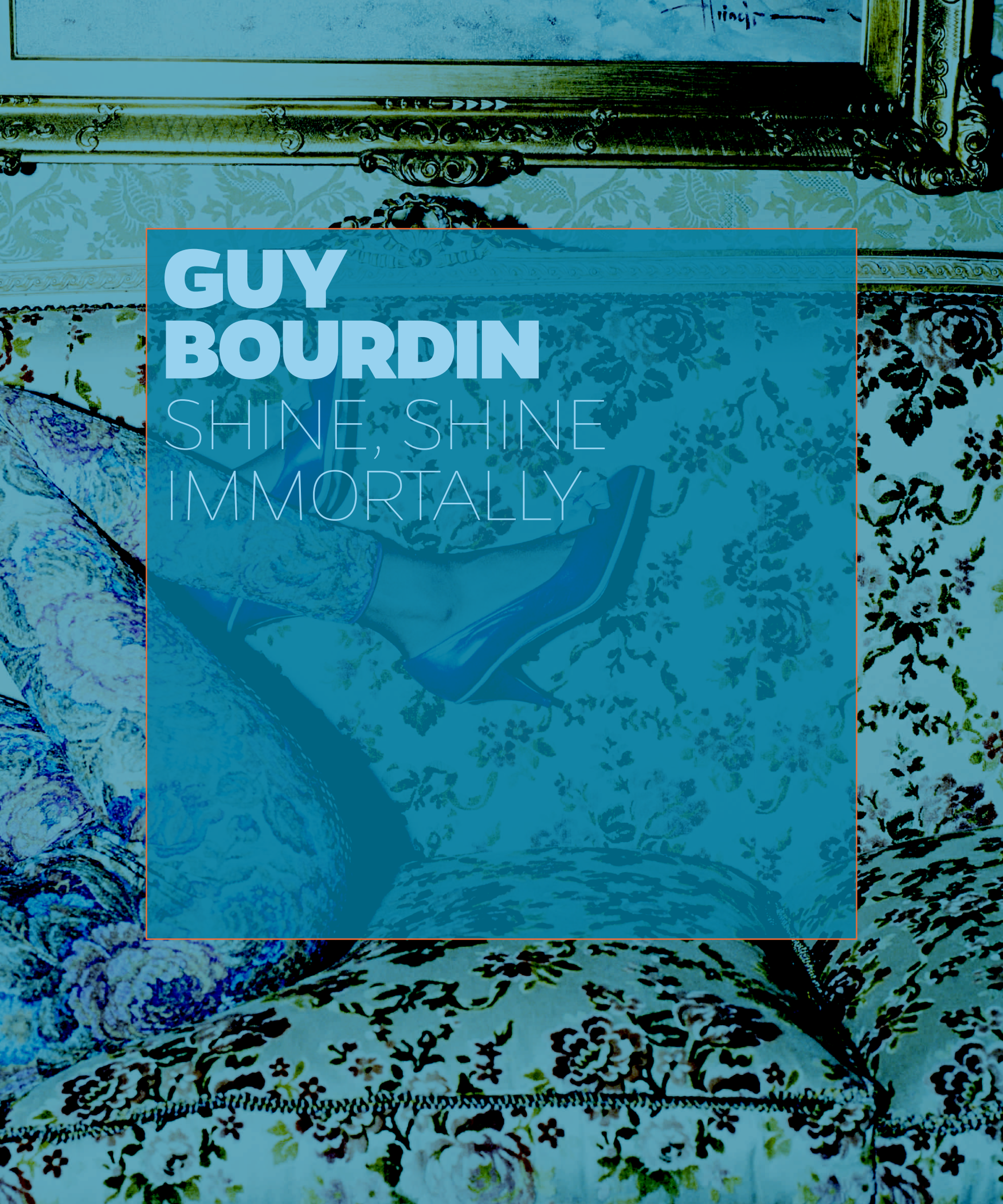


GUY BOURDIN

SHINE, SHINE IMMORTALLY

Charles Jourdan, 1975

Voyeurism and exhibitionism are as intrinsic to fashion photography as they are to fashion itself.[1] At the beginning of the 20th century, artistic conventions mostly promoted and glorified the elegant and aesthetic display of the female body both in art and fashion photography. Meanwhile, the sexual liberation movement slowly started to make subliminal, yet significant changes within art. The fashionably dressed body received a new sexual connotation and the fashion shot capturing it developed an even more voyeuristic nature. Guy Bourdin's images and photographic orchestrations incorporate this new explicitness and form an unprecedented genre in fashion photography, which is reflected in this exhibition.

