

Gaze Reinvented

FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY: THE STORY IN 180 PICTURES

The relationship between fashion and the cultural landscape is explored in Eugénie Shinkle's latest book, *Fashion Photography: The Story in 180 Pictures*. Providing a carefully curated overview of some of the most important figures in fashion photography of the past eight decades, Shinkle shows the evolution of the genre via a chronological account of key practitioners, alongside those shaping contemporary taste today – including Richard Avedon, William Klein, Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin and Viviane Sassen.

Shinkle presents mainstream fashion photography as representative of society's desires and fantasies. Early images by Erwin Blumenfeld, for example, portray women as objects akin to sculptures, where the female form is treated as an ideal. "Blumenfeld was working at the tail end of fashion photographer's period of 'classicism', when the body was treated as a kind of sculptural object – both in the way it was photographed, and in the way women were expected to comport themselves in a broader social context," explains Shinkle.

Seen through the male gaze, the subject is revealed as an object of vision: a sight, whose image is a product of the zeitgeist of its era. A shift in cultural attitudes towards femininity is reflected in the shifting photographic styles and themes observed in the book. For instance, the social and sexual emancipation of women in the 1970s is characterised in Guy Bourdin's overtly sexual and fetishist narratives. But as

Shinkle notes: "Women were freed of many of the social constraints that tied them to home and family in Blumenfeld's day, but at the expense of being seen as sex objects".

In contrast, Viviane Sassen portrays the female form as an abstract painting or collage. "With Sassen's work – much of which treats the body as a kind of living sculpture – physicality is no longer quite so explicitly subject to a sexualised gaze and is rather more reduced into elements of formal composition." In manipulating human shapes through components of modelling and structure, the photographs are an example of how the introduction of the female gaze in photography can alter the portrayal of women.

The evolution of this vision, as demonstrated through the chronological format, reveals a back-and-forth contention between the ideal and real life. Counterculture and movements like "youthquake" are cited as direct rejections of high fashion's unattainable notions of beauty and femininity, which is conveyed through an era of reportage images featured in magazines such as *The Face*, *i-D* and *Interview*.

As the book closes, however, it reflects on the medium at present. With platforms like Instagram democratising fashion, it seems reasonable to assume photography today is more rooted in reality. Nevertheless, as these new "influencers" gain a different form of social capital, the lines between the ideal and reality once again become blurred.

"In manipulating the human form through components of modelling and structure, the photographs are an example of how the introduction of the female gaze in photography can alter the portrayal of 'feminine'."

Words
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Viviane Sassen, *De La Mar Theatre*, 2010. From *Fashion Photography: The Story in 180 Pictures* (Aperture, 2017) © Viviane Sassen.

