrix. Later on, the scene moved to Max's Kansas City,[1] which became more of a fashion scene – Donna Jordan, Andy Warhol, Karl Lagerfeld and others. Back then the circles were much smaller; it was a different world living in New York, no cell phones, no social media. Even the city itself was different – there was no SoHo, no Chelsea. In 1971 I married in New York and moved to Italy, and my Italian life began. I had moved to Italy in the middle of a recession so figuring out where and how to work took a lot of creativity. Italy had its own energy, but I also carried my American background with me, especially growing up in New York.

My children grew up in a household that was both creative and social. Their father was an artist and I was always making things – jewellery, shoes, you name it. In 1973, I began working for Fiorucci which opened the doors to travelling throughout Europe and New York. At the time I had Mario and Vanina and made sure to take them along whenever I could. Summers in Italy were a world apart from life in New York. We spent entire seasons in Positano, Capri, Ischia – days filled with boating in the sea. That landscape, its beauty, rhythm and light, nourished the imagination and left a lasting mark on the creative spirit.

With everything you've done, how come you've never been in the limelight?
The truth is I never liked the limelight, and by limelight I mean posing for photos, being outlandish, hanging out with the crowd into the wee hours of the morning. By the time I was 26, I already had three children. To be in the limelight, there are certain things you had to be a part of. My head wasn't there, plus I always shied away from the camera.

When did you return to New York?
When I separated, I moved back with my children. Those first months were brutal, basically a year of sacrifice, barely holding things together in Manhattan. But out of that struggle came a turning point. By 1983 I became a stylist and my career took off. I don't think my career was by chance, it was rooted in what Italy had given me. Being brought up in an atmosphere like Italy, where everybody looks fabulous, especially in that era. You have to understand that there were no blue jeans, no stretch pants; you walked out of the house wearing make-up and clothes. Going back to my childhood: the pony jackets, the poodle skirts, the girls that I'd see on the street. My mother's wardrobe... when she punished me and locked me in her closet, I was in seventh heaven.

People back then were fully armoured. Fully dressed.
Yes, they really were. And so I had an eye for detail, a deep sense of style and, of course, the resilience to carve my own path. Then I met Steve Sutton, my partner of 40 years, and an amazing stepfather. Our paths in 1984 became one, along with our careers. We rented a studio next door to our apartment and my children were always welcome. Being the Italian that I am, my children were always allowed in the studio no matter what I was doing. They hung out there, they watched TV there. I ran home, cooked dinner, we had this family life. Then at the same time, I had a very active social life. I was out every night. This was the 1980s, it was a fabulous time. In fact, people sometimes ask me, 'What was the best time in history in your seven decades?' I'd have to say the 1980s. I mean the 1960s were fabulous, but every decade had its own thing. The 1980s was a combo of everything. You could be a hippie. You could be a punk rocker. You could be a disco queen, you know? There was New Wave, there was disco, you could have pointy hair or a side ponytail and wear glitter. Nothing cost the way it does today. Everything was at a reasonable price. If you worked, you could afford things. I mean it wasn't like the 1960s or the 1970s, but everything was affordable to a certain extent. One of the places I lived in was a four-bedroom apartment in the Zeckendorf [Towers residential building] with a pool and health club and everything. It was huge, overlooking the park and cost $4000 a month. Now that's unheard of.

'You have to understand, in Italy in the 1970s, there were no blue jeans, no stretch pants; you walked out of the house wearing make-up and clothes.'

Your children speak so amazingly of being brought up in this polyvalent creative environment where styling, photography, modelling was all part of one process. What went on behind the camera and what went on in front of it were connected in some way…

At the time we started an in-house ad agency for a clothing company. I became the creative director and Steve started shooting; he became a successful photographer shooting children's wear. My children were always in and out even when we were working. They were a part of everything and saw everything. Being very creative, they were like three young sponges. They were also very sought after models with Ford modelling agency. Mario was the Ralph Lauren muse, Vanina for Norma Kamali and Dave for EJ Gitano. Of course, children's modelling was very low-key back then, not to mention that I styled most of their shoots. No matter what the rhythm, family came first.

So how did you eventually get into taking photographs?

Unfortunately the 1990s brought the recession and times became difficult. Mario, who was modelling at the time, discovered photography and became very passionate about it, and Steve set up the dark room for him in our studio. I was still trying to figure out what to do. While Mario was still in the testing stage he said to me, 'Mom why don't you pick up a camera? You're always telling other people what to do.' And I replied, 'You don't just pick up a camera and if I were to pick up a camera I would need to know everything, and I'm not a technical person.' And he said, 'It's like cooking.' He said, and I'll never forget this: 'It's like making pasta.' Now you have to understand, back then it was all about turning knobs. He was saying, you know, 'You turn the knob just like when you're putting salt in the pasta.' So one day I said to Steve: 'Can you set up the studio? I want to try this out.' I was so thrilled by the outcome and I found a new career, but most of all a new passion, specifically for fashion photography.

How were those first years of taking photos?

As a woman photographer at the time I felt the weight of how difficult the industry could be. There were doors that stayed shut, opportunities handed more easily to men. I was lucky. I pushed my way in and made myself a player. I shot for *i-D, Interview Magazine, Vogue* and did my share of advertising. Those chances didn't come because the world was generous; they came because I knew how to navigate, because I refused to let myself be overlooked and because I believed in my talent and my style. I've always tried to pass on to my children that talent is the start; passion, persistence and presence matter just as much. The New York scene in the 1990s was very different. Another youth boom was starting to form with grunge exploding out of Seattle with bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam and others bringing flannel shirts, ripped jeans, and other anti-glamour attitudes. Doc Martens and sneakers were the way to go. Hip-hop became mainstream, Tupac, Biggie, Lauryn Hill. Gangsta and graffiti were, as my kids would say, 'the bomb'. And then the drug culture started to grow. At the time I was at the height of my career. I socialised and went to parties almost every night, but I also had boundaries. You'd understand if you lived through the 1990s. When I felt things veering in the wrong direction, I went home. I was fortunate to be that way. Maybe it was fear, maybe it was instinct, but I always remembered that I had kids.

I'm wondering, do you feel that the Sorrentis all have a shared sensibility in their work?

Let's admit it: we are a family of voyeurs. Curiosity is part of our nature, it's in our DNA. On an astrological level, we are a household of water signs. Mario and I are both Scorpios. Vanina and Steve, Pisces, and Davide a Cancer. We lived in a floating house. In Italy I had an astrologer do their charts. Mario was only seven at the time, she looked at me and said: 'This child will be exceptional, he will grow into an exceptional man.' I remember nodding, thinking: 'Well he's only seven, we'll see.' But as the years passed, I began to see exactly what she meant. His intensity, his vision, his drive, all of it was there from the start. I always found his photography very personal, very him. There always was a certain sensuality in his pictures. And then there is my daughter Vanina. She has always been my Alice in Wonderland, in a world of endless imagination, beauty and curiosity. She has this way of looking at life with a kind of eternal youth, as if she's untouched by time. That perspective is a gift. She remains so deeply, and naturally talented. I find her pictures magical and her personal work reminds me of pictures I've seen in museums. Vanina's creativity is different from Mario's, less about drive and more about spirit. Her passion for the arts has always been deep-rooted. Where he charges forward with intensity, she drifts through ideas with grace finding wonder in details others might miss.

And obviously for Gray as well, another female perspective.

Gray, my beautiful and talented granddaughter. Her energy is beyond, but I have to say she reminds me so much of myself when I was young. Her photography is so full of energy and beauty. I also find that she's inherited many of Davide's traits – they have a similar character and expression. A little bit of homegirl, not afraid of saying what she thinks. Even though Gray never got to know Davide, she is very much tied to the memory of her uncle.

Can we talk a little more about Davide?

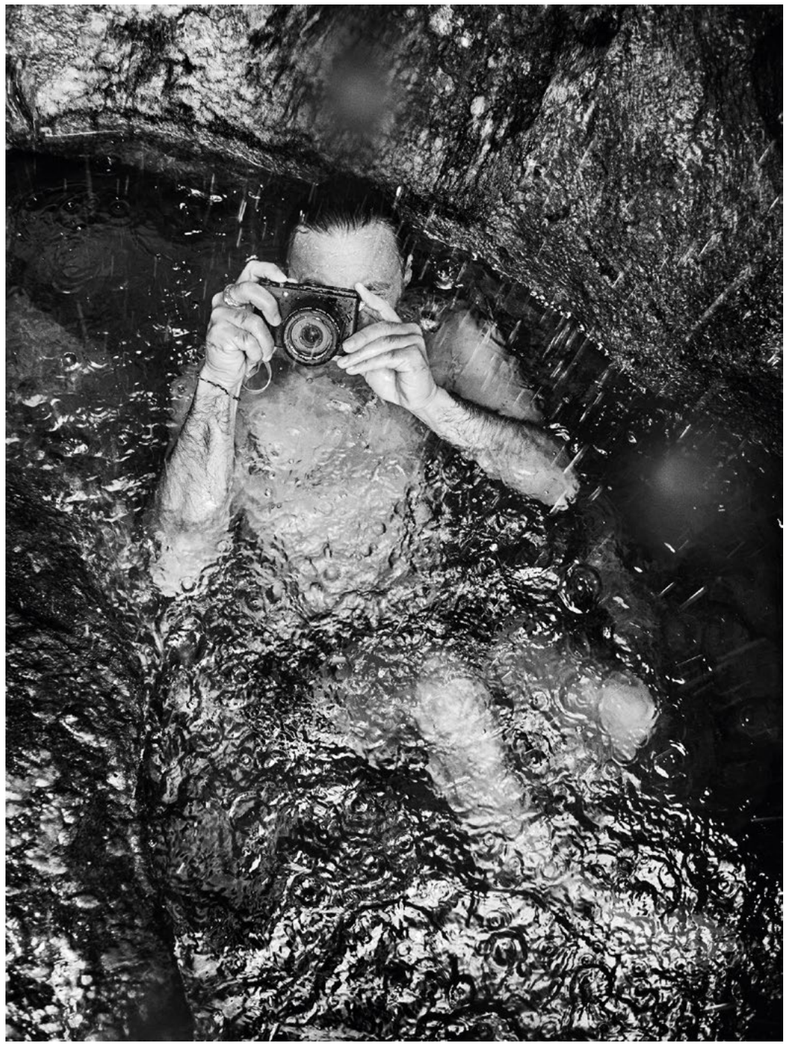
Davide, 'Dave', my youngest. Dave was like a sponge, he observed all the best qualities of his family and made it work for him. He loved to watch us shoot and he was gifted with an amazing sense of style. On a technical level he knew exactly how to print his photos with Steve. A truly creative artistic soul in a homeboy body. Sometimes I thought he was otherworldly. He refused to speak English properly. Everything was: 'Yo man, hi shorty, what's up!' He lived with his camera by his side shooting his friends and the people and things he loved around him. He didn't follow the rules. If he wanted to meet someone, he would just go work his way into an ad agency and ask to speak to an art director and he would actually get in! In 2018, a documentary on his life, *See Know Evil* by Charlie Curran was an instant success being seen around the world. DOC NYC had to add two additional showings due to the overwhelming request for tickets. It toured England, the Torino Film Festival and other venues. I was so surprised how popular Dave's work was amongst the younger generation. In 2020, IDEA Books printed *ArgueSKE 1994-1997.* At the book signing the crowd was overwhelming, and again I was surprised by the number of young people who were buying his book. It sold out within a few days. Now there are three books of Dave's work and a fourth one – on his journals – coming out. There have also been exhibitions that have been viewed by thousands of people.

How does it feel to see generations of your family all walk similar creative paths, finding their voices as they do so?

I must say I am very proud of my family. We have all been gifted with an amazing talent and love of creativity. My grandson Arsun, an exceptional musician with his own personal style, and my granddaughter Lennon, a true beauty, modelling at the moment, with inspirations of writing and directing. My amazing daughter-in-law Mary Frey, a truly gifted sculptor. When you have so much talent around you, how can you not feel blessed.

'My children were sought-after models with Ford agency: Mario was the Ralph Lauren muse, Vanina for Norma Kamali and Dave for EJ Gitano.'

1. Max's Kansas City was a nightclub on Park Avenue in New York City that became a regular haunt for musicians, poets and artists during the 1960s and 1970s.



Mario photographed by Gray.
Mallorca, August 2018.
For La Mer 'The Edge of the Sea by Sorrenti' 2019 campaign.

'Something happened in the dark-room that night when I saw the imag-es appear in the developing tray. I was like, 'Wow, this is pretty fucking cool.''

Mario Sorrenti in conversation

Neville Wakefield: It is pretty unique that you have three generations where multiple family members have been at the forefront of photography and fash-ion. I can't think of other examples.
Mario Sorrenti: It's purely by acci-dent. You know, it's really not anything planned by any of us. The only connec-tion that I can see is that, for some rea-son, we're a very visual family. I grew up in an artistic family. My dad's a painter, my mom has always been in a creative situation, but more of the businesswom-an in the family. She cracks the whip! My dad was really about art and love and coffee, cigarettes, and just chilling. An idealistic, beautiful life.

And he was doing that in Naples, right?
Yeah. He still lives there. We all grew up in Naples, and it's where my mom and my dad met. My mom was born in America. My grandmother Maria met an American soldier in Naples, and they got married. She went to Amer-ica with him, and my mom was born there. About a year or two later, they divorced. Then my grandmother left and came back to Italy. My grandmoth-er had a house in America and she also had a house in Italy. She went back and forth all the time, and she did a lot of business. She was kind of a crazy, cool saleswoman. She would buy garments and eyewear in Italy and bring them to America and sell them literally out of a suitcase to her friends up in the Cat-skills and in New York and Brooklyn. And then she would buy all the stuff in America and bring it back to Italy and sell it in Naples and Ischia. That was my childhood growing up. I remember my grandmother always with these massive suitcases going back and forth between New York and Naples.

As much as family might have shaped your approach to work, location has as well. I think about New York and about when we met in the early 1990s. I'm curious about how much the place has also helped form your sensibility.
Well, we came to New York because my mom and my dad separated. My mom decided to move back to America, and she took all of us to New York. I remem-ber getting there in 1980 and thinking to myself, 'Wow, this is not that bad, this city is not that dangerous,' you know, in comparison to Naples.

I arrived in the early 1990s, and was like: this is fucking terrifying, and brilliant.
My mom was on her own, so I really grew up in New York, on the streets. I didn't speak English, and I was thrown into street culture. All my friends were about hip-hop, graffiti, and skateboard-ing. I was in love with all of that. And in a strange way, when I was growing up in Naples, because my grandmother kept on bringing this stuff from America, I kept on getting these glimpses of Amer-ican culture. You know, just Ameri-can candy, movies, and I had a skate-board when *nobody* had a skateboard in Naples. I had an American passport too, which was weird because I knew nothing about America. So for me, it was like, 'Wow, this is incredible,' and that is the environment that I grew up in. I mean, photography really entered my life purely by accident. Nobody was taking pictures in my family at that time. When we moved to New York my mom started working in fashion…

Not with a camera.
Not with a camera, no. Back in the 1970s, when we lived in Italy, she was working for Fiorucci. She was work-ing on jeans and jewellery and stuff like that. I think a lot of her friends were in fashion. She knew Donna Jordan and all the models from that period. She knew the whole Andy Warhol crowd. So she had those influences. When she came back to New York, she decid-ed she wanted to be a stylist. So after a few years of us being in New York, she finally started working. I mean, she'll tell you her story better than me. Then she started working for some TV shows and for a jeans brand called EJ Gita-no in New York. And she started doing lots of kids' stuff. And then she met Ste-ve. She was styling and then she got Ste-ve into taking the pictures for the EJ Gitano brand for the catalogues. Steve had just finished film school. He was 24 years old when they met. That was my first exposure to photography, seeing Steve taking pictures for the kids cat-alogues with my mom. They became very successful and then they start-ed an ad agency together where they would design the catalogues. I did odd jobs around the office, like making

'My mom was on her own, so I really grew up in New York, on the streets. I didn't speak English, and I was thrown into street culture.'

photocopies, sweeping the floor… My mom would get me to do graffiti sometimes for the catalogues. It was fun but I was like, 'Man, I don't want *anything* to do with that commercial world.' I just really wanted to be an artist; to paint and make sculptures.

So who first put a camera in your hands?
My dad was coming to New York every once in a while to see us, and he became friends with these two Italian girls who were studying photography. They were going to ICP [International Center of Photography] and had an amazing loft on Broadway. One night, my dad brought me to a dinner party at their place; we were all messing around, taking pictures with their camera, and they said, 'Let's develop the film.' There was a darkroom in the loft, so they developed the film, and started printing the pictures. Something happened in the darkroom that night when I saw the images appear in the developing tray. I was like, 'Wow, this is fucking cool.'

A bit of alchemic magic, being in the darkroom with a couple of older girls. Anything can happen.
[Laughs] Yeah, I can see myself doing this for the rest of my life! But what was cool is that they had a bookshelf of photography books that I had no idea about – Robert Frank, Larry Clark, Bruce Weber, Irving Penn. All of a sudden I was looking at all of these images and I had never thought about photography in that way before. I was 18 and wanted to be a painter. I wanted to go to school for sculpture, my life had to be about art. I was living with my girlfriend and I'd been working on an oil painting for months. All of a sudden I realised that in one night I'd made a photograph, and something just clicked. I became friends with the girls and I asked if I could borrow their camera and take pictures and use their darkroom. They were so sweet and kind. After a couple of weeks, I started crashing on their couch and using the darkroom. For about six months, I pretty much lived in the darkroom, took pictures and studied the photobooks. And as soon as I could afford it, I bought my own camera.

When I got to New York, you were taking photos all the time. I remember you going on road trips, taking acid, and coming back with these documentary photographs.
I was just documenting and learning how to use the camera; photographing friends and whatever I could get myself into. My influences were Diane Arbus, Larry Clark, Robert Frank...

You were looking for extreme situations and road trips, stuff on the fringes.
To be honest with you, because I grew up in New York City, I grew up in extreme situations. So for me, it wasn't that foreign. I grew up in the subway tunnels, writing graffiti and running from the cops. Getting into all sorts of trouble, and being in a situation where I might be in a little scrap was not such a big deal. I knew that's where the excitement was, and that's what I wanted to document, because that's what excited me in the books that I was looking at.

Was there a sort of 'decisive moment' in which you realised that this could work in the context of fashion?
Because of my early years, studying classical painting and being inspired by painters like Michelangelo and going to churches, looking at sculptures, I naturally had a love for the classical nude, anatomy, plasticity and perspective of things. Also the drama and tragedy in the works really moved me. And in some weird way, I would recognise these influences in some of those documentary photographs as well. I'd see that Larry Clark picture of the boy reaching out with his arm, and it reminded me of something from a classical painting. And then as I needed to make some money, I started modelling, which brought me closer to fashion photography, and working with photographers like Bruce Weber and Steven Meisel. Seeing them work was such a huge inspiration, which gave me a new appreciation for fashion photography. These two worlds were joining and meeting. I realised that fashion and art could co-exist. I started taking some fashion pictures to try and make some money. I was taking portfolio pictures for models and for people I knew. I was finding my inspirations by documenting the street and from these road trips I'd go on; I would work on these personal projects making photographs with the intention of making a book, and then when I'd come back I'd end up in a studio shooting fashion. The road trip experiences influenced my fashion images, and it was like a combination of the paintings and the documentary work. Then photography started to change for me because it wasn't so much about the decisive moment and just documenting anymore, it started being more about constructing a photograph, more like painting.

'I think being so close to death gave Davide both the urgency and desire to live life to the fullest, to express himself, and to experience beauty and love.'

Growing up in Naples surrounded by these highly charged religious and classical paintings, was that something that influenced you?
That was a huge influence on me.

There's an emotional intensity to your work, which is pretty unique. And I was curious whether it was connected to that tradition.
When I moved to London in the early 1990s and I was taking pictures there I was only 19 years old. I met David Sims, I met Glen [Luchford], I met Corinne [Day]. What I found really inspiring about them is that they were all making pictures from their life experiences. It really reflected their cultural experience. They were not only taking pictures, but thinking about *what* they were going to take pictures of. So I started asking myself 'What am *I* going to take pictures of? What are my influences?' So, I dove into those classical paintings even more because I was like: this is where I should be drawing my inspiration from because this is my education, my stuff, you know.

Was there a point at which you became aware that the world that you were photographing and inhabiting had become the fashion world?
You know, I was quite young and I had a lot of trouble being a fashion photographer. It was almost like being a sellout. I was constantly fighting with myself between the art work and the fashion work. I was really conflicted by all of this, but I was very successful as a fashion photographer. As much as I fought it off, it kept pulling me back in. And then my brother passed away, and that was a huge life lesson for me.

He was making photographs as well, in a slightly different way.
Yes, he started making photographs as well. My brother and I were very, very close. Not only me and my brother, but me and my brother and my sister, because we grew up in New York together on our own. Our single mom had to work all the time so the three of us are extremely close because we had to take care of each other. My brother started taking pictures because I was taking pictures and he thought it was cool like most younger siblings would.

A way to relate to the world.
Exactly. And we loved each other. So we were inspired by each other. He was inspired by my life and what I was doing. I moved to London, and then when I came back, he was taking pictures. He was pretty young and I thought, 'Wow, this is so great.' Davide saw the world in a very particular way. Growing up with his illness [thalassemia], his life was very different from most other kids. He had a deep emotional relationship with life. I think being so close to death gave him both the urgency and desire to live life to the fullest, to express himself, and to experience beauty and love. That sensitivity and compassion gave his work such depth. His family and friends were a huge catalyst for his work. And as for Vanina, at this point, she hadn't started taking pictures yet. She was going to film school in LA and wanted to act.

Do you think that there's an essential Sorrenti sensibility that crosses across your family?
Yeah, I think there is a Sorrenti sensibility. If you look at all the work, you definitely get a singular feeling.

Could you describe that?
Ouff! [Laughs] I think we're all passionate, emotional individuals but very closely connected. I'm thinking about Gray's pictures as well, because they're the latest manifestation of this thing. There is a lot in her work that reminds me of my work. But in her own way. She's very young, she is so instinctive. The thing about her that I find incredible, besides her natural creative ability to see and compose images, is that she's a big people person. She's super social. She's just infectious, so everyone really falls for her, and I see that coming out in her photographs. That's her own thing. Then there's obviously the influence of the lighting and stuff because she sees my work. She's inspired by the things that I've done. She grew up on my sets.

She's been schooled in the Sorrenti style.
She has. Mary and I raised our kids in a way that we were always together, working and travelling. And Mary and I were young as well, so in a way we all grew up together. My mom takes pictures as well: she approached photography a little differently. She came at it more from a stylistic point of view, I think. She's telling a bit of her own story in her photographs – growing up between New York and Naples, and this back and forth. But her focus is always more about style, it's about the girl and the style.

Is that a distinction that you'd make between form and content? Between style and fashion photography...
That exists all the time together. But it's about what has more weight in a photograph, and I think her photographs tend to lean more on the stylistic. Whereas Gray's pictures, for me, lean more on the relationship between the subject and the photographer. Vanina tends to really explore the idea of being an artist as a woman, and what femininity is.

Finally, what would your advice to a younger photographer be today?
I'd say don't compromise when you're younger because you'll be made to compromise later in life. And at some point later on, you're going to have to learn how to be somebody who can be part of the solution as opposed to being part of the problem.

Vanina self-portrait.
8x10 Polaroid.
Centre Street, New York, 2016.

'Mario lent me his Hasselblad and said, 'You have to take good care of this, it's the Rolls-Royce of cameras."

Vanina Sorrenti in conversation

Neville Wakefield: I was joking with Mario that this is a sort of family group therapy session, where we can all discuss your relationships to each other through the lens of photography. So, you grew up in a family where photography was all around you, cameras were all around you.

Vanina Sorrenti: My mother was a fashion stylist and at the time, in the 1980s, children's fashion was really booming. We were always in the mix modelling for her in shoots and in fashion shows with lots of other kids. It was an extended community, it was lots of fun! That's how we were first introduced to the industry and to photography.

So, your first experience was in front of the camera?

Yes, I was eight years old. Because my mother was working all the time, we would go with her when she was prepping shoots. Mario, Davide and I did a few shoots with her and really enjoyed it, and as more requests were coming in she signed us with Ford [Models] kids agency. We would go to a phone booth and call our agents after school to see if we had any 'go-sees' to go to – that was a way for my mother to keep tabs on us and out of trouble.

Do you remember anything specifically from that era?

Yes, we modelled for this brand called Gitano, one of my mother's clients. She really made it into a cool brand. She always cast the same gang of kids and we all had lots of fun together. You got to skip school and do pictures all day. There was always candy, chips and soda on set, loud music playing. We danced to Cyndi Lauper, Cocteau Twins, Run-D.M.C… Mario would breakdance and we would always try to get up on our toes to mimic Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. It was the 1980s, it was big teased hairdos, hairspray and gel. Leather jackets, layers of fluorescent mesh T-shirts, three-studded belts and baggy jeans, with puffy socks and high tops, and a thousand rubber bracelets with fishnet gloves! My mother and Steve started a creative agency called Sorrenti & Sutton where she was styling and Steve was shooting. They worked as a team on all their projects. If we asked for weekend money, my mother would say, 'Come to the studio and work.' I was about 12 years old and we did odd jobs like filing models' headshots in alphabetical order. We would help with whatever had to be done around the studio.

'We'd go to a phone booth and call our agents after school to see if we had any 'go-sees' to go to – that was a way for my mother to keep tabs on us.'

Was photography something you grew into, rather than there being a moment where you realised you wanted to be the one making the image rather than participating in it?

It was gradual. After high school I started to assist my mother's friends who were stylists and got the chance to see other photographers working. We were on set with Mark Borthwick, Ellen Von Unwerth, Annie Leibowitz, Sheila Metzner, Bruce Weber, Sante [d'Orazio]… They were all incredible learning experiences. After a few years of assisting, I started working on my own as a stylist for *Vogue* and *Marie-Claire,* on photo shoots with my mother. And then, when Davide started shooting, we worked together on some really great editorials for *i-D* and *Surface* magazine. Taking pictures myself was something that evolved over time and quite naturally. In my early twenties I was always taking pictures with a 35mm camera that Steve had given me. I was shooting a lot of black-and-white film, and I had a camera on me all the time. I kept binders of contact sheets. I really loved the idea of them as cinematic sequences. Little films documenting stories of my life, my friends, everyday street life.

Was it the style that drew you in first, or the image?

I think it's many elements that come together – the subject, style and light. I was mostly drawn to what was happening in the moment and capturing it with friends, family and people I connected with on the street. It was definitely more cinematic and reportage at first. I was free from any definitions and just exploring the world around me. Eventually I found a language and style as I gained more knowledge and control of the medium, exploring different films and camera formats and delved into the history of photography. I spent hours at the bookshop A Photographers Place in SoHo, where there were so many books stacked everywhere from floor to ceiling; every nook and cranny of the place was filled with rare, vintage

photography books. From early turn-of-the-century to contemporary: Stieglitz, Bill Brandt, Edward Weston, Man Ray, Julia Margaret Cameron, Berenice Abbott, Diane Arbus, Will McBride, Duane Michals and Lee Friedlander were some of my favourites.

When did you come to see yourself as a photographer?
A defining moment was not long after Davide passed away. *Surface* magazine had asked my mother if I took pictures and if I wanted to be part of their 'Avant Guardian' issue, which featured young unpublished photographers from all across America. They would have exhibitions travelling through San Francisco, New York, LA… And I said, 'Yeah, why not?' So I went through all my binders and started editing and then went into the darkroom and printed a bunch of stuff and sent it in to Riley [Johndonnell, *Surface* magazine co-founder] who loved it. He asked if I wanted to publish the images for the issue, or if I'd like to shoot something in particular for it. It never occurred to me to shoot a fashion story. Up until then, I took personal pictures as an amateur and was more into cinema. I loved foreign films: I would go to Kim's Video [1] and watch a lot of indecent foreign films. I was shooting a lot of Super 8 and 16mm. It was all very personal. But when the 'Avant Guardian' project happened, it all shifted. Mario lent me his Hasselblad and said, 'You have to take really good care of this, it's the Rolls-Royce of cameras.'

Had you used one before?
No, but I knew the basics. He showed me how to load the film and use the different lenses. I went to a few showrooms to pull the fashion – all the young designers like Susan Cianciolo, Bernadette Corporation, Rebecca Danenberg. Then I asked my girlfriends if I could take their portraits: Susan Cianciolo, Jade [Berreau] and many others, and I went over to their apartment. We shot a series of different looks and set-ups.

I remember those pictures.
I couldn't stop shooting. I loved the format. I'd never shot with the square format of the Hasselblad before and it was a whole new experience of framing and composing an image. I think shooting with the Hasselblad played a big part in defining my style and my language. I showed my mother some of the contact sheets and she suggested I start editing as I had so much material. All the images were beautiful moments in their own right but you had to figure out which one fit in the context of the linear story, not just as a body of work.

That's funny, because I was going to ask you how you characterised your approach in relation to that of your brothers or that of your mother.
Sometimes we can have very similar ways of going about it but we digest them very differently. We can be inspired by the same references but we have our own unique way of expressing it. For example, I was influenced and inspired by Balthus at the time; I took those images for *Surface*, which people describe as classical, feminine, Romantic images. But he's a male painter, and the images had this innocence but also a very strong dark taboo undertone. I think that there is so much romanticism in my brother's and mother's work, we just have different ideas of what is romantic. I'm drawn to the grey zone where things aren't so black and white.

What were the films that were influencing you?
I loved Tarkovsky at the time. I was really into his movies, like *Mirror* and *Nostalghia.* Also Miloš Forman's early films, *Loves of a Blonde, The Firemen's Ball…* All of Cassavetes. I was also very influenced by religious Italian Renaissance painters like Botticelli and Da Vinci. I loved the expressions on the subjects faces and their hand gestures.

Something that is really fascinating, looking at your creative evolution as a family, is that it's also a document of New York, a city that runs through your mother's work, with the 1970s and 1980s downtown scene, and then your and Mario's and Davide's vision of it, and then obviously Gray's coming of age in the 2010s and 2020s.
I think that growing up in New York definitely gives you a sensibility that is unique. There's an intensity to the city that vibrates through everything. An amalgamation of cultures. Now that I'm living in Milano, when I go back to New York I see a madness on the streets that I was so used to when I was living there but that I'm no longer confronted with in my everyday life. You were just surrounded by wild energy and constant contradictions. It's fascinating and disturbing at the same time. I find it inspires me and infuses me with ideas. When I'm shooting it's like a ritual where I try to find silence and create a stillness between me and the subject in a seance, very much like a painting. The camera is like an umbilical cord that connects you and records it.

Can you tell me about Davide's work?
Davide's work was very embedded in New York. He photographed and documented everything around him, his friends, family. He pretty much had a camera on him all the time, and was someone that had very strong connections with people, even just walking down the street or in a deli. Everyone knew him in our neighbourhood, people loved him. He had a fantastic sense of humour and such a beautiful way of connecting with people from all walks of life. There's a strong connection and intimacy in the interaction with his subjects and environment. I think it really comes across in his pictures. Davide has an extensive body of work, considering the timeframe from when he started taking pictures. My mother has curated several books and exhibitions on Davide's work and has kept his spirit and lineage very much alive. People have been inspired by Davide's sensibility and legacy since the late 1990s and still today I see so many young people paying tribute to him and his work. For me, Davide is my little brother, and we were very close. His spirit is constant within me.

When you think of Davide today, what is the first image, memory or feeling that comes to mind – and how does it connect to the way you see creativity and legacy within your family?
His laugh and smile is always the first thing that comes to mind when I think of Davide. I am inevitably influenced by my whole family, not only in my work, but in life. We are extremely supportive of each other. Fortunately, we have been able to work in a creative field and industry and all our children continue that lineage. It's so inspiring when I look at the work that they're doing, I'm blown away! I step outside and I look around, I feel very fortunate to have such a strong bond with my family and the unconditional love we share.

That brings this perfectly to my last question: what would your advice be to an emerging photographer?
Make it your own. It's about adapting and finding new ways of being creative and expressing your vision, regardless of the context. When I was younger I had to adjust from working one-on-one with my subjects to orchestrating a team of creatives. With a team, the goal is to fuse your aesthetics and ideas into one vision. Communication is everything.

'I think that there is so much romanticism in my brother's and mother's work, we just have different ideas of what is romantic.'

1. Kim's Video and Music, a legendary video rental store in Manhattan, was the go-to place for hard-to-find, obscure cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Gray self-portrait.
669 Polaroid.
Connecticut, Sunday April 19th, 2020.
M Le magazine du Monde.

‘Someone once told me that they could feel my photos on their skin, and I loved that.’

Gray Sorrenti in conversation

Neville Wakefield: So, you grew up surrounded by photography. Was there an inevitability that you were going to follow the family tradition? Or was there any moment when you felt that you needed to rebel against that? And if so, how?
Gray Sorrenti: I think if there’s a moment of rebellion, it might be now – but I’m good. I’ve been surrounded by art in general my whole life; I was brought up on it by my parents. They would lay out pens and paper and cover our walls, floor to ceiling, with massive pieces of paper, and let me and my brother go crazy – painting and drawing all over the place. So, it started there. I had this idea that I was going to be a painter because I would sit alone in my rooms for hours painting, drawing and collaging. The alone time is where my mind would explode. I was applying for art school while in high school and kind of randomly fell into taking pictures because I was shooting kids my age being bad in New York.

You were just documenting your social surroundings?
Yeah, it was just my surroundings. I remember this one photo that really stuck with me – it was early on, I had just started taking pictures of my friends. We were all crammed into a room, hiding out, passing around a harmonica they’d turned into a pipe, smoke flowing out of it. It was chaotic and kind of ridiculous, but also completely normal – that was New York youth culture at the time. We were raw, messy and inventive.

And only photography could have caught that moment, right?
It was as if the camera became my own eye. I never approached it with seriousness; I was simply tracing the rhythm of my life as it unfolded. The act of documenting felt instinctive, almost effortless. Sometimes it was as simple as laughing, and that laugh felt like the click of a button.

You mentioned just before that your initial ambition was to become a painter. Were you aware of your grandfather’s paintings?
When you’re inside your family, you don’t really think about it – it just feels like one unit. I never looked at my grandfather and thought, ‘Oh, he’s an oil painter.’ It was more like: this is my art, my family is my art. We protect each other and live inside this bubble – a beautiful bubble to create in. It’s not about shutting out the world, but about holding on to something unique that we share.

That’s a nice way of putting it.
Yes. Just going back to my early experiences of shooting my surroundings: maybe this is a little much for the interview, but once in the Catskills a few friends and I were tripping on mushrooms. I had my camera with me, and for some reason I couldn’t take it away from my eye – I wanted to see everything through it. It was like the camera had become my eyeball.

So the camera becomes prosthetic. An extension of the self.
There’s always that barrier between you and whoever’s in front of it. An extension of yourself, yeah, but at the same time it’s one of the most invasive objects. I always think a camera is the one thing between you and your subject. That is kind of the problem with it. If I could just jump over the camera. It can be about intimacy and connection, but it can also carry this weight of disruption, even death…

[Susan] Sontag writes about, literally, ‘shooting.’ [1]
Exactly. I think about that a lot. Honestly, if I could take pictures without a camera, I would. And that’s exactly what I’m trying to explore in the book I’m making.

‘As a kid, I was super wild and all over the place, but when I started taking pictures for fashion it gave me a purpose and a reason to focus.’

Tell me more.
Since 2016, I’ve been taking screenshots during FaceTimes – family, people I’ve loved, breakups, friendships, moments of laughter, people crying, even someone in the bathtub. It’s just fragments of my life. What I love is that there’s no camera in the way, no object separating you and the other person. It feels like capturing something with your own eye – direct, unfiltered, honest.

How would you say your approach to photography relates to the approach of your dad or your grandmother or your aunt?
You know, my dad is extremely technical. I always call him ‘The Shapeshifter’ because he can do anything. Absolutely anything and *everything*. I take pictures based on feeling – I think my dad does too, and my aunt as well, but that’s their

story to tell. Someone once told me they could feel my photos on their skin, and I loved that. I've thought about it ever since, because that's what I want – to feel the subject, the landscape, whatever it is, in its purest form, as close as I can get to it.

Its purest form being its most unmediated form.
Its most unmediated, most vulnerable. Something that you can relate to, but also something that makes you feel uncomfortable because you relate to it so much.

You all grew up in New York City. Three generations effectively grew up in New York City and it's been the backdrop, but it doesn't necessarily appear in your work. Would it be true to say that you're more interested in social architecture rather than the architecture of place?
I like taking pictures of whatever I like. That's the truth of it. Whenever someone tries to put me in a line, I always go off it. And then when I try, I can't figure out how to stay on the line.

That intimacy and vulnerability you've talked about, is that ever at odds with the fashion image, it being loaded with meaning, with style? Are you trying to do something other than that?
Yeah, 100 percent. I really want to make films. I've been working on my first feature-length documentary for nine years now, and I'm finally in the last part of it – the editing. Documentaries just take time.

What's it about?
Dirt bike riders and bike life culture in New York, both men and women.

Was that a case of immersing yourself in that particular community and culture, and then, as you've always done, shooting your surroundings?
Yeah. I met them when I was 17, still in school, and they quickly became some of my closest friends – really, my family. I started riding with them, and I realised they needed someone to help tell their story. So I offered my hands and whatever knowledge I had, and we've been doing it together ever since.

The film feels quite distinct from your work in fashion. Do you consider yourself anti-fashion?
No, I'm not anti-fashion. I love it – I grew up in it. But I grew up in a different time, and what I saw and learned as a kid feels very different from what it is now. Still, I think each to their own. Fashion is a beautiful thing, and it's given me so much. As a kid I was wild, all over the place, but shooting fashion gave me purpose – it gave me focus. I think the art of fashion is beautiful. There are some incredible designers out there, and also incredible young designers who, if given the chance, could really change the industry.

Other than the incredible bond that you all have and the incredible common interest in photography, is there anything you would identify as being unmistakably Sorrenti that connects your family's photographic work?
Yeah, so much. We're all so alike. It's almost disgusting how alike we are.

Does that create problems?
No, it just causes more happiness and more laughter. Maybe the one thing that connects our art most is how sensitive we all are. In every aspect of life, not just within art, but the way that our hearts work, our emotions, the way that we view, understand and perceive the world.

Would you say that's through the common lens of emotion?
For sure. And our hair. We all have silky smooth brown hair.

That's amazing.
Yeah, my dad said something to me once that really stuck. We were driving down the West Side Highway – I think he was dropping me at school, and I had just started taking pictures. He was always giving me little pieces of advice, and who knows how much I was really listening back then, you know? He pointed out the window and asked, 'What do you see?' Me being a teenager, I just shrugged, kept my finger pointed at this little spot on the water, and said, 'I don't know… not sure.' And he said, 'Exactly. You see that? Not everybody sees that. Only you see that. Only I see that.' That moment has stayed with me ever since.

And to my last question – what would your advice be to someone who wanted to become a photographer today, aside from blowing the dust off the current fashion system?
Something that I abide by always, and I even struggle with it – because obviously fashion is a super difficult world to work in – is to really just have fun with what you're doing. Love it. Because if you don't love it and you're not having fun, then it's not worth it. And I have to remind myself of that all the time when I have some difficult client that's telling me it's not good enough. It's yours, let it be you.

Fantastic, that's great advice.

'My dad is extremely technical. I always call him 'The Shapeshifter' because he can do anything. Absolutely anything and *everything*.'

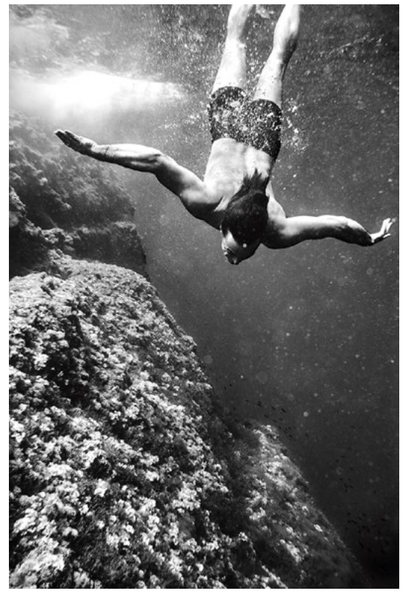
1. In her seminal 1977 book *On Photography*, the American writer and critic Susan Sontag argues that the act of taking photographs is a 'sublimated murder' and compares the camera to a gun. She also notes a cultural shift where 'Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this earnest comedy... When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures.'

Francesca, Davide, Vanina, Steve, Mario and Yoda the cat
photographed by Francesca.
Sorrenti & Sutton studio, New York, 1993.

Lennon photographed by Vanina.
8x10 Polaroid.
Centre Street, New York, 2016.

Vanina photographed by Davide.
Paris métro, 1997.

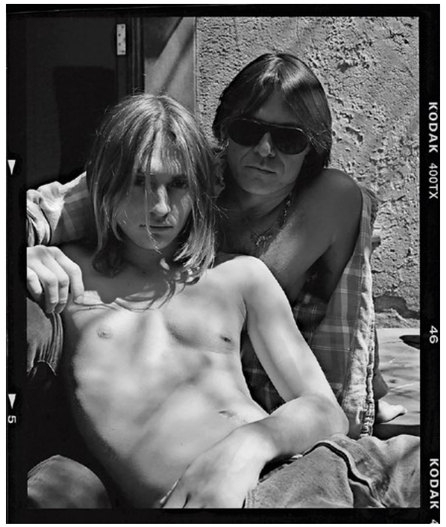
Francesca photographed by Gray.
New York subway, June 2018.
Document Journal, Autumn/Winter 2018,
Miu Miu special story.



Mario photographed by Gray.
Mallorca, August 2018.
From La Mer
'The Edge of the Sea by Sorrenti'
2019 campaign.

Davide photographed by Mario.
Washington DC, 1992.
From Mario's 2001 book 'The Machine'.

Gray self-portrait.
New York, March 2024.
Beyond Noise magazine, issue No.1.



Mario and Arsun
photographed by Gray
The Bronx, 2017.
Let's Panic magazine, issue No.4,
'The Boys I love' story.

Mario and Davide
photographed by Francesca.
Sorrenti & Sutton studio, New York, 1993.

Vanina, Davide, Riccardo and Mario
photographed by Kate Moss.
Menton, France, 1992.

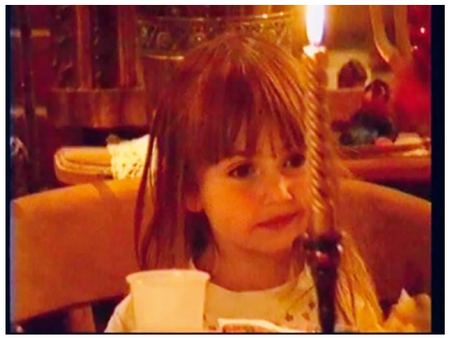
Lennon and Arsun
photographed by Vanina.
8x10 Polaroid.
Centre Street, New York, 2016.

Arsun and Mary
photographed by Vanina.
Tribeca, New York, 1999.
i-D magazine, 'New York Artists' series.

Nadia Lee Cohen

‘Transformation requires bravery, and is usually in response to something. When someone cuts off their hair or a teenager starts dressing like a goth, it’s some sort of rebellion or fuck you to something, and I like that. Britney’s 2007, Natalie Portman’s shaved head or Angelina Jolie’s Billy Bob era. It’s making a statement and, I guess, does the same thing for me as those Essex mums on my first day of school – the bleached blowouts, big boobs and immaculate morning make-up getting out of shiny Audi A3s.’

Interview by David Owen
Photographs by Nadia Lee Cohen



Video stills from the early life of Nadia Lee Cohen.

It has been six years since IDEA published Nadia Lee Cohen's *Women*, a book that had taken her six years to make. Track back those six plus six years and Nadia would still be at London College of Fashion. Hers is a short story but a vivid one, like how the biggest action movies have the shortest screenplays. A lot of work has been made in what seems like an ever decreasing amount of time. In the last six months, Nadia has released the *Julie Bullard* book with Martin Parr, shot Zendaya into space for On, paired Kate Moss with Ray Winstone for *Perfect*, appeared as a giant woman in giant ads for Instagram, photographed and filmed Kyle MacLachlan for Balenciaga, Kim Kardashian for Skims (again), and made and released her own music video for Aphex Twin. And that will only be some of it.

'I remember watching a girl at school with very long, blonde curly hair smear pink lip gloss over the edges of her mouth, with a Lancôme Juicy Tube.'

IDEA got lucky with *Women;* it was expensive to print and Nadia wanted it big and gold and looking more like a major monograph than a first photobook. We had three other hit books that Christmas in 2019 that had all sold out within a week or two of release. *Women* went quietly on sale one Thursday afternoon, backed by a feature on anothermag.com, and sold maybe 20 copies by 5pm. Then Nadia woke up in LA and posted it on her Instagram and... Our office phone makes a 'kerching' sound when a book sells and it rattled away like a Gatling gun. I stayed up until around 3am. All thousand copies of that first edition were sold by 9am the next morning. Angela, my wife and partner in IDEA, bought Nadia a jewellery box from Asprey for Christmas.

