

ERIK MADIGAN HECK CELEBRATING BEAUTY

FABIOLA SON

The art-infused photography of Erik Madigan Heck focuses on delicate fashion designs and the pure aesthetics of the picture itself. His shoots oscillate between surreality and clarity and a study of his work is rewarding and soothing.

Born in Excelsior, Minnesota, in 1983, Erik Madigan Heck is one of the most successful and prominent American fashion photographers in the contemporary art scene. Exposed to art and museums in Minneapolis from an early age by his parents, he began exploring his environment through the lens at the tender age of fourteen.¹ Heck went on to graduate from Salve Regina University in political science and earned his degree in photography from the legendary Parsons School in New York.²

In 2007, he founded the publication *Nomenus Quarterly*,³ conceived as a collaborative platform for artists and institutions focusing on the intersection between photography and painting, relaunched in 2019 as *Nomenus*. He is a regular contributor to *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *TIME*, and *Harper's Bazaar UK*. He is also known for his unique, exclusive celebrity cover shoots, where he presents some of their facets mostly unbeknown to wider public—Adele (*TIME*), Kylie Jenner (*PAPER*) or Nicki Minaj (*The New York Times Magazine*), to name just a few.⁴

Erik Madigan Heck has developed his own recognizable visual language through various influences from art history, ranging from the likes of Edouard Vuillard and Edgar Degas to contemporary artists, such as Peter Doig, Marlene Dumas, and Gerhard Richter. It is characterized by his rather daring use of explosive and partly contrasting colors—his favorite combination of red and blue features prominently

throughout his oeuvre.⁵ Due to the choice of colors, his photographs look very pure, straightforward, and uncompromising. His work resides between photography, painting, and classical portraiture, which is why his fashion photography style is often referred to as “painterly.” According to the artist himself, he has often used paintings as a guide for his use of colors and figure representation.⁶

The ethereal images with their deeply considered compositions push the colors and patterns to the forefront, but then again take a step back regarding their plasticity, with the surfaces of the pictures remaining seemingly two-dimensional.

Moreover, he often abstracts the model from his photographs, shifting the focus towards the clothes and their playful interaction with the background. Using unorthodox techniques, such as depicting his models as they look away from the camera, Heck successfully avoids their objectification in photographs. Even when his imagery is at its most abstract, there is a sense of depth beneath the beauty of their surface.

The *Mary Katrantzou Surreal Planes* and *Florals* prints, both in large scale (approximately 230 x 150 cm) are characterized by mesmerizing floral patterns, incredible outbursts of pure dominating and oversaturated colors and a painterly sense of two-dimensionality. The two works were inspired by the 19th-century French painters Pierre Bonnard and Vuillard, craftily combining Katrantzou's architectural couture with customized sets. The patterns and colors on the Greek fashion designer's dresses are mirrored in the background, the objects in the photograph, and even in the hair and make-up. According to Heck, his aim was to create a new

set of images that exemplify Katrantzou's patterns within a physical space, while negating the traditional approach of creating photographs. He also added that “Everything in the image was built in a set physically, not on the computer, and through layering various colors, the space between the objects and the backgrounds flattened, just like Mary's clothing, and just like the paintings I had originally been drawn to.”⁷

Mary Katrantzou Surreal Planes shows an elegant woman depicted in an interior with a richly ornamented wallpaper in the background. Subtle, yet colorful make-up contrasts her dashing blue hair, neatly coiffured into a low dutt. The dress gently meshes with predominant floral patterns in the background, yet still manages to stand out because of its soft, yellow tone. In the bottom left corner, a table with an assortment of books, an ornamental vase with flowers, and a cup of tea briefly distract the observer. The composition of this photograph is strongly reminiscent of Jan Vermeer's famous studio, where he used to paint female models accompanied by still lifes on tables, with a source of natural light penetrating the window on the left side of the room.

Heck's blend of vibrant colors, high fashion, and the self-conscious yet seemingly effortless poses of his models as they become one with the complex backgrounds, gives a long-lasting impression of astonishing elegance and timelessness, essentially manifesting itself as a celebration of abstract beauty. With such qualities, his works are poised to become future classics.



Florals, 2012
Chromogenic print
Image: 228 x 152 cm

Mary Katrantzou Surreal Planes, 2011
Chromogenic print
Image: 228.5 x 152.5 cm

