



HIRO

THE COOL AND
ELEGANT EYE



Black Evening Dress in Flight, New York, 1963
Dye transfer print

For more than sixty years Hiro (Yasuhiro Wakabayashi) has excelled in fashion, beauty, still life, and portrait photography, creating cool and elegant images for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *Life*, *Rolling Stone*, and many other publications.

Born in 1930 as a child of Japanese parents, Hiro spent his youth in war-torn Shanghai and Beijing, moving later to Tokyo, where he taught himself photography. During this time he identified Richard Avedon and Irving Penn as his photographic heroes. In 1954 Hiro moved to New York where he did a brief two-month apprenticeship in Richard Avedon's studio. Avedon quickly noticed Hiro's huge talent and urged him to work on his own projects. At the same time he introduced him to legendary art director Alexey Brodovitch. After studying under Brodovitch and assisting him for two years at the famous New School of Social Research, Hiro set himself up as a freelance photographer in New York before joining *Harper's Bazaar*, then one of the most powerful forces in editorial photography, in 1958.

In 1982, the magazine *American Photographer* devoted an entire issue to Hiro, on the cover even asking the question: "Is this Man America's Greatest Photographer?" Ever since then, Hiro participated in the major group exhibitions on the history of fashion photography: "Shots of Style" and "Appearances," and on advertising: "The Art of Persuasion," or on color photography: "Color as Form" and "50 Jahre moderne Farbfotografie."¹

Hiro had his heyday in the 1960s when working for *Harper's Bazaar*.² He created the most beautiful and striking covers and provided many editorial highlights in his fashion and jewelry reports. From early on in his career, Hiro strove to take photographs which were different and unique. To achieve such images, he took time to reflect and research properly.³ He is a patient and curious observer, who enjoys getting to the bottom of things.⁴ Author Mark Holborn states: "In Hiro's world everything is new. The most mundane objects or the most delicate features are transformed. A toenail, the pupil of an eye, a mouth or a light-switch are seen with the same concentration. Concentration is Hiro's most obvious quality. When he takes the whole theater of fashion to the beach, he returns with a metaphysical contemplation."⁵

The Nicola Erni Collection showcases twenty-two color and black-and-white photographs by Hiro, taken between 1962 and 1994—mainly commissioned works for US *Harper's Bazaar*. Among them are fashion photographs from an editorial story for US *Harper's Bazaar* in February 1967 with the heading "The power of print."⁶ Two models were captured in different dresses which alluded to Op Art and psychedelic patterns. Shot from overhead the fabric designs are transformed into masterpieces of abstract design⁷: *Three figures in silk* by Julian Tomchin, New York, 1967 and *Two Geoffrey Beene Dresses*, New York, 1967. Other highlights forming part of the Nicola Erni Collection were shown in the US *Harper's Bazaar* December 1963 issue,⁸ which includes Hiro's breakthrough story called "Of Beasts and Jewels." All images are masterfully composed, graphic, and sensual at the same time: in color, full-bodied, sculpture-like photographs, virtually the actual size of the subjects depicted, a fragile-looking gleaming green snake curls up in an emerald and diamond studded bracelet (*Van Cleef & Arpels Bracelet with Green Snake*, New York, 1963); an owl with a piercing stare clasps a bejeweled golden amphibian in its right claw (*David Webb Jeweled Toad*, New York,

² Hiro was a staff photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* from 1956 through 1975. From 1981 onward he was a contributing photographer at Condé Nast.

³ "I usually don't touch a camera until I know exactly what I'm doing. There's a vain discipline in me that wants to think a problem out first," in *Graphis* 278, Mar/Apr 1992, p. 68.

⁴ Meeting of the author and Hiro at the opening of Hiro's exhibition in Hamiltons Gallery, London on 01/21/2016. This is reiterated by the author Mark Holborn in: Richard Avedon (ed.), *Hiro Photographs*, Boston et al. 1999, n.p. who writes: "Before beginning a series of fashion photographs, he conducts his research as if for an intelligence operation or a social exercise. ... His preparation has no limits. He is said to change in the studio from affable figure to the rigorous disciplinarian."