In the years that have followed that first release, IDEA has been at pains to keep up with her. We published her second book, *HELLO My Name Is...,* built a cinema in Dover Street Market London, and produced a Japanese pirate version of *Women* as an excuse to take ourselves to Tokyo. The one thing we respond to most of all is talent – and Nadia has a lot of it. She also likes to use it and is generous with it too. We have become close collaborators. I write scripts for her commercials and film projects; Dominik Pollin and Karla Järvinen, who work for IDEA, design her books and zines and even props for her film shoots. We all like making things, and no one more so than Nadia. Everyone who works with the company has worked with her in some capacity and is a friend. Right now, courtesy of the *Julie Bullard* installation, we have a Hollywood special-effects level, full-size waxwork of her in a coffin in our office kitchen. At IDEA, there is literally no getting away from her.

David Owen: Bear in mind that everything you say now is going to be recorded, appear in print, remain on the internet forever and could be used as evidence against you.
Nadia Lee Cohen: Do not speak freely, basically.

Best not to include the barbecue chess story you just told me.
Right. Well, I am going to speak freely, and then we'll chop it up.

Let's start early in the story. When did you first get an idea that you were going to be a creative person and an artist?
I don't know if I knew that was even a thing. I think I just did kid stuff that I wanted to do, what all kids do. During my primary school years, my brother and I would spend a lot of time in the fields surrounding the derelict farm in Essex that dad was trying to make into our house. I'd be outside all day getting covered in dust, mud and pond water. Very boyish. No hairbrushes, no dresses. Just roaming around on this little quad bike. Then I'd come in and sit in front of the TV, quite self-sufficient. I'd make a little cheese sandwich with a packet of crisps and a bit of orange juice and sit cross-legged in front of the TV binging Cartoon Network. Stuff like *Johnny Bravo*, *The Flintstones*, *Tom and Jerry* and then, at 6pm on a Tuesday I'd watch *Ren and Stimpy* with my brother, that was my favourite. I think all that is the basis of why I like what I like now, it is purely the contrast between cartoonish bright colour and the rural British palette of browns and green. Escapism was as basic as looking at the TV… In colour. There was a period where I would continually draw cartoons. The reason this is at all notable is because one era consisted of sketches of women with different coloured hair and really big boobs – a huge *Crime and Punishment* sized ring-binder full of them. I think I probably got the inspiration from playing *Tomb Raider*; Lara Croft had quite big ones. But the reason I'm saying this is because it was a prelude of what was to come and what I would eventually find myself interested in.

This is all inspired by the TV and games. When did it become real?
On my first day of high school, I remember getting ready in a mid-calf-length skirt, Clarks shoes that came with a free watch, two Princess Leia buns on each side of my head, and unplucked eyebrows that were dangerously close together in the middle. We drove to my school on the outskirts of London and pulled up in dad's shit estate car. A fleet of shiny BMWs, Mercedeses and Audi A3s were all lined up next to each other and the next scene still plays in my head now in slow motion. The mums getting out of their cars, revealing bleached blowouts, big boobs and immaculate morning make-up. I'd never… I hadn't seen that many people with blonde hair in such close proximity. My mum doesn't wear make-up, so this was one of the first things I noticed and was interested in. And then there were the daughters, who were mini versions of the mums. I remember watching one girl with very long, blonde curly hair get out; she smeared pink lip gloss over the edges of her 13-year-old mouth with a Lancôme Juicy Tube. I was like, 'Wow, this is it, *this* is glamour.' I didn't understand yet what 'transformation' was, and that it was even an option to have hair a different shade to what you were born with. I remember the heat of embarrassment rising up because I didn't fit the aesthetic and it wasn't something I was familiar with feeling. Up until that very moment it just hadn't mattered, and then immediately, with a gut punch, it mattered more than anything and I had to work on blending in. After that first week, I did some deep-dive research into pioneers of 'the Essex look' via magazines like *Heat, Sugar* and *Bliss*; people like Jordan [Katie Price], Jodie Marsh, Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie. I think even Donatella was inspo. It didn't take long to realise I needed basic essentials: tan and bleach. I got a Saturday job in a local hair salon, 20 quid a week for sweeping up, washing hair and making cups of tea. This funded the tan – which was a tenner – and the girls at the salon would bleach my hair whenever my dark roots came through. So, I think, by way of that long, long story, that was where I first noticed I was interested in 'character' of any kind.

'I won a grant, bought me and my friend a ticket to LA, bought a BMW for $700, and spent eight weeks taking pictures. That trip became *Women*.'

And what about you becoming a photographer, an artist?
See, now *this* is a shit story. It was literally that my friend in college was studying photography. She asked if I would model for her and took some pictures of me wearing some not-great outfits that another girl studying dressmaking had made. This dressmaker told me she was going on to London College of Fashion and that she was doing the 'Fashion Portfolio' course. She explained it was where you do a little bit of everything until you figure out what you're good at. As I didn't know what I wanted to do in general, this strategy sounded good to me. So that's what I did. I was quickly able to eliminate textiles, design and marketing from my various options, as I was terrible at all of them. Styling and photography were all that remained for me. One day the tutor said: 'You need to pick one because you can't do both,' so I picked photography and that was that. I still do not think that I'm a photographer. Didn't then and don't now.

And after LCF, did you just start working? You didn't spend years waitressing or driving a taxi, waiting for your chance?
Well, I'd served my time at the hair salon and I knew I wanted to go to America. The reason being, when I made the decision to pursue photography, I went into the university library and sat on the floor with a pile of books that looked interesting. From what I can remember, these were Larry Sultan, William Eggleston, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, Nan Goldin and Martin Parr. I was drawn to the use of colour and the shared theatrical spotlight cast onto objects and subject matter that I'd previously not paid any attention to. Martin's work stood out because he was doing what *they* were doing, but the main difference was that *his* photos were funny. I loved that combination, and remember the revelation that it was possible to make a strong, unsettling statement *and* be funny without having to utter a word. From that point, I wanted to visit the environment of the American photographers but look at it with an eye like Martin's.

My photography tutor told me about a grant that no one had applied for. It was five grand to do whatever you wanted with. Which, at the time, was a total dream. I applied and won purely on the percentage basis that I was the only applicant. I bought myself and my friend a ticket to LA and spent eight weeks there taking pictures and getting into and out of trouble. We bought a BMW for $700. Only it wasn't actually a BMW, it was a Nissan, with the shell of a BMW on top of it. For some reason, someone had done that.

That's so cool, but what would be even better is if it was just actually a Nissan, and they'd stuck the badges on it.
That would be way better, yes, like a Rolls-Royce fairy. Much cooler. What's funny though, the photos from that trip became *Women,* the book we first did together. That was where it started.

And your fascination with transformation was always there?
Yes. Somebody asked me the other day if I would shoot a singer. And this singer hasn't changed their appearance, like, *ever.* Same hair, same glam, same styling. And I was thinking, 'Why do I not feel inspired by this person?' And I think that what it boils down to is that change usually requires bravery and is in response to something. When someone cuts off their hair or a teenager starts dressing like a goth, it's some sort of rebellion or fuck you to something, and I like that. Britney's 2007, Natalie Portman's shaved head or Angelina Jolie's Billy Bob era. It's making a statement and, I guess, does the same thing for me as when I saw the Essex mums. I like being able to see 'eras' in a person physically or in their art. I think this is true of myself too. I'm in the era of teenage-boy mushroom haircut right now.

And the women in LA were particularly inspiring?
The draw wasn't the people of LA, it was the landscape. The people that I was photographing and became interested in were the *characters* of LA – and they weren't the Beverly Hills type, which I think is probably the closest possible US equivalent to the 'Essex girl'. It was more: 'Look at how that woman at the checkout has done her make-up' or 'Wow, is that man at the bus stop aware he's matched his wig to his shopping bag?' I've realised now that the common thread is when there is *thought* behind an appearance. Obviously everyone has this, but some just have it more than others and sometimes the genius isn't even on purpose. It's the theatrics of dressing up that I'm interested in, and the ability to decorate.

If you don't necessarily consider yourself a photographer, you probably don't think of yourself as a fashion photographer either.
Nope.

But you do it. How much do you do of what people offer you? Not much?
I do my bit! Fashion editorial can be nice because you mostly get to do what you want. The downside is you end up spending a load of money because the good magazines don't have any. I do tend to say no if somebody dictates what I can and can't do. For example, the other day, I got offered an editorial with an artist that I really wanted to work with but the magazine sent a note along the lines of: 'feel free' but then followed it quickly with a 'but please no nudity, smoking, aggression, or any reference to religion or politics.' I probably wasn't planning on doing any one of those things but at that point I can already tell that it's unlikely this is going to be smooth sailing, so I bowed out.

And in fashion, how much motivation do you take from the clothes?
I really like clothes! I am interested in fashion. It's that form of decoration I was talking about earlier. But in the same way that I am also interested in the way Adam Sandler or Shia LaBeouf dresses because it has that sort of weird rebellious aggression behind it. I think I just like to pay attention to intent. Whether it's looking like that, or the people that go to Cannes at the time of the festival and wander around the streets in a ball gown hoping to get noticed. I like looking at that more than the actual red carpet. I love fashion shows and the extravagance that goes alongside anything in fashion. Someone told me the other day that an intern spent a week testing out every scone in London because Anna Wintour was coming to town and they wanted to make sure they had the right one for her. Anna probably didn't even eat it when she eventually arrived but I love the visual of some poor intern sick and backed-up on scones. I find all that amusing, and not in a way that I'm taking the piss. I like being around the theatrics and drama of seemingly trivial situations; I guess it's the same enjoyment of watching a sitcom.

I always thought you were a good fit for Demna's Balenciaga, because he makes clothes which reference 'types'; clothes that themselves have a social meaning. Of what they mean. He makes clothes that suggest the character who wears it.
Yes and it often references something quite brutal and that's interesting to me.

Well, it does seem to suit you, because you work within fashion photography in an almost exclusively narrative, character-driven style which is completely different from the classic approach to fashion photography.
I like when I can see where someone's inspirations have come from real life.

The predominant model is for clothes – dresses, skirts, whatever – that look nice and make people feel like they're more attractive.
And I like those too.

Shot against white in studios with models semi-leaping in front of a wind machine.
Well, when I was in my teens, that's all I saw. So when I realised that photographers like Martin, Larry or Nan occasionally did fashion shoots and brought their real-life experience into the narrative, that's when fashion photography became exciting and I knew I wanted to do something similar. It's having a genuine anthropological interest in existing and in real life. I think I owe it to Martin that I can now go anywhere and have a good time, because I like to watch what people do, pay attention to what they're wearing or the objects they chose to put in their house. Because of this, every situation and everything becomes interesting, and I really rarely feel boredom. I like walking around my parents' village when it's early evening in winter and people have the lights on and the curtains open – like an Essex *Rear Window.*

That is a holiday for me – either in LA or Tokyo – seeing how people live.
And it's the best when you're surprised by your own judgment of a person. Like what I'd expect them to do or be interested in and then I get it entirely wrong. Like the chess barbecue story I told you earlier.

Yeah, let's not get into that. Tell me how you manage the balance between you being in the pictures and you being the artist.
I think the only difference is that I won't and can't say no to myself. I usually work with artists that are already very established in their careers and generally have a team of naysayers around them in order to protect them. Which is, of course, fair enough, as they are successful at whatever it is that they do. It's rare to work with someone like Kim [Kardashian], who has this unwaveringly confident trust. That kind of relationship is really important and why I work with a lot of the same artists more than once. Brands can have this too, Balenciaga being one of them. So, really, the main benefit of self-portraiture is that I'm not going to have some sort of bipolar argument with myself about what I should and shouldn't do. I push myself to do things that I know somebody else will have an issue with because they have a career to protect.

There is a future book project, isn't there? Where you…
…do the things that people said no to.

Do fashion brands come to you and want you, the model and entity that you are, as much as you the photographer?
It varies, but if someone has come wanting more than one element and I've gone back preferring to do one aspect over another then sometimes the job can go away. I guess that answers it.

Do you care that, within the world of fashion photography, you are effectively missing out on or not being offered most of the main work because you would want to do it your way? You can't just get offered whatever brand, and it's on a balcony with curtains blowing in the wind, and it's all about chiffon. Do you know what I mean?
Not really, I'm quite happy doing something else. But that makes it even more special when someone *does* want me, and gives me a chance to either do it entirely my way or show them that I can adapt and do it in a way that still respects their identity. It would be so arrogant not to understand that brands have spent decades developing themselves and it is not my destiny to come in all Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen[1] and try to change that.

You are also busy with books, your art career, music videos, commercials… It's not like you *have* to shoot fashion.
What I've come to realise is that I like everything to be a chapter, its own thing. With *Julie Bullard*, or the Japanese version of *Women,* whatever I'm doing with [Jeffrey] Deitch, or when I worked with you on *Perfect* with Kate Moss and Ray Winstone, and Karla [Järvinen of IDEA] designed it. These were episodes, chapters or eras. I like making things that I hope are going to define and live past me. No matter what medium.

What are the downsides to life, working

'The benefit of self-portraiture is that I can push myself to do things I know somebody else will have an issue with because they have a career to protect.'

'More than the actual red carpet, I like looking at the people who go to Cannes and wander around the streets in a ball gown hoping to get noticed.'

like you do? I know you get anxious being on LA time, and waking up to hundreds of emails... And social media must bring its share of problems.
I like this negative question. Yes, I wake up in the morning, everyone's finished their day, I'm asking agents to do things, or you're at home watching a movie, and no one gives a shit. By living in LA I have literally *chosen* to live in the past. Going to Japan is like living in the future, I was so ahead there. The social media stuff is the same for everyone, and the rhetoric is probably boring to talk about. It's generally fine, but the more people know *of* you, the more they think they know *you* personally and also hold this incredible key of knowledge to your background, intentions and life choices.

Right.
I can tell you something that people assume is a downside but it's not.

Yes, let's have that.
Yesterday, I was at that barbecue, right?

Famously, yes.
I went into the house, in a quiet room, and I was sending an email. I was trying to, you know, craft the email properly and whatever, and a girl came in, she was like, 'Oh, babe, are you alright? I feel so sorry for you.' I said, 'What do you mean?' She said, 'You're at a fucking party babes! You should be having fun, and instead you're in this room writing this email, what are you doing?' I decided to reply honestly and told her that I was fine and that I actually enjoyed doing this. And she was like, 'What do you mean?' And I explained, 'I genuinely really like what I'm doing and am happy writing this email.' It was as much of a revelation to her as it was for me to actually think about this and say it out loud.

It's harder to be on holiday than it is to be working?
No, it's not that I don't like being on holiday, I just wouldn't choose to sit on a beach and stare at the sea, contemplating, alone. I like being busy, being around my friends, chatting, watching things or people and gathering inspiration. I love a party... I just need to be able to write an email :)

I think you've got it pretty good because you have made these opportunities on your own terms and now clients and brands and collaborators want you for the talent and ideas that you have. I can't think of many other examples where someone gets to go to work on the basis of someone saying, 'Here's the money, what do you actually want to do today?'
I do feel extremely lucky if that happens. It isn't something I take for granted. I hope it's because I actually care about whatever it is that I'm working on and want it to be the best it can possibly be. And you know this about me more than anyone, that when I'm doing a project, I really can't work on anything else. I can't do multiple things. I have to get one thing done perfectly before I can move on to anything else, which is often an annoying hindrance, but I think it means that most things don't go unfinished. I think it's also true of the work I do commercially. I think if you're truly passionate about anything... This sounds like I'm giving, like, a fucking speech to kids or something…

It does! Is this interview the kind of thing you would have read yourself when you were in college?
No. I wouldn't have bought something as sophisticated as *System*, I would have bought something tackier.

***Adhesive Weekly*?**

1. Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen is a British interior designer and television personality, best known for his flamboyant style, larger-than-life persona, and his role – between 1996 and 2004 – as a presenter on *Changing Rooms*, the BBC's popular do-it-yourself home improvement series. When asked to explain his approach to redecorating a room, which rarely matched what the show's homeowners had asked for, Llewelyn-Bowen bluntly replied, 'I don't give people the rooms they want... I give people the rooms they deserve.'

Video stills from the early life of Nadia Lee Cohen.

déjà vu

Nadia Lee Cohen wears looks from the 54th Balenciaga couture collection. The last designed by Demna.

J'ai couru, couru, couru. J'avais oublié ce que ça faisait.

Peut-être que lorsque j'arrêterai, je me sentirai mieux.

Mais je serai toujours à la même distance de lui.

Il n'y a rien de moins romantique.

Et elle se demandait parfois, à propos des films en noir et blanc,
s'ils faisaient beaucoup d'efforts pour assortir les rideaux.

Je ne pense pas qu'ils l'aient fait.

Si le monde devenait incognito.

Cela n'a pas d'importance aujourd'hui et cela aura encore moins d'importance demain.

Je pense que la couleur est une perception, pas une propriété.
Les objets ont des propriétés qui déterminent les longueurs d'onde de la lumière qu'ils réfléchissent. La voiture n'est pas plus rouge que bleue.

Toute la saison de films français diffusée sans sous-titres,
regardée par moi avec des lunettes de soleil. Personne n'a rien vu.

Elle pouvait sentir que tout le monde ne la regardait pas.

Hair: Jake Gallagher at The Only. Make-up: Mona Leanne at The Wall Group. Set designer: Manon Everhard. Production: Lovecraft. Production coordination: Théo Barbé. On-set photographer: Charlie Denis. Photography assistants: Pierre Sénéchal, Sebastien Issartelle. Digitech: Florent-Sinan Brunel. Make-up assistant: Celine Yang. Set designer assistant: Sassa Ann Van Wyk.

Vuja dé

Phil Bicker

‘Looking back now, it’s difficult to imagine how drastically Instagram’s candy-coloured, choreographed aesthetic, and enablement of direct-to-audience content changed the cultural landscape. Its original form feels so innocent and limited in comparison to the complexity of today’s social media landscape.’

Interview by Shonagh Marshall

After a decade, Phil Bicker recently left his role at Instagram. As the communications manager creative editor, he had been part of the team that runs @instagram, the app’s official Instagram account, shaping its editorial voice. With over 690 million followers, it’s the app’s most followed account, and was created to build community, filter the billions of images and videos shared on the app, and bring a curated, creative content experience to a broader global audience.

Phil’s work at @instagram has been intentionally focused on discovery. He has consistently used his position to bring to the surface and collaborate with emerging creatives. This is not unlike the work he did in the early 1990s when he was art director at *The Face*, where he championed the work of a new generation of photographers who would go on to become some of the most influential image makers of the 20th and 21st centuries. He was the first to commission Corinne Day, David Sims and Glen Luchford. Others like Nigel Shafran, Juergen Teller and Stéphane Sednaoui, he nurtured and collaborated with regularly in the embryonic stages of their development. The photographs they produced came to define a generation through their documentary approach to fashion photography, depicting England’s disenchanted youth with Kate Moss as their poster girl. In 1993, Kate, shot by David Sims, was plastered on billboards across the world as the face of Calvin Klein underwear. What Phil had begun as a rejection of the era’s supermodels (prim, athletic bodies and 1980s glamour) and an embrace of what he saw happening around him in real life, had hit the mainstream.

The career trajectory of these particular photographers came to map out an editorial approach still followed in fashion today: create images that are unapologetically unique, share them with your community, get them published in an independent magazine, then wait for the campaign requests to come in. With Instagram, that ecosystem has been further enhanced, being used as a platform for all photographers, both emerging and established, to share their work with an international audience.

Until May this year, Phil sat right at the beginning of this process, collaborating with creatives for @instagram before they had been featured anywhere else; when they were still making content for themselves, their close friends and their quickly expanding communities. Until relatively recently, the only way to get noticed was through collaboration with magazines and brands. Today, people can put their work out there and gain huge followings without any official endorsement from the system.

‘I felt going into Instagram in a curatorial role would be the natural extension to my previous work as art director for magazines like *The Face*.’

In addition to *The Face* and his tenure at Instagram, Phil’s career has been expansive. He was creative director at *The FADER, Vogue Hommes International Mode* and Magnum Photos, worked on campaigns for Calvin Klein, Stüssy and Yohji Yamamoto, and was a senior photo editor at *Time* magazine. It is this gamut of experience that enabled him to go to Instagram and make sense of the wildly disparate content he encountered. Fashion has, in recent years, begun to commission more engaging content for Instagram’s ever-evolving format from a new generation of image makers, much like how the industry adopted the grit and grunge of the 1990s photography commissioned by Phil for the pages of *The Face*. The one thing that these two era-defining moments have in common? Phil. Right there, at the centre of it all.

Shonagh Marshall: What was Instagram like as a company when you first joined in 2015?

Phil Bicker: Very small. The staff for the whole company was tiny – about 300 people in total. On our community team there were literally only a handful of people working directly on shaping content for @instagram, and we were involved in the curatorial aspects of the account. I was hired by Pamela Chen and her team was a disparate band of creatives with distinctive perspectives and unexpected backgrounds, including photojournalist Teru Kuwayama – who had covered conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kashmir – and photographer and curator Andrew Owen. We were there to work on a community-first strategy. Pamela herself had come from *National Geographic*, where she had launched @natgeo which would become the biggest Instagram account at the time. People like David Guttenfelder and a lot of other great photographers were getting eyes on their work because of it. My background hadn’t been a straight-line trajectory. Across my work as a creative director for independent magazines and mainstream

fashion campaigns, or as a photo editor in the news and documentary space, I'd encountered a wide range of creatives and driven some unconventional creative paths. So for me to go into Instagram in a curatorial role at that time was something I felt would be a natural extension. Joining the team was like joining the Avengers. It was exciting and I was totally up for the challenge but I wasn't sure exactly what to expect.

What images did you encounter when you got there? What was the visual landscape like?
It was still exclusively a square-image format, photo-sharing app. Looking back now, it's difficult to imagine how drastically its candy-coloured, choreographed aesthetic, and enablement of direct-to-audience content changed the cultural landscape. Its original form feels so innocent and limited in comparison to the complexity of today's Instagram and the broader social media landscape. I'd come directly from working at Magnum Photos and *Time* magazine, with images from the wire; war photography that was really gritty. Suddenly I was in a world of cats and cupcakes – that was the language of Instagram. It was a positive space, but Instagram also ushered in a photographic aesthetic that was seen by some, particularly those working in legacy media, as superficial and somehow inferior. The Instagram app signalled a new frontier for photography. Professional photographers were conflicted at the time, they saw opportunity in directly reaching an audience themselves, but there were concerns that the app's filters, aesthetic and the proliferation and explosion of UGC [user-generated content] would somehow contribute to or result in the death of the traditional or established photography ecosystem that sustained them.

Were people creating a new visual language for the format?
Yes. Every project I worked on, I'd be like, 'Oh my God, hold on, let me reconnect my brain.' I'd look at a load of images of pets, and then immediately up next I'm looking at work from someone in South America who's doing a hybrid between Instagram's new aesthetic and documentary photography. The subject matter and the ways the Instagram community were approaching things was very different. I had to ask, 'Can I take the next step to understand what this is?' My judgment was informed by the fact that I'd experienced a lot of things and pulled from a lot of different creative content sources in the past, so I wasn't looking at the images one-dimensionally or from a single point of view. I was trying to find the nuances and determine what was good and what was bad. Someone's making cupcakes, but who's the *best* person making cupcakes? There's definitely an art to that decision-making process, and a lot of it is intuitive. Most of it was photography at that point, there was very little video.

You held the title of communications manager creative editor at Instagram from 2018 until May this year. Tell me more about that role.
Pamela referred to me as Instagram's first photo editor. There were similarities to the work I'd previously done as a photo editor, curator and art director in the magazine space, but at Instagram it felt I was doing all of these jobs simultaneously. It was everything everywhere all at once. There was no discernible rhythm to the content I was exposed to. I found myself shifting between skill sets unconsciously, as I worked through these divergent projects on a case-by-case basis, in an effort to find appropriate creative solutions. Initially my role was to establish the visual voice for international accounts in different regions like Japan, Brazil and Germany. Then from 2018, I transitioned to the main global @instagram account. There I edited and curated content for regular series, like the user-generated content #WHP (weekend hashtag project) and the regular pet account series #WeeklyFluff. I also developed new series ideas and formats including themed weekly creative curations for #ThisWeekOnInstagram, and a weekly location-based series #HelloFrom which featured surprising travel destination imagery from around the world.

In 2020, to start the year, I conceived and curated #2020Vision, a series of 20 up-and-coming culturally relevant people to watch out for in the year ahead. The project included creatives working across a broad range of disciplines: advocacy, art, comedy, music, dance, fashion and more. There was even an astronaut. In the early stages most of the work was curatorial, surfacing and editing content to represent creative accounts. The process ultimately became more focused on making original content in collaboration with the creators we featured.

How do you discover people? When you were at *The Face* or other magazines, people were coming to you with their book, but now that the tables have turned, I presume you are proactively searching for people. Are you scrolling? Are you looking at hashtags? I am a little overwhelmed thinking about it.
People weren't literally knocking on our door at Instagram as they were when I had worked at independent magazines, but they were able, at least in the early days, to have their work found by @instagram by using hashtags that corresponded to regular series. When I started, we'd also look at the accounts we already knew were strong, including accounts we'd featured, and then look at the accounts they were following. That would often lead to other people we considered feature-worthy. Now it's a little bit more nuanced and also more expansive. We use Explore and other tools, but there's still a lot of time-consuming labour and, yes, there's a lot of scrolling too. You're looking through literally hundreds of thousands of things, you can spend weeks scrolling and only come up with half a dozen accounts that are strong enough to share. Say it's #OutfitOfTheDay: the clothes are interesting, but then it's also the way the video is being made or edited. There are multiple things the creator is doing that show not only their style, but their interests and their personality through self-expression.

Give me an example of someone you found.
One of the recent finds was Urmila: @ursk8kid, a 19-year-old Indian female skateboarder. Her account just turned up on my Explore. She is so incredible. Beyond her obvious skateboarding prowess she has an innate sense of style, a genuine relatability and such a positive energy. I DM'd her and asked, 'Would you be interested in doing an interview and making a reel?' In this case we were collaborating with a creator and they were choosing to make something new that we could feature. We had a Zoom call and she was amazing, and she made an original Reel for us to feature. The difference at Instagram from a lot of other work I had done is that I had agency not only in the creative direction and execution, but in the choices of who and what I featured. That's a huge responsibility and a huge challenge, and one that I really wanted to respond to. I'm thinking of the theme, I'm picking the people to feature and then I'm working on the edit and deciding which images I'm going to use. I feel I brought a lot of people to the account that might not have ever had the opportunity to land on there.

I am sure for many people it transformed their lives being featured on @instagram.
Yeah, but it's the same as with those photographers back in the day at *The Face* or at *The FADER*. We're not 'discovering' them, we're just platforming them. We're giving them a place to showcase their work. I never say I 'discovered' anybody. I would say that I was there and I gave them the opportunity to reach a bigger audience or to express themselves in the way they wanted to, and that's important in its own way, as not everyone thinks like that. You need to have a vision that's open-minded enough to adopt and encourage things that are not necessarily fully formed or for that matter even your personal taste. My natural instinct is to see something and go, 'Oh my God, what is that?', but also to ask, 'Is that interesting or not?'

I have been wondering if Instagram is in fact the world's largest magazine. Every person has a chance to share their vision and what interests them, each account is like a column or story according to them. This could be fashion, food, art, something else cultural, or it could just be pictures of their kids or their pet.
It is, but it's more than that, because it's more connected than any magazine could be. It can get into everybody's home, it can get on everybody's phone; you can make something omnipresent. The @instagram account can take something really niche and bring it to 690 million followers. In the 1980s and 1990s people would pick up *The Face* because they wanted to discover something new. They wanted to find out what was interesting at the time, from a source that had integrity. @instagram has the opportunity to do that one million fold, or six hundred million fold.

How is Instagram as a format different to that of a magazine?
Instagram is not a curated end product like a magazine is – it's a point of discovery, a jumping-off point. It's like

'I'd come from working at Magnum Photos and *Time* magazine, with gritty war photography. Suddenly I was in a world of cats and cupcakes.'

'Instagram is more connected than any magazine. The @instagram account can take something really niche and bring it to 694 million followers.'

going to the magazine store. You decide which issue or publication you're going to pick up, but Instagram is not the magazine itself.

What was your strategy to bring an editorial voice to @instagram?
With millions of images on the platform there needed to be some intentionality in where we were steering the @instagram curation, but like the early days of *The Face* we weren't looking for a homogeneous outcome. There was still room for nuance, different perspectives and continual evolution. Although there was lighter #WeeklyFluff pet content and unexpected UGC creative back then. There was also a lot of documentary photography. For example, the first project I worked on was with @krisannejohnson, an American photojournalist. Some of the things that fundamentally changed @instagram were things I didn't necessarily work on, for example featuring public figures, like Kim Kardashian and Lady Gaga. That is the language that built and built on itself. Gradually, the format of the app changed, it went from square photos to other formats, to videos, DMs, Stories, then Reels. It was always the product that was driving the change of format. Everything that Instagram has done to evolve has been for relevance. And when the product changed and new things were introduced, it had a lot of impact on the way people put content together and leveraged the platform in different ways. From this pressure to present a perfect aesthetic, it went much more lo-fi. You've got TikTok, Snapchat, and all these other apps influencing the way that Instagram had to grow. It couldn't just stay as a square photo, candy-coloured land, or it would've been dead by now.

A through line in your work seems to be that you are responding to the times. Is this a conscious approach?
My interests and contribution to Instagram were quite particular to picking up on things I'd done in the past and applying that mentality to what I was doing there. It wasn't the same kind of content or format, but I could still bring the same mindset. For example, the idea of what Kate Moss represented in 1990, when I commissioned her breakout cover story for *The Face* shot by Corinne Day. It was the time of the supermodel. They were inaccessible and there was a pressure to be perfect. They were shot in ways where they were put on a pedestal, shot in very heroic ways. There was no sense of who they really were on a human level. You could recognise them, 'That's Tatiana, that's Naomi, that's Linda.' But you didn't ever see anybody on the street looking like that. That look didn't exist. Not in the world I lived in, at least. *The Face* was a British, youth-oriented magazine that fundamentally focused on music, culture and style rather than fashion. Kate represented that demographic. She was 16 years old. She was natural. She was short: five foot seven. That story brought personality and relatability to the fashion model, which hadn't happened since the 1960s with someone like Twiggy. With Kate it was like a breath of fresh air. There she was, smiling, laughing, giggling, wearing her own clothes – well, a lot of people thought they were her own clothes, but they were actually stylist Melanie Ward's and Corinne Day's second-hand stuff and Birkenstocks.

It was the same with all the photographers I worked with: David Sims, Nigel Shafran, Corinne. They're all grouped together when people look back, but the reason that I worked with them was because they all had – like others I gave early commissions to, including Juergen Teller and Stéphane Sednaoui – a very individual, unique and authentic perspective on the world. I felt they were bringing something distinctive to the table. The mainstream fashion industry initially resisted rather than embraced the moment. They didn't understand it. They felt threatened and wanted to quash it. But then Margiela and other designers were doing similar things with fashion: deconstructing clothes, creating stuff that looked almost vintage. Then came grunge music and the whole thing was like a groundswell. There was a British *Vogue* cover, which I remember distinctly, of Linda Evangelista shot by Nick Knight with ring flash, like Helmut Newton used to use. The tagline said, 'Glamour is Back.' This riposte failed to quell the momentum of a youthful rebellion and ultimately the industry was forced to welcome in the new protagonists. Soon the emerging generation of stylists and photographers who had up to this point developed and showcased their own personal vision on the margins, and through the pages of independent magazines like *The Face*, found themselves working for fashion's most prestigious editorial and advertising clients. Their work was relatable, and that's something that I was able to identify and apply when it came to Instagram years later.

Do you think there is a similarity in how brands and mainstream media are embracing the creatives you feature on @instagram? In a similar way to how they commissioned the photographers you championed in the 1990s soon after they appeared in *The Face*?
I'm sure it happens, but it's a little more nuanced and difficult to trace a direct lineage nowadays. In 2020, Calvin Klein did a CK One advert featuring young activists, including Quannah Chasing-Horse, @quannah.rose, an indigenous model who we'd featured on @instagram. At the time, she and a lot of other advocates and activists were using their voice for societal change, and her presence on social media would have helped build her cultural capital and likely led to her being recognised by Calvin. It's natural that with both public figures and regular users on the platform, @instagram would feature content from both segments and tap into audience engagement and brand building aspects, too. My own interests at both ends of this scale – and also at their intersection – have always been more based in the idea of discovery: emerging voices, individual self-expression, representation and/or community building. This editorial ethos very much aligns with that of *The FADER,* where I worked as creative director between 2004 and 2010, which gave many established artists like M.I.A., The White Stripes, Kanye, Nicki Minaj and Drake their first covers when they were relative unknowns. At @instagram, whether they are a musician (@flowerovlove), an actor (@lizethselene), or advocate like Quannah, for me a subject's style and attitude always subconsciously come into play.

The fashion industry was slow to embrace social media and an online approach in general. Why?
They weren't the only ones. Legacy print media, publications like *Time*, also didn't adapt quickly enough and lost advantage. It's like when Kodak didn't embrace digital photography. There's this idea that you're so big that you can survive anything. But the truth of it is: if you don't change with the times and adapt, you miss opportunities to grow and remain relevant. It's likely to be the same with AI, which is so expansive. We have to evolve.

Fashion has in some respects embraced these new forms of content being made on social media. Do you think there is more openness to what fashion means today as a result?
Some of the creators that I've platformed on @instagram are not purely fashion creators. There's a bridge with other interests, and that's what makes them distinctive. Someone might be a fashion creator who is a dancer, or uses comedy, or is into sports. They might be multi-hyphenate, use video edits, dance, and be interested in vintage clothing, but the primary reason to feature them is because they're uniquely themselves and they're bringing something that's distinctive to the table. The thing to recognise is that today's youth culture is different. Whereas in the days of *The Face* and before, it was a tribal thing. If you liked punk music, you dressed a certain way; you knew what you were and you dressed accordingly. Nowadays, youth culture is less dictated. Music streaming services have played a major role in how we consume music too, there's all these Reels and TikTok videos that go viral. The music for those videos can be some nostalgic thing from 20 or 30 years ago, or it could be something from right now. Kids today, they're not conditioned by the idea that they can only like a particular type of music, they can only like a particular style of clothing. Take #OutfitOfTheDay on Instagram or TikTok. It's someone going through their wardrobe, but they're not a punk all the way through, they're not simply goth or emo, they've got different things going on. It is the same with music, you don't listen to a whole album, you might take your favourite track from here and there and make a playlist, and that playlist can go from rock and roll, to hip-hop, to doo-wop, to whatever.

It seems that through Instagram, people are able to define fashion or style on their own terms, making it more cross-cultural than ever before.
It dissolves the boundaries for people. They don't need to be restricted in terms of being only in fashion, they can branch out. But when it comes to the commercial world, there are similar connections and the mainstream has leveraged that – like Pharrell at Louis Vuitton. There are those crossovers that are really omnipresent in the world of the mainstream as well. All the mainstream magazines take actors or musicians and they style

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'You look through hundreds of thousands of things, you can spend weeks scrolling and only come up with six accounts that are strong enough to share.'

them to the heavens with all the credits they need for the advertisers. But that's a very different thing. My interest is still in the idea of the individual-self expression and uniqueness. Style rather than fashion.

What creators did you collaborate with at @instagam that felt true to themselves and relevant?
@a1jewel0310. She creates make-up art and also designs fashion. These designs are always evolving. Initially I saw some painted make-up looks she made based on her Chinese heritage; she is from the Kam ethnic group. Then a year later, her work had evolved to intricate, elaborate sculptural paper masks. Her work is very visual, it's graphic, unusual and creative. She's got a distinctive look and aesthetic and the way she shoots stuff outside of her make-up work is distinctive too. There might be some selfie style images of her shot on the street, but the way she presents the images is interesting. It's in two panels cut vertically or horizontally and there's a sequence in a carousel. If you look at her profile grid, it's cohesive and it just feels like her thing. There's variety in it, it's quite considered even when it feels random, and the images are raw and accessible. They're not – even when they're straight portraits of her with the make-up – how it would look if it was photographed by a beauty photographer with all the right studio lighting. There's something very organic about it. Another person is @ines.alpha who does 3D digital make-up. I first featured these creators some time ago, and also collaborated with them again for a beauty event which extended @instagram to IRL. These are things that I wouldn't have seen in the 1990s, there was nothing quite like that going on back then – Leigh Bowery's emergence from the London club scene and his extraordinary art and life being a slightly different but notable exception.

Reels have expanded the creative scope for self-expression, naturally paving the way for a more expansive, multi-hyphenate approach. More recently, I've been drawn to and collaborated with more relatable Reels creators whose distinctive styles seamlessly blend fashion sensibility, personality and aesthetic. Examples include @ava_ark's vintage looks paired with unfussy, short snappy video edits; @kittylever's whimsical 'be your own muse' vignettes, and @jaclynsth's student lifestyle cooking content – all of which integrate fashion to varying degrees, but in innovative, non-traditional ways. These accounts, and others that cross-pollinate style with other interests like sport or music, signal a breaking down of boundaries and reflect a more authentic and accessible approach to fashion, which, in its own way, is as refreshingly raw, natural, and honest as the early work of the photographers I first worked with at *The Face*.

All of these creators are making all parts of the images, from taking the photographs, making the films, styling, sometimes making clothes and props. This is a new form of creativity in fashion that sits apart from the rigid idea of 'fashion photography'. In terms of fashion photography in a more traditional sense, who do you think is using Instagram in an interesting way?
Instagram's full of photographers and some of them have disjointed accounts. They're full of tear sheets, they use it almost like it's their website. But there are people like Maya, @stolenbesos. She just sets out a mood which shows you where she's coming from in terms of photography. It just gives a vibe. I think that's interesting. When people understand what Instagram is, they understand how to put their work out there. There are other photographers, like Jack Davison, who's more established in the fashion world. When you look at his website and then you look at his Instagram account, it makes sense. It's him. You can see his aesthetic, it's considered. So you can be on the margins like @stolenbesos, or you can be someone who's started in an art space, or, like Jack Davison, as a documentary or portrait photographer, and ended up crossing into the world of high fashion. Jack is more in the traditional lineage of what you expect of great photography, echoing the innovative, exploratory aesthetic of colour pioneers like Saul Leiter, and @stolenbesos is somewhere closer to what Juergen and Corinne were doing in the 1990s. A bit more lo-fi, a little less perfect.

Then there's image makers working at the intersection of photography and AI, like @salometrz, who is really interesting. When it comes to AI, there's also Simon Foxton who has moved into working in that visual space. Simon was a stylist at *i-D* back when I was at *The Face*. His Instagram account @simonfoxton is amazing. It's all AI imagery, fabrications of nostalgia, conceptual takes on the things that have always informed his work like youth culture and gay male imagery. They're on the edge of being believable, but they're fantastical. That work is super interesting to me, because it's not photography. It's informed by photography and it fuels photography, but it's AI.

Do you think being a content creator today is equivalent to being a fashion photographer in decades past? I don't know if there is a direct like-for-like comparison to be drawn between being a content creator today and being a fashion photographer. That feels too limiting. The creator economy is far broader and connects to a multitude of disciplines, and the lines are continually blurring and expanding all the time.

'An account like @stolenbesos is somewhere closer to what Juergen and Corinne were doing in the 1990s. A bit more lo-fi, a little less perfect.'

There are people who have had successful careers as a result of social media, people who may not have broken through in the traditional media landscape. How do you think Instagram has changed the way people are able to build their brand?
There are a lot of brands that were made by using Instagram in different ways. On the app, creators are able to start their journey on the margins, set out their stall and build as independents without compromising their vision, whether that's in fashion, as a hair or make-up artist, designer, stylist, photographer or model – like those I have already mentioned, or others like @kaprisun_kid, @tomikono_wig and @mayaventour, or in other creative fields. Instagram enables direct-to-audience connection, not only in a passive sense as a delivery tool for content visibility but via DMs as an active conduit for creative collaboration, community building and business opportunity. Instagram has enabled influencers to build cultural capital. I feel like a brand like Skims would not exist if it wasn't for Instagram. But on a much more interesting level for me are the small creators and brands. There's somebody I featured, her name is Shy, @sl33zyskiz. She just turned 21, but she was 18 or 19 when we featured her. I featured her because I just loved the way she dressed. She had great style. Japanese street style-influenced, her hair was amazing, she wore baggy jeans and belts and had lots of little tattoos. Then a year or two later, because I was following her, I saw she was putting out a clothing line. It was through Instagram, and she would direct you to a website from her account where she was posting about limited-edition drops and that she would be selling at a store on the Lower East Side. I contacted her again and asked if we could do another feature.

It's nice when you see someone who's expanding their creative output and they're using Instagram to tell people how they're evolving. Offgod, @yalocaloffgod, a young Hong Kong-based artist and designer, has gained recognition for his innovative work, including 3D-printed headphone sculptures and wearable art pieces. What's remarkable about his journey is that it started with DMs to creatives he admired, like artist Takashi Murakami and Pharrell. Both offered support and encouragement, with Murakami even reposting Offgod's artwork on his Instagram account, helping launch his career.

'Hong Kong-based artist @yalocaloffgod began his journey by sending DMs to creatives he admired, like Takashi Murakami and Pharrell.'

Spending a lot of time on the @instagram account for this interview the thing that strikes me is all the content is so entertaining. Yet the majority of legacy media are sharing images, text and video on Instagram that have been made for print or their website.
It seems counterintuitive to me. It doesn't necessarily have as much impact as it could do if it was bespoke for the platform. But the other thing to say, is that a lot of stuff that is bespoke for the platform doesn't speak in the language of the platform either. You see a lot of stuff out there which doesn't feel fun or entertaining. It feels like there's an old-media mentality that is then applied to social media or other online platforms that doesn't make any sense. The mistake is not to live in the present and understand that ways of approaching things can be very different to the traditional and established ways people have approached things in the past. The mistake a lot of media companies and outlets make is the idea of telling people this is the one thing. This is the right answer. This is the thing to do. This is the choice you should make. Instagram enabled the democratisation of culture and content. AI signals the potential for further evolution. And I'll be watching with curiosity and interest to see where that takes things, and then some.

Phoebe Philo

With the intentional sidestepping of the spectacular world-building of fashion week runway shows, photography is the primary toolkit for Phoebe Philo's visual language.

Essay by Charlotte Cotton

Photographed for...

Phoebe Philo


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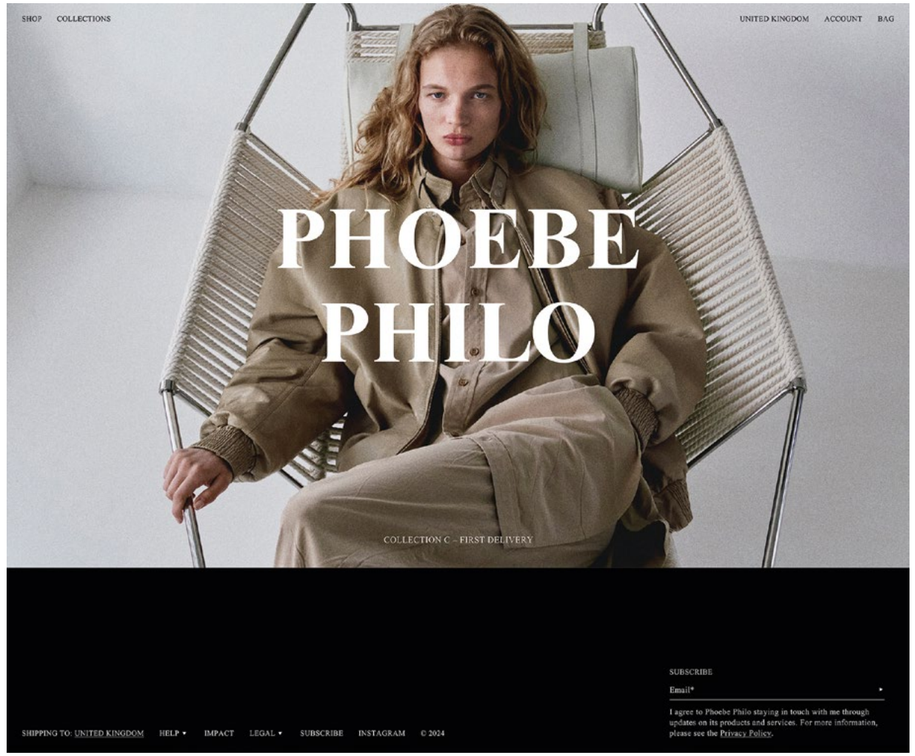
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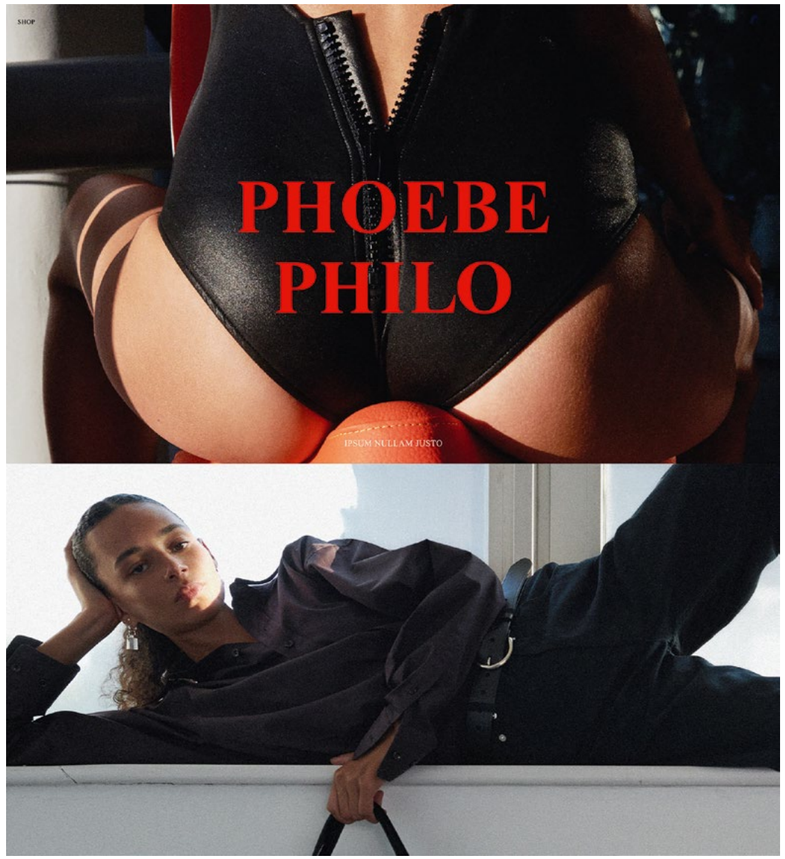
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PHOEBE PHILO

'I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means.'
– Joan Didion, 2012

The October 2023 launch of Phoebe Philo's eponymous brand was pitched at an elegant pace and in a minor key, both serious and *sotto voce*, with intentionally unhurried, wardrobe-sized edits. From the outset, the concise visual and textual dialects of the house have read as counterpoints to the often overstretched messaging of the ready-to-wear fashion system. There was no runway spectacle, no red carpet gowns, no flagship store opening, no pre-Fall or resort collections, no operatic language or memetic trending. The astute, episodic delivery began to appear on social media platforms and in the house's email newsletter to whom over 100,000 people had subscribed by the time of the release of Collection A's first edit.