Together with Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin is one of the most influential, innovative and exceptional fashion and advertising photographers of the 1970s. Born in Paris in 1928, he started his career as a painter at the young age of eighteen years. His military service in Dakar, Senegal, first brought him into contact with photography. Upon his return to Paris, he started to establish himself professionally as a painter and photographer and became a protégé of the Surrealist photographer Man Ray. The year 1955 marked the beginning of his lifelong collaboration with *French Vogue*.

Bourdin's complex oeuvre is distinguished by his creative composition of a magazine's page. One of his works, published in the December issue of *French Vogue* in 1976, depicts four women in the nude. Their headless bodies are facing the observer and invoke the image of Greek or Roman marble torsos. Instead of a fig leaf, a phallic flamingo flower covers the genital areas and thus blurs the lines of physicalness and gender. Bourdin's photographs no longer focus on the fashion itself but rather on an erotic, sometimes violent and sinister lifestyle which he depicts in brilliant, complementary color settings with occasional surrealistic elements. The fashion—the product—becomes secondary in this staging and the image itself takes center stage. The photographer's emphasis on visually projecting his own fantasy onto the enduring female stereotypes set the 1970s apart. Bourdin transformed the utopian fashion photo into a dystopian one, where the female body was depersonalised and objectified.

As a protégé of Man Ray and a fan of René Magritte, Guy Bourdin drew visually on Surrealist fantasy, as seen in his advertising campaign for Charles Jourdan. The designer's shoes were often displayed being worn by a pair of female legs, cut-off and placed in a casual everyday setting. Playing with space often resulted in a laminar atmosphere that can be seen in another Charles-Jourdan-campaign photo: a yellow wall merges with what appears to be a red floor into a planar, dichromatic space . A female model leans over the edge of the red surface and the upper part of her body vanishes between the two-colored plains. The annulment of the spatial sphere adds a radical, reduced, and slightly brutal trait to the photograph, which can also be found in a photograph published in *French Vogue's* 1976 December issue. There, the entire captured space is filled with black umbrellas. In the middle of the composition, one catches a glimpse of a female face looking back at the viewer. As with the cut-off legs, the trimmed face exudes an eerie feeling.

Bourdin collaborated with the French writer Françoise Sagan on a jewelry campaign, in which the models' faces and bodies were covered in thirty kilograms of black pearls. Sagan gave it the title *I am black but I am beautiful*. In one of the photographs for this series, the viewer seems to be poised in front of a bed made up with white sheets. Two doll-like models are lying in it, the visible parts of their bodies fully covered in black beads. The women's stricken poses are symptomatic of Bourdin's way of staging females. They appear passive, as well as defenseless and their provocative vulnerability almost seems to invite assault. A tray, set with two cups and neatly positioned on top of the white bedding, imparts the

1 Valerie Steele, *"Erotic Allure,"* in Aperture (no. 122), pp. 81–101, New York 1991, p. 81.

quality of a still life onto this fashion shot. While playing with conventions of beauty, Bourdin formulates a visual narrative of his own fantasy, in which the sequential juxtaposition of contrasting elements dominates the compositions.

Guy Bourdin often integrated mirrors into his photographs. His obsession with reflections, d istortions, a nd a ugmentations d raws o n Lewis Carroll's tales of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass.* An imaginary and surreal dimension opens up behind seemingly mundane objects like mirrors and iridescent surfaces. The old tradition of a reflected image being incorporated into another depiction can be found for example in a photographic shot Bourdin produced for the May issue of *French Vogue* in 1977. A red-haired female wearing a strapless, startlingly scarlet swimsuit leans over a desk, her face turned towards a round mirror on the wall in front of her. The observer follows the model's line of sight into the mirror, where he meets the reflection of her eyes staring back at him. The woman may be scrutinizing herself or gazing at something that lies beyond the surface of the looking-glass. The shiny, lacquer-green walls reflect diffuse outlines of the woman's body and some whitish light reflections.

Bourdin composed many other photographic images in a similar way. In one example, a shot for the October issue of *French Vogue* in 1976, he used a fish bowl to distort the viewer's perspective. The carefully made-up area around the model's eye is located behind a transparent bowl, which has two goldfish swimming in it. The enlarged deformation of the female face through the curved glass again adds a surrealistic element, which positions the viewer on the threshold between reality and illusion.

Scenes involving windows and translucent surfaces resulted in yet another photographic scenario. In an almost socio-critical fashion shot for the 1985 May issue of *French Vogue,* Bourdin stages two models dressed in swimsuits in front of a shop window. The viewer is inside the shop looking out at the two models. Within the shop, next to the window, there are three mannequins wearing nothing but bathing caps. The outstretched arms of the mannequins embody the viewer's desire to possess the voguish and fashionable clothes worn by the models, but the glassy surface of the window separates and distances both the mannequins and the viewer from the dazzling and radiant world of fashion. The lighting makes the mannequins appear almost lifelike and once more the photographer creates a deliberately ominous atmosphere.