⁵ Mark Holborn, "Afterword," in *ibid.*

⁶ US *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1967, p. 135.

⁷ Cf. Nancy Hall Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography*, New York, 1979, p. 173.

⁸ US *Harper's Bazaar*, December 1963, pp. 82–89.

1963); and the shimmering silver body of a fish presented with a diamond necklace (*Van Cleef & Arpels Necklace with Fish*, New York, 1963) and a jet-black bull's hoof with a double row necklace of rubies and diamonds (*Harry Winston Necklace*, New York, 1963) are astounding. As this exhilarating juxtaposition of beast and jewel was so unusual and had not been seen before, Hiro wrote fashion history with these images. They leave us wanting to look at them time and again.

Another key photograph in Hiro's oeuvre is *Akiko in Rudi Gernreich Sheath*, Bombay, India which was included in the US *Harper's Bazaar* editorial of August 14, 1965. The evening dress by Rudi Gernreich is reminiscent of a modern astronaut's suit, the model in the same outfit of a Noh actress or a Japanese doll. He photographed the same model on Hawaii sitting on a volcanic rock with her back turned toward the viewer and a sandal in the foreground (*Akiko on the Black Lava of Hawaii*, Hawaii, 1965): she seems frozen in her adopted pose, and the barren landscape silent. Typical of Hiro, the pictorial elements are perfectly composed and graphically arranged. There is no movement whatsoever, unlike in Avedon's work in post-war Paris in which he made his models leap over puddles or sent them into bars. In Hiro's work a concentrated atmosphere is generated that surrenders to the object itself.

A work which very much matters to Hiro and Nicola Erni is called *Shinjuku Station*, Tokyo, Japan, 1962. It consists of seven panels, each measuring 120 x 76 cm, each individually framed and presented next to each other with no space between them; each photograph depicts a scene from the Tokyo subway. These shots were made under the famous art director Henry Wolfe for *SHOW Magazine* and were produced on Hiro's first return to Japan in 1962. Subway riders which the viewer can spot through the train windows, are shown squeezed into a carriage, enshrouded in a trance-like setting. The cramped atmosphere and the vapid expressions of the riders' faces reflect the inhuman condition of a multi-million city which seems not to have changed ever since.

Hiro is known as a master craftsman, a darkroom perfectionist, and a technical innovator. "He belongs to an age before computers. His manipulation was achieved by dexterity. His love of technology does not embrace the virtual reality of the computer screen. He is more interested in the world created by an artist like Magritte than in a computer-generated horizon. To collage visual elements he painstakingly sandwiched film together – eight separate films exist in his photograph of paper shoes."⁹

9 Mark Holborn, op. cit.



Akiko on the Black Lava of Hawaii, Hawaii, 1965
Gelatin silver print

Now over eighty years old, Hiro is still working for fashion magazines while adhering to his unique aesthetics, his extreme originality, and the precision of execution of his vision. His teacher, Brodovitch's adage: "If you look in your camera and see something you've seen before, don't click the shutter,"¹⁰ has lost nothing of its significance even in old age.