Philo's prior client base and a wider, self-elected audience of 'Philophiles' were waiting in readiness to once again heed her inimitable and pre-possessed approach to the language of women's fashion. This is the third public phase of Philo's creative life to date, with her first creative director role at Chloé from 2001 to 2006. Her design approach at Céline (2008-2017) is, of course, fashion lore, signalling a new vocabulary that provided a prescient lexicon for a timely overhaul of fashion narratives. Philo's design language is pragmatic, sensual and architectural, and can manifest as breathtakingly specific distillations of the present moment. She has always created entry points for direct connections to fashion, the kind that fire up our mirror neurons and show fashion to be a true modality with a durable function as social armour for our agency and autonomy.

From the outset, the Phoebe Philo house has articulated an intention to hold itself to a standard of fundamental sustainability in the post-pandemic environment where there is a collective longing for a clear cultural compass in a messy and mercurial climate. With its added advantage of being a new entity that is unfettered by having to mitigate against past mistakes, the challenge for the Phoebe Philo label is to continue what it has started and play no deliberate part in the structural attrition by design within the present day R-O-I-meets-zero-sum-game of the fashion business. Philo's 'permanent pieces' of clothing, leather goods and accessories are made with lasting materials and mindful supply chains, crafted for sale in batches that were initially only sold via its bespoke direct-to-consumer e-commerce platform. This approach of concisely saying only what you are doing in reality, in our current state of affairs, is an earnestly winning paradigm for creative sustainability.

The first sentence of the Phoebe Philo launch communication in Autumn 2023 describes the staggered deliveries of its collections (a restrained total of two per year) as a proposal for a 'continuous body of work.' Attendant to this frame of reference is the emphasis it gives to Philo's creative direction as a process of expression and making, deliberately codified as a sustained creative practice. This strikingly precise language speaks to a cultural context that is broader than the fashion system, and significantly more ubiquitous in the arena of contemporary art. It is a knowing but certainly not presumptuous choice of phrase for collections that are purposefully made and intended to be worn for their material duration, born from a creative practice that is an ongoing process of combining constancy and evolution. Akin to pieces in a body of authored works by an artist that leave the private space of the studio for public showing, Phoebe Philo collection pieces from the past two years are presented in well-curated deliveries and immediately recognised for their point of view and resonance beyond a conventional fashion season. They are cultural forms that will no doubt become collectible, and rare objects that circulate on the secondary market titled with gorgeous, haiku-like names including Gig Bag, Zip Polo, Peak Sunglasses, Wave Trousers, Parachute Skirt and Buckle Cuff.

The 'voice' of the Phoebe Philo house has a recognisably particular restraint. Words are used purposefully and sparingly, clarifying but not embellishing the body of work. There are no behind-the-scenes anecdotes or origin stories, and Philo remains resolutely cipher-like. Like many of the best original thinkers and creators, Philo doesn't let her biography get in the way, and our reading of her body of work is orchestrated to quickly get us to the vantage point of our own interpretations. These semantic conditions place photography and moving image in a compelling and vital position within the creative processes of the Phoebe Philo studio. With the intentional sidestepping of the spectacular world-building of fashion week runway shows, and without a route map (beyond well-placed editorial projects) of what cultural collaborations may become in the orbit of this fashion house, photography is the primary toolkit for its visual language.

Philo's creative direction is a thoughtful, exquisite economy of means and extends into being curator, stylist and editor of all of her collaborations with image-makers for the Phoebe Philo label. There is an essentialist and mediumistic understanding of photography that stations it as a working tool expressively folded into Philo's continuous design process. Photography is not separated as an ancillary action to be picked up and put down with little material impact on the making processes of the Phoebe Philo design studio and is instead integral, regardless of who clicks the shutter. Photography here is more of a default instrument for articulation than a fetishistic, virtuoso material that runs the risk of adding an obfuscating layer of interpretation to her body of work. Like writing, photography is a language form with a process through which to focus and discover, and a means to observe and take account of the thought process behind a body of work.

Philo is deeply knowledgeable of the continually shifting relationships between fashion, art and image-making of the past 35 years and this no doubt informs her visual strategy. She has been a close observer of the rise of photography to become an uncontested contemporary art form and the artist-led blending of the traditional industrial boundaries between so-called 'fine art' and 'commercial photography'. Philo seems especially sensitive to the enduring idea – even in a digital image environment – of photography as a sequence of active choices that form the consequential steps in a dynamic process of rendering an image. If there is a throughline in Philo's incitement of photography, it is her as a cultural producer who truly understands that photography is an alchemic combination of preconception and observation.

Since launching her self-titled label, Philo has invited long-standing collaborators Talia Chetrit and Tyrone Lebon, as well as foremost fashion portraitists Sam Rock and Alasdair McLellan to think through with her these formative visualising steps. They are like-minded in their appreciation of what can happen in the intensely concentrated moment on a shoot, when all eyes are focused on what is unfolding in front and around the camera, and the reward of paying attention to the happenstance of reality that is beyond what has already been planned and rehearsed. Everything within Philo's very particular fashion imagery has to be fully believable as the fixing of a fleeting moment into perpetuity, and held in every facet from casting to styling, hair and make-up to *mise-en-scène*, and from a subject's gesture to the light at times of day and the distinctiveness of a chosen vantage point. There is more than one way to interpret the degree of attention that Philo gives to every stage in the image-making process, not least that each step and decision sets a new precedent and has consequences for the evolving Phoebe Philo body of work. Perhaps the most compelling reasoning for this meticulous visual strategy is that these seemingly effortless and uncomplicated images of her chosen ensemble cast are the aperture through which we encounter the Phoebe Philo world. Rather than the plot lines of cinematic storytelling, we are given narrative vignettes of unforgettable photographic encounters with these extraordinary characters embodied by long-time collaborators including Daria Werbowy, Binx Walton, Selena Forrest and Karolin Wolter, as well as a constellation of subjects chosen with the support of casting director Julia Lange. Older models such as Amanda Parker, younger talent including Noor Khan, Sun Mizrahi and Karmay Ngai, old-school street cast archetypes, and the wild card inclusion of German actor Sandra Hüller – whose presence adds a fascinating combination of ambiguity and certainty – make for a resounding chorus of profound individuality.

Philo draws up from a personal well of instincts and experiences and draws down from the contextualising ether of our real-time collective consciousness to direct her versions of womanhood. There is something staggering about the agency, pre-possession and rightful self-love that manifests in these performances for the camera – akin to the groundbreaking resonance of Martin Munkácsi's vital and realistic representations of women in fashion photographs in the 1930s – because they are still the exception to the rule of the tired general conventions of character construction in fashion imagery. Philo's alter egos and wondrous femme characters inhabit her body of work, styled for adventure and self-determined experiences. At times, the frame of reference for these campaigns looks and seems almost literary, like the searing specificity of a poem by Philip Larkin. '*That* vase' from *Home is so Sad* (1964) becomes '*That* bag', propped on the seat of a stool by the woman who has walked out of the frame. There is also an acute sense of being present in the moment, like standing close to someone and noticing how the light hits the top of their glasses frames. There is a tenderness in this photographic capturing of an unrepeatable moment in time and place. In other pictures, where shoes are the principal fashion subject, the camera looks down and is so close that it could almost be the woman wearing the shoes who is taking the photograph. We get to experience the play and joy of '*The* new pair of red shoes' from a first-person perspective. We are the observer and the observed.

'Seemingly effortless and uncomplicated images of her chosen ensemble cast are the aperture through which we encounter the Phoebe Philo world.'

Luis Alberto Rodriguez

‘When you grow up in the closet, everyone makes you aware of how you walk, how you talk, how you breathe, laugh, jump. You feel like you’re in a fish tank. That’s become a useful tool later in life, and in my photography, because I am very aware of somebody’s posture. I’m aware of what their fingers are doing. I’m aware that they are super light in their shoulders, but they’re tense as fuck in their knees. I’ve become like an X-ray machine.’

In conversation with Jermaine Spivey
Text and interview by Summer Bowie
Photographs by Luis Alberto Rodriguez
Styling by Raphael Hirsch

Top and trousers by Duran Lantink.

Dress by Bibi.

Underwear by Capezio,
boots by Rick Owens,
and bracelet by Alexis Bittar.

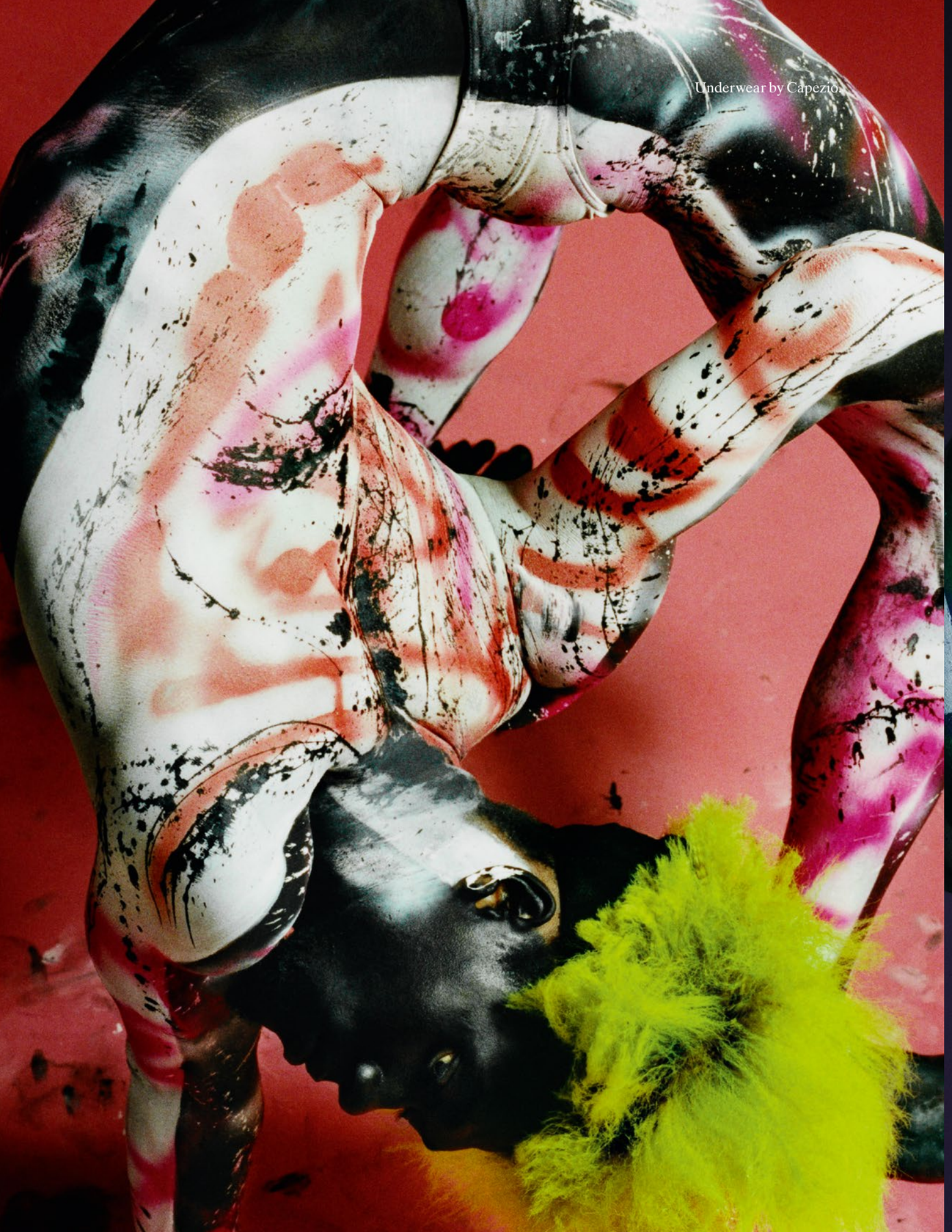
Body suit by Gareth Pugh.

Mask by Camilla Giani, tights by Falke,
and shoes by McQueen.

Top and trousers by Issey Miyake,
undershirt and tights by Falke.

Underwear by Capezio.

Top by Urania and tights by Falke.


Underwear by Capezio.


Dress by Bibi.

Underwear by Capezio.

Top by Junya Watanabe at Artifact,
tights by Falke,
and gloves by Seymoure.

Director of photography: Kyle May. Talent: Mohamed Bongoura. Casting director: Maria Osado. Hair: Joey George. Make-up: Sam Visser. Set designer: Zacharie Adams. Production: Second Name Agency. On-set producer: Lindsey Gomez. Photography assistants: Roy Beeson and Doni Towers. Styling assistants: Storm Foster, Gabriella Georgie, Chris Lee, Wynn Salman. Hair assistants: Skye Melena. Make-up assistant: Aya Tariq and Miki Ishikura. Set designer assistants: Syavash Jefferson and Vango Jones. Production assistant: Kristen Miller. Post-production: Dtouch. Special thanks to Ed singleton at Yello Studio.

Luis Alberto Rodriguez does not tell his subjects how he wants them to look; he builds an environment that makes them feel it. His figures are always comfortably at ease or at the very apex of a gesture, such that your brain completes the unseen range of motion. In a film accompanying his cover story for the eleventh issue of *Beauty Papers*, Kristen McMenamy bounces and twists eerily in vintage couture. His covers for *Harper's Bazaar* with Gisele Bündchen and Rihanna move in ways that feel equally distinctive to their subjects. Bündchen leaps, skips and lunges in a wide-knit pompom-covered Bottega Veneta dress. Shot in black and white, Rihanna balances in ballerina-like *relevé* in a Dior gown and sits high with one leg folded over the other. In these shots, Rodriguez uses something unique to his work – his background as a trained dancer – to breathe life into the otherwise inanimate page.

After graduating from Juilliard and touring the world with numerous European dance companies, Rodriguez realised that his enthusiasm for taking portraits of his dancer friends was more than just a hobby. He was encouraged by his late mentor, Black queer dancer, artist and self-proclaimed 'creator and instigator' Mac Folkes, to submit his work for the Hyères Festival of Fashion and Photography in 2017. He took home both the Prix du Public and the American Vintage prizes and since then has been welcomed by fashion with open arms.

Even though Rodriguez and choreographer Jermaine Spivey, his longtime friend and lifelong confidante, may have taken different routes, both share a commitment to embracing collaboration. While Rodriguez guides models into channelling the kinetic power of what they are wearing, Spivey studies his dancers' bodies and finds ways to challenge their default patterns of movement. They both learned through experience that the body does not know how to lie because our motor reflexes fire infinitely faster than our thoughts. Here the pair speak together about their shared history and approach to working with the body – Rodriguez through the camera lens, and Spivey through choreography.

Summer Bowie: You two go way back. When did you originally meet? Was it at Juilliard?

Luis Alberto Rodriguez: We actually met before Juilliard. Alvin Ailey[1] has a summer program and we met there when we were, like, 16.

Jermaine Spivey: In 1997.

Luis: We don't have to date ourselves! [Laughs]

Jermaine: [Laughs] It's dated, OK.

Luis: Well, he was in the summer program and I had gone to a ballet program. That's when we became aware of each other, and then eventually we found out that we were both going to Juilliard.

You attended Juilliard at the same time and you both had very formative experiences with William Forsythe,[2] but he impacted you in slightly different ways.

Jermaine: He impacted both of us before we even came close to meeting him in person. When we were in school, his company came to perform at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music] and it was mindblowing. I didn't know how to watch it. It wasn't until years later that I was mature enough to know what people were doing when they were working with him. He changed all of dance forever, and people are still trying to imitate and chew on the information that he offered.

Luis: The company came to New York when I was in my late teens, and it was quite life-changing for me. At Juilliard you're taught that you should be incredibly versatile, but that was never really me. I felt a little bit odd compared to the other people in class, and I think that oddness followed me through my career. When I saw Forsythe and Ohad Naharin's[3] companies, there was such excellence, but also individuality – it felt like there was room for me. All the company websites back then just had a headshot and a nice ballerina pose, but with Forsythe's company, people were upside down, lying on a couch, or they were on the floor. The posters were blurry, chopped, whatever. It was this world that felt like a science lab. I would look at Forsythe's website and was obsessed. I would try to either do what they were doing on those posters or take pictures of my friends doing it. It's what initially got me excited about photography. But I had no plan whatsoever to be a photographer or to be working in fashion.

Hungarian photographer Martin Munkácsi was a foundational influence on Richard Avedon, who said that 'Munkácsi brought a taste for happiness and honesty and a love of women to what was before him a joyless, loveless, lying art.' Now that fashion photography is no longer reserved for women's magazines, how would you say you're carrying that torch?

Luis: What's important for me is to carry my history. This whole journey into fashion photography has been really non-linear for me. I never assisted anyone. I was thrown into the deep end and it was sink or swim. I've always had a strong connection to what moves me. And whatever that is, it's not vanilla. I've always been interested in transcending, but I try not to focus on how I carry it forward. I'm trying to be great and to honour my truth.

Jermaine: We came up in a time and place where it was valued to adapt what you have to a very specific aesthetic. I prided myself on the ability to do that, but Luis was already absorbing it and turning it into something more individualised. It took me many years to find myself, and he was a big influence in a lot of that. His eye, his taste, his intuition has always been intact and very specific. Like, he was the first person I knew to wear Crocs. Ever!

Can you talk about your sartorial sensibilities a little bit?

Luis: When I was younger, I was much more colourful. I would wear beads and I had bright yellow Crocs, striped pants, polka dots. It was just a lot. But as I've gotten older, I've become a bit more basic in my dress. Much more worker vibes, very everyday classic.

Jermaine: But it's also a rebellion. He's always going against what everybody else is into. Now that bold and colourful are in, he's keeping it rebelliously classic.

Growing up, you were essentially living a double life, Luis. Your dance life was kept completely separate from your home life, and you didn't come out until your mid-20s. It makes sense that rebellion would manifest in the way that you dressed.

Luis: Yeah, exactly. My parents gave me what they could and we have a great relationship, but there was not a lot of money. It was public housing, food stamps, all of it. My parents don't speak English and there were a lot of things that I didn't know how to process. The way that I survived was by compartmentalising my life. I got into these after-school programs to keep kids off the streets, but I was ashamed of them so I didn't invite them to my shows. My father didn't even know what Juilliard was. When he answered the call from Juilliard to tell me I was accepted, he thought it was some girl named Julia.

Jermaine: When you're in a space where being gay could potentially be a problem, you don't want to hinder your chances. I'm from inner city Baltimore. Dance was my ticket out. So, on a subconscious level, you're always thinking, 'I cannot let anything get in my way – which includes myself!' I came out after Luis, when I was 29. I met my partner, who I'm still with, and we were living together before I officially came out to my parents. It was difficult for me to incorporate that part of myself and to live it truthfully, but at a certain point it was holding me back artistically.

Luis: I was quite repressed in my sexuality and genuinely confused. But there was also a part of me that was very free. My parents didn't really know what the hell was up with my dancing, but I was like, 'You will not be stopping me. I'm just letting you know.' And the same thing with my sexuality. It got to the point where it was like, 'How about, fuck you?' As gay men from a different generation, sometimes your emotional growth is a little bit stunted because you don't have those years as a teenager to develop and date people. And when you allow yourself to feel those feelings, it has a ripple effect on everything you do.

In your photography, is it difficult to translate the postural ideas that are innate to any dancer to subjects who don't speak that language?

Luis: It's quite frustrating, but it can be such a beautiful challenge to work with people and meet them where they're at. In my book *O*, it's all nudes with all

'My father didn't even know what Juilliard was. He answered the call from Juilliard to tell me I was accepted and thought it was some girl named Julia.'

'The clothes already tell such a story. I see the restrictions in the clothes. I see the fabric, I see how it moves. The clothes really dictate what's possible.'

different types of people. One of the guys was a 70-year-old blind man and I've never had an experience like that. There was no music playing in the studio. He couldn't see me and follow my directions, but all his other senses were so in tune. So it became this meditative state where I'm working with his body and learning what he's capable of doing, which often surpassed my expectations. With a dancer I can go deeper in some ways and it's an easier flow. But I'm trying to work on a more sensory level, so if they've been raised with classical dance, it can be pretty hard to convince them to let go. And then if I'm in a fashion context, and I get one of these models who are 17, 18 years old – insecure, and don't know their left foot from their right foot in a pair of heels – I actually enjoy the challenge of finding where she's locked in her body. Then I work with that and make her feel at ease.

I'm curious about how you approach the challenge of teasing out the particularities of somebody's body, everything from their posture to their cadence to where they hold their tension so that you can exploit it for the right reasons.

Luis: I usually like to start with someone sitting, something for them to feel grounded in. I've worked with some celebrities and sometimes I can tell they're not comfortable in front of a camera. You have to make them feel at ease. I also do research before I see them. I watch interviews, I see how they're holding themselves, I see how they walk. The thing is, when you grow up in the closet, everyone makes you aware of how you walk, how you talk, how you breathe, laugh, jump. You feel like you're in a fish tank. That becomes a useful tool later in life because I am very aware of somebody's posture. I'm aware of what their fingers are doing. I'm aware that they are super light in their shoulders, but they're tense as fuck in their knees. I've become like an X-ray machine.

It sounds like a gestural code switching that you were forced to learn at a young age and now you're like a Rosetta Stone of body language.

Luis: Exactly, everything from how your eyes are looking at the camera, how your neck is placed, where your shoulders are. Are you breathing? Are you really sitting on the chair? Are you clenching your butt cheeks? Sometimes I look at editorials and I can see what they're trying to go for. Somebody told the model, 'This should look elegant and relaxed. Look like you're thinking.' But there's no real understanding of the weight of the body. There's no connection.

Jermaine: The body does not lie. When it comes to non-dancers, you're really trying to get someone to feel the moment and not pose it. You can't make non-dancers look like dancers. You have to give them references. Maybe it's a famous scene where someone fell out of a window. You're trying to get them to imagine something, because as soon as you start imagining something, the body responds. But if you're not thinking about anything, the body responds with what you're not thinking about.

What's it like trying to balance your vision with somebody who has a personal brand they're trying to maintain?

Luis: I've had incredible opportunities, but it can also be a nightmare. I understand the theatre very well, so with actors there's a certain language that you can tap into. But with musicians, some can be really disrespectful. They can speak to you like you're nobody, and the reality is that we've actually had very parallel trajectories. I have worked with the best of the best in dance. I have performed all over the world at opera houses, in every major theatre. It's a psychological game that I have to play so that we can all get what we need; me, the subject, and the magazine. It's not for the faint of heart. You always have to be very professional, always think about tomorrow, and never leave with regrets. I worked with Rihanna, and it was incredible. She was so generous and warm. She's so in control of her body. There is no hiding. She's just a bad bitch. Working together felt like a collaboration, but a lot of times you don't get to that place because there's so much ego. So, I try to make that connection and I try to be as fast as possible. Sometimes you only have 40 minutes, so you learn to read the room.

Jermaine: Ultimately, if you're showing up with an attitude of, 'I don't want to do things,' then you're not showing up to do the job, because the job is collaborative. We all have to work together.

Jermaine, you compose movement on and with people's bodies and then you find ways to complement their movement with costume. And Luis, you're given a body in costume, and then you prescribe posture or movement to bring the garments to life. How does the order of that process affect the outcome?

Luis: The clothes already tell such a story. I see the restrictions in the clothes. I see the fabric, I see how it moves. The clothes really dictate what's possible. I was just shooting the editorial for this and some of those clothes were really delicate. And so, I have to factor those limitations into what I can do with a contortionist's body whose abilities go beyond normal body movement.

Jermaine: I made a piece called *Extant* in 2023 for Ballet Flanders in Antwerp, where we wanted the dancers to be restricted by the costumes, so we chose denim, the kind that doesn't really stretch. Sometimes people were weighted down with layers of denim and from underneath that they had to fight for the clarity of the choreography. Oftentimes though, they want you to give the concept for the costumes a year in advance; long before you've made the dance.

Edward Steichen was a pivotal figure in photographing not only dancers, but fashion. He brought drama with his use of lighting in the studio. Has your experience of watching how stage lights bring choreography to life informed your own use of studio lights?

Luis: I was quite intimidated in the studio at first. I didn't think I knew those codes until I remembered that I grew up with stage lights. I know how lights can be used to create mystery or suspense or confusion. I'm quite a melancholic person in general, so there's this moodiness in the way I light a photo. I don't know if it's sadness, but it's drama.

There's a sculptural component to your photography that goes well beyond the realms of dance. Do you have specific artists that influence your practice?

Luis: From the beginning, the work has been quite sculptural, but it was never an intention. It was just what I was drawn to. In the early days, I didn't have any photography references. It wasn't until I moved to Berlin that I met my late mentor, Mac Folkes. He started showing me Irving Penn, Viviane Sassen, Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon. I saw Richard Avedon's photos of the American West and developed a huge respect for him.

In your first book, *People of the Mud*, you photographed people in County Wexford, Ireland. Tell me about that.

Luis: I was awarded this residency in 2018 and then sent to this farm town in the middle of nowhere to make a work about cultural heritage. I had a picture that I took in the Dominican Republic, where my family's from, of two brothers embracing. It just looks like this knot of bodies – it's a love that's so intense, it's suffocating. Originally, I wanted to extend that to an entire family. I wanted to photograph a huge family wrestling. But once I got there, I was like, 'This is never going to happen.' Then I learned about a sport called hurling.[4] It's kind of a religion in Ireland and that was my connection point. The players have grown up together; some have been on the same team for 15 years. So, there's a great sense of intimacy and also legacy. I would film the game and then go home and watch it in slow motion and find motifs that were created while they were pushing, pulling and lifting each other. I'd take those, do sketches, then I'd take those sketches back to the players. And so, it became collaborative. I was very nervous about going there as a person of colour but they were so welcoming. I learned about the colonisation of Ireland by Britain and I photographed traditional Irish dancers.

Can you talk about your process of casting and conceptualising the images in your book, *O*?

Luis: It started during the pandemic, when I was in Berlin. My father was in New York and he has emphysema, so I had a lot of anxiety that he was going to die from Covid. And then, on top of that, it was also the election coming up. I did this picture of a friend for his album cover where he's falling backwards and it's almost like he got the wind knocked out of him. I was like, 'Oh my God, I want to do people collapsing.' The idea was like, if everyone's collapsing, how much collective will does it take for us to bring ourselves back up? I wanted to bring my parents into this. So, I photographed my father for the first time and my mother does these very Dominican coffee cup readings for people when they're looking for clarity. For the casting, I was looking at this as a portrait of humanity. I had this really big woman, and it just felt like this mass of body. And then I had someone who was really bony. Then, when I photographed that blind man, he's in this pose where he's looking right at you, but he can't see you – that is still one of my favourite portraits that I've ever taken. When you are hit with something, you don't really choose how your body reacts. You just react.

'The body does not lie. With non-dancers, you're trying to get them to feel the moment and not pose it. You can't make non-dancers look like dancers.'

1. Alvin Ailey was an American dancer, choreographer and activist who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) – a haven for nurturing Black artists and expressing the African-American experience through dance.

2. William Forsythe is an American dancer and choreographer known for his experimental approach to dance, combining elements from ballet and the visual arts and expanding his practice into installation, film and music.

3. Ohad Naharin is an Israeli dancer and choreographer known for his experimental system of dance called Gaga.

4. Hurling is an Irish field sport, often cited as one of the world's oldest. Played with a wooden stick called a hurley and a small ball known as a sliotar, it combines elements of hockey, lacrosse, and baseball, and is renowned for its speed and physicality.

Tyrone Lebon & Graces Mews

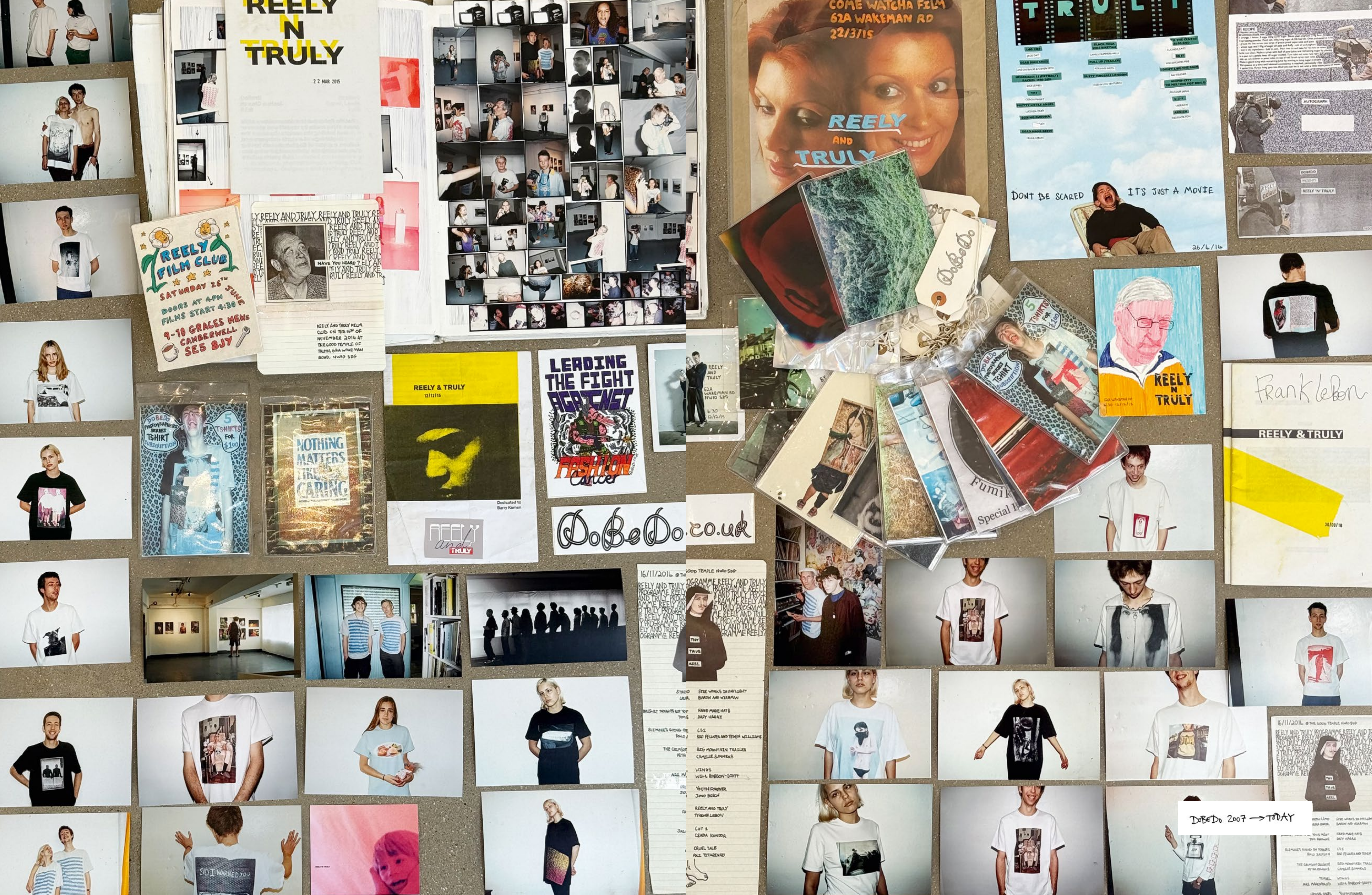
The story behind London's new photography gallery.

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield
Photographs by Tyrone Lebon

TO SO

CHILDHOOD PHOTOS (FROM 1997)

EARLY PHOTOS (2011-2013)



DOBEDO 2007 → TODAY

COMMERCIAL WORK 2014-2016

AGENCY 2019 → TODAY

GRACES MEWS - PREBUILD & DURING CONSTRUCTION 2020-25

CATALOGUE dick jewell

CATALOGUE dick jewell

CATALOGUE dick jewell

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DICK JEWELL

GRACES MEWS

8-10 GRACE'S MEWS LONDON N16 8JF

INAUGURAL EXHIBITION:
'DICK JEWELL' JUNE 2025

to be

to do

BARRY KAMEN

IF IT IS

HANGING 'BARRY KAMEN: IF IT IS'
EXHIBITION OCTOBER 2025

Tyrone Lebon isn't the first fashion photographer to have channelled his accolades and earnings into founding a photography-focused exhibition space, but that doesn't make his Graces Mews gallery any less unique. Back in 1905, pioneering fashion photographer Edward Steichen co-founded The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, along with Alfred Stieglitz, arguably the most important photographer of his time and an advocate for photography as a legitimate art form. Based in what had been Steichen's New York portrait studio, the *bijou* gallery showed works from the Photo-Secession – an early 20th-century movement that promoted photography as a fine art. Although brief, The Little Galleries' 18-month existence is widely acknowledged to have changed the course of photography.

Fast-forward 120 years to Camberwell, in South London. Recently-opened Graces Mews is situated in a 7,500 square-foot converted printer's workshop. The gallery boasts three exhibition spaces, a working photography studio, a private print-sales room, a custom darkroom, state-of-the-art scanning and digitalisation equipment, archival cold storage and a photography bookshop. It is the brainchild of Tyrone Lebon, one of contemporary fashion's most sought-after photographers, who also personally bankrolled the project. Ambitious, verging on the quixotic, it is born out of Lebon's seemingly boundless love for all things photography-related: books, zines, prints, analogue cameras, dead-stock film, 'all sorts of geeky kit', and, most importantly, the wider community of photographers. In particular, Lebon is drawn to those artists, contemporary or historical, who operate in less conventional realms, in the margins, often overlooked or underappreciated.

Graces Mews' inaugural show, during the summer, presented a career-wide survey of lesser-known British artist Dick Jewell, whose collage and film works are steeped in photography as social anthropology. Jewell has, since the early 1980s, been a friend and close collaborator of Tyrone's father, the one-time fashion photographer Mark Lebon, who today is perhaps the embodiment of the cult artist. Having observed from close quarters the sprawling, chaotic scene at his father's Crunch Studio – a former-garage-cum-creative playground in North-West London – it's easy to understand the affection that Tyrone now holds for iconoclasts, self-saboteurs and all things counterculturral. 'Whether it's Dick, Dad, or whoever else,' he explains, 'I have a love for people who are either uninterested in or incapable of fully capitalising on their work, because they're too busy being an artist.'

Pumping his earnings from commercial work into Graces Mews isn't an isolated example of Lebon's singular characteristics as a fashion photographer: his largely analogue approach scares off many potential clients; he founded his own artist representation agency in 2018 (DoBeDo Represents, whose roster currently includes Rosie Marks, Johnny Dufort, Jim Goldberg, Frank Lebon, Nigel Shafran and Takashi Homma – although Tyrone himself has now stepped back operationally); and he's chosen not to produce a single editorial story in over a decade, preferring instead to divide his time between shooting largely-unseen personal work and some of contemporary fashion's most arresting and ubiquitous campaign imagery: Céline (circa. Phoebe Philo), Calvin Klein, Bottega Veneta, and most recently Alaïa.

System sat down for a lengthy chat with Tyrone as he was installing Graces Mews' second exhibition: the work of the late Barry Kamen. He's using the extensive show to reclaim Kamen's rightful legacy – that of a prolific artist and painter, more than fashion's sometimes reductive memory of him as a prominent figure in 1980s London style.

BARRY KAMEN: IF IT IS EXHIBITION, OCTOBER, 2025.

Barry came into my life as an uncle figure, I suppose. As a kid I remember his spirit was generous and warm and he always had time for me – traits that a child remembers about rare adults who shine with some extra energy most adults don't have. Growing up, I became aware that he was a painter, and I went to one of his shows when I was about nine years old.

Dad collaborated closely with Barry's older brother Nick for years, doing photos and music videos throughout his pop-star music career in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was at this time that I first saw Barry's painterly animations that he'd made as overlays for sections of those videos. Years later, when I ended up making films myself, I started using that same technique. I made a documentary in 2014 called *Reely and Truly* about 20 photographers. There was a short animated sequence about Jason Evans and Barry kindly agreed to work on it for me. My brother Frank was assisting him, and I was so excited and honoured that he had collaborated on it.

By then I was about 30, and I'd seen Barry infrequently over my adult years. But from that point on I started to visit him in his studio in East London. Now and again we'd have lunch, and one time while I was there he asked if he could do a painting of me at some point. I loved his studio. He was always working on something new each time I saw him: an animation, a painting, charcoal drawings, a collage using newspaper lettering or letterpress. I really cherished that short period we were in touch more closely. In October 2015, Barry suddenly died. We heard the news that he'd had an issue with his heart and literally dropped to the floor while painting in his studio. It was totally out of the blue.

Tatiana, Barry's wife, oversees Barry's estate with a small team. I hadn't been in touch with her for a long time, but once we reconnected last year we soon started planning how we could work together to do something at Graces Mews. At first we were looking into a way to show his animation work only, but soon the idea developed into a bigger show, with the animations placed centrally, surrounded by a selection of his larger paintings and smaller works on paper. A lot of the work hasn't been seen before.

Both Barry and Nick passed away in their 50s – very young. And when Barry's show opens in October, it will be the 10-year anniversary of his death. While we were hanging the show a few days ago, surrounded by all of his work, it surprised me quite how present he felt. Feeling him more closely, in the presence of his work, actually reminded me, for the first time in a long time, quite how much I missed him. Barry is often remembered by people for the Buffalo scene, but to anyone who knew him closely he was first and foremost a painter and an artist.

CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY HISTORY

Mum and Dad split up when I was about two, and Dad soon moved into a garage up in Kensal Green. It was his home but also more prominently his studio. I grew up visiting him on weekends, with longer stays through the school holidays. My main memory of that time is that the place was always busy; filled with lots of stuff and busy with his photoshoots. There was a period when Crunch, his production company, was run from there too, and even when that closed there were always a lot of people dropping by. The winters would be cold and leaks would drip through the corrugated plastic roof, but in the summer the big doors would open out onto the street, records would be playing, and we'd have showers with a hose pipe.

Looking back I would say that although at the time I was probably more interested in watching TV and playing football out on the street with my friends, but it must have had an effect on me. There was a constant creative, collaborative energy and dialogue. Yeah, he's not really interested in doing things in isolation. He only likes to work on things when he can work collaboratively, with someone else, or a team.

In contrast to Crunch, my mum's house in Whitechapel was minimal and clean. This was my main home where I stayed most of the time. When I remember back to that time, I think of the house as being peaceful and quiet, and aesthetically it felt like every item in the house was significant and had been selected. My mum worked with my stepdad, who was a furniture and product designer. In a lot of ways, the two households couldn't have been more different, but I found it exciting to jump back and forth between the different worlds.

I think my mum, pretty understandably, found my dad quite frustrating through those years when he was particularly chaotic, and as a result I think she was pretty open about her disapproval for his job and some of the people that he worked with. This might have been one of the origins of my suspicion of the fashion industry. Although, to be honest, any person with their head screwed on right would probably find various aspects of it pretty dubious.

By the time I got to university to study social anthropology, I would say that I was questioning a lot of things about the world – and I remember questioning my dad about what I saw to be the many negative effects the fashion industry had on society: encouraging people to desire things that they don't really need, twisting beauty ideals, encouraging consumption and capitalism… I was idealistic and also probably a bit naive. At the time, Dad's girlfriend was an agent for fashion photographers – Julie Brown, who owned MAP – and I remember quizzing her, 'How can you sleep at night being involved in such a toxic industry?' Fast-forward less than 10 years, and she was representing me at MAP [Laughs].

FIRST STEPS INTO PHOTOGRAPHY

I went to boarding school when I was 12, and living there with about 600 other kids was pretty overwhelming. Discovering there was an old hidden darkroom I was allowed to use, and being taught how to process film and print in black-and-white chemicals, was like finding my own private hideaway. Photography helped me get closer to people that I was interested in, and was a shortcut to a type of intimacy that in normal life would take time to be earned. That was a huge thrill to me, and is a part of photography that still draws me to pick up a camera to this day.

Finishing school and going to university, I'd been taking a lot of photos of my friends, just documenting my life. I knew that photography was always going to be part of my life, but at that point I was thinking that I was going to try to be a documentary filmmaker. I'm not sure we have time for me to go into the full story of the next 10 years, but I'll give a quick summary: I finished my MA, and struggled for a few years trying to make documentary films. Got into a lot of debt. And after a string of jobs, I ended up freelance photo-assisting and could just about pay my rent and survive off that. Kind of… [Laughs].

How did I end up getting drawn into fashion after being so convinced it was a sinister world? I wouldn't like to sound like real life beat the idealism out of me, as I think it's more complex than that. But I think I've always held that initial mistrust of fashion in the back of my mind, even as the industry fully embraced me. I was doing a few small portrait shoots of musicians for magazines like *i-D*, and then gradually started shooting fashion editorials.

Probably the most significant thing from that time was the friendship and collaboration I formed with [stylist] Max Pearmain. We met in the *i-D* office I think. He was interning. The pictures we took over the next few years started to open my eyes to the pleasure and the satisfaction I could get from working within the constraints of a magazine shoot. Max had studied fine art at Slade and the way we both approached editorial felt very sideways. The clothes came last. We were just trying to make interesting pictures and play with all the access and material that fashion provided. At the time, the work we were making felt really exciting to us, and different from most of the super-digital and hyper-retouched imagery that was dominating magazines and fashion advertising at the time. I don't think either of us ever really thought that we'd get work from those shoots; to me, I certainly felt more like an outsider that was having fun, kind of taking the piss and holding a mirror up to the more ridiculous and grotesque sides of fashion.

Anyway, at this point I had been with my agent for a few years and had barely got a single commercial job. Meanwhile, I started to feel like I'd said all I had to say in the world of editorials. This was 2014. Seemingly, no-one was interested in hiring me, the photos I was taking were costing me money to take, and I was thinking, 'This has all been fun and everything, but where's it going? Maybe it's time to think about something else.' Then I got an excited call from my agent saying that Phoebe Philo wanted to discuss shooting the campaign for Céline – and that was basically when everything very suddenly flipped.

DOBEDO, 2007 TO PRESENT DAY

DoBeDo began in 2007 as a 'platform' – for want of a better word. It was in fact a lot of different things: we ran a regular film night and club night, put on a few photography exhibitions, published books and made products. At that time it was all based around a website. This was before Instagram, and we had 'blogs' where all sorts of photographers kept daily photo diaries that you'd have to visit the website to look at. Back then it was far harder for people to put their own stuff online themselves, so we'd sell all sorts of things: photographers' books, zines and prints, music MP3s, T-shirts by designers like Judy Blame (he liked to call us 'DoBeDon't') and London brand Trapstar. DoBeDo was a mix of different things, done entirely for the love, and to build and support an existing community – mostly of photographers.

In the back of my mind, even back then, I had a bigger dream for DoBeDo that involved some kind of real-world home. A permanent place to put on shows, host events, have a shop… I wasn't sure exactly, but for the idea to be properly realised to its full potential it couldn't simply be online.

COMMERCIAL WORK (MAKING MONEY TO MAKE A GALLERY)

It's quite hard for me to make sense of what happened next. But the best way I can describe it is that because some part of me was never truly convinced that I was destined to be there, I always kept fashion at arm's length. Somehow by trying to resist it, I unwittingly created a dynamic of being really selective and saying no to a lot of things. The more selective I was, the better the opportunities were that came back. After Céline, there were a couple of big Calvin Klein campaigns, a music video for Frank Ocean, a run doing YSL perfume ads. Other highlights have been Bottega Veneta, Burberry, Miu Miu and now Alaïa. It doesn't actually sound like so much for 10 years of work, but it certainly felt like plenty.