Placing a photograph inside another photograph was yet another way of playing with the idea of the picture within the picture. Bourdin made use of this technique several times, including a shot for the spring campaign of shoe designer Jourdan in 1975.

A reflection or a picture within a picture visualises the dualistic character or double-meaning of the image itself. Fashion can thereby be associated with fantasy, danger with nostalgia, and poetic flair or criticism with nonsense. The culmination of the aforementioned artistic techniques can be found in an undated shot titled *Mirror*. In the image, which belongs to the Bloomingdale's catalog *Sighs and Whispers* from 1976, three Polaroids slotted into the corner of a mirror first attract the viewer's attention. In the mirror's reflection, one catches a glimpse of two posing models, dressed in clothes with floral patterns. The Polaroids symbolise the space and time between each shot and therefore become an embodiment of the process of image making itself. The advertisement starts to reflect upon itself visually. Bourdin by no means propagated commercialization and consumerism, but captured the aestheticization of these tendencies.

In addition to their sometimes socio-critical essence, the depersonalizing manner in which Bourdin formulates his photographic stagings contains an erotic element, mostly in combination with a morbid, sinister atmosphere. In a shot for the 1980 Pentax calendar, the photographer orchestrates a scene in which a nude model is half lying, half kneeling in bunched-up satin sheets. A red, heart-shaped pillow has been placed next to her head. Her pose appears unnatural and her white skin, the slightly twisted arm and the closed eyes suggest her being asleep or even dead. This still life-impression is reminiscent of a *memento mori* which clings to so many of Bourdin's photographs. Fascination with death was a widespread phenomenon during the 1970s: Helmut Newton, a contemporary of Bourdin's who is also represented in the Nicola Erni Collection, staged several photographs of women murdering well-dressed men. Similarly, the upscale department store Bendels in New York filled its windows with mannequins posed as either suicide or murder victims.

The newly discovered, sexually liberated female freedom of the 1960s was visually picked up by Bourdin and combined with the anxieties of a very tumultuous decade. Student revolts in France, the Cold War, a weak economy, and the Vietnam War all contributed to a general feeling of insecurity and instability. Bourdin's images deal with disconcerting fantasies and scenarios of a certain *zeitgeist*, which transform into a historical record published in glossy magazines.

Guy Bourdin did not release any large-sized, serial prints during his lifetime but rather focused on communicating via the printed pages of magazines, of which he was a sublime analyst. One of his most influential innovations was the double-page spread, which meant that one photograph covered two facing pages in a magazine. Bourdin experimented with this new medium and, for instance, positioned a woman's spread legs in such a way that while skimming the pages, the woman would seemingly open and close her legs. Guy Bourdin's photographic style is easily recognizable by his use of color blocking, his way of placing pictures within pictures and the surrealistic, objectifying elements he uses. He once wrote:

There is no measure for the infinite
Nor time for eternity
But I'll transform beauty into marble
That in the blue of the night, of the eternal night
Will shine, shine immortally [2]

His way of capturing the dazzling, glamorous, and sometimes treacherous world of fashion in his unique photographic style eternalized Guy Bourdin as one of the most remarkable and innovative fashion photographers of the late 20th century.

