

Nick Knight

The Image Maker

MAUDE JOANNA HÜRLIMANN

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“I’m no longer a photographer, I don’t consider what I do as photography anymore. I think it’s a new art form: I’ve called it very badly ‘image making.’”¹ By looking at the four works showcased in this year’s exhibition, the viewer can discover the distinctive yet sublime use of manipulation and editing inherent in Nick Knight’s oeuvre which elevate his photographs to images. An image that is no longer bound by tradition or prescribed parameters but the result of a modern multimedia process.

The contemporary artist Nick Knight, born in 1958, is regarded as one of the most influential and important image makers and fashion photographer of our time. The term of image-making was connected to Knight’s persona a long time ago. The images and concepts Knight creates do not abide by the boundaries of categorization and are connected through their avant-garde nature. His images are always created around one specific object, be it fashion, people or colorful roses from his garden. In the case of fashion, Knight’s advanced implementation of photography creates a space for the intrinsic narrative of fashion – a scope that underlines the story and draws secrets from any garment.

Millie, dressed in Gareth Pugh, was shot in 2015 for the ten-year anniversary of the designer’s brand and commissioned by *The Sunday Times Style*. Nick Knight remembers: “Gareth Pugh asked me to shoot this image for *The Sunday Times*. His collection was inspired by paganism and witchcraft so I wanted to create an image that spoke of the persecution of people with strong beliefs. It has always interested me that old beliefs live on in people’s imaginations. There’s a certain beauty to that. So I positioned the model somewhat purposefully like a bullseye, drained of its color, so that you can’t persecute her anymore. She’s no longer a target, just a porcelain-like, but fearless figure of strength.”²

The staging for this shoot involved two walls and a floor covered in squares of gold foil, which then under different lightning situations transformed into a surreal room that embraced the “awe-inspiring” creations by Pugh. For *Millie* and her flowery dress, a section of the gilded wall was roughly covered with white paint, letting part of the golden foil shine through. In the lower half of the completed image, the observer can spot some white flowers, the same flowers covering Millie’s body and making up the piece of clothing starring in this image. The floral citations on the wall, which somehow seem partly deconstructed, in fact belong to the digital manipulation that, along with a thorough conception coming from an irrepressible mind, transforms Knight’s photographs into images. The concept of this fashion image is constructed with contrasting tensions: the symmetrical pose of the model stands out against the uneven background. The vivid, almost sculptural dress contrasts with the flatness of the wall and, at the same time, seems to merge with it as the meticulous mise-en-scène composed and conducted by Knight is drained of its color. The elaborate and symbolically charged use of color is another characteristic of the artist’s image making.

Besides *Millie*, other good examples for the importance of color are the two fashion images of Linda Evangelista shot in 1991. At that time, digital manipulation was still being developed. Nonetheless, Knight found ways to edit and manipulate his analogue photographs and thus to establish his own style of fashion imagery: through different, sometimes chemical treatment of the film or paper, Knight produced color inversions that dramatically highlighted color contrasts.³

These creative and experimental methods, together with innovative stagings, set a new standard for fashion photography in the 1990s. The turn away from the 1980s grunge fashion movement towards “... more ostentatious displays of fashionableness ...” is reminiscent of Helmut Newton’s and Guy Bourdin’s 1970s fashion photography showing hard-edged, fashionable femininity.⁴ Knight made use of these prompts for shooting Linda and he reflects: “This was shot for Jil Sander in the early 90s. What’s interesting about it to me now is the technical side of the print, which was shot on a 10/8 Sinar, not digitally. When I printed the picture I first flashed the photographic paper with a subtle pink light and then printed the negative on the same paper but filtering the exposure very blue. The gentle pink picks up in the highlights of the print such as the skin but the deep blue can be seen in the shadows as I was trying to replicate the strange light you get in cities at night with the contrasting and overlapping lights—car headlights, street signs, overhead lamps, and so on.”⁵

The coloration of his work takes center stage again in the process of editing. From Linda’s strong yet slightly predatory expression which emphasizes her crystal blue eyes, the minimalistic but expressive poses, well-orchestrated down to the tips of her fingers, and the vigorous use of glossy coloring, an image results that is timeless in its style. In an essay honoring Knight’s first solo retrospective in 2016, the director of the Daelim Museum in Seoul, Woochul Jang, concurs: “For me, his works seemed like something that is not of the ‘present’, but of the ‘forthcoming future.’ Something still to come.”⁶ Carrie Scott, Knight’s archive director adds: “Knight wants us to see the images as he sees them in his head, forever in pursuit of the next beautiful thought, never content with sitting still in what came before.”⁷

Due to this self-imposed obligation toward his art and conscious opposition to stagnation, Nick Knight’s influence on the pictorial world of fashion imagery is inevitable and images such as the ones featuring Linda Evangelista are hardly to be attributed to one specific decade through their style.