When this all first took off, I had a lot of fun travelling and just being super excited by all these new opportunities and challenges. Then, at some point, I had a bit of burnout. I ended up moving away from London, following a girlfriend to LA to take some time off. Eventually I started to get some energy back, and with no distractions the idea of a gallery space kept coming into my mind. At first, I started looking in LA but soon realised it was never going to be my home, and after two years there, packed up and came home. This was when I began shooting for Bottega, and Dan Lee [creative director from 2018-2021] was super loyal to me – we did every campaign for those three years. As a result, I started to save money, and so for the first time the dream of having a photography gallery became a possibility. At some point in 2019 I started properly searching for a location.

AGENCY

A bit earlier than this, there were some changes happening at MAP. The owner had sold the company to a large conglomerate called Great Bowery which was owned by a hedge fund. Pretty quickly, I could sense a shift in the energy and growing pressures that were being put on staff and artists. To cut a long story short, I wasn't enjoying this new dynamic and so started to look into what it would take to set up an artist-led photography agency. We launched DoBeDo Represents in 2018, and I was excited by the challenge of setting up a business. The early days were pretty rocky. I hired some questionable people and Covid was a very close call, paying for staff and offices in NYC and London. But the big turning point was the arrival of Nikki [Stromberg, managing director]. Since she started, and took leadership of the company, the whole thing has been smooth sailing. Her taste level and dedication to the agency being artist-led has meant that I can focus on my photography and other things like the gallery.

9-10 GRACES MEWS

I looked for over a year and was lucky to eventually come across an amazing place that wasn't publicly marketed. It was a pair of single-storey printer's workshops down a mews in Camberwell. Two A-frame buildings side-by-side, each with a large back studio space. I immediately fell for the place, and it didn't take much imagination to see the potential – or the amazing daylight the building naturally had. The owner was in his 70s and looking to retire after owning it himself for over 30 years. He didn't want to sell it to a developer who might turn it into flats, and was happy to hear I was looking to turn it into a gallery. I got the keys in January 2020. And then Covid struck. The first architect had a plan to have the place fully ready for us to move into within a year; a very simple refurbishment that wouldn't have required extra planning. But once the process began and we really started thinking about how the space would be used, we realised that we needed more space. After a long and sometimes painful journey (multiple architects, an additional two years digging out a basement) we eventually moved into it in May this year – five years later.

Graces Mews has three exhibition spaces, a print-sales room where you can look at and buy work from over 50 photographers, private colour and B&W darkrooms, and archival cold storage. The program is photography focused and we are planning to have three or four shows and six new publications this first year. The photography bookshop at the front of the gallery is open to the public five days a week, all year around. We have a film club a few times a year, photography workshops every couple of months, and a bunch of film screenings and book launches scattered throughout the year.

To hear the buzzer ring, and for people to come in and look around the shows downstairs, is such a good feeling. Some days, we had over 100 visitors for Dick's show. It is a bizarre feeling for this thing I've been imagining for so long to now be alive and working for real.

INAUGURAL EXHIBITION: *DICK JEWELL*, JUNE 2025.

Dick was the obvious choice for a first show because of the depth and the breadth of his work. I've been a fan of his since I was a teenager. Dick's work for me is a type of visual anthropology. He's studying culture through image collection and analysis. The way his mind works, he takes groups of imagery and distils a truth about people or society or culture. It's so particular to Dick and it's so spot on. I'm describing it in a way that maybe sounds dry, but it's not at all; it all has a sense of humour too which I love. His work is also tied up with whatever the current technology is: I love his work from the 1970s when it was made with scissors and glue, collecting magazines and printed materials. In the 1980s he moved into TV, taking photos of the screen. Then, once the internet hit, Dick's mind must have been blown by the quantity of material online. His *4000 Threads* book and video installation is, for me, an amazing, playful portrait of humanity through found online imagery.

With the quality and quantity of work he has produced over the years it surprises me that he has had such little attention throughout his life. Maybe he wouldn't consider it that way, as he's certainly had work in a variety of major arts institutions; recently, for example, he had a few works in the Tate Modern's Leigh Bowery show, but for me he is deserving of a lot more recognition. I think part of it, and what I actually admire about Dick, is that he lives purely to make his work. He has never been especially motivated by any of the rest of the stuff that goes with being a capital-A 'Artist'. He certainly hasn't been influenced by financial motives. For years, I was trying to buy some work from him, and he was always very elusive so I eventually gave up. Presenting a full retrospective of his lifetime of work, as well as publishing a *catalogue raisonné* to accompany it, has been really satisfying. And at last I can buy something of his [Laughs].

FINAL THOUGHTS

In the five years between getting the keys for an empty building to it becoming a functional gallery and studio space, there's been so much to be excited about. But it's also been a painful struggle at times. There were months when the construction bills were terrifying. And the never-ending stream of challenges and setbacks was exhausting. I wondered if I'd bitten off more than I could chew, but I always kept my eyes set on the future – on when the place would be finished and how excited I was for that.

Walking into the finished space for the first time when the builders had left, was a strange moment. I'd always imagined I'd be immediately elated, but when it happened for real I was just exhausted. But, you know, having had the chance to settle in a little bit now, and watch the first shows come together, and see the shop space set up, it's beginning to feel really joyous. Like it was all worth it – although I've definitely got more grey hairs now than I did five years ago. These days, I'll get in early in the morning, before anyone else has arrived, have a cup of tea while the morning sunshine is coming through the windows, and think to myself, 'Wow, this is going to be a really special place.'

David Sims

‘A teacher warned me not to look for the meaning of life in a pop song. My answer to him was: ‘That’s all I’ve ever done.’ And it’s all I’ll ever want to do. I was lucky to find a medium to explore that when I was 17 – and I think it probably saved my life.’

Interview by Mathias Augustyniak

Hard Wear
Summer Denim Special, *i-D*, July 1994.

Wendy's House
The Face, June 1996.

Are Friends Electric
The Face, November 1996.

East of Eden
The Face, May 1997.

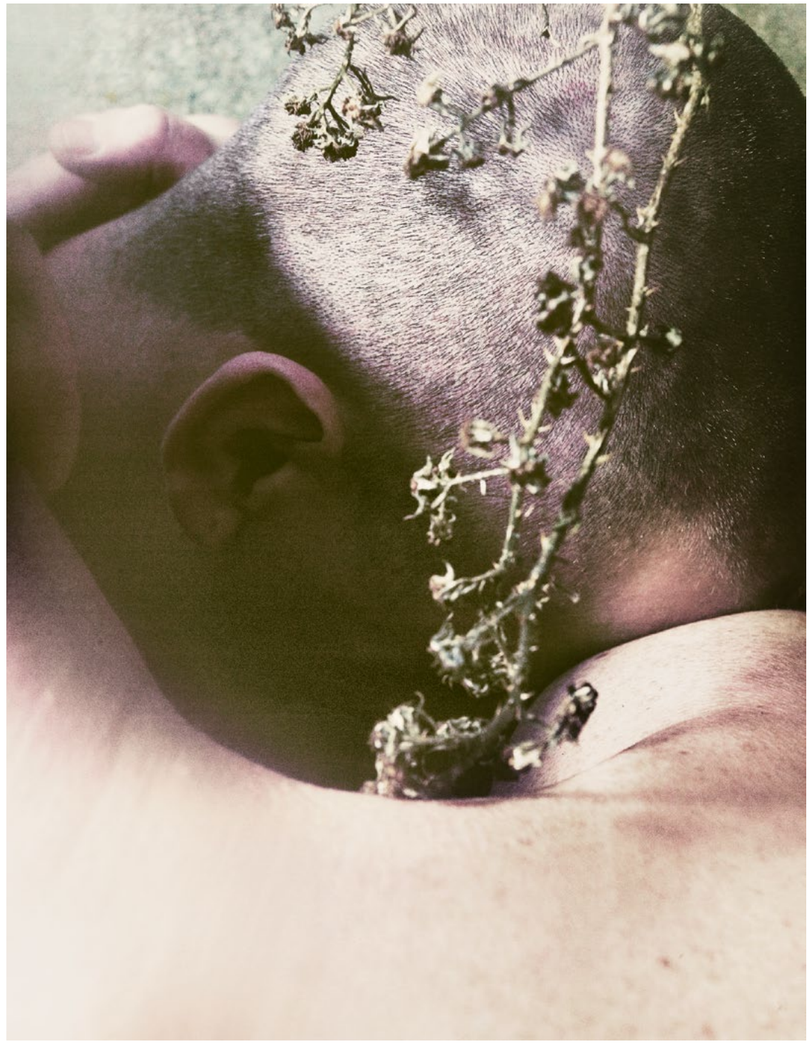
The biggest No-No of the season is high heels with long skirts
Self Service, Autumn 1998.

The biggest No-No of the season is high heels with long skirts
Self Service, Autumn 1998.

The biggest No-No of the season is high heels with long skirts
Self Service, Autumn 1998.

Face Off
January 1998

School Kid
2000



Shine So Hard
Arena Homme+, Spring/Summer 2010.

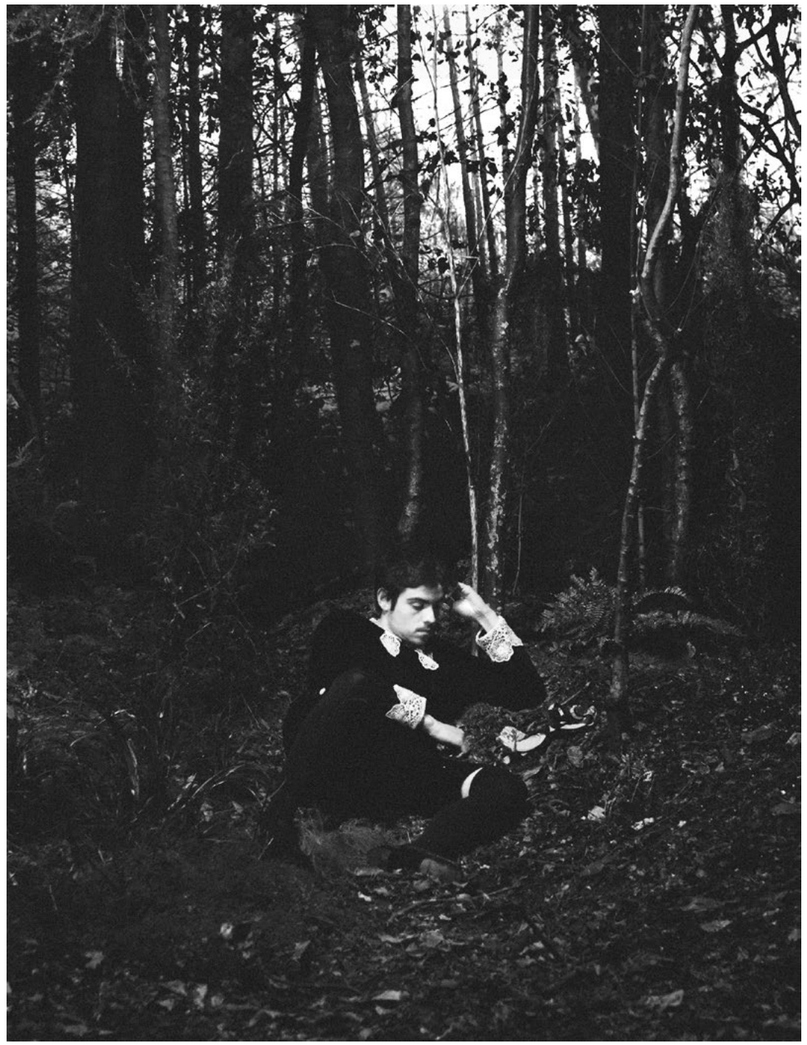
All I see is art and Yamaha
Arena Homme+, Autumn/Winter 2011-2012.

This is the one
Arena Homme+, Spring/Summer 2012.

Rainbow Like The Shadow
Arena Homme+, Autumn/Winter 2013-2014.

New Values (Welling Up)
Arena Homme+, Spring/Summer 2015-2016.

Retox: Light pours out of me
Arena Homme+, Autumn/Winter 2015-2016.



Retox: Light pours out of me
Arena Homme+, Autumn/Winter 2015-2016.

Untitled
Self Service, Spring/Summer 2016.

Dance Vision
Vogue Italia, November 2019.

Dance Vision
Vogue Italia, November 2019.

A'trophy
Arena Homme+, Summer/Autumn 2024.

Robber (Remix)
Arena Homme+, Summer/Autumn 2024.

Untitled
2 magazine, Spring/Summer 2024.

Frankenstein
Beyond Noise, Summer 2025.

‘If you were brought up as a working-class kid the way I was, you weren’t told to have aspirations. What you had was your rebelliousness.’

‘We couldn’t afford clothes, but you could hack away at your hair with a pair of scissors and put colour in it without having to spend much money.’

Since the early 1990s, when his first editorials began to appear in *i-D* and *The Face*, David Sims has been ceaselessly redefining what it means to be a fashion photographer. Favouring style over fashion, his images consistently challenge convention – always to striking effect. His restless pursuit of the new has secured his place among the medium’s greats. Here, he speaks with his friend and long-time collaborator, the art director and M/M (Paris) co-founder Mathias Augustyniak, about the art and craft of image-making, and what continues to drive his work today.

Mathias Augustyniak: We’ve been trying to do this for God knows how long. I would say two months now.

David Sims: It’s either a reflection of our ineptitude, our inability to be organised, or maybe we’re just very busy people.

Since I’ve known you, I’ve never felt like you have been resting. You’ve been constantly engaging in a conversation with your surroundings. Sometimes you disappear, which happens to all of us, but I always hear from you – of course, when we talk, but also through your work.

Would you say what appears to be restlessness is also kind of charged? That I make things visible somewhat – to you anyway. Is that what you mean?

What I mean is that I see you as someone who has a point of view. And you keep engaging in a conversation not just to express yourself, but to express your understanding of the world.

I think there’s a degree of clarity that I get with that question. As a kid, the things that were normal for most people seemed alien to me. So I got in people’s ways simply by asking how and why. Quite early on, you realise that most of what that results in is other people’s frustrations, right? I think a lot of children go through that. But when given a medium, you can attach that side of yourself to what people like to call a ‘practice’. But it’s torment as well. It’s got to be the same for you. I don’t think I’m speaking in terms which are foreign to you.

At one point in my life, I declared myself an artist, even if I operate in the graphic design world – I design typography, I make books, I do exhibitions. I’ve never heard you declare yourself an artist, but you still express yourself through your work. I always see a comment about the world. I hear you within your work. Do you consider yourself an auteur?

I have a grasp of what an auteur is or does, but whether I think of myself in that way, I would say no. But I’m interested in the question. Let’s say that there’s a certain level of nervousness around your ideas or impulses, and you don’t quite know what they are when they’re in the process of manifesting… Sometimes, when I look back on the work, or on a particular picture, suddenly the message or the idea becomes more readily available to me on an emotional level. I kind of go, ‘Oh, fuck. Right, yeah.’ Without wanting to make it sound a bit trivial, I suddenly realise the importance of the way that I felt when I photographed the image, and I was only able to connect to that because it had turned into a riddle – one that unravels and eventually becomes apparent to me. Those are the pictures I end up wanting to claim and want to live side by side with, even if they don’t speak to anyone else. The subjective nature of those pictures and the way that I feel about them in the end is so obscure, and in some cases a bit absurd, that I couldn’t imagine someone else getting it. There’s a failure to that image if it’s taken in order to communicate something. Most of it is wanting connection and to find out who else out there might get it, but I don’t rely on that. I don’t assume it. I don’t know if that means that I’m one thing or another to you. And if it falls into the description of an auteur, I don’t think I can have any genuine authority over that.

I was expecting you to answer like this. I know you, though, and this is why I’m putting you in the category of an auteur. For me, you’ve kept doing the exact same thing. I remember meeting you in 1996 and you had a box of Polaroids, which was basically your portfolio. I found it extremely courageous and bold to say, ‘All my work is in that box.’ It was several types of images and they were all different but all had a link. There was one still life photograph of a watermelon. There was one black-and-white fashion image, and then there was the same watermelon on top of it. So there were two images of the watermelon. One was complete and then the other one was crushed in. You had dug a hole in it. It is still the same toolbox you use today. Does that resonate with you?

I think you’re right. What was in that box was an opportunity for me to not have to say anything. There were a multitude of proposals in there, but ostensibly that occurred in that particular moment because of some restlessness, and because of the way in which I experience images through all sorts of channels. I don’t consider photography to be defined by one kind of ritual or rigorous practice. I’m more curious about the idea of a high and low version of the craft or the art. One of the things that inspired a second wind of wanting to make pictures was having found a box full of images from my cousin’s bedroom from when we were kids. I think the reason that struck me was because I wanted some emotion to be available to people in my pictures. But I never really feel like it gets there. And these pictures that I discovered in my cousin’s shoebox – literally under his bed, it’s that clichéd – they were very unsophisticated pictures, but they were full of emotion. They were collected memories, people who had gone, people who are no longer around. Of course, that creates emotional resonance. But I’ve never wanted to practice just one version of the craft.

It was a time when a lot of technicality went into the taking of a picture because there were no digital processes to add anything to pictures, but there were printing techniques that would give a certain quality to the photograph. Your pictures were always very simply printed, but extremely well executed. Somehow in this looseness, there was a sense of perfection.

There is a craft to photography. When we worked in an age when really all we had were the simple tools that analogue afforded us, to some degree we had to manipulate the ingredients in order to give the image singularity. There were as many keen enthusiasts or amateurs as there were professionals, and we were all given the same tools, depending on your budget, right? But the further you went into the principal stages of a photograph, the more you could stretch and explore the limits of each stage. Lighting for me in particular. When I saw what Arnold Newman had done to Alfred Krupp simply through lighting,[1] and how unsettling that portrait was, it drew me to the power of light, tone and contrast. Those tools were available to me from the outset, and that’s what made them compelling. I remember you talked to me once about my collaborators, and I was very flattered by that. When you said that you’d had some kind of response to them, that was simply enough to push me forward. I don’t know if you can do that anymore – if you can create colour combinations and expect people to feel disturbed or disrupted by them, the way that that Larkspur blue background did in the 1990s,[2] because it was viewed as something fairly banal and unattractive. But that background, for a long time, did enough to gain people’s attention. A lot of people didn’t like it, and that was as interesting to me as anyone that did.

I had a conversation with Glen Luchford and he mentioned that you were an extremely good colourist, and I completely agree. You mentioned that you started that trend of using a colour as a background which could have a meaning. But also the way you lit it made a difference.

Becoming successful put me too near the edge of failure. And in order to kind of unconsciously survive that, I started to imagine ways in which I could put people off my work. These ideas that people had about what I’d made up to that point felt so inaccurate that I wanted to test people. That’s where the primordial therapy shit comes in, really. Maybe I was saying, ‘But am I as good as you think?’ Because it was a shock to have success, right? It wasn’t expected. So, what I did was pretend that I was nothing but a keen amateur. And what could be more amateur than this awful blue paper background?

This is where I go back to the question around the notion of auteurship. At one point it feels like you want to know if people are still listening to you. So, there is a need for provocation. Like, ‘OK this blue is a completely unexpected blue. Are you still following me? Do you still like my pictures?’

If I remember accurately, up until then I’d done everything in black and white, everything in daylight. And then I went for the opposite, which was overlit, in colour against colour. Kind of colour comparisons, like a colour conflict. In a way, it was perverse, but it was a test of whether I had any value at all. Because when you get trendy, which is what me and a few others had become, it’s destabilising. I don’t want to be part of a group. I don’t want to be seen as a trend. I just want to have an opportunity to continue.

In your work I see longevity, I see a trajectory rather than a beginning, middle and end. What's interesting is that you keep evolving. There is this kind of restlessness, a lust for life. I think your relationship with Guido [Palau] is very important. I know you are good friends, but at one point you were crafting images together where you knew that a piece of hair was also a way to express a feeling or an idea.

The culture that Guido and I both grew up in, our exposure to 'high' culture was pretty limited. We grew up in a period of accelerated pop culture in the UK, but things were still very small. In *Squaring the Circle* [a 2022 documentary film about music album art design studio Hipgnosis], Noel Gallagher very succinctly says that for a long time someone's record collection was akin to an art collection in some aristocratic estate. The kind of ideas that went into creating album art, purely in terms of design, style, photography, was a source of utter fascination for a lot of people my age. I'm glad that I was able to learn through that particular channel, because it went with this incredible musical soundtrack. There's this kind of liminal experience that you have because you're confused and drawn to the picture. You're informed by it, you become emotional about it, and then the music does a whole other thing for you. It fits into the rest of what is left on the scale of your emotions. It can literally make you a different person. When I discovered The Stooges, I thought I was the only person on the planet who had heard them. Of course, I wasn't, but I felt like that, and the fabric of my life completely disintegrated in front of me, and it became something else altogether, which made me a passionate person. Working with Guido, there was a language between the two of us because I knew he felt the same. We are completely different people, but we strove towards the same thing. For us, hair individuates people in our culture – from the 1970s through to the 1980s, we expressed ourselves through hair. We couldn't afford clothes, but you could hack away at your hair over a basin in your bathroom with a pair of scissors and put colour in it without having to spend much money at all. It was amazing how powerful that tool was.

It upset your parents, and it would get you expelled from school. You could literally get kicked out of school for dyeing your hair. It was like a political statement. It was people just reaching for the resources that they had. You were only a punk if you meant it. And if you meant it, you had to pay the price. When I got to London and saw what the queer community was doing – how they dressed up and how they were presenting themselves to a very staid and conservative country – it drove that fascination even more, because those people started to appear in style magazines alongside musicians. It's not to say that London was the first place where that had happened, it had been going on presumably in countless different cities for countless different decades, but that was what was in front of me.

I think you were the first to really deal with communicating the core expression of a human being, respecting every part of them. I'm interested, how do you express someone's inner self? This is what you did in a very natural and delicate way.

We were wanting to create something that was, for us, novel. Knowing full well that novelty wouldn't get us very far at all. We were still in a rebellious phase, let's say. We struggled in adolescence, we'd been given this platform, and I don't think we'd grown up quite enough to listen to criticism. We just went forward because we didn't have anything to lose. The idea of profit, aside from getting respect from your peers, was entirely foreign to us. We didn't get paid. Nor was that the objective. And look what happened! We were lucky enough to operate for long enough in a space where we didn't need it. We didn't need the advocacy of the higher-ups to tell us we were good. We had a clique, and we were having a good deal of fun just testing each other, to see just how much we could make in terms of the work.

'We didn't need the advocacy of the higher-ups to tell us we were good. We had a clique, and we were having a good deal of fun just testing each other.'

The way you related to pop culture, you and Guido, was a bit like, 'We have a band, and we have things to say, and we're not here to entertain you.' Maybe you didn't really intend to do this, but ultimately I feel this is why you're still around – it's because you still have something to say.

Failure has always, to a degree, been a close companion. A friend, ally, maybe. But, you know, it didn't always feel that way. Failure was something we were akin to. So we didn't require success. That connection that we gained through our insouciance was really fulfilling. It was

That's what I like about your work, that you keep repeating the same thing. I believe in the strength of repeating the same thing, and the same thing being distorted by repeating it. That's quite interesting as a strategy. I think once we had a discussion and you said, 'I need to attack the pictures.'

It's true, I said that. Attack the page!

This is your charm, you know? When you worked with [stylist] Anna Cockburn,[3] there were clothes that you made as you were taking the photos. There were clothes that you were putting on people that were cut so they could become a new shape. Then on top of that, you would add a bit of paint or colour, not to make it look cool or nice or trendy, but just because you were finishing the whole silhouette.

'Becoming successful put me too near the edge of failure. To unconsciously survive that, I imagined ways in which I could put people off my work.'

just that you can't do that forever. You can't say, 'I'm going to be insouciant forever.' What I can do is recall what's important, what's of value. Why do I love teaching people? Because it redresses this need that I have within myself to create something. A recent set of pictures I did where I dressed somebody up as Frankenstein – I don't think I've ever done a more absurd set of pictures – the meaning, the relevance of those pictures for me, probably ought to some degree remain private… But, you know, I might stumble across those motifs from time to time and I don't know why, but I've just got to dress somebody up as Frankenstein, and I've got to cast a young woman blowing down a tree. I've got to take a fake baby and throw it in the air. Once those pictures came out in the sequence that luckily someone else had managed to stitch together for me, suddenly I went, 'Oh Christ, look at what that means, that's actually really quite painful.' So, I'm very grateful that my pictures can appear in those magazines. I'm so lucky that, in spite of their absurdity, someone goes, 'Yes, OK, we'll give those a chance.' Because only once they've come out do I realise what the fuck they're about. Otherwise, it's just in your head and it doesn't become very clear. The pain of looking at those pictures is a clear indication to me that the work has value, but it's so deeply subjective that I can't expect, and I refuse to expect, anybody else to want to understand it.

Are you, like me, obsessed with Frankenstein? I'm obsessed with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the novel. Because it's about creating a double of yourself.

This desire to play, to hold sway over the person that you want people to think you are, that your ego designs. In doing that, Mary Shelley is probably also commenting on hyper-masculinity and her struggles in the face of patriarchy. I think there's a psychotherapeutic read on it, in that we all create a persona through which we think we're going to gain some control over the way people will appreciate or experience or review us. It's clear to Shelley there's an inevitable failure, that your authentic self can't be stitched together from different places, different influences. Hence why Frankenstein, the monster, is rejected wholesale because he's so deeply misunderstood. In particular I felt when I saw the film, this accidental murder of the young child that he commits because, in his mind, he's engaging in a game that he's just too big for... It's such a cripplingly sad scene and sends him on his way to oblivion. It's that moment that gives people justified reason to want to kill him. To want to send him off into the furthest reaches of the polar ice cap, because he's misunderstood. It's a really profound book for me.

And how do you find profundity?

I think you find profundity because you really connect. You see something in yourself, or in fiction, or in a story that someone else has given to you. Maybe a photograph can do the same thing. I don't think I'm just being falsely humble, but it's hard for me to imagine that anybody would get that from a photograph that I've made, but it's fine because it means that I can just carry on having a go at it.

I guess that was the homespun nature of the way Anna worked. I was always blown away by her thoughts and her approach. I wish that we could have collaborated more, but it was a very intense working relationship, and it was bound to end fairly quickly.

I believe in quick encounters, there are people like that.

Yes, and that was definitely one of them. When I was working alongside Anna, the important thing was to find some parity, some equality with her brilliance. So that was the challenge for me. I had to bring something from beyond the margins of the norms of what a fashion photograph was supposed to be. I was compelled to be more inventive with her. But it depends on what sound you make together. I always thought

that was a really good way to measure what was going to work or wasn't going to work, in my mind. As it came together, I felt like, 'Oh, what sound is it making?' All melody or no melody; whether it was dissonant or if it was tuneful. We were very different people. She was much more cerebral than I ever was. She was a very deep thinker, and I was more impulsive, more instinctual. When I say 'attack the page,' it's like: let's just seize the opportunity to grab it and reshape something. She worked more carefully with the opportunities that were presented and therefore was more subtle.

But, you know, maybe together we made a sound that shook people up a little bit. I think that was half the intention. I always wanted attention and I guess that was my funny, skewed way of courting it. It goes back to what I was saying before, like: let's see if you really think I'm good, then look at this, and if you still think that's good, maybe we're in with a chance. Anna did that in equal measure. As I said, she sort of really blew me away. It took me a good time to catch up with her, really. I probably never did, but it took me a while to absorb where she was coming from. Once I'd had that chance to review things, it would push me to bring something else. I think, if I'm right, the pictures you're talking about, I drew on and I created a little peanut character. And who is the peanut? You know, it's me.

If we are staying with the music business metaphor, you keep sending singles out into the world. We're entering a digital age, and you don't have a monograph of your work. This is why I'm very interested in your particular way of being an auteur, because normally an auteur puts out a book or something that compiles all of their work.

I think the thing is, if you were brought up as a working-class kid the way I was, you weren't told to have aspirations. What you had was your rebelliousness. In terms of this new age we're entering, I don't see a sophisticated way forward as to how to extrapolate more from the work that goes into a magazine. Don't forget, I don't have a social position with my work. There may be one, but it's intrinsically subjective. It's asking, 'Is there anyone else out there?' Whereas I think I see a lot of young photographers now positioning themselves socially in terms of a platform. You know, their medium is secondary to what they want to say socio-politically. I get that, and I support it. But does it make the work better? Not really. So, I think I've got to start trying to explore the medium, not for its own sake, but to explore if it could just say something better than I have found ways to say it in the past. If it's depleting the craft or its sophistication to a point where it takes on the refrain of something which is untrained and unsophisticated, known as 'amateur' photography, I don't have a problem with that. I like amateur photography as much as I like any so-called 'sophisticated' work. I don't believe in the camera possessing some kind of magical skillset to suddenly make you good or bad or whatever. It's just different. I think exploring the medium in terms of what extremes you can put it through was, for me, a very important part of working in analogue. But it's also a very important part for me of working in digital as well. They're totally different materials, but the approach is the same.

In your work there is no fetishism in relation to the medium. It's still a camera and you know how to handle the camera. I remember one point in your career where you were a bit lost – lost more in technical terms, disturbed by digital. Not because you were afraid of digital, but suddenly the tool you were using to record the world was not efficient.

The shift towards digital came, for me, after I'd actually taken a period of time away and not worked for a number of months. I came back and I suddenly found myself in a situation where I was almost forced, or obliged, to work digitally. At first I felt exposed because I didn't really understand it. It was very democratised. Suddenly the authority had kind of left the photographer and it had become more of a 'groupthink'. So you couldn't stitch your personal position into the idea. That was a real struggle for someone like me who'd grown up the way I had. It took a while. I was listening to John Cale talk about drone and his experiences working with La Monte Young [4] and I suddenly thought, 'Well, that's how digital is.' You know, we went from a very simple process to one which was enriched with all manner of different possibilities.

The turning point came when I realised that, even if I felt I no longer had a voice, I could still sit at home, take a picture of something as ordinary as a cup, and place it in a completely different context – suddenly that felt like a powerful act. I think I got very involved in the idea of data being a very flexible material. When we listen to one of our favourite guitar players, we're not expecting or wanting a bum note, but sometimes the bum note can become the most important note in a piece, and the feedback can lend something supersonic to a piece which might fall flat without it. So, I think the possibilities that exist in data are really important to the human imagination. In fact, they *are* the human imagination. It's the transition between reality and possibility. It's more akin to painting, except we still expect digital to perform the way a photograph did. So, once I felt like that, I thought, 'OK, I'm going to jump wholesale into just completely cutting pictures into shreds and seeing what emotions I discover putting dissonant elements together.' There's a wavelength that operates between photography and data. The way the lens looks at something, or the way you can make a frame through a lens on a particular item or a moment, and then put it through a digital machine, it gives you a second chance at adding an emotional layer to that. And I think once I'd come to terms with that, it became really exciting again.

Then the way the light was, it's almost like you constructed your own brush or your own hoover to suck up the surface of the world. So, do you see it like this?

I think the only answer I can give, really, is that there's a compulsion to explore. If we go back to what I said earlier about Arnold Newman and light, he couldn't light everybody in that same way. As an American Jew, he was bound to have a disposition for a German industrialist who'd been part and parcel of the German war machine, and this was his opportunity to utilise aspects of his craft or his practice to say something which was deep, profound and important to him. I think that finding something that is important is actually the only thing it takes to make art, right? True art. And I shouldn't be the commentator. I'm not trying to position myself as a sort of authority on that. But if someone gets it, great. If they don't, OK. Does that mean you stop? No. Because ultimately, you're talking through your medium to yourself. If you feel you need connection to dig beyond the troubled surface of your own complexities, then you will see it through the pen, or you will see it through a camera, or you'll see it through a paintbrush. If you're not getting there because your practice has become in some way banal to you, or you're just expected to perform and create it that way, then it is essential to change.

Sometimes you forget the essential qualities of change. We as humans cling to who or what we are and we're afraid of change. Luckily for me, I've got something I can play with that gives me the opportunity to practice in a way which is less consequential. Change, in reality, is a very difficult thing for us to face. I think there are many reasons that probably explain it better than I can, why we're so averse to change. You know, we stick to a fantasy of what works and we won't let it go under any circumstance. But I have a medium that is easy to manipulate and helps me go forward in terms of discovering something that, as I said earlier, much to my surprise, I kind of had no real true connection to.

I'm struck by how you collapse time and perspective – whether it's a girl emerging from a hole, a forest inside a studio, or an archive image that feels both staged and real. Can you talk about how you build these layered spaces?

I'm drawn to the way you remember things. But I think the point is that, for me – and this might sound trite but it isn't – I like to laugh when I'm working. I just want to be humoured by how preposterous it can all get.

Simply saying 'I'm having fun' doesn't mean much. But in your pictures, there seems to be a deeper impulse – to be human, to laugh, to feel extremes. Do you see your work as bringing everyone into those feelings with you?

The fantasy of the experience will drive the picture, right? I think you and I have been in situations where we've tested what those boundaries might be. We've been provocative, we've invented challenges to keep ourselves alert, critical, and engaged. You and I have done that to each other. I don't say that in a malicious way. We both know that sometimes there is a sort of drum roll to everything we do. It has to come out as a

'I like amateur photography as much as I like any so-called 'sophisticated' work. I don't believe in the camera possessing some kind of magical skillset.'

'The shift to digital came after I'd taken time away. At first I felt exposed. Suddenly authority had left the photographer and it became more 'groupthink'.'

mild performance because the energy that goes in will also resonate in the final reading of it. It's a circus. And, you know, you've got to come away from that thinking, 'Well, we did get somewhere, I don't know where it was, but we definitely got somewhere.' You can go to bed that night safe in the assumption that other people are going to pick up on that and that it will have achieved at least some kind of direction that will hopefully appear to give a sense of intrigue. That's very important to people like you and me. Sometimes that energy can be a little hard and challenging. It can even, in some cases, be destructive. But I think if we're on our game and we're working well together, then it's highly productive, and that has proven to be the case.

One last thing to discuss is your relationship to nudity. It's complex, but it feels like an important part of your work.
I would describe that part of my work as deeply adolescent. Without wanting to go into self-analysis, I think that probably would suggest that it requires some analysis. I haven't done it for the whole of my career. It's a part of what I do that came pretty late. I've utilised it to make points about photography and about desire through photography. It doesn't necessarily have to be my desire, but of course, once you start working that way, you experience it, like it or not. And that is adolescent because it's confused. Whether it has value, I don't know.

That's what I was interested in – because even if you're willing to work in underwear, like the guy with the black mask, it doesn't mean you're revealing yourself. You're still very protective of your inner self.
Exactly.

So when a naked or half-naked woman appears in your work, it feels more like citation than projection of your own desire.
You know what? I think it's really hard to take a really good naked photograph. Have I got anywhere near that? Probably not, if I'm being honest about it. I also think it's really hard to make a great landscape photograph. The two consist of the same thing, in that it's very difficult to intervene. It's very difficult to direct either of those two pictures. They can go all too easily into the form of a cliché. They can go really easily into the form of something which is kind of indifferent. I've tried them both, and I guess to some degree it's an exploration.

Since we're talking about adolescence, I wonder if there's a parallel in publishing. At *The Face* you were still inside someone else's world, but with *Arena Homme+* it feels like you decided to take ownership – as if to say, 'OK, this is mine.' Was that a kind of coming-of-age moment?
It was so easy to do that. The magazine had become about a very marginal, eroticised male image, which had gone tepid. Better practitioners had already described that kind of male beauty, and repeating it had become banal. That frustrated me, because my memory of the magazine was that it was highly erotic around the male. To repeat that constantly was, in a way, dishonouring the original creators of that universe. So I spoke to Ashley [Heath, *Arena Homme+* publisher] very briefly and said, 'I'm not interested in making images like that, but I will make a picture of an ordinary man. What would he look like? Where was he, what was the context? What was he thinking? Was he the hero? Probably not. But inside the camera, he becomes prominent.'

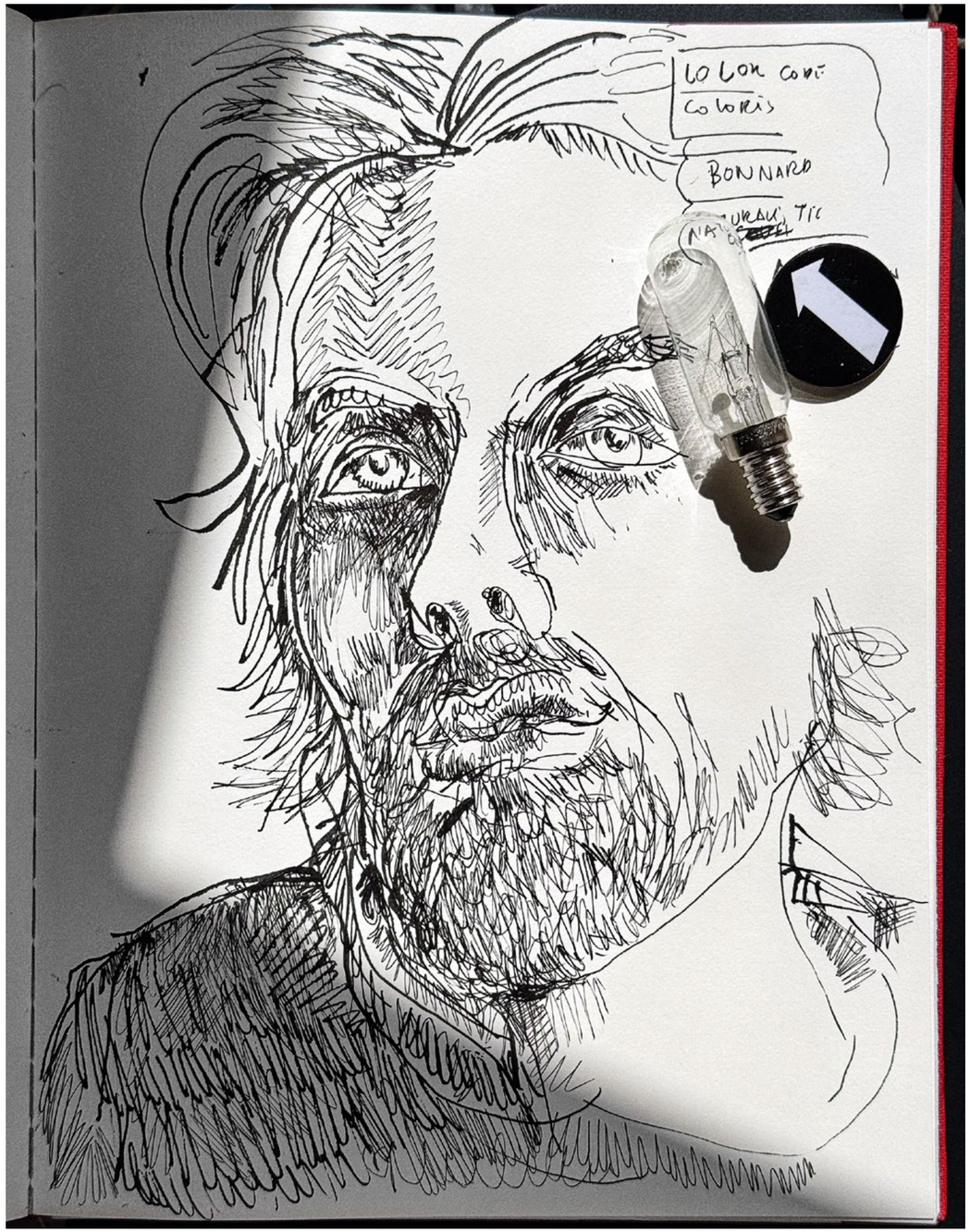
You really have a sense of wanting to preserve things. You can keep saying the same thing, but with a resistance to authorship. And where things have inspired you, you keep them alive in your own work.
It's like once in my life, I was warned by a teacher to not go looking for the meaning of life in a pop song. And you know what, my only answer to him was: that's all I've ever done. And it's all I'll ever want to do. So, the songs that stay with you cannot leave you. They just can't because they changed you. I think that sense of irritation with the norm or what is hegemonic entered me at some point, and I don't think I'm alone in thinking along that line. I think there's plenty of people who probably feel the same. But do they react, and do they have the good fortune to have a medium through which to explore that? I don't know, but I've got it, and I was given it when I was 17 years old. I'm inclined to be somewhat dramatic, but I think it's probably clear that it saved my life.

1. In his 1963 portrait of convicted Nazi war criminal Alfred Krupp, Jewish photographer Arnold Newman used stark lighting to carve harsh shadows across the face, heightening Krupp's features into a menacing, almost demonic presence. The effect was so unsettling that Newman himself described feeling the hair rise on his neck as he shot it.

2. The Larkspur blue backdrop became a defining feature of David Sims' 1990s imagery, establishing a recognisable visual signature in his work.

3. In the 1990s and early 2000s, David Sims and Anna Cockburn worked together on editorials for the biggest style titles of the era, many of which appeared in *The Face*, ushering in a new era of pared back, yet gutsy styling and fashion photography.

4. In 1963, classically trained Welsh musician John Cale moved to New York and began performing in La Monte Young's minimalist avant-garde musical ensemble Theatre of Eternal Music – playing 'drone' sounds on a viola which were characterised by their mesmerising and repetitive nature. The following year, Cale met a young songwriter from Long Island called Lou Reed and the pair began experimenting with dark rock songs infused with improvised 'drone' sounds, for what would become tracks such as 'Venus in Furs' and 'Heroin' for the band the duo formed – the Velvet Underground.

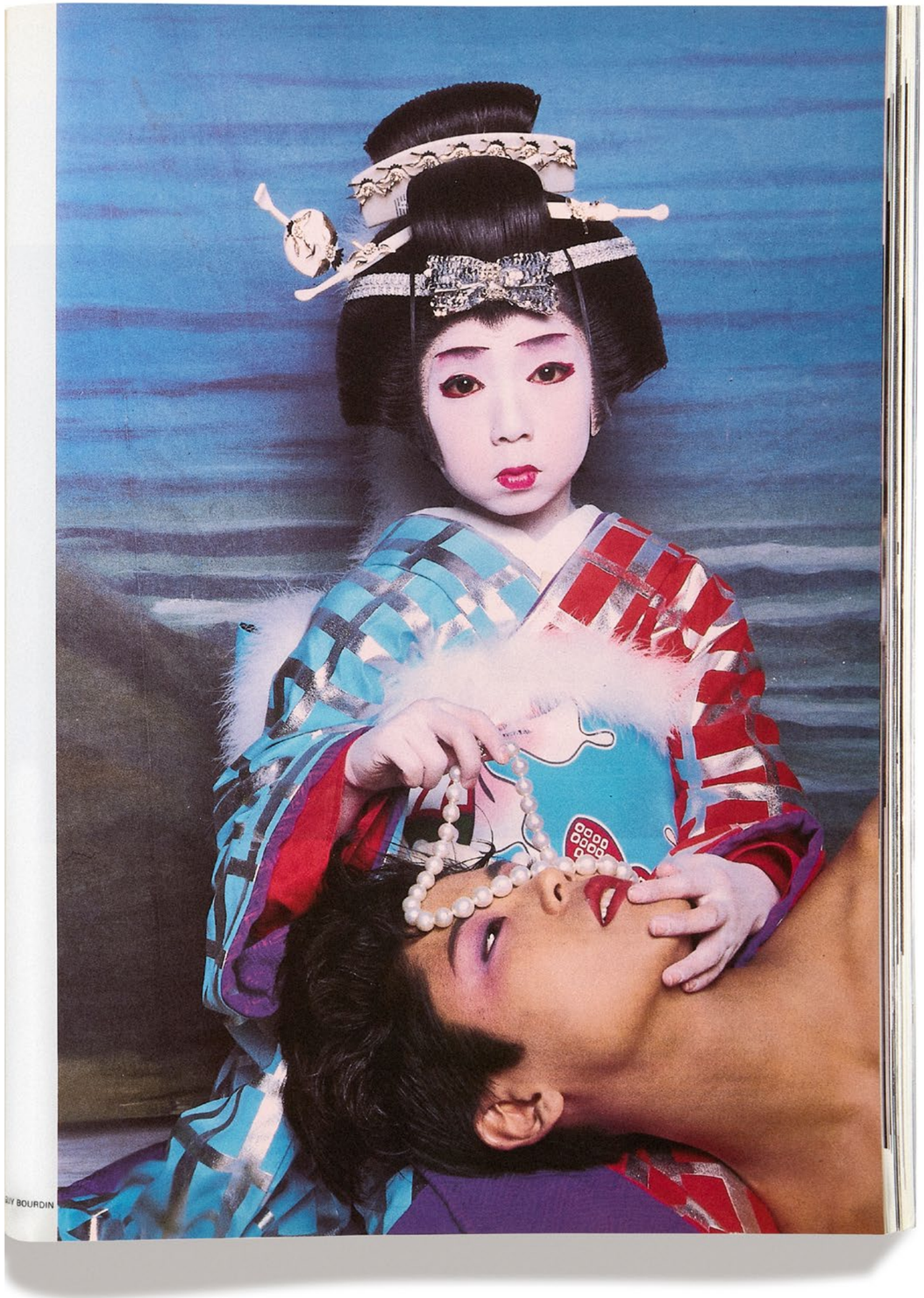


David Sims, 'I Light You Madly', by Mathias Augustyniak, 2025.
Drawn during the interview, 25 July, 2025.
(Title also serves as Mathias' informal title for the interview)

On the road with Guy Bourdin for *Vogue Paris*

‘What was extraordinary about Bourdin was that you could take him anywhere and he’d manage to take a photo that was exceptional, completely modern, and totally unique to him.’