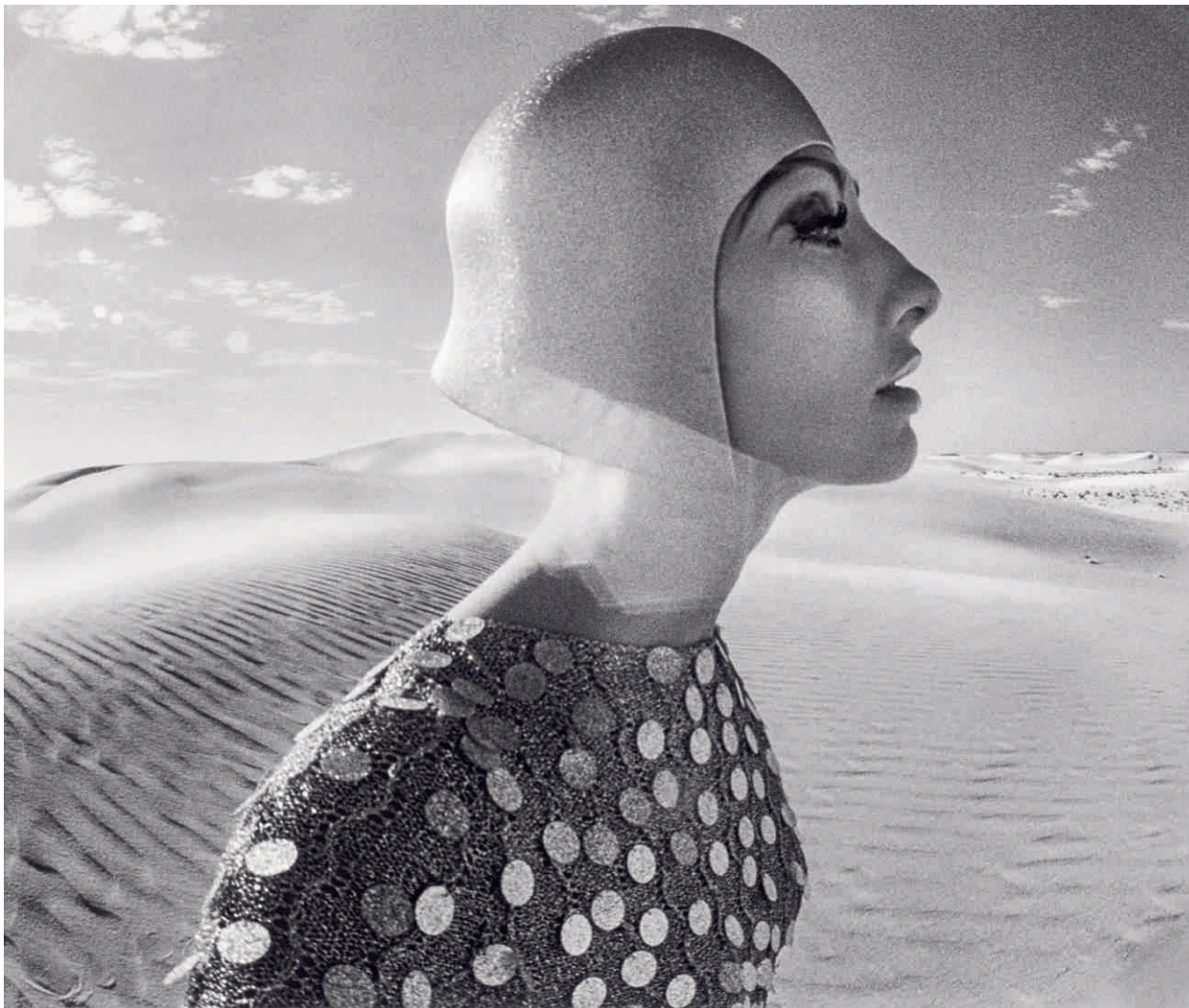
Throughout his career, even as a "photographer hero" in the Sixties, Hiro never showed much interest in museum or gallery shows. As a result he had been overseen for the last two decades, although he was considered a member of Avedon's and Penn's peer group. It is all the more pleasing therefore that Hiro, at such an advanced age, is now open for cooperation with galleries and institutions. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is devoting a solo exhibition to Hiro's work this year and two of the world's leading photographic galleries—Hamiltons Gallery in London und Pace/MacGill in New York—are exhibiting Hiro's oeuvre in major exhibitions. Through the purchase of a number of works, the Nicola Erni Collection has prompted Hiro to take a closer look at his archival material and to publish a considerable number of works in large formats as well. The good and inspiring relationship between photographer and collector, supported by studio visits in New York, has led to new discoveries and we dearly hope that there are more to come.