Maude Joanna Hürlimann

2 Shelly Verthime (ed.), *Guy Bourdin: In Between,* Göttingen 2010, p. 264.

French Vogue, Issue December 1976/January 1977
1976

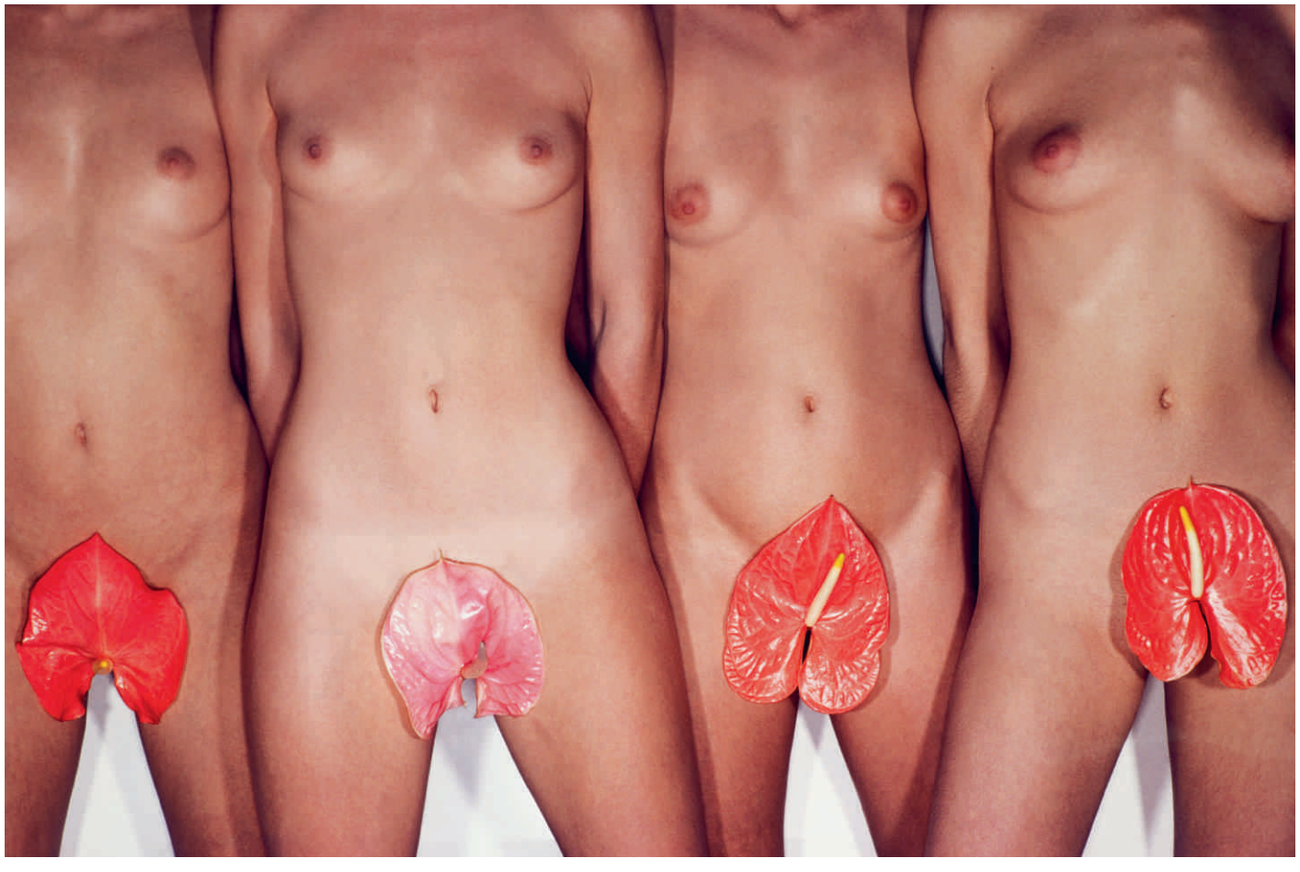
Charles Jourdan, England, 1979

Untitled, 1976

Grès - Le soir, des robes sculptées, 1976

A Cinecittá, en plein incendie de cinéma, 1976

French Vogue, 1973



French Vogue, Issue December 1976
1976

Guy Bourdin Archives, 1978

Charles Jourdan, 1979

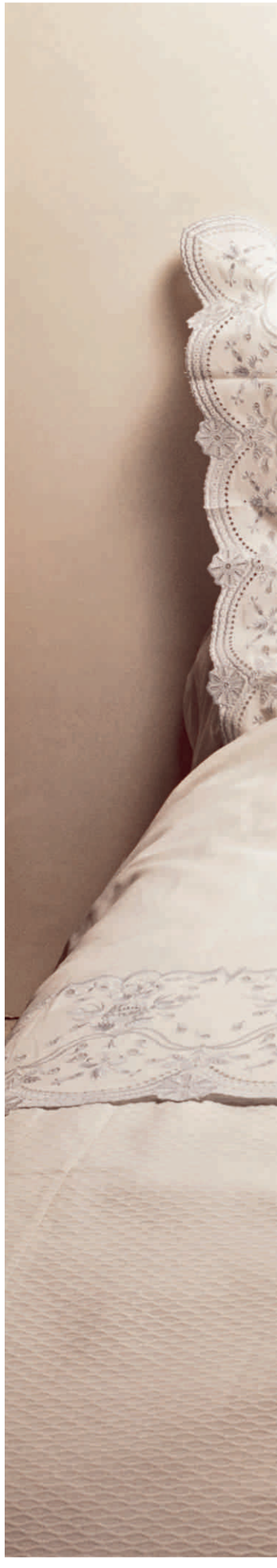
French Vogue, Issue May 1977
1977

Roland Pierre, 1983

French Vogue, Issue October 1976
1976

Pentax Calendar, 1980

French Vogue, Issue December 1969/January 1970
1969



Mirror, French Vogue, Issue June 1976
1976

Photo France, 1987

French Vogue, Issue May 1985