Text and interviews by Jérôme Gautier



2) les articles de luxe et haut de gamme sont vendus par l'intermédiaire de boutiques spécialisées d'un style également classique ;

3) les articles plus typés portant la griffe du styliste qui les a conçus, sont distribués par l'intermédiaire de réseaux de boutiques franchisées ou par le truchement de "corners" dans les grands magasins

4) articles bon marché destinés à la clientèle jeune.

Les tendances de ces dernières années peuvent être résumées de la manière suivante :

Les articles appartenant aux catégories 1 et 2 ont tendance à stagner alors que ceux, plus typés de la 3ᵉ et de la 4ᵉ catégorie connaissent un développement croissant. L'analyse des bénéfices des principaux fabricants révèle que ces entreprises possèdent dans leur équipe des "designers" de talent et à forte personnalité. Ainsi Yuuji Ookusu qui dirige Bigi, ou Mitsuhiro Matsuda dont la sphère d'activité se situe à New York, la maison Italiya de Kikuchi, Issey Miyake International, Comme des Garçons ; ces 5 noms sont des "designers-makers". Certes, ils n'atteignent pas les chiffres des grands fabricants, mais leurs bénéfices sont souvent supérieurs. Les "designers-makers" conçoivent et diffusent une mode originale et chère qui correspond exactement aux exigences de leur clientèle, d'où leur succès. Néanmoins, s'ils étaient privés du support de vente en dépôt, leur réussite ne serait pas complète.

Ce mode de vente semble particulier au Japon. En effet, tous les articles présentés artistiquement en vitrine n'appartiennent pas en réalité aux grands magasins, ces derniers ne font que mettre en location pour une durée déterminée un emplacement, un point de vente au profit d'un fabricant. Les vendeurs sont également délégués par l'entreprise et avec les employés du grand magasin, ils contribuent à sa renommée. Ce système de consignation s'applique aux articles de mode, mais aussi à la plupart des marchandises. Ainsi tous les risques liés à une baisse de prix sur des marchandises soldées ainsi que la dégradation qu'il pourrait en résulter pour l'image de marque, sont supportés par le fabricant.

C'est la raison pour laquelle les bénéfices des fabricants qui diffusent leur marque par le canal des grands magasins (en fait, les articles ne sont que consignés) sont relativement bas par rapport au chiffre d'affaires général réalisé et surtout par rapport aux bénéfices réalisés par les "designer-makers". L'avantage des grands magasins réside dans la possibilité de grands débits mais les marges bénéficiaires sont réduites. De nombreuses entreprises se sont déjà détachées de ce système pour s'appuyer exclusivement sur le canal des boutiques spécialisées. *(Suite page 288)*

GUY BOURDIN

Page de gauche, ensemble tailleur en crêpe de laine, à jupe évasée, avec une blouse en soie façonnée assortie et porté sous un manteau en cachemire à col châle. Hanae Mori, Tokyo, Paris. Maquillage Tatsumi pour Kanebo. Coiffure Tetsu pour Mod's Hair. Photo prise à Asakusa, un des quartiers populaires de Tokyo. Les enfants portent les masques symboliques de la fête japonaise.
Ci-dessus, ensemble costume masculin avec grand blazer à carreaux, porté sur un pantalon en flanelle et un chemisier imprimé cachemire. Yoshie Inaba pour Bigi. Sur le lit, manteau de vison de Yoshie Inaba. Maquillage Tatsumi pour Kanebo. Coiffure Tetsu pour Mod's Hair. Photo prise dans la chambre de l'Hôtel Impérial à Tokyo.

Certaines entreprises ont remporté un grand succès en introduisant des noms occidentaux tels que Courrèges, Per Spook, Christian Aujard, Georges Rech, Lancetti et Tokio Kumagai (chaussures). C'est avec le concours de la Sté Itokin (Pdg M. K. Tsujimura, Directeur Général M. T. Nishigaki) que Hiroko Koshino diffusée et distribuée par Itokin, a installé ses boutiques dans les meilleurs quartiers de Paris, New York et Milan.

Contrairement aux grandes entreprises qui misent sur le volume pour réaliser un gros chiffre d'affaires, Itokin mise sur des modèles personnalisés diffusés par des boutiques spécialisées. Il est le seul, à travers le monde, à exploiter plus de 60 marques. Ce mode d'exploitation lui permet de réaliser un bénéfice plus important que celui des grands magasins. Même au niveau du chiffre d'affaires, il arrive à atteindre des chiffres proches de ces derniers. Tout en évitant de passer par le canal classique de vente, il réussit à se créer une place de choix, grâce à sa politique "qualité-originalité", parmi les rares grands de l'industrie du vêtement, son chiffre d'affaires annuel est de 3 milliards de FF.

Top Mode Internationale est un autre fabricant, spécialisé dans la maille, réputé pour ses coordonnés et pour le soin apporté aux finitions des articles qui sont pourtant destinés à une clientèle jeune. Son dynamique et jeune Pdg M. T. Tanaka pratique la méthode commerciale dite de division mise au point par Itokin et si son chiffre d'affaires de 430 millions de FF n'est pas encore spectaculaire, il n'en reste pas moins une belle réussite.

Dans les années 70, période de forte croissance, le canal des grands magasins présentait l'intérêt d'un écoulement à gros débit. En revanche, dans une période de faible croissance, il est plus avantageux de diffuser des articles de qualité sous un volume plus réduit. Néanmoins, la méthode de vente dite de consignation, pratiquée par les grands magasins, représente un intérêt non négligeable dans certains cas. Elle est intéressante notamment pour les boutiques qui exploitent des articles de marques renommées importées directement de France. Par l'intermédiaire de ces boutiques, cela permet aux "makers" d'avoir un contact plus direct avec la clientèle et de mieux connaître ses besoins.

C'est ainsi que le monde des affaires de la mode japonais, tout en livrant une bataille acharnée entre les différents styles, consolide sa base économique et représente une des industries prépondérantes du Japon. Mais, désormais, la bataille finale à laquelle se livrent les grands de l'industrie du vêtement japonais est la conquête des marchés européen et américain; bataille d'ores et déjà bien engagée.

AKIRA ODA (SENKEN)
Traduit du japonais par
Marthe Saas-Yamazaki

Ci-contre, Sayoko porte un tailleur en velours noir à basque longue décollée, et jupe arrivant sous le genou. World. Accessoires World. Photo prise dans le célèbre salon de thé Toraya, à Tokyo, fournisseur de l'Empereur depuis le XV[e] siècle. Toraya a également ouvert un salon de thé à Paris, il y a trois ans, rue Saint Florentin, où l'on peut goûter les fameuses pâtisseries impériales. Maquillage Sakae Tomikawa pour Shiseido. Coiffure Tetsu pour Mod's Hair.

GUY BOURDIN

Ho est ici maquillée par Tatsumi pour Kanebo avec un maquillage de fête de Kanebo Palette. Fond de teint compact Kanebo PO-B1 ; sur les joues Kanebo RS-01. Ombres à paupières Duo Kanebo VI-04 et WN-03. Rouge à lèvres Kanebo RD-10. Coiffure Tatsumi pour Mod's Hair. Bouquets "caniche" ou l'art floral humoristique japonais.

COMME DES GARÇONS

On ne fait pas une interview de Rei Kawakubo, on reste à l'affût de bribes infimes de mots à peine articulés, d'une phrase qui n'aboutira pas... Elle est assise, frêle, le visage nu et pâle, comme perdue sur la plage du profond sofa moelleux, au centre d'une immense pièce vide et noire où chaque bruissement s'effrite dans son propre écho. Dans le magnétophone, il ne subsistera plus rien, que la confusion d'un frôlement de voix mêlées à quelques rires.

— Je vous ai vue hier à ce cocktail en l'honneur de X, dans le fourreau de votre robe noire, vous cherchiez à vous blottir dans un coin du salon...

— Oui, je vais peu aux mondanités, je préfère la solitude.

Parce qu'elle est née à Tokyo, par contraste, Rei Kawakubo rêve à la nature, à la terre et aux arbres... à la place des grands buildings qui ravagent les paysages urbains...

— La destructuration de vos vêtements me fait tout de même penser à l'anarchie architecturale de Tokyo.

Elle sursaute, surprise par la comparaison. Elle ne forme jamais ni théorie, ni concept...

Rei Kawakubo a elle-même aménagé son univers, feutré et doux comme les matières qu'elle utilise, dans le ventre d'un immeuble situé en plein quartier de la mode. Un staff fidèle, discret, et dont l'efficacité est à n'en pas douter redoutable, l'entoure, la protège a-t-on envie de dire. Mais c'est elle qui tient sa société au chiffre d'affaires gonflé de zéros, à la manière japonaise : chaque lundi, un quart d'heure plus tôt que les autres jours, elle passe en revue ses 90 employés et donne les directives pour la semaine. Et c'est ici qu'elle crée la ligne de ses vêtements singuliers qui paraissent entretenir un rapport individuel avec l'espace. Comme un mobile qu'un corps viendra bientôt habiter.

— Je ne travaille pas sous le coup d'une stimulation extérieure mais au fur et à mesure de l'élaboration...

Je pense une forme puis j'en confie la réalisation. Elle sait passer d'une pièce à l'autre, infatigable, en reprenant le travail là où elle l'a laissé...

— L'asymétrie ? C'est ce qui m'a permis d'extraire de l'harmonie classique du vêtement, la silhouette que j'avais imaginée...

Je souhaite que le vêtement que j'ai créé ait un impact, qu'il soit porté avec plaisir, et s'il le peut, soit une stimulation...

— Une stimulation pour aider la femme japonaise a trouver son indépendance ?

— Oui, je pense qu'une femme indépendante "tombe" sur un vêtement "Comme des Garçons"... bien que la plupart aujourd'hui portent mes créations simplement à cause de la mode.

Elle évoque à peine les débuts, difficiles, lorsque les boutiques refusaient ses couleurs. C'est vrai, que le noir est presque absent de la nouvelle rue japonaise éclaboussée de couleurs... où une silhouette "Comme des Garçons" se détache avec effronterie.

— Il y a pourtant du noir au Japon : les toits, les haies, entre les maisons, les laques... mais elle évoque là un Japon ancien et secret, celui de "l'Eloge de l'ombre" de Tanizaki. C'est sans doute l'univers que Rei Kawakubo affectionne, même si elle est entièrement tournée vers l'avenir...

PROPOS RECUEILLIS PAR CORINNE BRET

Ci-contre, robe longue drapée en jersey de laine. Comme des Garçons par Rei Kawakubo au Japon et à Paris. Accessoires Comme des Garçons. Photo prise dans le show-room de Comme des Garçons à Tokyo, décoré par Rei Kawakubo. Sur le mur, panneaux de laque façon acier signé Rei Kawakubo. Maquillage Sakae Tomikawa pour Shiseido. Coiffure Tetsu pour Mod's Hair.

GUY BOURDIN

YOHJI YAMAMOTO

Après Kenzo, le précurseur, venu à Paris en 1971, Issey Miyake qui le premier a donné aux Parisiens la notion des belles matières, les Japonais ont aujourd'hui plusieurs chefs de file sur la scène française parmi lesquels la mystérieuse Rei Kawakubo styliste de Comme des Garçons et Yohji Yamamoto (à ne pas confondre avec Kansai Yamamoto). A 40 ans, Yohji vit enfin à l'échelon international. Ce personnage grave et silencieux à la barbe noire, qui fait plus penser à l'un des sages des romans de Mishima qu'à un créateur de prêt-à-porter, dessine ses collections comme l'on écrit un conte philosophique. Toiles froissées, cotons chiffonnés, tissages d'inspiration ethnique ou cuirs poncés : toute matière prête à la création, tout le pousse à inventer. Les formes inspirées du geste minimal du théâtre Nô restent austères et rigoureuses avec une ampleur propre à montrer la qualité des tissus. Les matières sont des trames de fils travaillées, triturées. A une coupe raffinée, il attribue une matière brute et primitive sans jamais aucun décalage dans les résultats. En 1976, il crée à Tokyo sa propre maison de prêt-à-porter après avoir travaillé dans celle de sa mère. Mais avant, il y avait eu un séjour à Paris, dans plusieurs ateliers de style et un souci de développer à la fois la mode masculine et féminine. Conserver l'aspect naturel des tissus et aller à l'essentiel sont les deux démarches de Yohji qui a voulu bousculer la structure traditionnelle des vêtements pour jouer des asymétries, des jeux optiques.

Aujourd'hui, il est vendu dans près de trente boutiques en Europe — à Florence, Turin, Stuttgart, Londres, Paris et Bordeaux — et a quatre vingts points de vente franchisés au Japon. Pour ses défilés au Japon, il loue un stade qui contient 8 000 personnes : les modèles sont toujours proches du noir par opposition aux couleurs chatoyantes de la rue japonaise ; mais aussi parce que sa mère veuve très jeune, a toujours porté le deuil et l'a donc habitué dès l'âge de deux ans aux couleurs sombres et à leur force. Cet adepte de la religion Zen considère que les vêtements ne sont qu'une réflection de la vie qui est triste. Aussi doivent-ils créer un effet dramatique le plus fort possible. Dans ses modèles pour hommes comme pour femmes, c'est le contraste des matières et des imprimés — très sobres — qui compte. La pureté jusqu'au bout des fils.

Ci-contre, manteau en lainage à grands carreaux fendu dans le dos, porté sur un jumpsuit imprimé coordonné. Yohji Yamamoto au Japon et à Paris. Accessoires Yohji Yamamoto. Maquillage Sakae Tomikawa pour Shiseido. Coiffure Tetsu pour Mod's Hair. Photo prise dans le show-room de Yohji Yamamoto à Tokyo.

GUY BOURDIN

Sayoko maquillée par Sakae Tomikawa pour Shiseido, maquillage "velours" Shiseido Moisture mist. Fond de teint velours 01 Ivory. Sur les yeux, Eye Shadow P. F 101 Forest Green. Crayon pour les yeux, Eye-Shaping Pencil 256, 156. Mascara, auto mascara 71. Sur les lèvres, lipstick 209. Coiffure Tetsu pour Mod's Hair. Sayoko porte un blouson tableau de Kansai Yamamoto, au Japon et à Paris. Photo prise devant la vitrine du "Pop Bar", passage Takeshita-Dori à Tokyo.

GUY BOURDIN

Guy Bourdin loved the sky. He would ask for clouds and stars to be set up in the studio – sometimes even the moon. He'd also venture outside and look upwards, always happy to invite passing aeroplanes into his images. He could wait for hours for a happy accident to occur, because he knew he'd always get what he wanted.

The first long-distance journey Bourdin took was in 1948 to Dakar, Senegal, for his military service as a photographer in the Air Force. The desire to both travel and take photographs never left him. His first professional trip was to Cala Piccola, in Italy – described in *Vogue Paris* (May 1961) as 'an unspoiled wild coastline'. But Bourdin was already dreaming of a very different destination: New York. He was sent there in the spring of 1966, alongside his *Vogue Paris* accomplice Francine Crescent (who, at the time, was the magazine's improbably titled fabrics, leathers and furs editor) and the top model Nicole de Lamargé. Guy photographed de Lamargé wearing a 50/50 mix of French *prêt-à-porter* and American ready-to-wear: in the streets and avenues of Manhattan, on and under the Brooklyn Bridge, in the subway, and in the back of a limo. Nicole also posed with the kings of Pop Art: Rosenquist, Indiana, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann, and then with… Batman. The result: 38 pages of comic book-style adventures in *Vogue Paris*' August 1966 issue. Bourdin couldn't wait to get back out on the road again.

In Paris, he set about constructing his own world: a surreal universe built within his cavernous lair in the Marais and at Studio Vogue on the Place du Palais-Bourbon. Francine, now promoted to editor-in-chief since their New York escapade, worshipped Guy and gleefully encouraged his latest audacious exploits in her pages. By doing so, she brought glory to *Vogue* – the big, bold and grandiose jewel of 1970s Paris, in what would also become Bourdin's golden age.

There were his photos taken from behind closed doors, and then those shot when he escaped the studio: the on-location shoots. Firstly in Normandy, at La Chapelle, which offered up an unassuming house that he'd inherited from his grandmother, as well as the beach, the railway, green grass, and the cliffs of Étretat.[1] Bourdin found the shoreline's wind and rain deeply inspiring. Another elemental figure, the sun, would rouse him to shoot the summer swimsuit collections in the winter months, capturing them in Martinique in 1974, then in Los Angeles in 1976, and in Miami during the winter holidays of late 1977. Guy was as smitten with the city's Fontainebleau Hotel as he was with Paris' *palaces*. He also loved returning to the mountains, such as Hallstatt in Austria, which he'd once cycled to in his youth.

By 1981, Guy Bourdin was both at the peak of his career and at his lowest point in life. His wife, Sybille, had committed suicide. Pummelled by life and with the taxman on his back, he was desperate to get out of France. To flee, if not to completely escape, his woes. So the *Vogue Paris* team began sending him off on more peripatetic assignments than ever before; some in France, others further afield. He travelled many a time with the magazine's fashion editors Martine de Menthon, Barbara Baumel and Marie-Amélie Sauvé, and its 'artistic advisor' Patrick Hourcade.

In the following interviews, the one-time travel companions share their memories of these epic journeys taken with Bourdin for *Vogue Paris*. To illustrate their recollections, we have selected a single Guy Bourdin story that encapsulates their experiences: the avant-garde fashion of the 1980s Japanese designers, photographed in Tokyo by Bourdin, and published in *Vogue Paris*' November 1984 issue.

Jérôme Gautier: Was travelling good for Guy Bourdin?

Patrick Hourcade: Yes. Guy needed to externalise his feelings, to escape.

'When you travelled with Guy, you had to be with him *all* the time. For lunch, for dinner. There was no question of saying, 'Right, I'm off to bed now.''

Barbara Baumel: It took him out of the comfort of the studio and his daily life in Paris. As a team, we functioned like a family. He loved travelling, it made him happy.

Marie-Amélie Sauvé: When you travelled with him, you had to be with him *all* the time. You had lunch with him, dinner with him. There was no question of saying, 'I'm off to bed now.' He expected *total* dedication. We were a close-knit group and the atmosphere was very good-natured. A bit like summer camp. I was good at doing imitations of people in those days, and so I'd imitate Guy which made him laugh. He loved those moments of just hanging out and relaxing.

Barbara: It was very joyful. Guy loved to have fun. For example, he'd have everyone on the team pick up a camera and take a photo at the same time as him. Then he'd mix up the films and develop it all himself. He made me laugh, and I made him laugh too. We really clicked, we had a great rapport.

Did he make you cry too?

Barbara: No. Never.

Martine de Menthon: He was a very, very unusual character. He could be extremely unpleasant, dismissing people he didn't like, and, conversely, be very gentle and generous to those people he loved. Guy loved it when you made him laugh, or when you had fun together. He was a big kid who perhaps had a desire to distract himself a little. He had experienced terrible tragedies in his life, and there was a period when he just stopped working altogether. There is a 'before' and an 'after'.

'In Venice, Guy woke us all up in the middle of the night, wanting to take a photo in the cemetery, on a bridge, in the fog, in the freezing cold.'

When did this break occur?

Martine: At the time of his wife's suicide. That explains a lot about Guy's work. Before then, *anything* went; everything was crazy, everything was free. And then after that: 'Can I do that? Do you think I should do it? I'm going too far here, aren't I, Martine?' Afterwards, he always seemed afraid.

Marie-Amélie: Guy had an extremely childish side to him, in my opinion. There was something very sacred about him, and Francine [Crescent], like everyone else, held him in very high regard. But at the same time, you were dealing with a kid. For me, it was always a very ambivalent relationship.

Barbara: He taught me lightness, and the idea of not turning anything into a big drama; to work hard while always remaining straightforward; to cultivate a sense of irreverence; and to believe that nothing is impossible. He often asked for things that I thought were impossible – and yet they always ended up happening.

Marie-Amélie: Everything had to be possible. I remember Francine telling me, back when I was an assistant: 'When Guy asks for something, you have to say yes.'

Barbara: My first trip was for a fur story shot at the thermal baths in Baden-Baden. I was [fashion editor] Franceline Prat's assistant, and only 17 years old. Guy said to me [imitating his nasal voice and deadpan tone]: 'Miss, you're going to change into a swimsuit.' I turned to Franceline and whispered, 'There's *no* way I'm putting on a swimsuit and jumping into the pool.' She replied, 'Honey, we're not asking for your opinion. You're doing it.' So I ended up in a swimsuit, alongside the models, and he made me dive in countless times to get his photo. Because I was a kid, he deliberately teased me; he loved to provoke and make me blush. He was both shy and modest, but also very provocative and mischievous.

Patrick: He could be ironic, bordering on cynical.

Martine: He needed to create space around him that people couldn't invade because he was incredibly sensitive.

Could he become a nightmare, especially when travelling?

Barbara: One time in Venice, he went completely crazy. Usually, we'd go away for about a fortnight, sometimes even a month; he loved to take his time to soak up the country. But for this particular trip on the Orient Express, we were only away for four days, which freaked him out. On the way there it wasn't too bad. He took a few photos on the train. We all slept a bit. Then we arrived in Venice. Things hadn't been going well with Franceline: they weren't seeing eye to eye on the shoot and the atmosphere was very tense. Guy woke us all up in the middle of the night wanting to take a photo in the cemetery, on a bridge, in the fog, in the freezing cold. Then he photographed one of the models in one of the hotel's boats. But it was all complicated. He thought everything was ugly and threw away the film because he wasn't happy. On the train back to Paris he made us work all night. He went completely bonkers. He had one of the models pose for photos in the toilets. And poor Thibault Vabre [the make-up artist] was told to dress up as a train controller, posing in this rather awkward scenario with a model in lingerie. Then, to top it all off, we arrived at Gare de Lyon at 7am, after a sleepless night, and Guy announced he immediately wanted to continue shooting. Franceline was completely fed up and just left. The two models were exhausted, and the hair stylist and make-up artist finally said, 'That's it, we can't take any more, we're off as well!'

Is that why you can't see the models' heads in those pictures?

Barbara: Yes. He asked me to go fetch some suitcases from the Orient Express and have the models put their heads inside them so no one would see they hadn't been made up or had their hair done. I'll never forget it. Guy was *awful*!

In the end, I just said to him, 'I never want to see you again, or hear from you, or work with you.' And I left. Next thing, I received 10 kilos of chocolate, 15 bouquets of flowers and 50 apology notes from him. That was the only trip that I'd say was truly hellish.

Who chose the destinations?

Martine: We let Francine decide, but of course we had the choice of whether or not to go.

Barbara: Sometimes it was [*Vogue Paris* publishing director] Robert Caillé's choice. He was the one who chose Haiti.

Patrick: The *Vogue* trips were just money-making exercises. They weren't for sightseeing. The trip to Tokyo, for example, was paid for by make-up brands. It was also done with a view to launching *Vogue* in Japan.

meeting in his office, 'So Guy, where do you want to go next?', he looked at me and replied: 'To the Gers.'

Once the destination had been decided, and one or two fashion editors assigned, how was the trip organised?

Martine: We were basically ditched. That's really the word for it – we had to fend for ourselves! But we were given artistic freedom with the photographer, which was both wonderful and absolutely unheard of. We could be irreverent, no one stopped us. As soon as we arrived somewhere, the concept for Guy was always about 'discovery'.

Patrick: Guy was very knowledgeable. Before leaving for Tokyo, he had heard about a theatre in the suburbs where a child actor was performing.[2] He asked to attend the play, and the

real discovery. For five or six days, we'd set off in a van – sometimes I would drive, sometimes an assistant would. The clothes were hanging up in the back; the models already had their hair and make-up done, just in case. Sometimes we'd all be ready to go and Guy would say: 'I'm not feeling inspired today, I don't feel like working.' So we didn't work. But everything was ready to go. I loved those moments when we were just wandering around, not knowing where we were going, setting off in one direction, turning back in the other direction, in a kind of aimless drift. In Haiti, we stayed for an entire month because our suitcases didn't arrive for the first eight days. During that time, we just travelled around the island in search of inspiration. Everyone pitched in and sometimes posed. In the photos Guy took on the Virgin Islands, for example, you can see the make-up artist Brigitte Reiss-Andersen posing in one of the pictures. She hadn't eaten for three days to fit into the outfit. Hair stylist Raymond [Camacho] also appears. And Guy would ask me to hold the reflector, even though I had no idea about lighting. It was never right, of course, and he would yell at me and tell me I was useless. So I'd throw the reflector in his face and remind him that I was a stylist, not a photographer's assistant. Guy and I often bickered.

In reality, it was much simpler than it seems when you look at the glamour of the images.

Marie-Amélie: It was luxurious and not luxurious at the same time. We stayed in small, low-key hotels. In France, they certainly weren't *palaces*. In the Pyrenees, we just ate in little bistros.

Barbara: Guy loved those little eateries, he was very down to earth.

Marie-Amélie: Yet it was also *very* luxurious in the sense that we had an entire week to take the photos. Time was a luxury.

Barbara: In principle, we had a fortnight to travel and cover one or two stories, roughly 12 to 14 pages. But today, when I look at the story from Los Angeles, I just think to myself: 'I can't believe we spent two weeks travelling to produce five pages!'

Did you ever run out of time?

Barbara: No. I was never stressed; I always knew Guy would deliver. I trusted him completely.

Martine: And time had nothing to do with money – there *was* no money!

Marie-Amélie: It was the school of being 'enterprising'. We'd scout locations and he would say [imitating Bourdin]: 'Right, let's take a photo right here.' And you'd be thinking to yourself: 'He's mad, what's he going to do with that?' But he'd manage to transform something banal into something extraordinary. Like paintings. He knew how to elevate a place, even when it was just some old wall. When we went to Sierra Leone – which, by the way, wasn't particularly beautiful; I didn't see the point in going – he found a rusty boat wreck. I thought to myself, 'Where on earth is he taking me? He's mad.' I didn't see the same thing he did. For him, it was a painting. That's when I thought to myself: 'He's a real artist.' What was extraordinary about Bourdin was that you could take him to the middle of nowhere in France and he'd manage to take a photo that was exceptional, totally unique to him, and that was completely modern for its time. The trip to the Pyrenees, with Barbara and I, was incredible. His photos from there are like paintings. He *was* a painter, he was a draughtsman. You could see it, he always had images and scenes in his head.

Barbara: He kept sketchbooks in which he'd draw the photos he wanted to take. He would look for locations, stop, and jot down his ideas. In Martinique, for example, he spotted an area at the foot of Mount Pelée. He wanted to set up a picnic scene there with the models [Mounia and Nahanni]. He drew the scene and I wrote down: 'photo, picnic,' and then I'd think about the clothes that would fit that particular image. Nothing was left to improvisation.

Marie-Amélie: I'd be thinking to myself, 'What clothes would look best in front of this rusty boat wreck?'

Did he have a say in the choice of clothes?

Barbara: No, and I never had any problems with styling with him, although it must be said that we always went along with his ideas, except for the special 'Fashion Collections' issues. What Guy loved most of all was photographing swimsuits, and this idea of the Lolita, the pin-up, the doll look – those 'Bourdin codes'.

How did you go about selecting your looks beforehand?

Marie-Amélie: *Vogue* had its advertisers. All the major ones, but some pretty awful ones as well, so we hired geniuses to photograph them. We had to have these star photographers in order to make each and every piece of clothing look beautiful. Some had to be given a certain 'twist', and to do that we had to find someone who could create the right *mise-en-scène*. Something awful became something completely sublime when seen by the eye of an artist. And so *Vogue* was really based on photography.

Did *Vogue Paris* allow photographers to freely express their style?

Barbara: Yes. At the time, photographers were given *carte blanche*. No one asked them what they were going to do. It's nothing like today, where everything is so tightly controlled that an editorial story can look more like an advertising campaign.

Patrick: There was real magic, real passion. It was *Vogue*... It wasn't 'fashion'. What we loved most was creating images, working either with photographers we adored or those we'd discovered. We never talked about fashion… Ever! *Vogue Paris* was something else entirely, it was beyond fashion.

Marie-Amélie: *Vogue* didn't shape my fashion sense, because I was young – about 18 or 20 years old – so I considered 'fashion' to be something old-fashioned. But at the same time, *Vogue* taught me everything from a photographic point of view, because it was seen through the eyes of great photographers, such as [Helmut] Newton and Bourdin. In Sierra Leone, it was my first ever fashion series as an editor. Well, I was more like an assistant, and they must have said, 'Let's

'In Haiti, we stayed for an entire month because our suitcases got lost for eight days. During that time, we criss-crossed the island in search of ideas.'

'When we went to Sierra Leone, Guy found a rusty boat wreck. For him, it was like a painting. That's when I thought to myself: 'Bourdin's a real artist.''

Barbara: We'd also ask Guy where he wanted to go, and he often decided. For example, we went to Hallstatt, because he loved that place and used to spend his holidays there. Martinique was also his choice: he was madly in love with Mounia, the model, who had successfully charmed him into organising a trip entirely centred around her. Except that Guy, true to his rather mischievous self, decided to bring a second model along, a blonde [Nahanni Johnstone], who was the complete opposite of Mounia. Mounia was furious and was horrible to the other girl. I remember one time we went to Sydney because his assistant, Sean [Brandt], was Australian. And around that time I met my future husband, but he'd had to leave Paris to go do an internship in the Gers. Guy knew this, and when Francine asked during a Japan correspondent for *Vogue Paris,* Hiroko [Matsumoto-Berghauer], replied, 'Oh, of *course*, Guy.' She was very taken with Bourdin. So we attended the performance and afterwards he took a photo with the child actor along with the model [Jun Kano]. Guy had also been told the story of the statue of a dog at Shibuya station.[3] The atmosphere of this series in Tokyo is somewhere between Edward Hopper and David Lynch... [Gesturing to one of the photos.] And now here we're in Fellini's world!

Barbara: When we arrived in a country, Guy always said, 'I can't start working right away like this, not without seeing the country first.' He would buy postcards, and we'd criss-cross the country, wandering around and visiting places. Each time, it was an epic adventure, a

give all the crap stuff to the little girl.' But what's incredible is that we actually said, 'Guy will do it, because he has that eye...'. Although, to be honest, they're not Guy's best photos.

Did you have a clear idea of the images Bourdin was going to take?
Marie-Amélie: Yes, because with him the Polaroid was *very* similar to what he'd actually photograph. You knew exactly what you were going to get because he was very precise. Whereas with someone like Arthur Elgort, you wouldn't know. That's why I held onto Guy's Polaroids. I still have a few of them today, because they were amazing.

After so many faraway destinations for swimwear, why did you end up at the Dune du Pilat... In France?

'When the tax authorities seized his passport it really got to him. He was no longer allowed to leave France. For him, this free spirit, it was terrible.'

Barbara: It was because his passport had been seized by the tax authorities. It really got to him, because he was no longer allowed to leave France. For him, this free spirit, it was terrible. So we ended up going to the Dune du Pilat. I remember one shoot where it was pouring with rain the whole time, and we ended up taking photos with umbrellas in them – the models wearing swimsuits in the rain!

Did he have any particular favourite models to take on the trips?
Barbara: Yes, some of them came a number of times, like Bridget Yorke or Nora [Ariffin].

Once you were on location, did you sometimes do street casting?
Barbara: Yes, he'd say to me [imitating Bourdin again]: 'I need a handsome Black man.' And I would go out and find people on the street. In Haiti, he asked Isabelle Maubert [another editor at *Vogue Paris*] to go find someone to place in a bed for a photo, and she came back with a leper whose arm was destroyed. That's why he placed him on his side in the bed!
Martine: In China, it was obviously forbidden to ask girls on the street to come and pose, but I did it anyway, because I thought it was fun.
How long did the trip to China last?
Martine: Almost two weeks. In fact, we spent most of the time travelling, going from one city to another to take each photo. Formal visits and excursions were organised for us in all these places, so our actual shooting time was extremely limited and closely monitored. It was a restrictive trip, not at all suited to Guy.

Why did you go then?
Martine: In 1985, China was opening up and Jean Poniatowski, who was the director of *Vogue Paris* at the time [following the death of Robert Caillé, in 1981], asked me to put together a team to photograph Parisian fashion there. Guy was so excited to go to China, thinking, 'I'm going to be the first to do this.'[4] In 1985, China was in the midst of a transitional phase, and inviting us was part of their 'opening up' strategy. But when we arrived, we quickly realised that we were being constantly monitored by the translator and the drivers. We worked wherever we were told to, without any location scouting. The only way Guy could express himself was through having total *carte blanche*, so it was a complicated shoot. One day, in a public park, guards asked us to stop shooting because, according to them, the models were looking too suggestive. Guy began to get really impatient. He just felt trapped. And to make matters worse, the weather was awful: there was thick fog and torrential rain on the Great Wall. In the end, we did a lot of travelling and formal excursions for very little working time. And every time we *did* shoot, we were like UFOs – gawped at by crowds – which bothered Guy. He was always expecting miracles.

Did miracles finally happen in China?
Martine: No, and Guy, who was extremely sensitive, felt very negative about it all. He saw a country that was in some respects opening up, but not *really*. We felt like we were being treated like luxury tourists, while all around us people were still wearing Mao jackets, and you'd see workshops full of children working in them. We ended up at Pierre Cardin's Chinese premises trying to take photos the way we wanted, like in a studio, but Guy was feeling completely uninspired. And there was nothing Chinese about it! On the flight home, we were served meals in these little decorative Chinese cartons. I kept them, and in Paris we took a photo using them, which Guy was happy with. With him, we always adapted, we made do with what we had. We fed his imagination, and that's what mattered.

How did Francine Crescent view Guy Bourdin's on-location fashion stories?
Barbara: When we returned from a trip together, she would always greet us with, 'So, did you have a good time? Did you eat well?' That was all she cared about. Guy and Newton could do whatever they wanted, they were Francine's favourites; she let them get away with anything. In fact, Guy would just hand over a single photo and that was that. He'd then spend a lot of time on the layout with Alexis Stroukoff, a little with Jocelyn Kargère, and then with Paul Wagner – all from the magazine's art department. He would work with them on the layout before approving it.

When did you realise quite who Guy Bourdin was? When did you understand his world?
Marie-Amélie: I understood by working with him and getting to know him. You could tell that he was a true artist. He drew what he wanted to photograph. So there was a real artistic side to his work.
Martine: He did a lot of paintings, some of which featured elements that we later saw in his photographs. But he wasn't a great painter, whereas he was a *great* photographer.
Barbara: Guy hated the idea of being a photographer. He wanted to be a painter. For him, anyone could be a photographer – it wasn't a real job.

What's your recollection of the end?
Marie-Amélie: Towards the end, he had less support around him and had let himself go a bit. Times had changed, and his work was also of lower quality, to be honest.
Barbara: It was while in Haiti that his cancer was diagnosed, and the worst thing is that he never sought treatment. He didn't feel well in Haiti; he often lay down in the shade of the truck because he had stomach pains. And when we got back, we discovered he had cancer.

Post scriptum: By the mid-1980s, Guy Bourdin had begun to decline. Constantly harassed by the tax authorities, devastated in his private life and suffering from stomach cancer, he was forced to end his prolific 33-year collaboration with *Vogue Paris* following Francine Crescent's 1987 departure from the magazine – his lifelong champion and eternal protector. His very last international trip for the magazine took him to Marbella and was published in August 1987, while his final editorial story, entitled *Le cinéma des robes-maillots* ('The Cinema of Swimsuits'), appeared in the June-July 1988 issue. Francine continued to employ him for her new magazine venture, *The Best,* but his heart was no longer in it. Guy Bourdin died of cancer on 29 March 1991. He was 62 years old.

1. First published in the February 1971 story, *Les filles de l'an 71*.

2. 11-year-old Hakuryu Mitsuhiro, then the youngest actor in popular theatre in Kawasaki, dressed as a young geisha.

3. Hachikō was a Japanese dog famous for his loyalty. Every day, he waited for his master at Shibuya station, even after his death. He continued to wait for him until his own death. Moved by his loyalty, donors erected a bronze statue in his honour in front of the station, which has since become an icon in Japan.

4. In fact, the first fashion photographer to go there was Alex Châtelain, with Grace Coddington, for British *Vogue* in 1979.

Carlijn Jacobs

‘I collect elements that fascinate me: glass orbs or masks, for instance. I keep them with me. And then, when we’re on set, even if the client says, ‘We’ve got the shot,’ I’ll push for one more, and throw in that mask or orb. Those are often the images that make the whole thing sing. I think that subconscious side is a desire to escape reality, to tap into a dream logic, a surreal edge. To create something that doesn’t exist yet. Because everything *already* exists in our image-saturated world.’

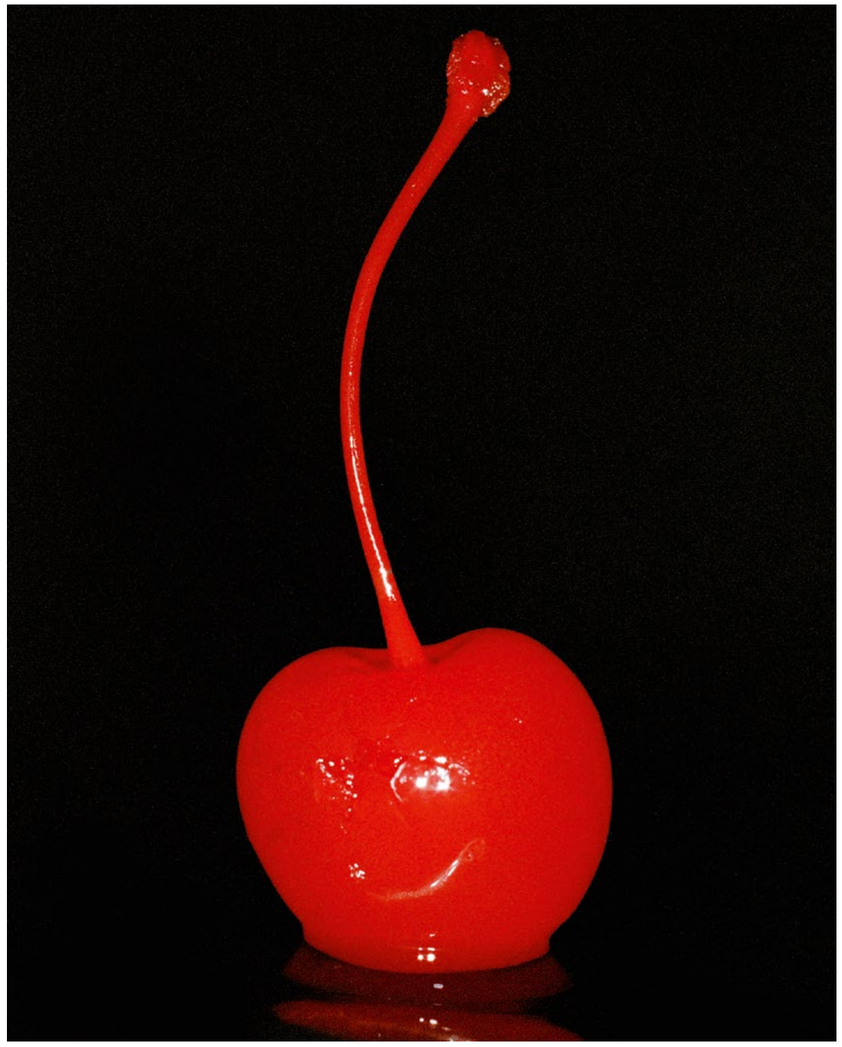
Interview by Mirjam Kooiman

The Bowl
Vogue Italia, Paris, 2021.

Bubble
Paris, 2020.

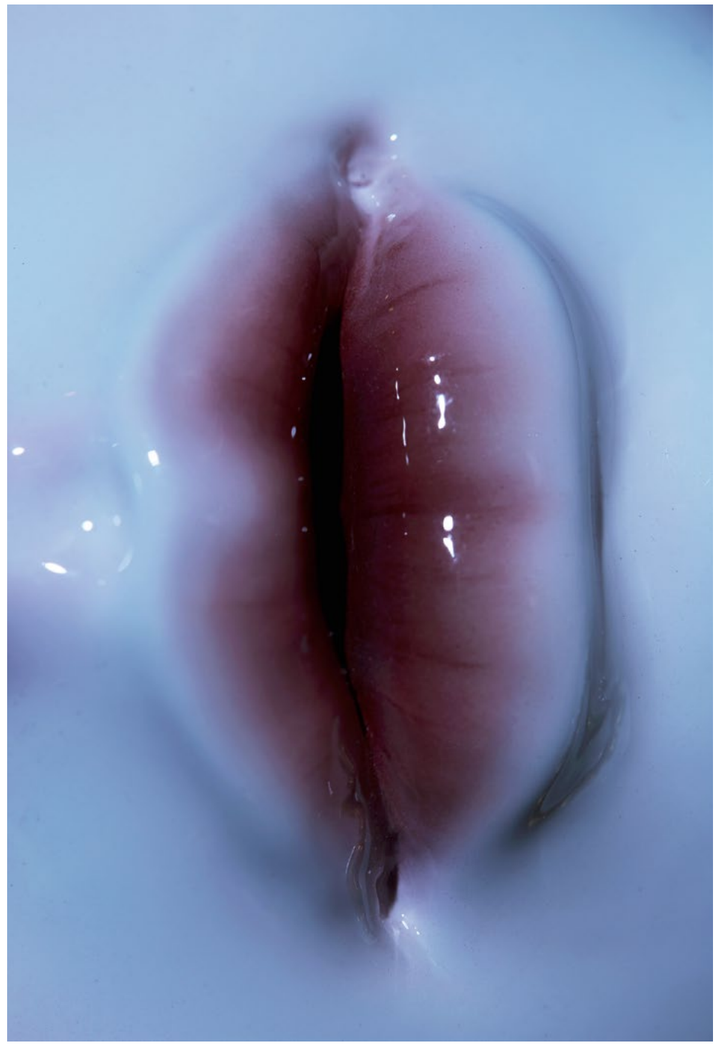
Untitled
Paris, 2023.

Chloe Oh
POP, Paris, 2022.



Cherry
Paris, 2021.

Flower
Tokyo, 2023.

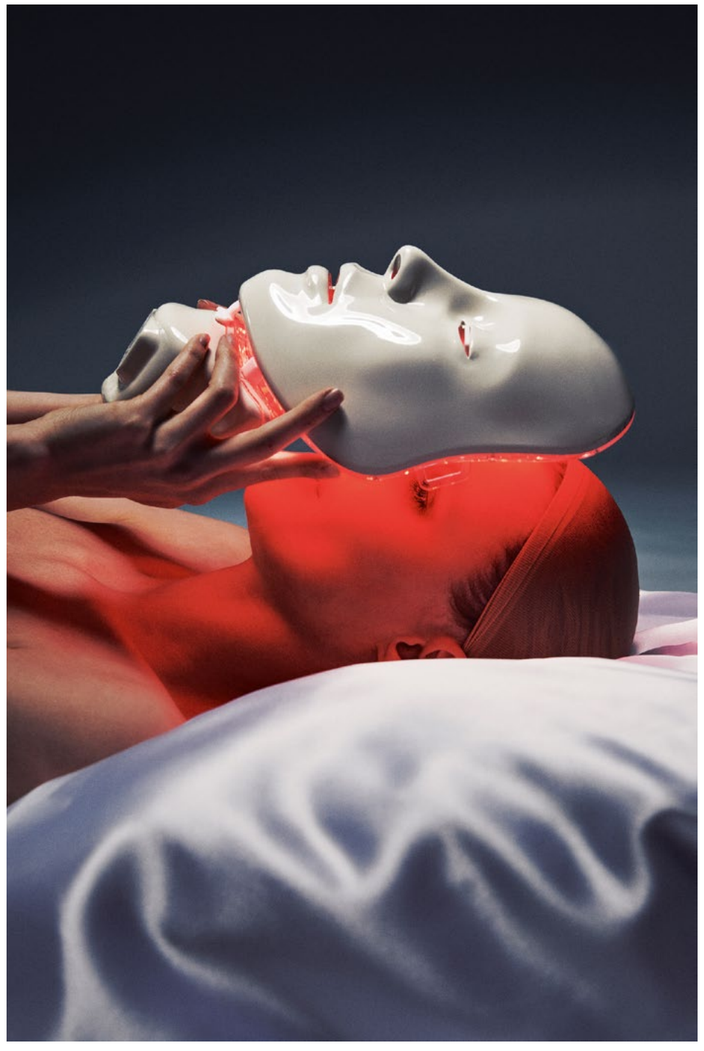


Lips
Paris, 2021.

System Beauty, Paris, 2022.

Fingertips
Frieze magazine, Paris, 2024.

Eye
Paris, 2020.



Sleeping Beauty
Paris, 2023.

IKEA
Paris, 2024.

Puck
Paris, 2022.

Saskia de Brauw
Acne Paper, Paris, 2023.

Kristen McMenamy
New York, 2023.

Anyone who entered Foam – Amsterdam's photography museum – between October 2023 and January 2024, was stepping directly into the dream realm of Carlijn Jacobs. The floor mirrored the images on the walls, echoing the atmosphere of disorientation: a face projected onto another face, an eye gazing at you from inside an open mouth. But the first image one was confronted with upon entering her exhibition was of a woman's body appearing to sink into a bed. Her torso cinched beneath a crimson, vaulted harness, her face hidden behind a white mask from which a scarlet glow spilled out across her skin. The fiery red light bled into the wall, reflecting from behind the print itself – as though the dream had slipped past its frame.

Sleeping Beauty, the exhibition was called. But this was no fairytale princess lost in eternal slumber – rather, a meditation on how modern technologies lull us into sleep, away from a reality that's increasingly difficult to grasp. Or perhaps a reflection on how they allow us to dream new worlds into being, to bend reality to our own design.