For the second shot featuring Linda, Knight explains: “This image was shot at the height of Linda Evangelista’s career. She was one of the most well-paid, sought after models of that moment. As a result, she was a huge personality on set, and it felt natural to put her on a throne. I wanted to play with the idea that she was almost royalty—majestic and strong.”⁸ To achieve this, Knight again experimented with the color concept. “The regal red tone behind her echoes this. But I surrounded her with the icy pink which in contrast made the red background almost violent and bloody.”⁹ The perspective Knight chose for this image, that further reinforces Linda’s majestic radiance, is another stylistic device as well as the systematic coloring that underlines Linda’s lofty pose.

The fourth image exhibited stars another big name in the fashion world. In 2007, Knight captured Naomi Campbell wearing Christian Lacroix for *V Magazine*, thereby producing an iconic fashion image. Stylist Simon Foxtton stated: “These work very well. The ‘drip

effect’ doesn’t overpower the final image. The styling is restrained and intelligent and the hair and make-up reflect that. Altogether they constitute a very beautiful set of images.”¹⁰

The drip effect Foxtton mentions is another editing technique Knight worked with over many years: “Pierre Soulages famously said ‘I don’t paint black itself, but rather the light black reflects,’ and his statement has been an inspiration for me when working with colour. This print took me many weeks to perfect. If you look closely at the white of Naomi’s dress, there are so many colours in it. From afar you see a wash of white. Up close you see pinks, blues and grays merging together in harmony. Technically it’s one of the first images I made that got me thinking about the dissolving boundaries between photography and painting and image making. There are drips of colour around her body where I encouraged the paint that is in the printing process to run and not be absorbed by the photographic paper. This is really a big and important step in my work that takes photography outside of its own boundaries and in my mind is better referred to as image making.”¹¹

The snapshot-ish, dynamic atmosphere originating from Naomi’s seemingly coincidental pose contrasts with the thoughtful editing of the photograph. This time, Knight hides the intense coloration in the reflections of a white dress, which again relates the detailed concepts he creates around his fashion photographs.

The still-life character Naomi’s image imposes on the viewer’s mind can also be found in Knight’s roses. These works, together with the shot of Naomi, seem to hover between painting and photography, between vanitas-imagery connected to sixteenth-century painting as well as modern printing technology. “This is a new genre,” Carrie Scott states. A new genre of art indeed.

Always ahead of his time, Nick Knight is not afraid to cross, revert and play with predetermined boundaries, to reinvent himself over and over again and thus to create milestones of fashion imagery.

1 *Nick Knight – Image*, Daelim Museum, 2016, p.15

2 Nick Knight, personal statement during a visit to the Nicola Erni Collection, July 25, 2017

3 www.showstudio.com/project/nick_knight_image/designer_monographs

4 Nick Knight and Charlotte Cotton, *Nick Knight*, Collins Design, 2009, p. 8

5 Nick Knight, personal statement during a visit to the Nicola Erni Collection, July 25, 2017

6 Daelim Museum (see note 1), p.176

7 *Ibid.*, p. 173

8 Nick Knight, personal statement during a visit to the Nicola Erni Collection, July 25, 2017

9 *Ibid.*

10 www.showstudio.com/blog/post/nick_and_naomis_v_magazine_shoot

11 Nick Knight, personal statement during a visit to the Nicola Erni Collection, July 25, 2017



Campbell, London, 2007
Hand-coated pigment print

Millie, London, 2015
Hand-coated pigment print





< *Linda Chair*, Paris, 1991
Hand-coated pigment print

> *Linda Car*, Paris, 1991
Hand-coated pigment print