Ira Stehmann

10 Ibid.



Alberta in Cardin Dress, Paris, 1967
Gelatin silver print



Alberta Tiburzi with Jersey Helmet, New Mexico, 1966
Pigment print



Alberta Tiburzi with Neon Necklace, Paris, 1967
Pigment print



Koji Tatsuno, "Butterfly Flower Cape", Andy Warhol's Interview, New York, 1992
Pigment print



Black Evening Dress in Flight, New York, 1963
Pigment print



Akiko in Rudi Gernreich sheath, India, 1966
Pigment print

OPPOSITE

Three figures in silk by Julian Tomchin, New York, 1967
Dye transfer print





Two Geoffrey Beene Dresses, New York, 1967
Pigment print



Rhinestone Necklace on tattooed Back, Tokyo, Japan, 1962
Pigment print



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
David Webb Jeweled Toad, New York, 1963
 Pigment print
Van Cleef & Arpels Necklace with Fish, New York, 1963
 Pigment print
Van Cleef & Arpels Bracelet with Green Snake, New York, 1963
 Pigment print
Harry Winston Necklace, New York, 1963
 Pigment print



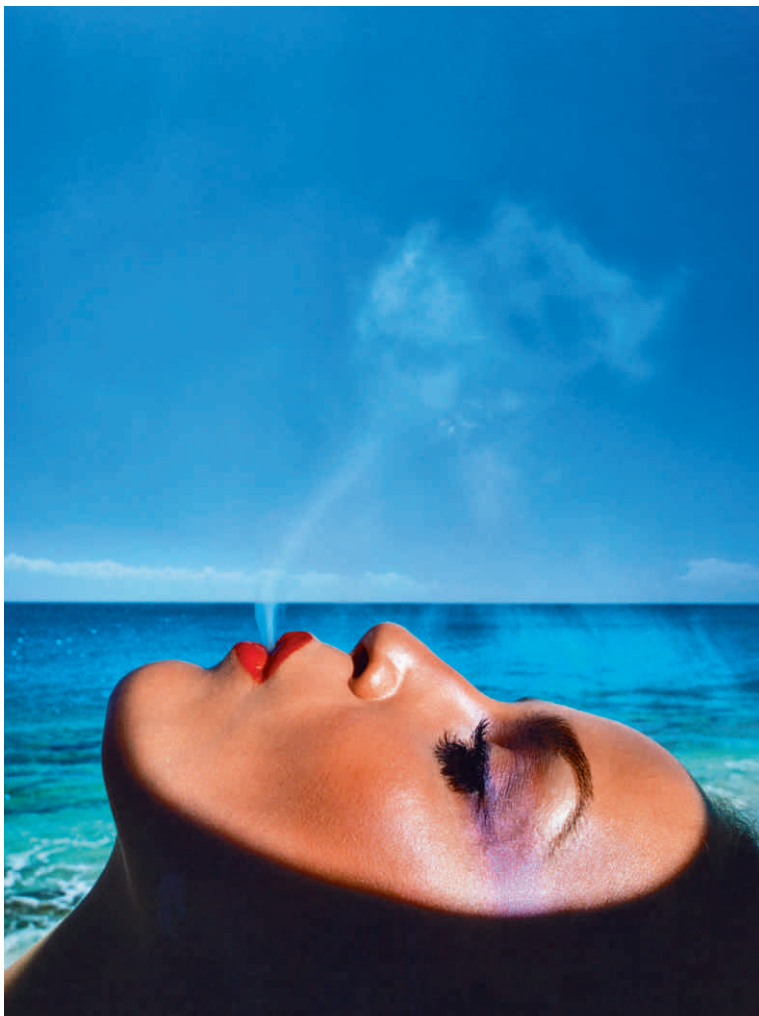
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Cardin, "Hooded Coat", *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1966
Pigment print

Balenciaga, "Four-Sided Dress", *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1967
Pigment print



Tilly Tizzani with Blue Scarf, Antigua, West Indies, 1963
Pigment print



Jerry Hall, Saint Martin, West Indies, 1975
Pigment print



Kelly Stewart, New York, 1994
Pigment print

Apollo Spaceflight Training Suits, Houston, Texas, 1978
Dye transfer print

Shinjuku Station, Tokyo, Japan, 1962
Seven gelatin silver prints mounted on board