Carlijn Jacobs has never shied away from technology – neither today, nor when she first picked up a camera at the age of 13. I witnessed this firsthand during the curatorial process for her exhibition at Foam [Kooiman is the museum's head of artistic programming and curator of the *Sleeping Beauty* exhibition], as we moved through hundreds of images she'd created over the years. In between edits, she showed me how she'd recently been experimenting with tools like DALL·E and Midjourney, feeding them her own photographs to see what new, dreamlike compositions might emerge. For Jacobs, AI wasn't a disruption – it was an extension. Not a replacement for the photographer's eye, but a counterpart to it.

Her exhibition marked a first for Foam: it included AI-generated imagery, displayed not as novelty, but as a natural continuation of photography's evolution. Photography has always been technological – from chemical processes to digital sensors – and with AI, we see a shift not in the essence of photography, but in its method. These works remain photographic, though the camera is now the point of departure, and no longer the final act. The photograph becomes material, the apparatus dissolves into code.

It's this very tension – between the mechanical and the mythical, the constructed and the instinctive – that has come to define Jacobs' vision as an image-maker. Her rise in the fashion world has been no accident. Long before she was shaping visual mythologies for brands such as Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Mugler, Balenciaga and Loewe, and for the likes of Beyoncé and Kim Kardashian, she was a child fascinated by the invisible systems behind the visible world – a mind wired to understand how things worked, moved and responded.

From early experiments designing her own imaginary fashion magazine covers, to capturing Amsterdam's nightlife, and eventually relocating to Paris to build universes of her own, Jacobs has always worked in pursuit of a personal mythology. Her references are layered: Venetian masks, geishas, latex, gloss, distortion, glamour and above all, camp. Not as empty kitsch, but as performance with intent. Her work is more than aesthetic, it's the subconscious made tactile, the dream rendered wearable, the mask worn not to conceal, but to transform.

Mirjam Kooiman: Can we start at the very beginning? We were both born in the early 1990s, so we still remember life before smartphones. But we also grew up during a visual culture explosion, with all the platforms appearing on which to share images. What were you into back then? What shaped you?
Carlijn Jacobs: Oh, I was completely obsessed. I remember Hyves [a Dutch precursor to Facebook] – you could actually code your own page. I got really good at it. I had flickery backgrounds, pink poodles, new layouts every week.

'When I was 14, my sister's boyfriend showed me Photoshop. I remember being totally in awe. I asked him to make fire effects! It just clicked.'

I was *heavily* immersed in all the visual stuff I could find. And MySpace – I loved styling my page, curating my little online world. That was everything to me.

So MySpace really felt like *your* space?
Exactly. I loved being able to design it, decorate it. Hyves was even better in a way, because you could customise it with HTML. MySpace was more limited. But yes, I got into the technical side of it too – no fear there. I'd play around with the code to make everything more 'me'.

So you were immediately into the technical stuff – that didn't hold you back?
When I was 14, my sister's boyfriend at the time – who was from Nijmegen, *the* big city compared to my tiny village Groeningen – showed me Photoshop for the first time. I remember sitting behind him, totally in awe. I asked him to make fire effects! It just clicked. From that moment, I started experimenting with it myself.

Did you already have a camera then?
Yes, I had one when I was very young. My best friend lived a few villages away; we used to hitchhike to each other's houses. She was into sewing clothes, her aunt was a seamstress. So we'd do these photoshoots in barns, on haylofts. I'd photograph her in the clothes she made, and then I'd edit the images in Photoshop – putting her into different environments. It was our way of escaping the village. And I'm sure *America's Next Top Model* had something to do with it too. I remember seeing beautiful editorials in magazines and just wanting to disappear into that world.

Netherlands. On one hand, we could say that living below sea level, the Dutch are quite inventive. On the other hand, there's that typical Dutch pragmatism. How do you think Dutch culture shaped you – or did you perhaps react against it?
I think it's both. I love extravagance, but I'm also very grounded. That contrast is very Dutch, I guess. Also, we're a privileged country: I could think about going to art school because I lived in a society where that was possible. I remember thinking, 'I'll probably never have a real job – but fuck it, this is fun.'

Did your parents support that mindset?
They gave me a lot of freedom, in a very supportive way. They didn't push me, but they didn't block anything either. The funny thing is, I didn't even know art school was an option. It wasn't on my radar. I didn't see myself as 'creative' – my sister could draw, sing, all that. I didn't think I fit the label.

'I didn't see myself as 'creative'. I didn't even know creative jobs existed. The only 'photographer' I knew was the person who took your passport photo.'

Was it always clear to you that you wanted to be *behind* the camera, not in front of it?
Oh yes, definitely. I tried being in front of it, but it just didn't work. I needed to *make* the image. I remember we even filmed a Pokémon video – we dressed up, jumped on trampolines, and I edited the whole thing. At the end of the YouTube clip, it says 'Camera by Carlijn Jacobs'. We were, like, 13. [Laughs]

Is it still online?
Yes… And it's really bad.

That video alone says so much. Escapism, world-building, early Photoshop. You mentioned that small-town feeling, where you basically had to invent everything yourself. I think that's also something about growing up in the

You were making edited video clips at the age of 13 and didn't see yourself as creative?
[Laughs] Exactly. But in my world, the only 'photographer' was the person who took your passport photo. I didn't know creative jobs existed. If you grew up in Amsterdam, maybe you knew someone who was an art director or a stylist. Where I was, that just wasn't a thing.

So how did you end up pursuing photography?
I went to the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam[1] and started a course in Lifestyle & Design, which was perfect for people who were creative but didn't yet know in what direction to channel it. Then, in my second year, I took my first photography class. The teacher immediately said, '*This* is your thing.' I started getting top grades. I even went to the studio manager and asked if I should switch to the photography department. He told me, 'No, you already know what you want to shoot. Focus on your ideas. You'll learn the technique.' That advice stayed with me.

It sounds like that broad creative background ended up working in your favour.
Yes, absolutely. I always still think in terms of the whole picture – graphic design, layout, research, concept. It all feeds into the work.
So was it clear from the beginning that fashion photography would be your main focus?
Not exactly. At the time, it was more a feeling of 'I just want to make images.' That's what it came down to. So I was still photographing weird stuff, like a pig's trotter, I remember. It was all still a bit offbeat. But I guess if you're naturally drawn to fashion, it becomes a logical next step. And of course at some point I also had to make some money. I was posting little visuals on Facebook. And at some point, it started rolling. People saying, 'Hey, we need someone.' That led me into party photography.

That's where it really took off for you?
Not at all. But it's actually a funny story. I was on Facebook and I don't know if you remember them – the *Fotomeisjes* [The Photo Girls].[2] I had this classmate

from art school who asked me, 'Do you know a photographer who could shoot at Club NYX tonight?' And I thought: 'I'll do it. That has to be me.' So I went to Club NYX and started shooting there. And that's how I got scouted by the *Fotomeisjes*, who were shooting every week at Chicago Social Club in Amsterdam. They were kind of referencing the Cobrasnake scene in LA – you know, capturing cool girls like Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen in clubs.[3] So yes, it already had a fashion lens to it. Observing the crowd, spotting who looked good. Anyway, they asked me, 'Can you shoot all summer at Chicago Social?' I thought, obviously yes. And that's how I met Imruh [Asha, stylist].

Really? How did that happen?
I was photographing and Imruh just kept showing up in front of my lens. I was like, who is this guy? Coincidentally, that same night I was working on a piece for *i-D* Netherlands – portraits of people in nightlife. I told him I had to run to this club, and he said, 'I've got a scooter. I'll drop you off.' That's how we met. He was working at SPRMRKT at the time, the concept store by Nelleke Strijkers and Annika Beekmans at the Rozengracht in Amsterdam.[4] First he interned there, then started working. They had beautiful designer pieces – Margiela, all of that. I was about to graduate, and he said, 'We can shoot in the store after hours.' So that's how we started doing editorials. Just like that. It was all very playful.

So these opportunities just kept coming, each one leading to the next.
Yes, exactly. It all felt quite natural. Like, I remember this pink poodle I had on my Hyves page. Very random, very visual. But it made sense to me. That kind of image made sense in my head. I also remember the first time we got the internet at home, and I came across Miles Aldridge's website. His photos were strange. Cigarettes being stubbed out on eggs, that kind of thing. I was obsessed. That was the first time I felt, 'OK, this is it.' Then I saw the images he shot of Kristen McMenamy, his muse. All these nudes. She looked like a ghost. That darker side of fashion, that whole world, it really stuck with me. And then, last year I was working with her in New York. I told her how into those images I was. She just said, 'Oh yes, those were done by my ex.' I thought: 'What is this full-circle moment I'm in right now?' Surreal. But also kind of funny.

Did you ever think about it the other way around? You know, strategically? Like, 'What's the next move?' Or was it mostly intuitive?
Pretty much all intuitive. That's how I work. But I think once I realised 'OK, I want to become a photographer,' I started being more conscious about it. Someone recently reminded me that back in my second year I said, 'I want to be a big international fashion photographer.' And I was like – *ugh*, kind of cringe. But yes, I said that. I guess it shows there was already intention behind it, even then.

Do you think anything from your early life shaped how you see or capture things now?
Maybe my taste – it's always been quite intuitive, and it hasn't really changed.

What would you consider your first real 'work'? Even if it didn't feel that way at the time. Looking back, what marks the start? Was it the Pokémon video?
No, that one's insane. That absolutely doesn't count. The thing is, as an artist you're never really satisfied. That whole early period where I was already making a lot of work, I now see as playtime. I started so young. But if I really had to name a first serious piece, it might be that *Vogue Italia* shoot. The one with the fishbowl. There's probably earlier work that was already making sense to me, but that one became a print, it sold well, and I felt like, 'OK, this is official now'. Of course, I was still figuring things out. You learn from every shoot. But in hindsight, that shoot felt like a first real mark.

Did something click for you, personally, with that moment?
Yes. I had just moved to Paris, and it's hard to break into the scene. You're sending all these emails, getting no replies, trying everything. I didn't have international representation, only in the Netherlands. So people didn't really take me seriously. I was young, a woman, handling major financial negotiations with big clients. It was a lot. But I'm grateful for that time, actually. I handled all my own budgets, all the negotiations. You learn so much. Still, at some point I really wanted an agent. And then, all of a sudden, I started getting emails from agencies. That's when I thought, 'OK, this is happening.'

Was that linked to a specific shoot?
It was just before the *Vogue Italia* one. But there were a few things that landed around that time. I got a message from [stylist] Charlotte Collet asking if I could shoot a story for *M Le Magazine du Monde* the following week. It was fast. Someone probably dropped out. But I happened to be there. We shot the story together and it ended up as three covers. It was a jewellery story, but very artistic. One of the images was that Indian man's hand – do you remember?

Yes, like the one with the fishbowl, it was part of your exhibition at Foam. That image really stuck with me.
A week later, I got a call asking if I wanted to shoot the *Vogue Paris* cover. Back when it was still called *Vogue Paris*, not *Vogue France*. It felt super exclusive at the time, and very few women were shooting those covers. I got a message from Emmanuelle Alt. That's when it really started rolling. That was the moment I felt like: 'I'm entering the Parisian scene.'

And you and Imruh had just… decided to go to Paris?
Yes. Totally. We thought, 'If we want to make it, we need to go where it's happening.' In the Netherlands, I wasn't getting booked by commercial clients. My work didn't really fit. In the Dutch market, it's mostly Nike, Calvin Klein… They weren't calling me. By that time, I was creating my own imaginary fashion magazine covers. And for Imruh too, whenever he needed to borrow clothes for styling they always came from Paris. So at some point we just said, 'Let's go.' We kept our place in Amsterdam, but we went. No real plan. Just the decision to go.

When was this again?
About seven years ago now. Time flies.

I'm just trying to imagine how your whole visual brain came together. Because I was just thinking back… You know, our first meeting was actually around the time of the Helmut Newton retrospective exhibition at Foam in 2016. We included your work there as part of a new generation, a kind of visual continuation of his legacy. Could you describe again how Newton influenced you?
Well… He portrayed women in a very powerful way. Never soft, always strong. That's something I do too. I wouldn't quickly photograph someone dreamily lying in a flower field. I like it when there's a touch of masculinity there. Newton had that too, this masculine edge. That's what I love about his work. Even though it was shot by a man – and yes, it can be quite sexualised at times – I still find it incredibly empowering. The woman isn't objectified. She's exalted. He puts her on a pedestal. I find that very beautiful. And so I try to do that in my own work as well. That sense of elevation. But I also really admire the analogue feel of his photography. The colours, and especially the odd details.

The odd elements set his work apart.
Exactly. There are so many images out there. But it's that one strange thing, that unexpected detail, that makes it stand out. He was brilliant at that. Especially at that time. I think people had more freedom then, too. Things weren't as restricted. That's something I do struggle with now.

You do? Can you say more about that? Because yes, times have changed. And Newton's work, for example, is now viewed through a very different lens. But how do you experience that shift? What's changed for you in the landscape you work in now?
Well, I've only ever worked in this era. I've been doing this for about 10 years now. But what I really notice is how much the whole world has changed. There's just *so* much content now. Fashion has become this massive machine. So many clothes. So many images. Which means there's an enormous need for content, constantly. That whole fast pace of photography, that's completely different from the past. Now, you have to shoot a minimum of 15 images a day. Back then, they probably had a week for the same thing. There's just no time to experiment anymore. No one has time.

I definitely want to come back to that later. I kept following your work and later invited you to do a solo show at Foam, *Sleeping Beauty,* which happened in 2023. And what struck me there was the way the exhibition started with darkness and that mirrored floor – it really made me see how much of your work is tied to the subconscious. So I'm still curious: how do you translate the subconscious into conscious choices in your work? Because I can clearly feel its influence. But at the same time, you work in a context where things have to be deliberate, collaborative, considered.
I think I just collect elements that fascinate me. And they can be wildly different, like glass orbs or masks, for

'People didn't really take me seriously. I was young, a woman, handling major financial negotiations and budgets with big clients by myself. It was a lot.'

'The things I liked weren't seen as 'chic' by everyone. So I started diving into camp: the culture of celebrating what's considered low-brow or kitsch.'

instance. I keep them with me. And then, when we're on set, even if the client says, 'We got the shot,' I'll push for one more, and throw in that mask or orb. And honestly, those are often the images that make the whole thing sing. So yes, that subconscious side… I think it's tied to a desire to escape reality. To create something that doesn't exist yet. Because everything *already* exists, especially in our image-saturated world. I'm always chasing something that feels like me but that also taps into that dream logic, that surreal edge. That's the subconscious I try to access.

Given how high the pressure is, and how fast you have to work, do you have any rituals or ways to reconnect with that other world?
Definitely. And I think it's more important than ever to carve out that space. It's so easy to be pulled in different directions – you're working with teams, advertisers, you have to hit certain marks. Even if you're working for a magazine and technically have creative freedom, there are always limitations. Maybe a look *has* to be included. But maybe I didn't want clothes at all – maybe I wanted them naked. But that's not allowed. So what I've learned is that the *only* way for me to protect that space is to prepare obsessively. I plan everything. I write down all my ideas ahead of time. I map out the day, scene by scene, beat by beat. There's no room for improvisation anymore. No time. So I've become extremely organised, almost militant.

Even under pressure like that, where do your ideas come from?
Lately, it's been a challenge. I've had so many projects going at once. But I've just had a summer break and suddenly I'm brimming with ideas again. It made me realise how important it is to step away sometimes. Rest really *is* fuel for creativity. But yes, I do a lot of research. I have a whole archive. I collect references constantly – films, objects, visuals. Anything that sparks something. I save it all on my phone. I have folders for everything. So, let's say I get asked to shoot someone like Nicole Kidman – I just shot her for American *Vogue*, which is coming out soon – then I dive into my folders and go nuts. But even then, there are so many layers. Her management needs to approve it. The stylist, the editor… It's a whole chain. So I'll often prep three full concepts. With moodboards. With studies. Just to get one through. Fashion is like a puzzle. You're constantly solving things, adapting. But that also keeps it fun.

What are your biggest sources of inspiration?
Honestly, it's super broad. When I travel, I'm constantly seeing things, like stained glass windows, for example. I'll think, 'This would be amazing for a set.' I'm obsessed with how light moves through space. And I just love images, full stop. There are so many photographers I admire, and they're all so different. From Bruno Barbey[5] to David LaChapelle. I'm drawn to artists with very distinct visual styles. I also have a lot of Japanese influences in my work. And I collect objects, especially animals. Animals appear in so many of my shoots. Also food. Especially food in impossible colours. I'm obsessed with that. It's a sensory world I'm constantly building in my head.

That Japanese influence was also clearly visible in your exhibition. What is it about Japanese culture that speaks to you?
I think it's the purity, the minimalism – of course that's part of it – but actually, I find Japanese theatre incredibly inspiring. It's so focused on costume and transformation, and it feels so far removed from my own world. That distance is part of what draws me to it. It's that same longing for something I didn't grow up with.

I'm just trying to sketch out your frame of reference a little more. I also read somewhere that you once rewrote *Notes on "Camp"* by Susan Sontag. What does camp mean to you?
I immediately think of the Eurovision Song Contest. My graduation work was kind of referencing that, actually. I started noticing that the things I liked, my intuitive taste, wasn't necessarily seen as 'chic' by everyone. And I found that tension really interesting. So I started diving into camp: the culture of borrowing from other styles, celebrating what's considered low-brow or kitsch. Like how Balenciaga works with Crocs now. Eurovision had that too: the elite dismissed it but still watched it. That play with cultural layers really stuck with me. It's definitely part of my work.

How do you relate to ideas of chic versus vulgar?

'I'm looking for the performance, not someone's true self. That's why I work more with women, or even with mannequins – anything that can be reshaped.'

It's a fine line, and a tricky one. Back when I graduated, I did this shoot that almost looked like a Eurovision scene – a model with glitter, that whole vibe. It was years ago but that energy still lingers in what I do. I don't think in terms of 'chic' or 'tacky'. I think in terms of what triggers nostalgia for me.

Your work often references the 1980s, sometimes the 1970s too, but at the same time there's also a strong sense of the futuristic. Almost like a version of the future imagined in the 1990s. How do you see your work in relation to time or zeitgeist?
Every era has something beautiful. If something inspires me, I'll borrow from it. I'm definitely more drawn to the 1980s than to, say, the past 10 years. Maybe because I lived through the recent stuff, so it feels too familiar.

And although you didn't live through the 1980s, you certainly seem nostalgic for that era.
Exactly. It's like I skip the in-between parts. What ends up in my work is a sort of mix of history and future combined.

Is there something specific about the 1980s aesthetic that attracts you?
It's hard to say. I think someone mentioned the 1980s in an old interview with me and ever since that reference keeps resurfacing. But it *is* something that returns in my work. I love the way power is visualised in the fashion imagery of that era – Newton's women, the shoulder pads, that strong silhouette. There's something really commanding about it.

Would you say you're exploring how women are portrayed? Or am I reading too much into that from a feminist angle?
I wouldn't necessarily call it feminist, but I *am* drawn to visualising women. Not that I don't enjoy photographing men, but with women transformation feels more accepted. There's more room to dress them up, to change them, to play with identity. That showmanship, that sense of becoming someone else, that interests me. I'm not looking for someone's true self; I'm looking for the performance. That's why I work more with women, or even with mannequins – anything that can be reshaped.

That connects back to the Japanese references again: the geisha, the mask, the masquerade you mentioned earlier. I wanted to ask more about your process. How do you navigate the aesthetic of a client, especially when placing someone else's creation within your own visual language?
That's one of the trickier elements of fashion photography. Especially at the beginning of a project. But I make sure I'm really involved from the start: I'll respond to a brief with a moodboard and gradually start steering it in my direction. In the beginning, it was a bit of a battle – I was like a tiger, trying to protect my taste. But now I'm lucky and clients usually come to me for a reason. Though occasionally I still think, 'Why did they book me for this?' But generally, I make sure I'm surrounded by people I trust – my stylist, my hair and make-up team – because they know my eye. That way, even if 50% of the concept comes from the client, the other half is mine, and it still feels like my world.

Have you ever surprised a client to the point where they saw their own product differently?
Well, kind of. I once did a campaign for Byredo, for their make-up line. They wanted to shoot in a library – old books, and with a kind of dusty, golden atmosphere. I couldn't quite settle for that; I wanted to see what would happen if we took it a bit further. I suggested photographing the model first, printing her portrait onto a book cover, and having the model then hold the book in front of her face, creating a surreal, slightly warped effect. They were unsure at first, but we went for it, and the resulting images became the campaign. Sometimes, stepping outside the initial idea leads to something memorable.

Maybe you get tired of being asked this question – feel free to say so – but I saw that in 2024, *The New York Times Style Magazine* curated a list of 25 photographs that define our modern era, and your photo of Beyoncé's [*Renaissance*] album cover was on it. I thought that was amazing. At the same time, I read that you weren't really given much direction for it. What can you tell me about that shoot?
When I first got the request I honestly didn't realise it was going to be such a big deal. I even thought, 'Wow, haven't heard from Beyoncé in a while… Is she still going?' Once I got to LA, the production side of things was different; the music industry operates differently from fashion. You have to be prepared for

'I map out the day obsessively, scene by scene, beat by beat. There's no room for improvisation anymore. No time. I've become so organised, almost militant.'

everything – pre-lighting, multiple sets – because you don't know if you'll get one minute, 10 minutes, or an hour. You have to be ready with every idea. In the end, the shoot kept getting extended; it just took longer than expected. You work with a creative director who has a vision, and you try to bring your own perspective. But ultimately, you're working with a superstar who has the final say. When the album came out, I suddenly got calls from everyone. I really hadn't realised it would blow up like that. In hindsight, it was funny, and really cool. But when I look at the other images on that [*New York Times*] list, like Cindy Sherman's, which are more personal and iconic, mine feels a bit different. It's a commercial image, made for someone else.

Is there a photo – maybe one of your own – that you feel *should* have been on that list instead?
The one that feels most personal to me is the geisha photograph that was exhibited at Foam. Years ago, I was walking down the street in Kyoto in the evening when a taxi suddenly stopped – a real Japanese taxi with lace curtains – and a geisha peeked out and stepped onto the street. She walked quickly on her wooden slippers to wherever she needed to go. That moment stayed with me; it felt like a dream. Years later, I recreated the scene in Kyoto, and that became the photograph.

Your show at Foam also marked the first time that we, as a photography museum, had exhibited AI-generated images. You were one of the first within the photography scene to see AI not as a threat, but as a creative collaborator. How do you feel about that now?
Still the same. I talk to ChatGPT every day – I'm addicted. I've learned so much from it. AI is definitely an addition, and the world is changing fast. I was recently called about the Guess campaign using AI-generated models[6] – there was a lot of discussion. I have mixed feelings. On one hand, yes, there are concerns about representation and standards. But I'm not against AI. Photoshop was manipulation too. It's different, sure, but it opens up new possibilities. Manipulation has always been part of photography, ever since the invention of the dark room.

I've noticed younger generations at art schools returning to analogue photography, as if they're seeking grounding. You, on the other hand, embraced AI early on. What do you think this says about our time?
Analogue has been a trend for a while, especially in fashion photography. It allows for experimentation. Light leaks or other imperfections create beauty. It's also a great way to really learn photography. Film just looks better than digital. But analogue and digital don't feel opposed in my work. Digital allows precision, analogue allows imperfection. Both have their own challenges and artistry.

Are you never worried that AI might replace your work – like clients generating campaigns without a photographer? If your work ever became obsolete, what would you do?
I have thought about that, and I think it's smart to have a backup plan, but I doubt AI will replace everything. Perhaps product photography will be the first thing affected. For bigger campaigns, people still want to see a human face. I'm not too worried, but I do consider it. You can't cling to the past. And, in any case, I'd find something else to do. There are so many things I love. I'd love to run a dog kennel. Or – and this might seem a bit silly – I've always dreamed of working with dolphins. I love animals and active work. Something hands-on, something real.

So it's about seeking new experiences?
Yes, exactly. The more worlds you experience, the better. That's why travel is so important to me – because it broadens your understanding. And fortunately my work allows me to do that.

Where do you see fashion photography heading in the next 10 years?
I do worry about the overkill of images. There's just so much imagery being produced now. And, of course, I do really hope we return to quality over quantity – taking the time to make something special, rather than always producing fast and cheap. I hope it moves closer to the 1980s approach, going somewhere like the Bahamas and making magic with time and care.

1. Named after the Dutch artist of the same name, the Willem de Kooning Academy is a Rotterdam-based school of media, art, design and education.

2. Founded in 2008, *De Fotomeisjes* ['The Photo Girls'] was a collective of female photographers who became notorious for their candid shots of Amsterdam's clubbing scene. In a 2015 interview in *Vice*, founder Iris Ooms explained, 'A club is the best training ground for any photographer. The light is always different, and that's where you learn.'

3. Mark Hunter, aka The Cobrasnake, is a photographer who has been credited with pioneering club photography, shooting club kids and A-listers in the mid-2000s, a period now associated with 'indie sleaze'.

4. Established in 2002, SPRMRKT was one of Amsterdam's foremost concept stores. After closing in 2016, it has reopened as of September 2025.

5. Known for his cinematic use of colour, Moroccan-born, French-Swiss photojournalist Bruno Barbey travelled the world covering conflict zones and served as President of Magnum International from 1992 to 1995.

6. In July 2025, Guess launched a campaign using an AI-generated model created by London-based AI marketing agency Seraphinne Vallora, which appeared in American *Vogue*, sparking discourse around the use of AI to promote specific beauty standards and calling into question the future of both photography and modelling.

Cover Girls, Series 1.
Amsterdam, 2018.

Nick Knight & Simon Foxton

‘The challenge, of course, is that AI doesn’t yet fully grasp the codes of high fashion – the nuance of a garment’s cut, the prestige of a brand, the fantasy a fashion editorial is meant to sell.’

Interview by Christina Donoghue

All images courtesy of Nick Knight and Simon Foxton

Image by Simon Foxton

All images courtesy of Simon Foxton

Image by Simon Foxton

All images courtesy of Nick Knight

Alex Consani wearing Ottolinger, 2024.

All images courtesy of Nick Knight

Alex Consani wearing Chanel, 2024.

All images courtesy of Simon Foxton

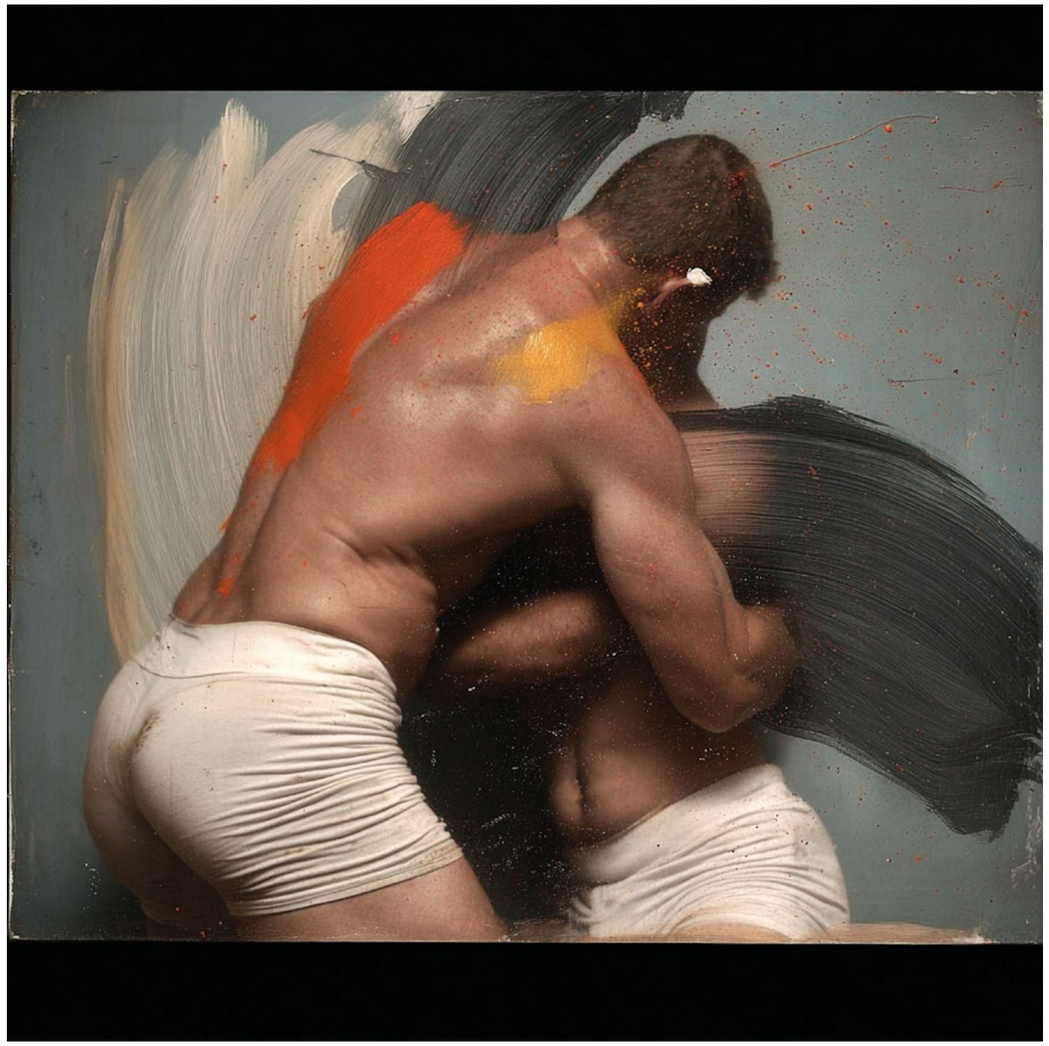
Image by Simon Foxton

Image by Simon Foxton

All images courtesy of Simon Foxton

All images courtesy of Nick Knight

Alex Consani wearing DSQUARED2, 2024.

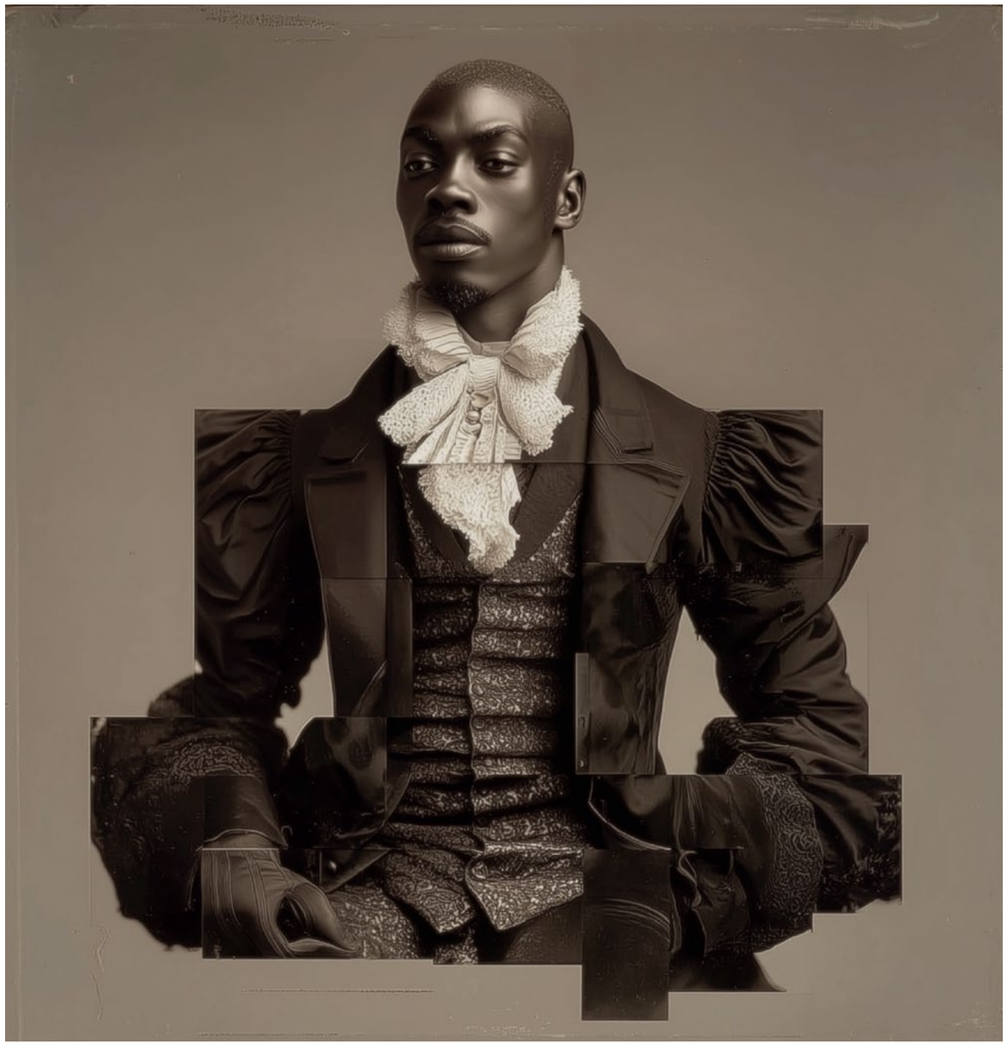


All images courtesy of Simon Foxton

Image by Simon Foxton

All images courtesy of Nick Knight

A.D., 2023.



All images courtesy of Simon Foxton

Image by Simon Foxton

All images courtesy of Nick Knight

A.D., 2023.

All images courtesy of Nick Knight

Alex Consani wearing Jacquemus, 2024.

All images courtesy of Simon Foxton

Image by Simon Foxton

Since its creation in 1998, Google has not merely indexed information – it has redefined how we navigate the world. The internet has grown into an omnipresent force, shaping the way we gather news, conduct research, communicate, connect and even form romantic relationships. What began as Tim Berners-Lee's visionary World Wide Web is now so deeply embedded into the fabric of our daily lives that the once-common phrase 'in real life' (meant to distinguish between the physical and the digital) has been cast aside by some in favour of the gentler 'away from keyboard', a term that has travelled far beyond its early gaming origins.

Given its vast cultural reach, one might expect the internet to have inspired a fully-fledged artistic movement that reflects the complexity and contradictions of our era. The Industrial Revolution found its aesthetic response in Futurism; post-war consumerism blossomed into Pop Art. Postmodernism exists, certainly, but does it truly encapsulate the here and now? That question remains open.

What's undeniable is that the creative industries are experiencing a new kind of divide – perhaps the most striking since the birth of digital photography – brought into sharp relief by the meteoric rise of artificial intelligence. Among its many tools, ChatGPT has become indispensable to countless creatives almost overnight. Yet fashion, that eternally self-referential art form, has often sought reassurance, wisdom and provocation in its own history.

Against this backdrop, two of fashion's most forward-thinking figures, visionary image-maker Nick Knight and pioneering stylist Simon Foxton, continue to resist nostalgia in favour of exploration. In conversation, they reflect on decades of collaboration, their unwavering pursuit of originality, and why, for them, AI is not a threat but the most intoxicatingly liberating new medium for visual expression.

Christina Donoghue: You've worked together for many years, yet your recent collaborations with AI seem to mark a new chapter. Am I right in thinking your recent *Numéro* editorial is your first truly joint project that leans so heavily on AI?

Nick Knight: It's certainly the first major one, but not the very first. Simon created a Tom of Finland-inspired series for SHOWstudio's *SHADOW-BAN* exhibition last year, and we also worked together on our *G-A-Y* film.

Simon Foxton: Yes, I created the AI images and Nick brought them to life by animating them and turning the stills into film by using AI. In a way, that was our first real AI collaboration, quickly followed by the *Numéro* story. Nick is gently trying to lure me back into fashion, but officially I'm retired.

Yet your AI work carries echoes of your early editorials with Nick. It's as if the aesthetic DNA remains unchanged.

Simon: I think that's inevitable. AI requires an enormous amount of curation and the images I choose are, naturally, the ones that align with my taste; a sensibility I've always shared with Nick. Over time, as I've worked exclusively with Midjourney, an AI text-to-image generator, I've shaped it to understand my preferences. It now produces imagery that instinctively resonates with me, so it's no surprise that my AI work mirrors my earlier fashion styling in spirit.

There's an art to crafting the right prompts, isn't there?

Simon: Absolutely. It's a balance between being precise enough to guide the AI while leaving room for unpredictability. There's a poetry to the language you use: too rigid, and you stifle its imagination, too vague, and it loses coherence. That dance between control and surrender is where the magic happens.

Nick: It's entirely natural that Simon's AI work retains his distinctive aesthetic. Our tastes may evolve. We might encounter a film, a piece of art or a sensation that shifts our perspective, but those influences rarely alter the foundation of who we are. I often liken it to the simplest decisions in life. Whether it's chocolate or cheese, coffee or tea, your instinct knows before your mind has time to deliberate. Over time, our preferences mature, but the core remains. What you see in Simon's AI work is, at its heart, the same decision-making sensibility that has guided him throughout his career. Unmistakably his.

What first drew you both to working with AI?

Simon: For me, it was something of a revelation. I'd known of AI for years, but as someone not naturally inclined toward technology I never imagined it would suit me. That changed a couple of years ago when my friend, the hairstylist Matt Mulhall, showed me some images he'd created on his phone, and I was instantly captivated. I downloaded Midjourney that same day and what astonished me most was its immediacy. You could conceive of an idea and see it visualised within minutes, sometimes seconds. For someone like me, who has always sought the most direct route to expression, that speed was intoxicating. After Saint Martins, I launched my own fashion label[1] but found the process laborious. Styling offered a swifter, more fluid way to express ideas and later consultancy proved even more streamlined. But AI? It is, without doubt, the most effortless medium I've ever worked in.

Nick: I find it irresistibly seductive as a medium, particularly if you approach it with the same creative intent you bring to any other discipline. I'm often baffled as to why an artist wouldn't want to explore it given its potential. Imagine being able to transform a flat image into a three-dimensional printed object, conjuring imaginary sculptures into existence. I can't think of a single visionary, from Rodin to Man Ray, who wouldn't seize upon that possibility to cross mediums and to experiment in ways previously impossible. For me, AI is not about replacing one's vision, it's about expanding it. It offers choices, much like the tools we've always used in more traditional workflows.

Historically we've compartmentalised mediums: painting, sculpture, photography, film. Crossing between them was often seen as the territory of the overly ambitious. We were taught to master just one. But AI dissolves those boundaries entirely. You can input a poem and receive an image; you can feed it an image and receive a sculpture. My own approach differs from Simon's. I'm drawn to the abstract and often work with AI models that produce painterly, distorted imagery. Images that resemble reality no more than a Modigliani resembles a photographic likeness. I'll then take those surreal results and place them into another AI, Midjourney, for instance, with the prompt to 'rationalise the abstract.' That's when extraordinary things happen, things I didn't know were possible. As an artist, I'm compelled by anything that pushes the boundaries of what's visible and AI does exactly that. It reveals images and ideas I could not see, opening entirely new dimensions of creative possibility.

Simon: Exactly. For me, it's perhaps the most thrilling tool I've ever encountered – ironically discovered only after I'd 'retired'. In a strange twist, I feel more creatively alive now than at any other point. It's unlocked an entire realm that had been, until now, out of reach. I understand the hesitation, the fear, the instinct to recoil from something so new, but it's a wonderful tool. It should be embraced. It opens not just a door but an entire vault of possibilities.

Nick: For me, AI feels like the culmination of a long wait that began with the birth of the internet. A new art form truly native to the medium in which I've lived and worked. The internet reshaped everything when it arrived; it was a profound pivot point, offering seemingly endless horizons. Surely, it's time it had its own art form.

Simon: You're right. Until now, nothing has emerged that both draws from and responds to the internet quite in this way.

Simon, if I can turn to your work for a moment, you've often spoken of steering away from abstraction. I wanted to ask about the almost devotional realism in your images, often paired with captions on Instagram that give them an added layer of narrative.

Simon: That's deliberate. Nick gravitates toward the abstract, but I've been intent on making my AI work feel plausible, anchored in forms of photography I already know and love. I draw on those traditions, reinterpret them or blend them together. The goal is to make the result believable. Not because I'm trying to deceive, but because that's the aesthetic that resonates with me. It's just what I like.

Nick: When we worked together, one of Simon's enduring touchstones was – and still is – *National Geographic*, which rarely ventured into abstraction in its imagery.

That's something I've also seen reflected in your scrapbooks, Simon. They've long been an important part of your creative process. Collage artists, from John Stezaker to Hannah Höch, have often turned to *National Geographic* for source material. Do you think of AI as a kind of new-era scrapbook?

Simon: Absolutely. My process has shifted fluidly over the years, from physical scrapbooks to the Tumblr era of the early 2010s. My Tumblr was like an online scrapbook, a living archive, until it became censorial and prudish

'What you see in Simon's AI work is, at its heart, the same decision-making sensibility that has guided him throughout his career. Unmistakably his.'

'Prompting AI becomes a creative act itself. It's a linguistic skill as much as a visual one, greatly enriched by a strong knowledge of art history.'

and began stripping images from people's collections. I came off the platform in a fury thinking 'Well, this will show them!' I downloaded my account and thousands of images before I logged off, most of which have just been sitting around in files on my desktop. At the time, I wasn't entirely sure why I was collecting them. When we were still shooting, they served as reference points. Now, AI has given that archive a second life. It allows me to transform those fragments into entirely new photographs.

And your Instagram captions, they've become something of a signature. They seem to help you flesh out this world you're building, which is almost teetering on the edge of a convincing reality.

Simon: Well, I wanted to add some sort of context to the work I was producing. Otherwise, it was just 'look how clever I am.' Initially, I was amused that people believed it, and then I got to the point where I didn't want to fool people. I didn't want anyone coming away thinking they've been made to look like an idiot. I am not trying to say that they are real; I just want them to be seen as realistic.

The hyperreal plays a strong role in your recent collaboration for *Numéro*, doesn't it? Could you both talk me through that?

Nick: The concept began with something that felt almost *National Geographic* in tone, this imagined journey across America photographing young couples in a range of social, cultural, and economic settings. I've always been fascinated by the idea of capturing a nation at a particular moment in time, in the way Robert Frank achieved so profoundly in *The Americans*.[2] For this project, we conceived a series of 25 portraits of couples, each one distinct. Simon would use AI to create a unique, stylised garment for each pairing. The challenge, of course, is that AI doesn't yet fully grasp the codes of high fashion – the nuance of a garment's cut, the prestige of a brand, the fantasy a fashion editorial is meant to sell. To bridge that gap, I photographed real models posed in ways that mirrored Simon's AI couples almost exactly. We then replaced one half of each pairing, leaving one AI figure and one real person. The casting became essential. We worked closely with the casting director Stefanie Stein and stylist Lara McGrath to ensure that each model felt convincingly in step with Simon's AI styling, as though they truly belonged together. To put the two images together we worked with the brilliant Tom Wandrag, a digital artist from A New Plane who often works with me in AI and CGI.

Simon: I thought it was an incredibly smart way to use AI, one that didn't replace the craft of photography, but rather worked alongside it. The integration was seamless and I think that's why it worked so well.

What kind of prompts did you use for the series?

Simon: They were quite specific. One, for example, was: 'An affluent young African American couple in a glitzy mansion. He's standing, she's sitting, wearing high-end clothing, photographed in the style of a *National Geographic* reportage.'

Nick: I tend to work less literally. I might start with something like, 'A girl standing by a fireplace,' then add seemingly unrelated words like 'candle wax, honey, shoe polish, chandeliers', just to see what the AI throws back.

Simon: Oh, absolutely. You can work that way, and I have. But for this project, we had a specific visual language in mind, so there was less room for pure improvisation.

Nick: That's part of the artistry in AI. The prompt itself becomes a creative act. It's a linguistic skill as much as a visual one and it's greatly enriched by a strong knowledge of art history. If you understand what *National Geographic* reportage actually looks like, or you know the quiet tension of a Balthus painting, you can guide the AI towards imagery with a certain cultural and aesthetic weight which implies a certain education in the arts.

Simon: You have to draw from your own internal library of references.

Nick: Just as you would when shooting a conventional editorial. You might think back to an extraordinary exhibition of, say, FSA photography[3] and try to reinterpret what made those images so enduring. You realise it's not just the subject. It's the lens choice, the camera angle, the light, the texture of the clothes, the character of the people and the reason those pictures were first taken. You pull from those established reference points, but you translate them through your own eye and for your own reason. There's no merit in simply reproducing a Dorothea Lange photograph, for example. You create something new, something informed, as there is no joy and no satisfaction in simply reproducing an existing piece of art. Plagiarism is the most soulless, and I might add artistically unrewarding, endeavour.

Simon: Exactly. My work is steeped in references, but I'm never trying to impersonate a specific photographer or artist. I might use *National Geographic* as a broad stylistic umbrella, but I wouldn't type 'in the style of Nick Knight'. It would feel wrong. There's no point in imitation.

Nick: Simon, do you find yourself developing a kind of relationship with your AI? Not in a sentimental sense, but do you see it as an entity in its own right?

Simon: I do, actually. I'm not talking to it over coffee, but there is a mutual recognition of sorts. Over time, it has learned my aesthetic preferences. It now anticipates my taste, becoming an extension of my own visual instincts.

Nick: In some ways, the landscape we're working in now is an improvement on what Simon and I were accustomed to in the early years. Take, for example, a 20-page story for *i-D*, the magazine where we first met and which, for the first 15 or 20 years of our collaboration, was our primary platform. Back then, a single editorial might require a month of preparation, another month of shooting, and then a further month in post-production. It was an immense investment of time, energy and resources. And yet, when the work was finally published, there was almost no feedback unless someone took the trouble to send a letter to the magazine which, to be honest, never happened.

Simon: You could never be entirely certain how it was received. Even now, you see Instagram accounts that repost editorials from that era as a kind of retrospective appreciation, but at the time, there was no feedback on what you had done.

Nick: The only real measure of a story's impact was how often it was copied. Believe me, there were plenty of derivatives. People often criticise AI for 'stealing' other people's work, but the number of Simon's stories that were appropriated – used by other brands, ripped off by other photographers – is staggering. In truth, I don't see much difference. Our work ended up on so many mood boards. I remember meeting Rihanna for the first time and she said to me, 'Your work is on every mood board and deck I ever get sent!' It does make me feel very proud to hear that sort of comment, but the reason I mention it is because AI gets so much criticism for referencing other artists' work but it has always been thus. Every trip to a gallery fills our minds with images that we subconsciously draw on when we are creating.

Simon: Now, working online, you at least get a direct sense of engagement. Likes, comments, interaction.

Nick: Exactly. Whether the response is positive or negative, it's still a connection. In the early 20th century, the Dadaists staged performances and exhibitions where audiences would shout, heckle, even rip work from the walls. It was visceral. A real, physical reaction. Compare that to today's online responses, perhaps less dramatic, but still an acknowledgment that your work has been seen. I've always believed that an artist should create first and foremost for themselves, not for their audience, but silence can be deflating. At least now, you know someone is looking.

Simon: And that matters. With the internet, you know your work is being engaged with in some way, which is far better than releasing it into a void.

Especially in fashion, where persistence and drive are essential. It's much easier to keep going when there's an audience in front of you. It pushes you forward.

Nick: It creates a conversation, however small. At SHOWstudio, we've always tried to involve our audience directly. In the early days, that online-to-offline connection felt incredibly close and immediate.

Simon: Working with AI has given me a similar spark to what I felt when we first began in fashion. Looking back, you realise how fortunate we were. There was little to no budget, but we had complete creative freedom. That freedom was everything. AI, in its own way, has brought that feeling back.

That reminds me of David Bowie's line to Jeremy Paxman: 'Where the internet is concerned, the monopolies don't have a monopoly.' [4]

Nick: In a way, fashion brands are killing off their own industry at the moment because the talent that was drawn to it for creative reasons, like Simon, Ray Petri or myself, loved fashion for the pure creative element of it. We would

'I'm not talking to AI over coffee, but there is a mutual recognition of sorts. It's learned my aesthetic preferences. It now anticipates my taste.'

'I do wonder whether AI might take over certain roles entirely. Lookbooks, catalogues, that sort of thing. Brands don't want creativity in those roles.'

create visions and characters by pairing so many different items of clothing together, referencing everything from film to art to the everyday people we saw on the street. You can't do that anymore because the brands are now insisting you can only use their clothing as a full look from their collection; it's turning what used to be pure, unbridled creativity and the very reason we loved magazines, into an unpaid advertising campaign slapped in the middle of a magazine.

Simon: If I were starting today, I'm not sure I'd choose styling at all. It's no longer the same creative avenue it once was. I do wonder whether AI might, before long, take over certain roles entirely. Lookbooks, catalogues, that sort of thing. They don't want creativity in those kinds of roles.

Nick: Possibly, but I think AI is still in its infancy. It's busy imitating – photography, film, painting – without quite grasping that it is its own medium. This has happened before. When photography emerged, it desperately sought artistic validation through mimicry of painting.

Simon: Exactly. It dressed itself in painting's clothes, quite literally.

Nick: Yes. Early practitioners brushed light-sensitive emulsions onto glass plates as painters brushed pigment on canvas. They posed like painters, too. There's that portrait of Edward Steichen in a smock, holding what looks like a palette. Anne Brigman painted clouds into her images using graphite powder. All to persuade a sceptical world that photography was a real art, not merely an optical mechanical device unable to create the true human beauty a painter could. The same doubts are now being cast at AI. But, just as photography eventually found its voice around the 1930s, when it stopped imitating painting and embraced its own strengths. I think AI will reach that point of self-definition.

Simon: Exactly, I think you're right. AI hasn't got into its stride yet, and it hasn't found what it is. It has its own aesthetic, and I think a whole new type of art is coming out because of it.

Nick: And it will be inherently cross-disciplinary. There are already tools that can turn an image into a poem. This is where boundaries begin to dissolve.

Simon: Which brings us to the inevitable question: what becomes of the photographer? Is the role itself endangered?

Nick: I've been saying photography is dead since the middle of the 1990s. Not just to rub people the wrong way but to make them think, by trying to justify why they think it's still alive. Photography was defined by a very clear set of parameters, and when you move all those parameters, it becomes a different medium. You can link the work of early photographers such as Eadweard Muybridge to modern photographers such as [Robert] Mapplethorpe, as they all work within the parameters that defined the medium. What we do now exists way outside of those parameters. So, when digital photography came along in the mid-1990s, you could do things with it you couldn't do with conventional photography. I can now take my phone and take an image that is instantly sent to a global audience, on a backlit screen, or I can turn the still image into a film or even a 3D object! That is so far from photography as to make it clear we work in a new medium entirely. The idea that I am a photographer or that photography is still the dominant art form I use is spurious to the point of mendacity. It's not. I'm surrounded by objects that I've printed out. It's all interesting and incredibly exciting, but none of it is best described as photography. I don't think photography has a way forward. Even iPhone photography is separate from the traditional medium because it uses AI. AI is built into your phone camera and is part of how the world now creates imagery. Every picture you have taken on your phone has been in part created by AI. I have studied photography for all my life and still feel incredibly affectionate towards it as a medium but as much as I love it, in all its forms – from Anne Brigman to my contemporaries today – and as much as it still makes my heart beat faster, I would be dishonest to myself, and to anyone who was reading my words right now, to say that what I do is photography.

'The leap AI represents is far greater than the leap from painting to photography. It's a transformation on the scale of the Industrial Revolution.'

Simon: Do you think photography and AI can coexist?

Nick: Coexist, perhaps. But the leap AI represents is far greater than the leap from painting to photography. This is a transformation on the scale of the Industrial Revolution, or the invention of writing itself. We stand somewhere humanity has never stood before, in art or in communication. And, as with all evolution, something will come after us. Perhaps that 'something' will not be carbon-based. Whether that's better or worse is a question for history, but AI will be central to it.

Nick: It's worth remembering: we ourselves supplanted earlier forms of humankind. Evolution is often indifferent to sentiment. That's not to say I'm campaigning for our extinction in favour of a silicon species, it's just that the definition of 'humanity' may not be as fixed as we like to think.

Simon: I suspect you're right.

Nick: If we pan back, there's a larger shift unfolding. Capitalism, in its current form, is revealing its hollowness; socialism and communism, as they've been practised, are equally ill-fitting. Add to that the stark realities of climate change, existential threats pressing from all sides, and it's clear we need more than incremental adjustment. We need a different rhythm, a reimagined social proposal. I don't yet know what that will look like. But I do know that evolution doesn't pause, and we've never reached some ultimate pinnacle, no matter how much we flatter ourselves otherwise. We will evolve. The question, almost absurd, but worth asking, is whether we might one day become a silicone-based life form rather than carbon-based. Whatever follows us – and something will – will be shaped by AI's development. That future could be one where cancer, ageing, even poverty, are within reach of eradication. Where someone without means can access legal defence, or 3D-print a home. For centuries, justice and opportunity have been rationed according to wealth; if AI can redress that imbalance, then we have to ask: is that 'evolution' worth embracing? The central proposal we have to think about is, which part of AI do we wish to keep, if any of it – the part that can save your child from dreadful diseases such as cancer but we lose the part that can change how we take an image?

Simon: It's a difficult question, because what you're really describing is a post-photography world. In fact, a post-work world. Which leads naturally to the question: are jobs even necessary? And beyond that, the deeper question: what is our role, our purpose? Many of us draw identity and joy from work, particularly in the creative fields. But could we reach a point where machines decide we're surplus to requirements? That human life, in fact, is the contaminant?

Nick: We wouldn't be the first human iteration to disappear. We supplanted earlier forms of humankind ourselves, the Dryopithecus, Ramapithecus, Australopithecus, Homo habilis, Homo erectus, Homo sapiens neanderthalensis, for example were all replaced by our own evolution to becoming modern humans.

'There's another plausible possibility, that we may simply become avatars: entities that look and sound just like us, but are no longer physically us.'

Simon: So you're saying the robots are coming?

Nick: The problem is, the moment you say that, it summons every tired sci-fi cliché. Silver humanoids, flickering warning lights, the inevitable showdown. It's difficult to see clearly past those cultural fictions.

Like a 1970s dystopian vision of the year 2025.

Nick: Precisely. I'm not advocating for humanity's replacement by some gleaming, silicone-based successor. But if that's the course events take, then that's what will happen. I believe, ultimately, life tends toward the positive, even if the path feels skewed. The internet, for all its flaws, has knitted the world together in ways that would have been impossible before.

Then what of creativity in this new landscape? Will it wither, or flourish?

Simon: More than survive, I think it will flourish. Personally, I feel more creatively alive than ever. AI feels like discovering an entirely new wing in a house you thought you knew intimately. It's a tool that invites invention, and that is a rare and exhilarating thing.

Nick: People don't like change because it's threatening. The future is always uncertain, and therefore it's threatening. You can only imagine how two farmers might have felt in the middle of the Industrial Revolution. No one knows what is going to happen, and so we can't judge the worth of it; all we can do is react instinctively to stuff.

Simon: There's another possibility, perhaps more plausible than we care to admit, that we may simply become avatars: entities that look and sound like us, but are no longer physically us.

Nick: Which is ironic, because we speak as though we truly understand ourselves. When in truth, we don't. Our grasp of who we are is astonishingly shallow. If we can't even fully comprehend our present – things like telepathy, intuition, the subtle sensory range of human experience – how can we hope to construct accurate visions of the future? Our theories are built on foundations we barely understand.

Simon: Do you think AI could help us understand ourselves better?

Nick: I do.

Simon: To propose another idea, there is also the possibility that we're about to

have so much more time on our hands. AI will be doing everything for us, and that means we'll have more time to be present in the physical rather than the virtual. On a side note, I was at the Central Saint Martins degree show recently, and I was struck by the message that was coming across, which was a rejection of the virtual and the digital, and it was about being in the here and now. It was about the physicality of the clothes and the workmanship that had gone into them. It was about the theatrics of experiencing life in front of you rather than on Instagram. There was something quite life-affirming about it. I thought, 'Well, maybe these students are seeing what's coming next,' and it's about real life as much as the next stage of the internet. So you can have AI and the digital and everything as part of your world, but we can't deny that there's an innate human, not just desire but need for something actual as well.

Nick: I think we'll live in both realms. We already juggle an 'offline' self and an 'online' self; it's just that the line between them will blur further as digital avatars and other virtual extensions of ourselves become commonplace.

Simon: I think we're going to look back on this period we're in and think how humorous and primitive we're all being because we are just dipping our toe into the water. We don't realise the tidal wave that's coming.

Nick: Part of the difficulty is that our imagination of the future is constrained by specific references from the past. Most of them are wildly off-mark: *Terminator*, *2001: A Space Odyssey* – HAL 9000 coldly locking humans out of the spacecraft in the name of efficiency. We're working with a limited archive of bad predictions. Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave* is one of the more interesting exceptions; he foresaw big cities hollowing out as people chose to stay home. If AI means we no longer have to march into offices and uphold a hundred-year-old capitalist routine, perhaps we'll be freer. Able to live fuller, richer lives.

Simon: Which makes you wonder: what purpose will town centres serve? Many already feel like relics, existing only because we haven't reimagined them yet.

Nick: And then populism steps in. Politicians evoke some rose-tinted version of the past – full high streets, bustling communities – to rally against whatever they dislike in the present, whether it's AI or immigration. They ignore that those 'golden days' were often neither golden nor desirable to revive, and in doing so, they deny the genuine benefits we've gained. It's the populist sleight of hand: a seductive fiction that serves no one but themselves.

Do you think AI will find its way into politics?

Simon: Inevitably. It will touch every facet of life; there's no way around it.

Nick: Which is why we have to be honest about its potential. If AI can cure cancer, surely we owe it to those who've suffered to pursue it. If it can secure legal representation for the poor, build affordable housing, or help avert ecological catastrophe, shouldn't we see where it can take us? Yes, it may raise difficult questions about authorship, about jobs, but those debates shouldn't blind us to its possibilities.

Simon: And in any case, it's not going away. We might as well learn how to work with it.

1. Simon Foxton studied fashion design at Central Saint Martins, graduating in 1983 before launching his own label, Bazooka.

2. Robert Frank's landmark photobook *The Americans* (1958) presented a raw, unvarnished portrait of postwar US life, capturing the nation's contradictions, tensions, and everyday moments.

3. Between 1935 and 1944, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) employed photographers – including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Gordon Parks – to document American life, particularly rural areas, and the impact of the Great Depression.

4. In 1999, David Bowie was interviewed by journalist Jeremy Paxman on BBC current affairs programme *Newsnight*, where he espoused some eerily accurate predictions about how the internet would change the world. 'I don't think we've even seen the tip of the iceberg,' said Bowie, in response to Paxman's comment that the internet was 'just a tool'. 'I think the potential of what the internet is going to do to society, both good and bad, is unimaginable.'

All images courtesy of Simon Foxton

Image by Simon Foxton

Angela Hill

‘I’m recreating my childhood, basically.’

Interview by Sara Moonves

***Very* magazine, issue No.2, 1997.**
Elizabeth White

***Very* magazine, issue No.1, 1997.**
Schoolgirls
Stylist: Sara Humberstone.

***Purple* magazine, 2002.**
Sylvia Mann
Stylist: Anna Clausen.

***Exit* magazine, 2001.**
Sylvia Mann
Stylist: Anna Clausen.

***Exit* magazine, 2001.**
Sylvia's room

***Sede* magazine, 2008.**
A Very North London Family
Stylist: Angela Hill.

***Man About Town* magazine, 2016.**
Edith Owen
Stylist: Isabel Bush.

***Marfa Journal*, 2021.**
Abbey Lee
Stylist: Max Pearmain.

***W* magazine, 2022.**
Emily Miller
Stylist: Max Pearmain.

***The Gentlewoman*, 2023.**
Rebecca Longendyke
Stylist: Eliza Conlon.

Unpublished, 2023.
Edith Owen
Stylist: Alice Goddard.

***d la repubblica*, 2023.**
Mica Argañaraz
Stylist: Max Pearmain.

***Marfa Journal*, 2024.**
Isadora and Noa
Stylist: Alexandra Gordienko.

Miu Miu Holiday 2025 collection campaign.
Rafe Crane-Robinson
Stylist: Lotta Volkova.

I met Angela Hill at a book signing for Nadia Lee Cohen. I walked into Dover Street Market during Paris Fashion Week and spotted this incredible looking woman in head-to-toe Miu Miu. Before I knew who she was or what she did, we started talking about how she dressed. She explained that she would buy seven different looks a season and rotate them. I thought it was brilliant and so was born our feature in *W* on the iconic and one-of-a-kind Angela Hill.
Hill is a woman of many hats. A photographer, co-founder of IDEA Books and fashion icon. I had the privilege of speaking to her about how she became interested in photography, the road that led her to shooting the campaign of a brand so close to her heart, and the challenges of photographing her most difficult subject, her daughter.

‘I’m really interested in my models; I want to know about their lives and their brothers and sisters. I love to look through people’s family photo albums.’

Sara Moonves: Hi Angela, I was flattered that you asked me to do this and I’m very excited to chat with you. Firstly, I’d love to know the origin story of when you picked up a camera and thought, ‘Wait, I want to do this, this is my calling…’
Angela Hill: I was a fashion assistant basically, working on *Elle* UK. The editor I was assisting was also styling shoots for the *Sunday Times* and *Vogue Hommes*. This was in the early days of Juergen [Teller] shooting for *Vogue Hommes* in the studio, when he used to do a lot of cross-processing. Anyway, one time we went on a shoot with the photographer Pamela Hanson…

Pamela is a very dear friend of mine.
I love Pamela. She’s really funny. It was a hunting, shooting, fishing, English countryside story. At the time, *Elle* UK was very strong: you had Debbi Mason, you had Lucinda Chambers, there was Naomi [Campbell]’s first shoot. It was really very strong at the time. And so anyway, this shoot was a couple of days in the UK countryside. We went for the big crew dinner that night, and I noticed that Pamela had brought her Contax camera to the table for dinner, and she put it by her side. She didn’t touch it the whole night. But for the whole dinner, I couldn’t stop staring at this camera. Partly because Contax cameras are beautiful and I love them. But also because she’d put it by her side like a very precious object. When I was little and got new shoes, I’d sleep with them by my bed that night, so I’d wake up and look at them. I just looked at her Contax and thought, ‘I want to do that, I want to be more in control of the image.’ You know, being a fashion assistant, or trying to style a few shoots of my own, wasn’t really going to work. I wanted to be the one in charge. So when I got back from that trip I saved up for the camera. That’s it.

That is the most amazing story. Does Pamela know this?
I don’t think so. But she’s a very cherished customer of IDEA. She’s lovely.

She still always has her Contax with her. I love that that’s what brought you to working in photography. I think that a lot of the world right now is changing in such a drastic and, in some respects, scary way – in terms of AI and Photoshop, and in terms of exactly what a photograph is meant to capture. Your work is so true to who you are, and you can look at your pictures and know how real they are. So how do you not concede to anything and stick to your guns?
Because I literally can’t do anything else. I’ve never been trained. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m the most untechnical person. Literally anyone can do my photography. Anyone. The only thing that makes it a ‘me’ photograph is that I have to have all my things in place before I can do it. I have to have the model I want. The location is very important to me. And that location has to mean something to me. I also have a big say in the clothes, which means there’s not many stylists I can work with. Again, it has to mean something to me because the world doesn’t need another fashion shoot. It really doesn’t. So, if I’m photographing an artist or a personality or celebrity or whatever – as I have done a few times – I kind of get to know them and I am really interested in them, and I talk to them the whole time. And it’s the same with models, really. I want to know about their lives and their brothers and sisters. I love looking through people’s family photo albums…

When you think about your subjects – and I know that sometimes it’s a person you’ve met or you found – what is the thing that makes you feel, ‘I want to photograph you’?
Some specific look they give. I think I often tend to pick really shy ones who don’t know that they’re beautiful. If I stop two girls on a street, often the one who thinks I’m asking her friend goes completely red. And then when I say, ‘No, no, I’d like to photograph *you*’, she goes even redder and is like, ‘Me? Uh,

I don't… I don't know.' And they're all kind of nervous and vulnerable and embarrassed and just don't have a clue why I would want to photograph them. *They're* the best.

You obviously have a very distinct, unique, exquisite personal style. But how do you get from A to B with the fashion element in your photography? How do you decide what you can and cannot photograph, and how it'll mean something to you?
It has to look real. I want you to look at my pictures in a magazine or in one of my books or something, and it has to look like a film still, in that you have to believe that this girl really lives in this house. These are her clothes. Or I've just taken a walk in the forest and photographed this girl. And of course, I

social media, because it's such an amazing way for people to see work. But with the printed page, we spend so much time on the layout and the order and the colour and everything. And your work *is* like a movie; it's telling a story. And you want people to start at the beginning and by the end, to really care.
For me, the best photographers are the ones who photograph what's around them and what they know. Nan Goldin photographing her friends and herself. Tina Barney photographing her social group and herself and her family. Corinne Day photographed those she saw around her at that time. Bruce Weber lives the lifestyle he photographs. So, for me, the location is very, very important. I often go somewhere that meant something to me as a child; somewhere my father used to take me

That's so incredible.
Well, he's there with me.

The nostalgia. That's what photographs are.
Yes, exactly. I'm basically recreating my childhood.

And what was your childhood like? I love that story of you getting new shoes and putting them by the side of your bed. I'd love to hear more.
I'm an only child. I had the happiest childhood. I just loved being with my parents and so the three of us were like a little team. We travelled a lot, which are my happiest memories: Cornwall, Canada, France, Scotland, Devon. My dad used to love driving. He always drove Volkswagens, and then he went on to only drive Audis. It was always

'I like to take my models to bird sanctuaries, aircraft shows, forests, woods, harbours, the sea... just *everywhere* I went with my dad, basically.'

haven't. But I want you to believe, just like you do in a film; you're really somehow emotionally connected now to the characters in that film. You don't want her to die. You don't want him to leave. And you're very concerned and connected and you're deeply invested in it. And I want that with my shoots. You have to believe this is real. This is where she lives. And often it is.

That's such an amazing way to think of it. I always think the judge of a great film or TV show is if you care. If you stop caring halfway through, they've lost you. Obviously you and I are both big fans of the printed page, and you want people to properly look through the pages of your work. You don't just want people to quickly flick through. That's why I have such a love-hate relationship with

when I was little. He was a bird-watcher and an aircraft spotter. And I spent my time fishing and metal detecting with him! He was very eccentric. And I always used to get dragged along. I never wanted to go to all these places but he wanted company in the car because my mother wouldn't go. I only used to go because he'd buy me sweets that my mother wouldn't allow me. And so, I knew I'd get a treat if I went along. He used to go to all these amazing bird sanctuaries and do fishing and metal detecting in Epping Forest – where Henry VIII and Elizabeth I went hunting. And so now I take my models to bird sanctuaries, to aircraft shows, to forests and woods. My father also loved the sea and the water, so I'll take my models to harbours, to the sea, just *everywhere* I went with my dad.

German cars. For a long time, he had a series of VW Beetle cars, which in the States I think you call Bug cars. One was bright orange. One year we got the boat over to Denmark, playing 'Abba' the whole time. I just remember being in the back of the car and singing, 'Voulez-vous! A-ha! Take it now or leave it.' And I think I got so much inspiration. You know, I have a photographic memory when it comes to what people are wearing, their shoes, and things like that. And I can still remember driving through the Danish countryside... I just don't think I've ever really grown up.

I like the fact you're saying 'I've never really grown up' while you're wearing a pink cotton Miu Miu shirt dress. It's the perfect outfit to be saying that in.
I remember the specific shoes that I

wore: I was four and I was at my aunt's wedding, and my mother called them 'coffee-and-cream' shoes. I had a coffee-and-cream coloured dress, and she found matching shoes, which had a little crossover strap with a little button. I can still remember them on my feet: the shape and how they felt.

That's amazing.
So, when I put my models in clothes… For example, one of my first shoots with Sylvia [Mann] was her in an Edwardian dress, climbing a tree. Or I'll go back to the sailor outfit that the young actor wore on the beach in *Death in Venice*. Or school uniforms, because I remember being at school in the summer, sitting on the grass, making daisy chains. And I remember how uncomfortable and scratchy the navy skirt was. So I

'Angela would love to photograph her,' so he was brave enough, thank goodness, to go up to her mother and ask, 'Is this your daughter? My girlfriend's a photographer, could she see Sylvia?' So all I had was a phone number and his assurance that I would like this girl. I called up the mother. 'Sure,' she said, 'you can come round to the house if you want.' I still hadn't seen Sylvia at this point. So I turned up at this South London house, walked in, and there was no sign of any girl, only the mother. She just said, 'Yes, come in, Sylvia's in here'. She was curled up in a ball under the dining room table, and her mother said, 'She's a bit shy.' I started speaking to Sylvia, but she wouldn't reply. 'Oh, she'll be OK in a minute,' her mother said. By now I knew I definitely wanted to take photographs of her. I then said, 'Hi Sylvia, would it

took an ugly photo of Sylvia because it's impossible, but no one will ever be able to do the Sylvia book, because no one will ever find a Sylvia.

That's what sets your work apart. It's not about checking boxes. It's not about casting PDFs. It's, you know, David meeting her at the dentist. I think the joy of your work is that it's serendipitous and perfect at the same time. It's a magical combination of things.
Exactly. If all the right magic is there… I suppose it's like meeting someone as a partner. There's just something you know is right. And yet there may be so many factors against this ever being right. You know, when I go on a shoot, it can be pouring down with rain and just everything's seemingly going wrong, and yet the model just looks round at you

'My daughter was the most difficult subject to photograph. I had 22 years of difficulty with her. She never wanted to do it. I had to pay her.'

take clothes along to shoots: old school uniforms, sailor's outfits, Edwardian dresses. With my photography, I couldn't do it any other way. I've never shot in a studio. Never shot digital. Never used lights.

You touched upon Sylvia, the subject of your amazing book. I would love to know how you met her. And why her? How did she become so inspiring to you? I'd just love to know more about how it came to be, because it's such a special book which is now heavily referenced. I think other people try to do what you've done, but your work has a realness.
David, my husband, first came upon Sylvia in a dentist's waiting room in London. I wasn't there at the time, and it was before mobile phones. He just thought,

be OK if I…?' And the next thing she did – while still not speaking to me – was run out into the garden and climb up a tree. She just looked down at me. And I looked up at her, and thought, 'How on earth am I ever going to do this?' I had a little Snappy Snaps camera with me, and I said, 'Can I take a photograph of you, please, Sylvia?' And finally she just kind of muttered, 'Yes.' I think I did three photographs that day: one up the tree, one by an old bath that was in the garden, and then something else. And when I looked at those photographs I just knew. So I set up more shoots from then on. And I basically photographed her over seven years. I became very, very attached to her; very motherly towards her. I didn't have any children of my own at the time. I just loved her, and I loved being with her. I still love her now. I never

and she's wiping some rain off her face or something. And you just think, 'Oh my God, if I never take another photo, *that's* the one.' And it all comes together. Whereas if I'd planned all of that…

…it wouldn't happen.
I don't like planning. Some companies say, you know, 'So, your shooting schedule is…' or whatever. I don't want to know my shooting schedule; I just turn up. We put the clothes on. I go, 'No way, I'm not shooting that. I hate that top!' And then I have an argument with the stylist. And then we get all of that out of the way. Then I explain to the model how I like to work, and hopefully she isn't like an ironing board, and I can work with her. And then I get in the zone and I don't care about anything else. I'm not listening to anyone else.

I just do it. And at the end of the day, I realise, 'Oh my God, I'm exhausted.'

Because you've been so deep in concentration?
Exactly. I just want to add that I feel I am very different to every other 'fashion photographer' – and I don't mean this in an arrogant sense. I don't turn up with a huge crew. It's me, my one assistant and literally an old wicker shopping trolley basket on wheels that my assistant is emotionally attached to. I like to wheel my equipment around in it. When I say equipment, it is extremely minimal and quite a lot of the basket is taken up with my special milk for my tea and my copious tea bags. I am very very fussy about tea – and everything else. So I look upon a commercial shoot as the client being 'allowed' by me to put clothes in my shoot and not me shooting their clothes. Clothes and fashion are way down in the order of things. So, and in a totally arrogant way this time, the client has to think themselves lucky that they can come into one of my shoots! This of course is beneficial to all as the client gets a better shoot and a 'me' shoot.

That all totally makes sense. Do you still have difficult shoots, or difficult people to photograph?
My daughter was actually one of the most difficult subjects to photograph. I had 22 years of difficulty with her.

Why that difficulty?
With her in particular? I know *exactly* why. She never wanted to do it. I had to pay her. I had to tell her how long it was going to take. And then I'd take her to locations where my father had taken me. We went to a bird sanctuary one day, and we argued the whole way there. She was very, very rude and insolent. I'd taken along some clothes but she didn't want to wear any of them. And every time I held the camera up, she went, '*Urgh?* What? How long is this going to take?' And then she'd be like, 'No, you said, like, two hours.' And I'd say, 'It hasn't even been one hour yet. *And* you're getting paid.' And then I got very emotional, because we were in the exact place where I'd been with my dad, and I knew he was there now, watching over me and her. And he loved her so much. So then I started crying. And then she started crying. And then she started melting. And then we were turning it around a bit. And then she said, 'Should we go and have some lunch?' So we went and had some lunch in this little café, sat next to all these kindly middle-aged male bird-watchers. They smiled over at us, and we ate, and we talked, and we went back, and I asked, 'Can I do a few more pictures?' And so we did a few more. And then I went and bought her some soft toys from the gift shop… and we went home perfectly happy.

That's really beautiful. It's such an interesting juxtaposition: you're such a personal photographer, and yet your hardest subject is the person closest to you. But it totally makes sense.
Yes, it does.

So, I want to talk a bit about the Miu Miu campaign you've recently shot, and how it came to be – and how you felt about it. You've obviously done advertising before, but this must have personal resonance since you are such a fan of Miu Miu. It's your life, it's your clothes, it's what you wear.
Lotta [Volkova, stylist for Miu Miu] called me up. I was beyond surprised… And beyond worried. Because if there's any shoot I'm ever going to do in my life that I want to make perfect, it's going to be that one. I don't suppose I was ever going to turn it down.

You couldn't in a million years.
I shot Super 8 for it as well. My first proper film and I was really happy with it. I wanted to do the very, very best for them.

I can't wait to see it. But I understand that pressure for you; it's not just an advertising job. It's so much more. Let's talk about IDEA. I'm so curious about the origin story of it. I mean, you were a photographer already. So how did that come about?
Well, yes, I was a photographer in the 1990s, working a lot for *Purple* and various other magazines, and I co-founded a magazine called *Very* as well. Everyone used to say they loved my work but they never used to *give* me any work, even though at the time I was making my whole living – or rather, *not* making a living – from photography. So, I always used to buy books for my photography research. And Sarah [Andelman], who owned Colette, the shop in Paris, was a friend of my flatmate. She used to come over to our flat in London, and one day she saw my books and said, 'Can I buy some of your books for my new shop?' And I just said, 'No, but I can find you doubles, and I'll bring them to Paris when I come.' So I did that to make some money. I never intended it to be a business. But it built up, and when Dover Street Market opened in London, I got a space there. At the same time, David's freelance work was quiet, so he joined me. We were still working from home, plus by then we had two young children, so I gave up photography altogether for a long time to concentrate on IDEA. We got half a room in an office in Soho and started having the odd customer or two come round to see us. Then we had a pop-up shop in 2009, then acquired more of the office and even more of the office. Now we have the whole building.

The growth of IDEA has been amazing.
But all that time that I'd given up on photography, I was trying to tell myself that it didn't matter. But it did, and it was really hurting me inside. And I knew that, but I just carried on because IDEA was actually making some money. And then a couple of magazines kept asking me, 'Would you come back? Would you do a shoot?' And I'd say no. But then eventually I said, 'I'll only do a shoot if it means something to me. So, I'll shoot my daughter if you like.' And that's how I got back into it. And then more people started asking me. And then I started getting jobs. And suddenly, when I didn't need the money, people began offering me more money than I ever knew was possible. And today I'm in the lovely position of being able to say no. Because it's not about the money.

It's well deserved.
And all they do, when they hear you say no… is they come back offering more money. But it's not about that for me. It's about the excitement.

Which photographers right now are you excited about?
I suppose it's the ones I've always been excited about: Wolfgang [Tillmans], Juergen... And I think Winter Vandenbrink, who shot me for *W*, is very good. I think Petra [Collins] is very good. And Nadia [Lee Cohen], *definitely* Nadia. She's my number one at the moment. Which is so weird, because she's the polar opposite from me. But we like each other's work. And I can't understand it. I *really* love her.

As a photographer, is there a particular subject or a place or a fashion that you are dreaming of shooting?
Kristen Stewart. Then I always have little stories, scenarios in my mind, and I write them down and I want to execute them. And so, in terms of dreams, yes, they've got some dream people in them who I don't want to say – models and stuff – but also very specific locations. One particular house I want to photograph is available for rental and it's in the most amazing location. I pretty much always like to shoot in the UK, so that's always on my checklist. Certain models I really want to shoot with, but often they're not models, they're family members. I like doing family shoots in family houses.

Alongside your photography and all your work at IDEA, I consider you a fashion icon. So what I'd love to know is... What's on the docket for next season? Is it Miu Miu again? Is it Phoebe?
I want to know what your seven looks for Fall are.
I've already done my pre-orders. I've already tried them all on. So firstly, the Miu Miu I've bought into: there's little skirts in very fine silk; the colours are really interesting at Miu Miu for next season, lovely muted lavenders and jade greens. And loafers, *big time*. I bought them in brown. I bought them in black. All the different colour socks. At Prada, a skirt and pyjama tops that you tuck in. I bought the shoes. I think I'm probably going to get one of the Prada bags next season because they're really lovely. What other Miu Miu have I got? God, a *lot*! A really nice chocolate brown tracksuit top with a skirt. And Miu Miu gave me a lovely gift from the shoot as well, custom made for me. They didn't produce it. A track jacket in that early 1980s Apple computer grey colour. With a really fresh, minty green. Like a sporty green.

Sounds amazing.
And I like mixing and matching. So I bought a blue silk dress from Miu Miu this season – Lotta actually has it too, but she has the bra underneath, because it came with a conical bra, like the one from the Madonna tour, but I didn't buy the bra. So I bought the dress, but I like the juxtaposition of putting a men's rugby shirt over the top of it.

Can't wait to see your looks. This has been such a pleasure. I could chat with you for hours and hours. You're so inspiring. You're such an original. You really are.
Thanks Sara. See you in Paris.

'I couldn't do my photography any other way. I'm the most un-technical person. I've never shot in a studio. Never shot digital. Never used lights.'

'I look upon a commercial shoot as the client being 'allowed' by me to put clothes and fashion in my shoot – and not me shooting their clothes.'

Malick Bodian

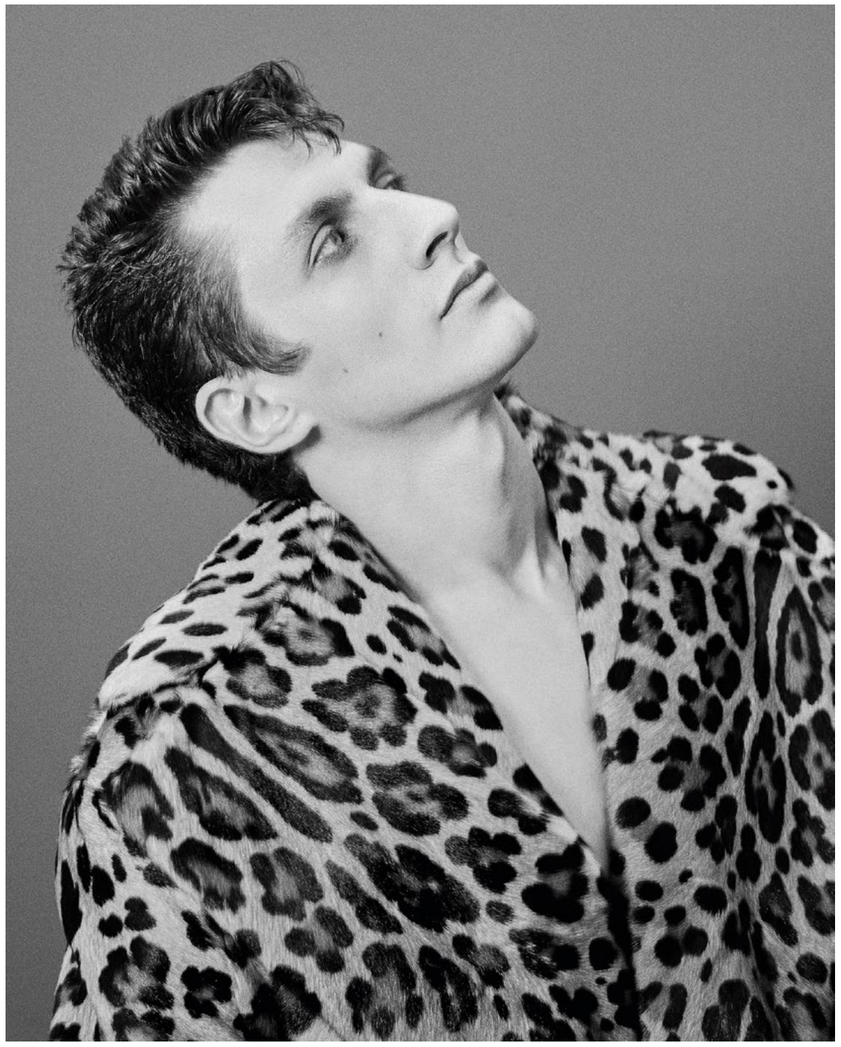
‘I think my role is to help my people realise their beauty, in the same way that people in fashion helped me realise my confidence.’

Interview by Jerry Stafford
Photographs by Malick Bodian
Styling by Robbie Spencer

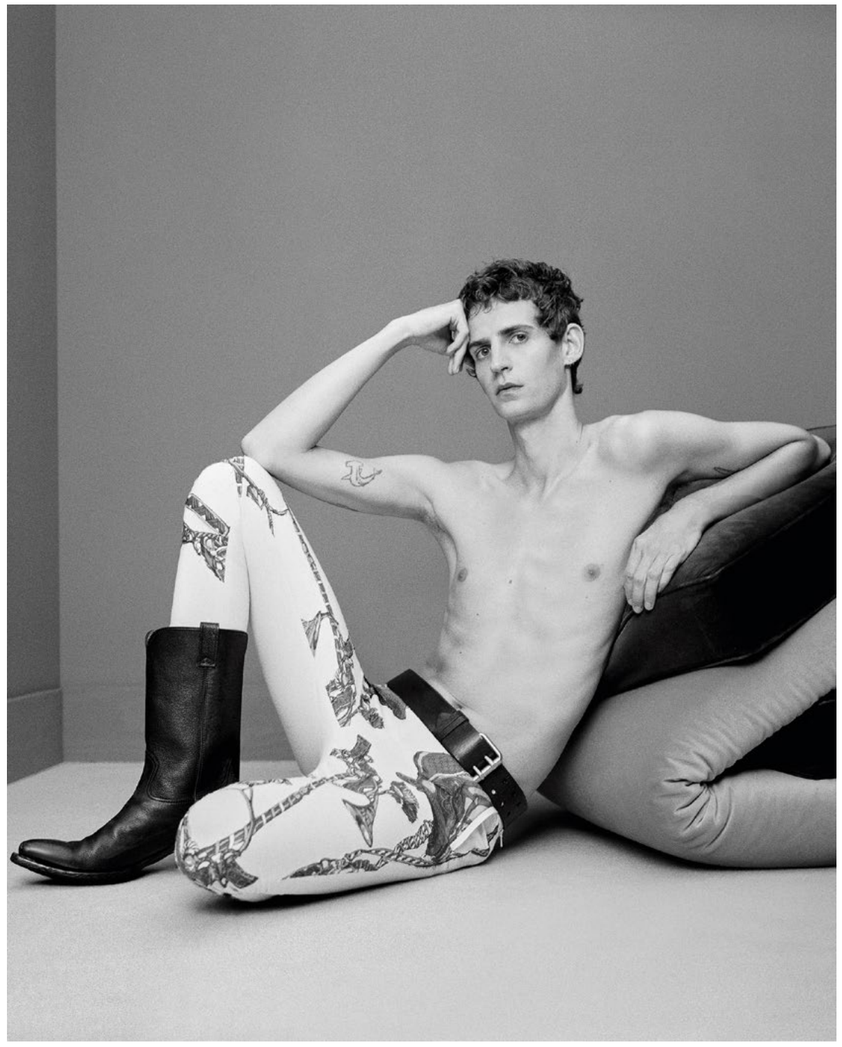
Malick Bodian
Cotton boxers by Sunspel and leather boots by Prada.

Alex Foxton
Leather trench coat by Lanvin and leather
over-the-knee boots by Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.

Adrien Dantou
Wool tank top by Miu Miu, leather trousers by Tom Ford
and leather over-the-knee boots by Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.



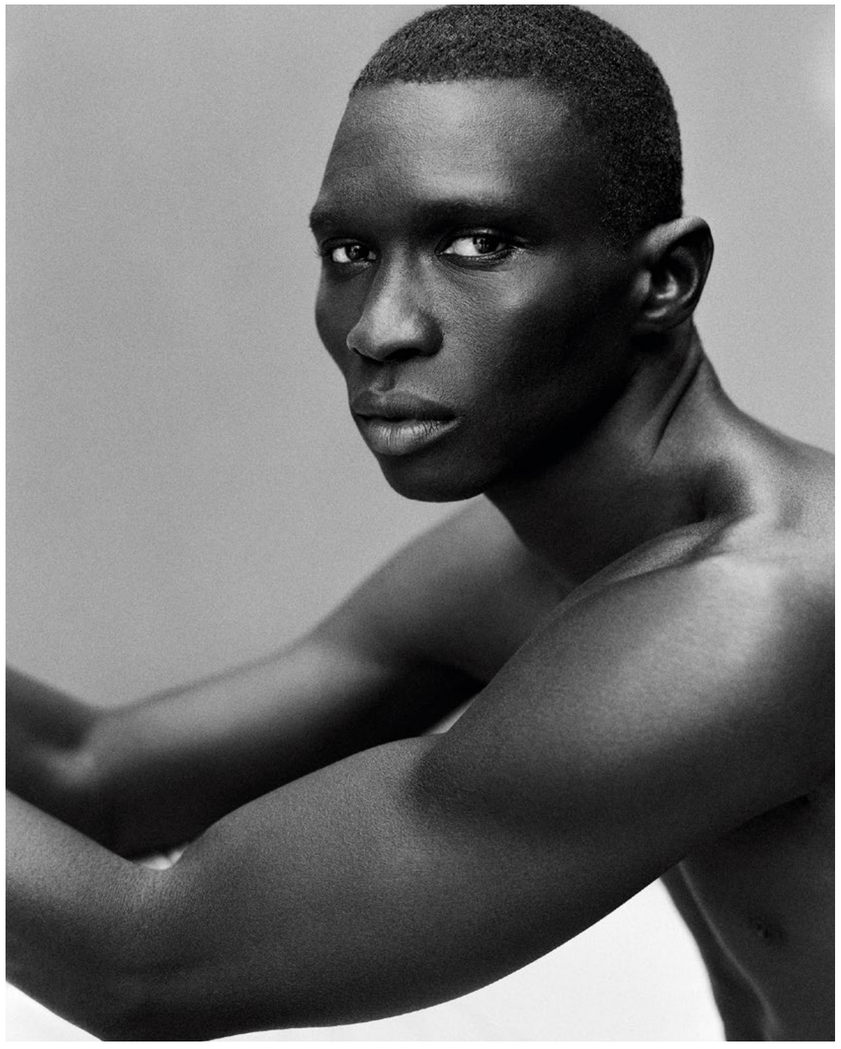
Henry Kitcher
Short hair fur coat by Dolce & Gabbana.



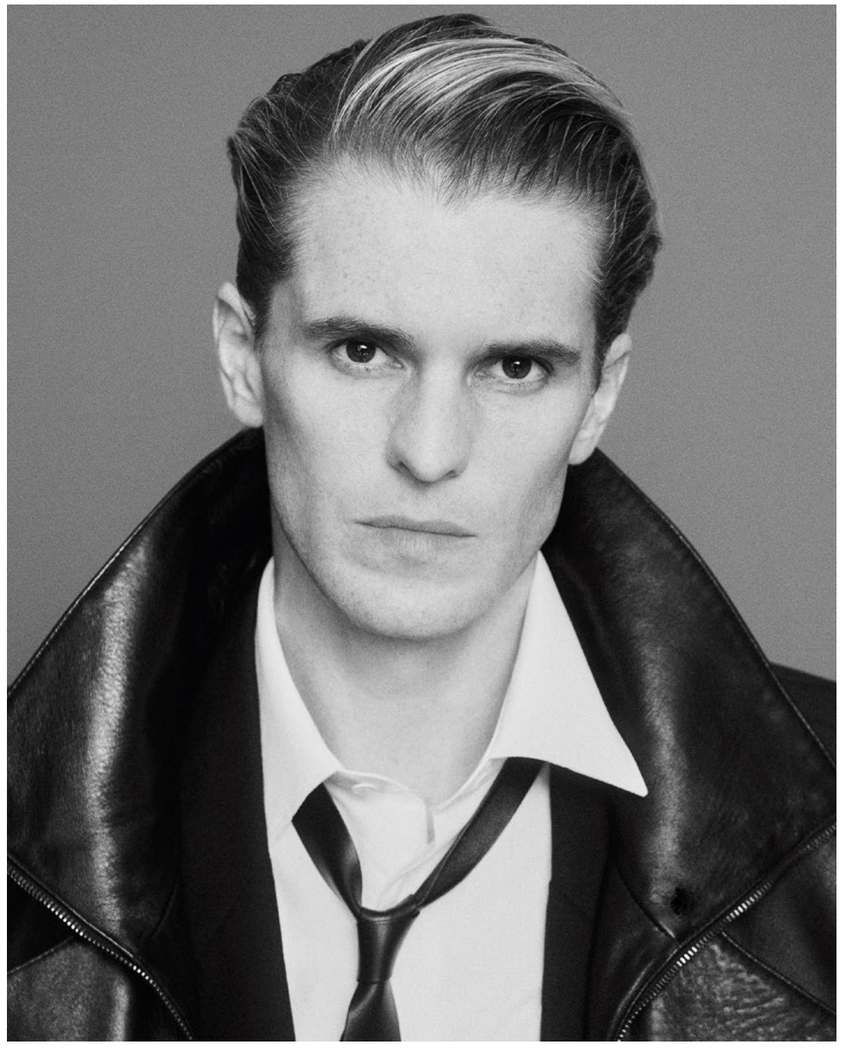
Tom Atton Moore
Cotton trousers by Stefan Cooke, leather belt
by Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello, and leather boots by Prada.

Sang Woo Kim
Cotton trench coat by Givenchy by Sarah Burton.

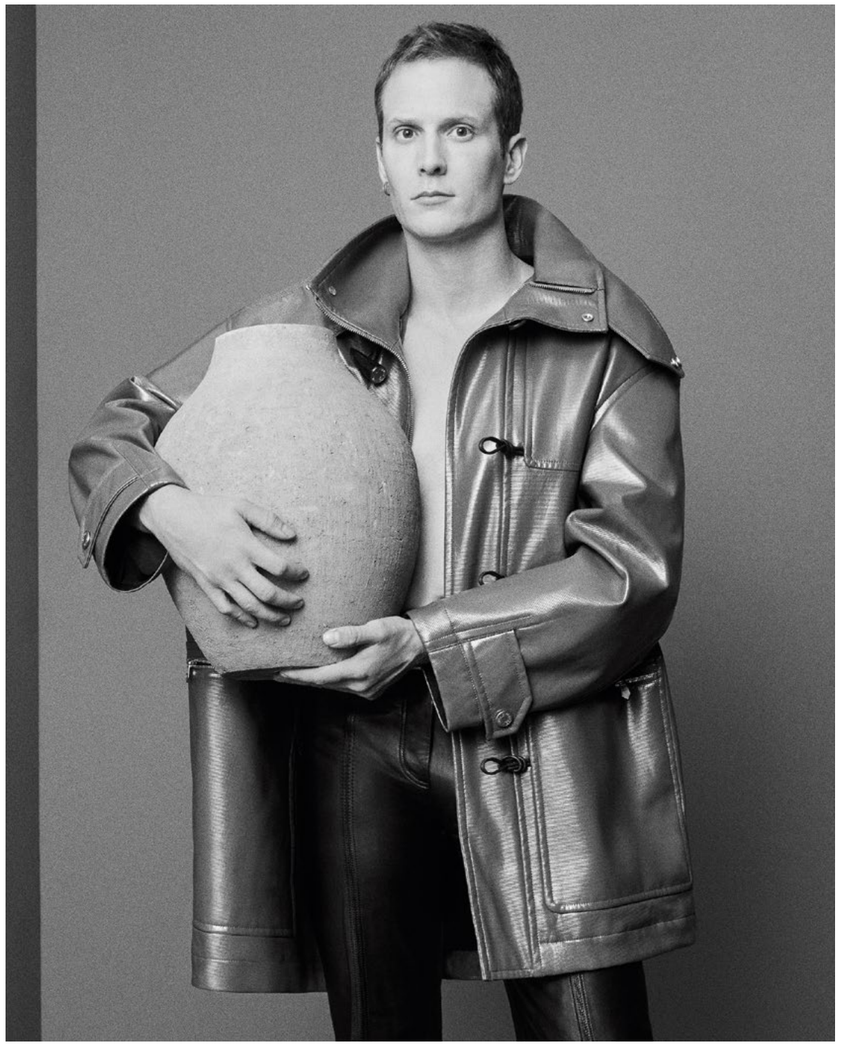
Clement Chabernaud
Virgin wool coat by Dries van Noten,
cotton pants and leather boots both by Prada.



Fernando Cabral



Adrien Dantou
Bubbled lambskin long coat by Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello,
cotton poplin shirt by Louis Vuitton and leather tie by Tom Ford.



Félix Gesnouin
Duffle coat with removable hood by Hermès and leather trousers by Rabanne.

Talents: Alex Foxton, Adrien Dantou at Success, Henry Kitcher at Ford Models, Tom Atton Moore at Initial, Sang Woo Kim at Lumien, Clement Chabernaud at Success, Fernando Cabral at Marilyn, Félix Gesnouin at Success. Casting: DMCASTING. Hair: Eugene Souleiman at Streeters. Make-up: Celine Martin at Art + Commerce. Set designer: Félix Gesnouin at Total. Production: Casa Projects. Executive producer: Tucker Birbilis. Production manager: Florent Norcereau. Digital tech: Stefano Poli. Photography assistants: Matthieu Boutignon, Mitchell Sturm, Sofiane Vergnet. Digital tech assistant: Vittorio Poli. Styling assistants: Carolijn Hooij, Cecilia Baistrocchi. Hair assistants: Yuri Kato, Aimie Brenanan, Celine De Cruz. Make-up assistant: Thomas Kergot. Set designer assistants: El Mehdi Largo, Luc Scriberra. Production assistants: Gwen Michau, Camille Doussy. Post-production: Maria Bieluszko.

Henry Kitcher and Tom Atton Moore
Cashmere sweater by Miu Miu and leather trousers by Louis Vuitton.
Wool trousers by Rokh.

Malick Bodian doesn't just walk into the room, he glides softly as if on an invisible cushion of fragrant air. He doesn't simply sit, he drapes and folds himself into a chair like a silk Hermès scarf. And he doesn't speak, he weaves delicate syllables and sentences together with long elegantly-manicured fingers as he describes his early childhood in Senegal and his adolescent peregrinations throughout Europe.

At the age of 13 he left his birthplace to join his mother in Italy. From there he made his way to Paris in 2018 after he was discovered by a model scout at 19 while working in a restaurant in Corsica. As one of a new wave of West African male models, his meteoric rise to fame on the catwalk quickly led to lucrative commercial work and close relationships with some of the most influential players in the industry – designers and photographers alike.

His early interest in the visual arts, particularly cinema, quickly and naturally led to photography and a desire to document his own experience as a model. Bodian continues an illustrious lineage of West African studio and street photography which includes such legendary portraitists as the Malien icons Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita, Cameroon's Samuel Fosso and the Beninois Roger DaSilva, who lived and worked for most of his life in Dakar, Senegal. Their revolutionary visual aesthetic, with its forensic study and celebration of Black elegance and style, underscores Bodian's exploration of photo reportage and fashion photography, and continues to inspire his own practice.

Bodian now divides his time not only between work as a model and as a photographer but also between a home in Senegal where he has decided to return to live, and his apartment and studio in Paris. He is equally at ease on a red carpet in Venice or New York as he is exploring the vast Northern plains of Kenya or the metropolitan cacophony of Dakar. Polyglot and Renaissance Man *par excellence*, Bodian navigates each medium to which he lends his tasteful attention with elegance, clarity and intelligence while retaining his own unique sense of humour and ambition.

So, in the words of his style icon and hero, American actor Eddie Murphy, 'Whatzupwitu, Malick?!'

Jerry Stafford: Let's talk a bit about your childhood. What are your first visual or sensorial memories of Senegal where you were born?

Malick Bodian: The place I grew up is called Mbao and every time I think about my childhood, I think about a specific beach where I spent a lot of time. There is also a village, Missirah, where my grandmother used to live and where I learnt how to ride a bike. It was a village where I also encountered snakes a lot. The reason why I fear snakes comes from this village, which was part of the biggest safari park in Senegal. I have really incredible memories of these places, it was almost like a fantasy.

Tell me a bit about the house you grew up in as a child. What did it look like?

I grew up in a traditional circle house. In the centre of this house were two trees: a big one in which we'd sit and have lunch, and a mango tree that we called papaya mango – the mangos tasted so good. In this kind of house, you have a courtyard with only sand and then you have the trees with the kitchen at the back. To the left are rooms where everyone sleeps, and at the back of the house was a huge kapok tree that scared me at night.

Can you remember any particular traditional aspects of Lebu culture when you were growing up?

The Lebu are the people of the sea, they live next to the beach. They're not really my people because my father comes from Casamance, which is in the south, but I was born in Mbao, which is 10 minutes from the beach, so the Lebu kind of lived there; they were always in the sea or next to the water. They're like the fishermen of Senegal.

Were you aware of any ceremonial practices in the community?

There was one called *tajabone*, which was a ceremony where you dress up and go and ask for candles and money. There was another memorable ceremony, *tabaski*. It's a Muslim festival but in Senegal it's kind of transformed and they make it their own: once a year you go to your favourite tailor and you make a specific dress. Men and women wear their custom outfits. It's a very beautiful festival and now that I work in fashion, I realise how connected I am to this ceremony.

What was your relationship with your parents and siblings like while you were growing up?

I only lived with them for three years in total. My mum left for Europe when I was young. I never really lived with her. I didn't know my father because they were separated and he lived far away. So I grew up alone. I remember my mum always moving me from one place to another. First we were in Ngaparou when she was working as a housekeeper and then she left for Europe. So she sent me to Nianing, which is a village where her best friend used to live and the family was Catholic. Because I was born Muslim, my grandmother came to the village and kidnapped me. She was like, 'There's no way you're growing up Catholic!' Very funny. Then she took me to Missirah, the village I just mentioned, where I spent most of my time and where my grandmother educated me. My mum's two sisters were also there, so I grew up with my cousins and my aunts. And then they sent me back to Mbao. I lived in an apartment there with my siblings and I went to school, and then from there I came to Europe.

Were you an active, social child or more cerebral?

I was always in my mind, but in Senegal, you don't have time to be with yourself. There's always things going on. There's always something to do, especially when you're young. It's like you have no choice! So, it's very social. If you don't want to eat at your house, you can go to someone else's house and eat, it's a very normal thing. Everybody kind of lives at each other's house, it's very open.

Who were your heroes or heroines at that time, and what were your dreams as a child?

I think when I was young, my hero was Kunta Kinte from Alex Haley's book and the TV series, *Roots*. I heard a lot about him and was inspired because he was born next to the village where I grew up, on the border of Gambia, next to the Kunta Kinte island. Then there was my mum. I admired my mum a lot at that age because she was travelling, trying to find us a better life. I always dreamt of becoming a footballer, then when I was around 13, I started dreaming about working in cinema. I didn't know what exactly, but I knew that somehow I was kind of connected to this world. But there was football, mostly!

Why did your mother decide to move to Sardinia and then to Corsica? What was her motivation and how did you experience the displacement and this huge existential change in your life?

My mum moved to Sardinia because it was small, so it was an easy place for her to find work. Then she fell in love with an Italian there, got married and stayed. When we came, my older sister and I lived with her. I have another sister who is older but she couldn't get a visa. So, we lived with my mum the first year and she was very happy to have us there, but I think at some point it kind of became a weight. My sister wasn't really working and I didn't want to work, I wanted to go to school and play football. Then at some point, she sent me back to Senegal because she felt disappointed that I didn't want to go and work like the people who go to the beach and sell clothes and Chinese bags. I told her that I wanted to keep going to school. So she sent me back to Senegal as a punishment, which is something that many African parents do. When I eventually went back to Sardinia, my other older sister had managed to go to France, to Corsica. And that's the reason we moved to Corsica. Things then started to become very difficult at home. I was 15 or 16 and at some point it was decided that I go live in a children's home. But I still went to school and played football, and because I was doing so well in my studies, I was given my own apartment for free. In my last year in Corsica, when I was 18, I was working in a restaurant every summer – and that's where I got scouted as a model.

Moving to Sardinia and then Corsica, did you feel alienated?

I felt totally alienated in Sardinia because it's an island, you know, and all the Black people were doing the same thing, some kind of selling. I think I've always been someone who's quite political, and even when I was young, I always wanted to do something different. I didn't want people to have a bad image of my people, so that's why I wanted to go to school. I was the only Black person in both my school and my football team. But I am someone who adapts very well. I remember when I arrived, it was June and they told me that you need to speak Italian in order to integrate with the school by September. I learnt Italian in three months over the summer by watching Italian cartoons. I had no choice.

When you came to Sardinia you spoke French, English and the local dialect?

Just French and the local dialect. I felt

'I was always in my mind, quite cerebral, but in Senegal, you don't have time to be with yourself. There's always things going on, it's very social.'

'Living in Sardinia and Corsica made me feel like a stranger, an alien, someone not desirable. So when I got scouted as a model, it felt like a joke to me.'

After Sun
Thiaroye Azur, Dakar, Senegal, August 2022.

very lonely for a long time. In fact, the whole time I lived in Sardinia, I never once had a girlfriend or any kind of relationship at all.

When you got scouted in the restaurant in Corsica, what was your reaction to being picked out? Had you ever considered modelling or fashion as a career?
No, not really. I never thought about it because I never thought of myself as being beautiful. Living in Sardinia and Corsica made me feel like a stranger, like an alien, like someone who is not desirable. So when I got scouted, it felt like a joke to me. I told the guy to fuck off, you know? I thought he was making fun of me. But then he really insisted and my boss at that time was like, 'You have nothing to lose, the guy just wants to take a picture of you.' The next morning, he messaged me saying he'd like to see me again to take another photo, because it was too dark that night. So, I saw him again, then he scouted me for this editorial for *Double* magazine.

So what happened next?
When the editorial came out an agent called Benoit Guinot in Paris saw it and he was the one who *really* scouted me; when he saw the picture, which was just a silhouette shot by Jack Davison, you couldn't even recognise my face! He was like, 'I like your profile.' It was insane! And then he was like, 'You have to come to Paris, and I will make you a model.' It was August and I was working that month because I wanted to move to Nice to go to university.

What did you study at university?
Foreign language studies, but then Benoit told me I should go to Paris for fashion week – and that's how I got to walk for Valentino, Dior, Kim Jones' last show for Louis Vuitton, and that's how I met Haider Ackermann.

How do you think you were perceived as one of the first important wave of West African male models?
When I entered fashion, it was very positive. It was a moment in my life where I had no confidence in myself; then I arrived into this world and it gave me so much confidence. Of course, the reality was that there were not many Black people but I didn't feel it. That's the reality, but there's been a lot of progress.

This period is also on the cusp of what became an extremely interesting and creative time for the Black artistic community, both in fashion and photography, and then the Black Lives Matter movement gained a lot of momentum. Do you feel that you were part of this powerful wave?
To be honest, the Black Lives Matter movement never really touched me. I am someone who never gets carried away with these kinds of events. I always felt like someone who is a human being on this Earth first and foremost. I'm a very open-minded person but I never really got attached to Black Lives Matter as a movement. I think at some point I was influenced by everyone talking about it on Instagram – as we all were. But then I realised that I didn't really know what I was talking about. I tend to stay calm when something happens and really think deeply about what I am going to say and how I am going to engage. I'm very connected to Africa and for me, I acknowledge when things happen in Africa, it just touches me more. A lot of times America has used Black African people as a tool for their fight. We don't have the same reality. It's everyone's war, but it's not necessarily their war. It's a very sensitive subject.

As this movement was gaining momentum, Covid hit. Where did you spend that period and how did this time influence you?
Covid was horrible for a lot of people, but it was the most important thing that ever happened to me. I was in Paris, living in my apartment in Bagnolet, and Covid was literally the thing that woke me up. I am sad about everything that happened, and I wish it hadn't happened, but I am so grateful that I had that time alone. I felt depressed, but at the same time I came to acknowledge all the privileges that I had. As I said, modelling gives you a huge amount of confidence, but then at some point it gives you too much confidence and you can take everything for granted. You get to travel, you get to visit all these countries, you get people taking photographs of you, who make you look beautiful, do your nails, do your hair, your make-up, give you all these compliments. It's an incredible job! But until Covid, I didn't realise it, I was just like, 'Yeah, I'm a model now.' I did so much in the two years between 2018 and 2020. I went to Japan, China and America so many times – I would have never gone to these places without modelling. More importantly,

'The very first photographs I was taking were of landscapes of Rwanda and of Tanzania, shot from the plane while I was travelling as a model.'

I also realised that I didn't know my own country at all. I had this sense of guilt and I was like, 'I have never actually explored my continent.' So I promised myself that when this was over, I was going to go back home. I wanted to travel around Africa, and that's how I fell in love with photography. I had been taking pictures since 2018, since I began modelling, but it was never a passion, but when I went home and I started doing documentary photography, I truly found a purpose.

When you went home to Senegal?
Yes, and then I began to travel in Africa. I loved doing documentary photography but I didn't know how to bring these photos into the fashion world. I learned by finding a collaborator, and that was Ibrahim Kamara. He was one of the first people I met who gave me the desire to photograph fashion. He is an incredible stylist but when he was travelling with me he was just adding a hat on a model, always something small. And that's how I realised that I could actually take real images in fashion, in an almost documentary way.

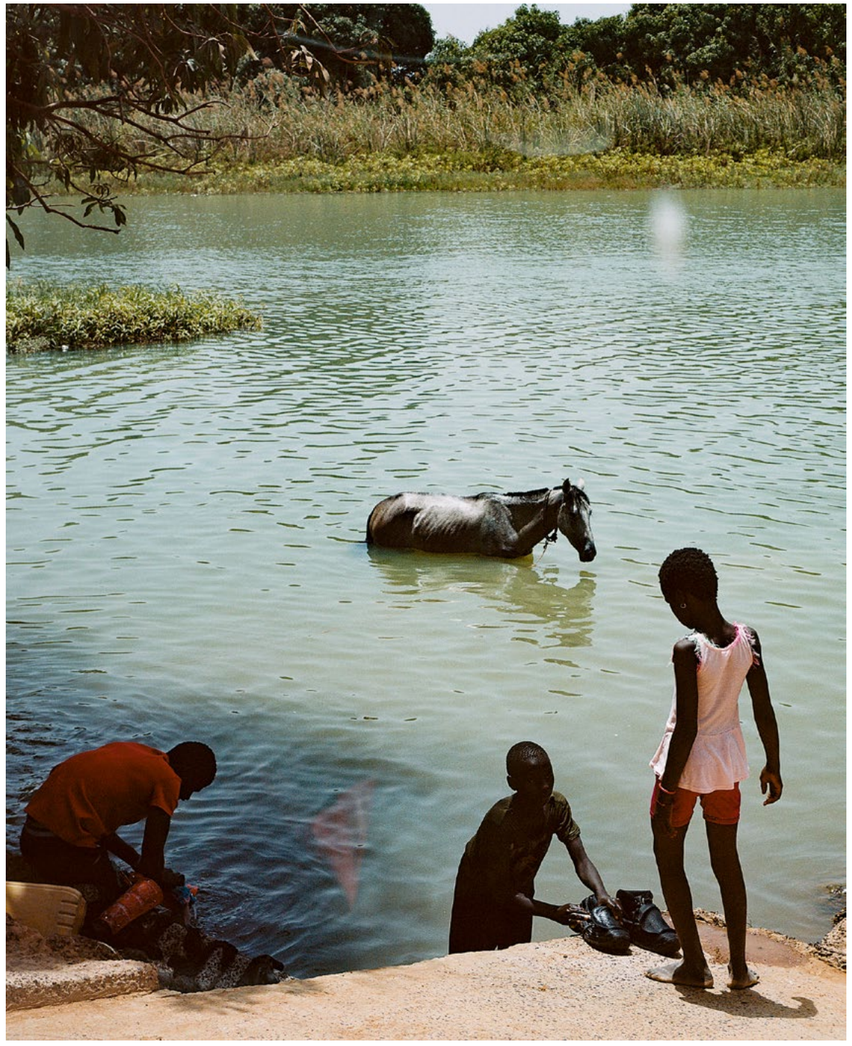
Where did you travel to with Ib?
The first time we travelled together, and how we became close, was when we went to his home in Gambia. Then from Gambia, we took a car and travelled to Senegal. It was such a long trip, and on the way we were stopping and photographing people. We did this series for *Luncheon* called 'Senegambia'.

Since then, you've successfully continued to work both as a model and a photographer. How do you navigate both?
I realised quickly that modelling wasn't going to be forever. It was something I loved doing, but it wasn't enough. I never had the idea of leaving modelling for photography, but I think some people tried to put it into my head that I couldn't do both. I was always like, why not? You know, if Virgil was doing design collaborations with Ikea while being a Vuitton designer, I could also do two things. So I still do both.

You've worked closely, both as a model and as a photographer, with leading designers like Grace Wales Bonner, Kim Jones and Matthieu Blazy. How did these collaborations evolve?
When I first arrived in Paris, I was a bit intimidated by everyone. All the designers, the casting directors... Kim was someone who inspired me when I met him at Vuitton. He was so humble at such a big moment in his career. Then when he went to Dior I became a Dior boy and we became friends. I worked with Matthieu Blazy at Bottega Veneta because of [photographer] Pierre Debusschere. Pierre was one of the first people I told that I wanted to be a photographer. It was on his set while he was photographing me for a magazine. He was very helpful, very encouraging. Pierre was working for Matthieu as image director for Bottega Veneta, and he asked me to take photographs for the first campaign because Matthieu wanted to create something new with young photographers. Matthieu chose my work to be the first image of this new era, because he thought it was very real and positive. As for Grace Wales Bonner, she's someone who knows exactly where her inspiration comes from: Africa. I love that about her, I like people who use their inspiration well. She does a lot of research, which I think is important. I felt connected to her, to her brand, and the first thing we did was a campaign in Ghana on the streets. I like to experiment but I also love to take photographs that are very raw, with real light and this was something that Matthieu and Pierre were also pushing.

Tell me about your project *Voyage Temporal,* your so-called return home to Senegal to document members of your family.
I went to Senegal straight after Covid and realised that I was a stranger there. Before, I would go every two years but after Covid I started doing these trips whenever I wanted to. I got myself a map and I'd be like 'I've never been to this lake, I've never been to this town' and I'd just go. While I was travelling, I was taking pictures, but I had no specific purpose, no objective, it was just to explore and to get to know my country. So, I was going to Senegal almost every month for four years and after a while I put all these pictures that I'd shot together. I am inspired by Magnum photography and I realised that all the black-and-white images I had taken were images of old things: old objects, old buildings, old people as well, and people who dress like in ancient times, people who don't want to change who they are. Most importantly though, I went to visit my father for the first time ever in 2021, and at the same time I met

'Collaboratoring with Ibrahim Kamara gave me the desire and confidence to take 'real' images in fashion, in an almost documentary way.'



Swimming in Spring
Fleuve Sénégal, Senegal, April 2021.

Young Maasai
Serengeti, Tanzania, October 2021.

and photographed my grandmother for the first time.

How has this project changed you, both as an artist and as a person?
The Senegal trip was a complete turning point. Before that, I thought my future was here in Europe. This is something that a lot of African people believe; they think the future is in Europe and that there is nothing at home. For me, it became the opposite. I realised everything was at home, there was so much inspiration, and I was much happier there. The country has progressed a lot.

Where is home to you?
Home is Senegal, and I'm grateful that I realised this early on. The African community is losing its talent because we're manipulated to believe that everything the West does is better. Of course, lots of things there are good, but it doesn't mean that what you have at home is not.

Your interest in film is becoming increasingly important in your artistic practice – tell me about that.
I always knew I wanted to be a filmmaker. At first I always wanted to be an actor, but I want to make movies because I love telling stories. I love to entertain people, and I would love to show them the elegance of my people. I'm very inspired by the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène.[1] He was very radical.

Tell me a little bit about the film you've been working on in Rwanda.
This is a fiction documentary about the Rwandan side of Lake Kivu. One day I was recording the lake and its fisherman with my camera and suddenly I noticed this place where kids would jump. I was really attracted to that place because it reminded me of my childhood in Senegal. So I started recording the conversations these children were having facing the other side of the lake: the Congo side. And the fishermen were also fishing between the Congolese side and the Rwandan side. I wanted to document this: the fishermen living day by day, and these boys in their childhood, a childhood that reminds me of my own. While on the other side of this lake, we know there is a war, there's darkness. I want to highlight our ignorance. The documentary is about the beauty of life while, at the same time, learning to question yourself.

Can we talk about the Costume Institute's exhibition, *Superfine*? What are your thoughts on its theme of Black dandyism and how were you involved in the conversations around it?
American *Vogue* reached out to me to do a story about dandyism and right away I wanted to do a story about African dandies. I'm so sensitive about America, especially about Black Americans, because I always think that they are not *African* Americans. I think they are Black Americans and as long as they consider themselves as African Americans, people will never consider them as *Americans*. We need to stop using the term Africa just because they're Black. This separatism is what creates problems. So it was important for me to explore a very precise narrative. African dandyism is, for me, situated in Congo where they have the *sapeurs*.[2] This is pure dandyism. Then there is also the work of Malick Sidibé who was an incredible photographer.[3] His subjects were just so elegant.

Who are the greatest exponents of Black dandyism, past or present?
Naomi Campbell. I don't think there's anybody like her. For me, it's completely her. I also love André Leon Talley, of course, and he inspired us for the American *Vogue* Lewis Hamilton cover! Dandyism for me is also Eddie Murphy, I don't understand why they didn't invite him. He is a huge inspiration to me, and he also inspired my own red carpet look!

You collaborated with Chanel, right?
The inspiration was Eddie Murphy's suit in the film *Coming to America!* It was perfect. I showed it to the Chanel team, and they were like, 'Oh my God, we have a jacket like that.' And I was like *what*? And then they made the hat custom. They made the shoes. Everything they did was custom. It was a privilege.

I remember going to your show, *Sénégal, voyage temporel,* and watching you take a group of students around the exhibition. It was very moving, actually, as they were clearly inspired not only by your work but by your grace and generosity in sharing this time with them. Do you feel a particular responsibility, as a Black artist from West Africa, to work with your community and inspire the next generation?
Absolutely. Sadly, when you're a Black person, the moment you are in a creative

'The precise narrative of African dandyism is, for me, situated in Congo where they have the *sapeurs*. This is pure dandyism. Pure elegance.'

industry and you are considered a little bit, you come to represent Black people. Everything you do is important. If you do stupid things, it can affect not only you, but also your people. So I have started taking myself much more seriously and I'm very careful. To answer your question, I absolutely feel responsible for everything I do, every work I bring out, I want it to be as good as possible and have a meaning.

You have also travelled to the DRC to photograph mountain gorilla conservation projects, and to Sierra Leone to document the amputee football team. These must be rewarding but also challenging commissions. How do you see your role as a photographer on this kind of assignment?
I love to occupy different universes in my life. You need to have balance. I do fashion photography because I need balance between fashion and being a model. And then I do documentary photography because I need balance in photography in general. I can't only do fashion photography, it would drive me crazy. So that work is very important to me. It's maybe more important than fashion.

Your photography is often about a relationship between subject and place, has this always been the case?
Yes, for sure. The very first photographs I was taking were of landscapes, shot from the plane while I was travelling as a model. In Africa, the first photographs I took were landscapes of Rwanda, of Tanzania. But for this *System* shoot, we built something specific. This year, I've been working on how I'm going to photograph in the studio. I don't like this backdrop thing. I can do it. Everyone can. So I want to find a way to build the outdoors, but inside.

You also have a passionate interest in architecture and have designed and built a house in Senegal. What does this house mean for you?
The house is literally all my modelling career savings and I built it in the place where my mum and I first lived in Senegal, Ngaparou. I built it to thank her for bringing me to Europe and for everything she had done for me. I didn't take it lightly. I always want to do things with *grandeur.* I didn't want to make a house just to make a house, I wanted my mum to have a house that was very special, one in which she felt like she could travel while inside it. I took a lot of inspiration from modernity, but also the ancient world and science fiction. So it's a mix between tradition and the new, and futuristic influences too.

You mentioned the shoot you've just done for *System*. Tell me more about it.
My own personal experience is reflected in the shoot. It is the story of the models whom I met when I first arrived in Paris. It was a community, and for me it was the first time I saw community beyond my skin colour. So the most important thing about it is the casting, which was very challenging because the stylist Robbie Spencer is always someone who chooses the casting and the character is very important to him. But he really loved the narrative. So, he went for it. And I'm so happy that I worked with him because I really love his work

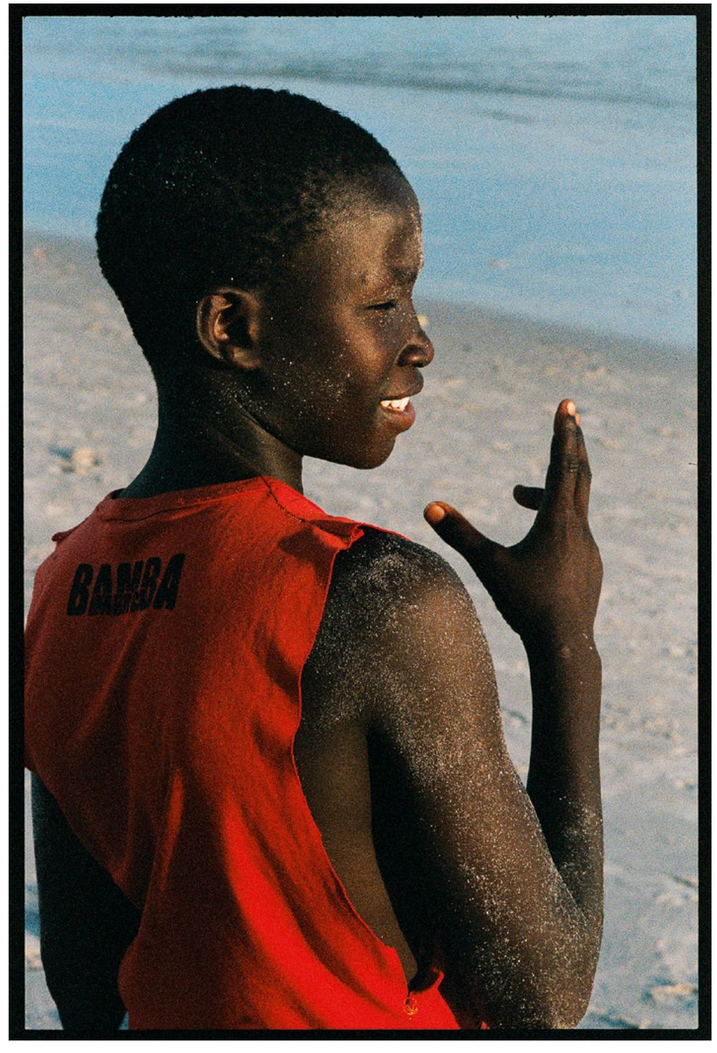
Was it the first time that you'd worked together?
Yes. For us it was a character study. Who are these people? What are their inspirations? Who are they inspired by? These people are models who are all artists, the models I've known since my early days in fashion.

You are such an archetypal Renaissance Man, somebody who truly embraces all modes of self-expression. Where do you want to take your practice next?
I'd love to make films. I already have precise ideas about the films I want to make which are political, but at the same time very subtle. I think my role is to help my people realise their beauty in the same way that I learned in fashion, where people helped me realise my confidence. This is why I am where I am. But I think the biggest problem with my people at the moment is the lack of confidence in themselves. This is my biggest purpose – I'd love to make movies about the intelligence of beautiful Black women and Black men, I'd love to make very romantic movies. It's something that I haven't seen at all, and I want to do something that people have never seen.

1. Ousmane Sembène (1923–2007) was a Senegalese film director, novelist and political activist, often called the 'father of African cinema.' He came of age in Senegal's segregated cinemas, which he attended almost every day.

2. *Sapeurs* are members of La Sape (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*), a movement from Congo where men adopt the refined, flamboyant dress of the European dandy as an expression of elegance, dignity and cultural resistance.

3. Malick Sidibé (1935–2016) was a Malian photographer celebrated for his black and white images of youth culture in Mali's captial city Bamako. From the late-1950s to the mid-1970s, Sidibé photographed weddings, baptisms, and the city's vibrant nightlife.



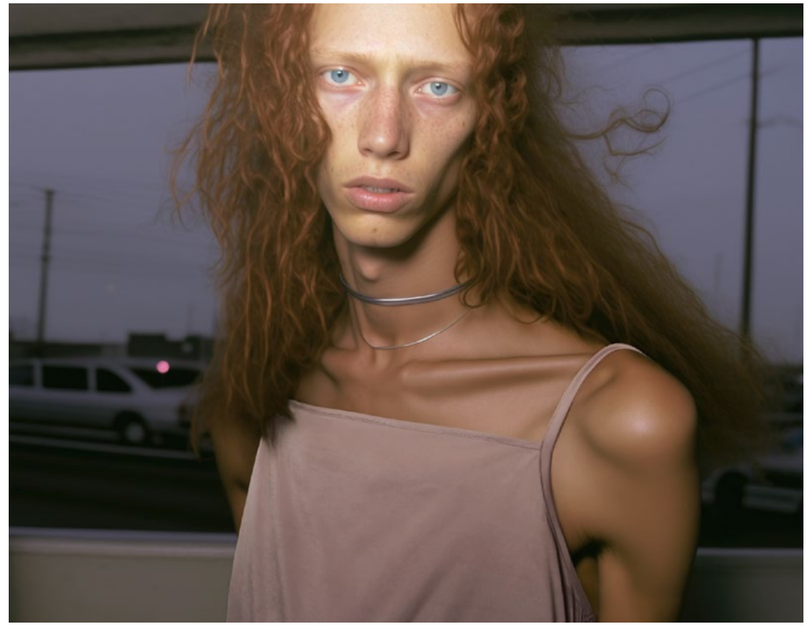
Untitled
Thiaroye Azur, Dakar, Senegal, August 2021.

Marili Andre

‘Usually when someone gets their hands on AI, they get carried away with the vast possibilities. I personally want my world to feel more grounded and more in the realm of realism and photography.’

Interview by Fabrice Paineau

All images: Marili Andre,
Double magazine, Spring/Summer 2023.
Stylist: Lotta Volkova.



For *Double* magazine's Spring/Summer 2023 issue, Greek-born, London-based photographer Marili Andre shot a fashion cover story that bucked against the limits of the medium. On the surface, through its casting, styling and attitude, the story feels rooted in raw, everyday reality. Yet the construction is precise, cinematic; uncanny, yet highly sophisticated. This tension between immediacy and tactful orchestration is at the heart of Andre's work. In collaboration with stylist Lotta Volkova, she created a series that doesn't just show fashion, but stages it within a world that feels both familiar and strangely hyperreal.

In the following conversation, Fabrice Paineau, editor-in-chief of *Double* magazine who commissioned the series, discusses with Marili Andre the references and ambitions that shaped it, her use of AI tools to help craft its execution and aesthetic, and the ways she situates herself in fashion photography today – within the restless spirit of experimentation native to the rich history of the image-making. The conversation is prefaced by Paineau's poetic, short-form reflection on the birth of and enduring presence of photography.

'From 1822 to 1839, Daguerre's diorama and laboratory stood here, where he perfected Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's invention and discovered the daguerreotype.' These words, discreetly inscribed on a plaque, placed on the back of a building situated on Paris' Place de la République, makes no secret of its intention: to geolocate the invention (or almost) of photography, and give it a new physicality – a plaque, a place. This is the same photography which, in its nascent years, was deemed the poor lover of its first mistress: painting. And that original fear that a single click could never replace the art of gesture and thought. It is amusing to note that contemporary art has recently reconnected with the success of increasingly figurative painting. Back to the...?

But here we are once again, two centuries later, with the hydra of artificial intelligence rearing its head and causing concern in every article about the future of photography, to the point that it's been claimed that recent prizes at festivals have been won by works created solely using artificial intelligence!

At the dawn of these debates, photographer Marili Andre and stylist Lotta Volkova recently played with these questions in Double *magazine. They insisted, in an almost secret recipe, on including a bath of artificiality in a series of fashion photographs combining historical and personal references from the photographer. A strange result for authentic intelligence.*

And the essential question remains: imagination does not operate on the same terrain as intelligence. It requires natural ingredients in this new recipe. Artificiality, yes, OK. But it also needs fertile ground of taste to enjoy it. Let's be honest: photography, however artificial it may be, never imagines the worst, except in its bad taste. Whereas the eye can enjoy it in complete freedom. Besides, where are we going to put the new plaque?

Fabrice Paineau, Paris, 2025.

'My mother had this undying love for clothing. Her absolute obsession with matching this skirt with that jacket and those heels.'

Fabrice Paineau: What kind of background do you have artistically?

Marili Andre: I come from Crete, in the south of Greece. My mother had this undying love for clothing. Her absolute obsession with matching this skirt with that jacket and those heels. The house was practically bursting with shoes and bags. That probably does something to a child, right? There was this obscene banality I had to emerge from as a teenager. I'm still unlearning my mother's school, although that school quite possibly also made me want to be here today. My father was a brigadier general in the army which also played a big part in my upbringing. I managed to get to London despite the anguish. They didn't want me to go and I had to really fight for it.

My parents didn't believe that I was going to be an artist. Their take was: 'Right, you can go, but you're coming right back to study something actually grounded.' But I decided to stay anyway. I worked all kinds of jobs: from washing dishes to mopping floors and waiting tables… And then I got hired taking Polaroids for a model agency. I would shoot my own thing after hours in their small studio and I managed to build a mini portfolio very quickly, in about a year.

Eventually I quit and went freelance. I never got to assist during that period, I lacked the connections and confidence. Through the model agency position I gained an understanding of how one types a simple, yet effective email and the importance of saying 'yes' and 'no'.

What was the turning point for you, from your Greek fashion references

to what you're interested in depicting today?
At my first week of university in London, a boy at the back of the class handed me a copy of *Self Service* – I had no idea what *Self Service* was. He was this boy from Pakistan called Arfan who wore a red Burberry trench coat every single day for a year straight. I believe I was 17 and I came across Inez and Vinoodh's work. It was the Joe McKenna issue with Stella Tennant on the cover. To be introduced to that issue for the first time and to go through that was really something. From the graphic design to the fonts and I mean, coming from Greece and only having seen *Vogue* and then seeing that, it just…

I remember that issue, it's one of my favourites too. So, *System* has asked us to discuss the shoot you did for *Double* with Lotta [Volkova] for the Spring/Summer 2023 issue. I remember having an initial discussion with Lotta during which I said to her, 'Give me a surprise' – and that shoot *was* a total surprise to me.
You didn't know what you were going to receive from us at all, right?

No, but I love surprises and I trust the people I like. I still don't know how you created the story because you didn't want to say at the time, but I'd love to know more about it now.
Sure! The way it was done is so personal and internal, it almost feels like asking a photographer what camera they use. It's not really about the tool. I had just started exploring the software and was deeply immersed in this new AI experience. I even set up a separate Instagram account at the time on which I'd post under a different name. Lotta then reached out introducing herself not knowing it was me – we had already collaborated multiple times – wanting to work on something together. I sent her a selfie laughing and we took it from there.

Honestly, it is one of the best portfolios I think we have ever done. It was the first time that I'd seen something that was produced using elements of AI but in a really creative way.
Not soulless, you mean? [Laughs] It really has my own imagery within it and countless hours of work – that's why. AI was used but just as a visual command, and the visuals were all personal. I also love working with elements that resist polish. The more polish, the less I feel I can relate on a personal level. But there's always a certain atmosphere that follows, that lifts the roughness. I think it happens subconsciously throughout my work, even on a non-AI level. There is always this constant resistance to the polish. My resistance counterbalances that perfection.

Do you see your dialogue with Lotta as mostly conceptual or visual?
With Lotta it can totally hop between the two. I remember vividly that in the very beginning of the project, there was a certain desire to 'drive' the medium to specific areas. However, the medium then – as much as now – offered limited control, and when Lotta and I tried to push it further, things didn't quite work out the same. It didn't give off the atmosphere that attracted her in the first place. We both agreed it would be best to trust the initial process, which is what we went with.

Where did the original idea for the shoot come from?
It all derived from one single image that I kept using as a foundation for my work. It's a photo that I'd taken of a terrace in my family home back in Greece. The view behind is Heraklion, the city I grew up in. The image depicts this girl I scouted in the street years ago that I keep photographing every year. And it has a lighting set up that washes throughout the work. I photographed her wearing this pink satin top – satin is an element we have been conscious of, me and Lotta, and it was a blue, gloomy day. So I kept blending that image with other images that I've taken of other people, and I kept feeding it into the AI program. I just kept feeding it and feeding it, and then I'd look at what I was getting back, and then I would blend *that* image with a new photo I'd take. Then I would go and shoot some more, just to constantly blend new images with the results I was getting from the software. This experimentation kept going until hundreds of individuals were generated. Which is fascinating.

So, in a way, you were putting your own memories into the programme. With AI, ultimately it's a question of what you do with the process.
Of course. Working with AI, I ended up realising how much power I have when it comes to casting. My AI world became very people-centred due to that. If you look closely, the worlds I create in my images are not really surreal. It's more about the variety of the faces. Usually when someone gets their hands on AI, they get carried away with the vast possibilities. I personally want my world to feel more grounded and more in the realm of realism and photography. It initially started as pure fascination, and now it's a tool I have acquainted myself with. Ultimately, I would say it has ended up being both a tool and a new way to just play.

Just because you've done some shoots using artificial intelligence, you're not considered an 'AI photographer'. How do you usually shoot – digital?
Yes, I shoot digital. Just before going freelance I briefly considered taking the analogue route. But apart from not being financially able to at the time, I also found that the whole gear talk around cameras, lenses and film felt like a delay or distraction from taking the actual images at the time. I did some extensive research and landed upon a digital combo and moved on with designing ideas and taking photos.

Interestingly, a lot of photographers are going back to using film. What's your position on this?
Perhaps they have this urge to revive a certain aesthetic that feels familiar or they look up to, or just simply love the slow pace that can surround the analogue aspect of the craft.

Even though some people weren't even born when film was being used widely.
Yes, regardless, that imagery still lives on. Before starting out, I felt incredibly drawn to the world of the Pentax and Mamiya lenses. At some point I would pop those lenses on my digital cameras and work that way, which was too much of a hustle. Eventually, I was like, 'I'm just going to strip off all this, back to a regular set up, no longer after any sort of look.' I just wanted to focus on what I'm actually shooting, not how I'm shooting it.

Sometimes your pictures remind me of older traditions – even the colours of someone like Joel Meyerowitz, or the feel of Kodachrome. Are those references you bring in deliberately, or do they just slip in subconsciously?
I think you're seeing that happen subconsciously because colour fluctuates for me. I don't think of it as a photographic identity and a huge part of my practice. It's more about shadows and highlights. Colour can be squeezed in and out for me.

Your pictures often feel cinematic – not just the light, but there's a kind of suspense in the poses or gestures. Do you think of film or literature when you're putting a story together, or does that just happen naturally?
I love images but long before photo books or magazines, I rented video cassettes and DVDs. I'm drawn towards motion for images and towards attaching character to my subjects. All of that rather subconsciously, I'd say. There's a constant need for space, textures. Once I grasp my starting point – be it a single reference image, or a T-shirt, even a piece of furniture – I can build from there.

Lastly, the cover line for that issue of *Double* states: 'The splendours and miseries of the everyday lives of young (and not so young) fashion designers in 2023.' When you saw that phrase placed over your cover image, what did it open up for you in relation to your images?
It made me think about the relentless pressures of being a fashion designer today and what the use of AI can mean for the field. Whether it adds to their pressure or whether it can take some of it off. How my story was signalling the arrival of a new era that can either feel like a gloomy cloud approaching or like a new way to play. Is it all down to how one chooses to approach it? To an extent, I think so.

'I found that the whole gear talk around cameras, lenses and film felt like a delay or distraction from taking the actual images.'

Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele

The Fashion Photography Questionnaire By Loïc Prigent

What's the etiquette for the start of a fashion shoot, when one arrives on set?
I always introduce *everyone*. Top to bottom!

Who's the most important person on set?
MOI!!

Who is the best female model ever?
Linda Evangelista.

The most overused word to describe the mood of a fashion photograph?
Iconic and Majjjor!

The most overused – and therefore forbidden – picture that you've seen used on moodboards?
Jeans and couture. High and low. Always my trademark. My first cover with Anna Wintour as editor-in-chief of *Vogue* that changed the fashion world forever!!!

The secret to enjoying fashion week?
Watching live on my computer from home, and not having to wait *hours* for an eight-to-nine-minute-long show!

Your best memory of working with Irving Penn?
The simplicity of it. Very small team and no egos! We had a great relationship. Just listening to him telling me countless stories like Alex Liberman sending him to Africa for two weeks to shoot one picture of one flower.

Your best memory of working with Richard Avedon?
When I was sent by Alex Liberman to do my first cover (instead of Polly Mellen…) I began wrapping a bath towel around Estelle, the model, and placed two earrings on one ear. Avedon jumped on the phone to Liberman to complain in front of me: 'Is your French editor out of her mind!? *No* dress and *three* earrings!?' Liberman's response: 'Let her do whatever she wants!' And the cover ran!

Your best memory of working with Steven Meisel?
Unforgettable. Extraordinary. Legendary. Iconic. And ALL SUBLIME! Paris, New York, Milan! Countless times. [Hair stylist] Oribe driving his jeep, all of us wearing wigs, spying on another *Vogue* shoot in New York, laughing out of control!

Your best memory of working with Linda Evangelista?
My partner in crime! Working hard and laughing hard, as we always do!

The best make-up artist of all time?
François Nars and Pat McGrath.

The best hair stylist of all time?
Oribe and Guido.

The key to good retouching?
The less the better!

When do you know it's too much retouching?
Open your eyes and look!

The best photography studio of all time?
Industria and Highline in New York. Studio Astre in Paris.

Your most memorable location for a fashion shoot?
Paris, New York, St. Barts.

How many images can be shot in one day? What is the right number?
The winner is Patrick [Demarchelier] – 25!

A word or phrase to describe your feelings about the imminent rise of AI use in fashion photography?
As ChatGPT answered: 'Guarded Optimism'. Cautious but open to its creative potential.

What is the appropriate etiquette at the end of a fashion shoot, as you're leaving set?
'CHAMPAGNE!'

Photograph: Theo Wenner.

SNOW GOOSE
BY / PAR CANADA GOOSE

LOUIS VUITTON