

Steven Meisel

The Contemporary Iconographer

VALENTINA FRUTIG

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a baby he would be Steven Meisel.”

MICHAEL GROSS

“If Avedon and Andy Warhol had a baby he would be Steven Meisel.”¹ Mixing up truths and untruths about a figure in the public eye is a widespread problem when writing about the first career steps of a prominent personality. The general tenor is that great passion, international fame, and an exceptional talent need to start with an overwhelming story. The stories circulated about the career start of the American photographer Steven Meisel seem to be a classic example for this phenomenon. It sounds like a well made-up prediction contributing to his success and influence within the fashion scene: hunting for models on the streets of New York, waiting in front of model agencies like a paparazzo, making a million phone calls to find out where he can shoot the top model Twiggy while he skipped school lessons to flip through the newest magazine issues owned by his mother. These anecdotes must be true since the photographer, born in New York in 1954, has shot the majority of the covers for the Italian *Vogue* for over twenty-five years, as well as many important fashion stories and campaigns. Having these stories and facts about this passionate and well-appreciated man in mind, it is striking to find hardly any interviews or personal statements of Meisel. Controversial works such as the advertising campaign for Calvin Klein in 1995 which brought condemnation from Bill Clinton, or the book entitled *Sex* he produced in collaboration with Madonna in 1992, do not reflect a secretive person who would rather prefer to stay in the background.

Steven Meisel stayed calm and private in contrast to the people he worked for or collaborated with. From art directors and editors-in-chief to supermodels and designers, his greatest fans are the big names in the fashion industry. As Franca Sozzani, former editor-in-chief of *Vogue Italia*, stated in an interview, Steven Meisel created the magazine’s identity: “He’s the only real fashion photographer around.”² Beside his ever-growing interest throughout the international fashion circle, the artistic quality of the works exposing and questioning the world’s constitution created by human beings were finally discovered by the art world. In 2001 at his first European exhibition at the White Cube in London, large-format photographs of his advertising campaign for Versace were exhibited; this was followed by a retrospective in 2009 during the *Festival International de Mode & de Photographie* in Hyères.

These occasions initialized the shift from the original commercial purpose of Meisel’s works to the beginning of a new perception entering the field of fine art. This is a remarkable step for a contemporary fashion photographer whose works are still published mainly in magazines. Thanks to photographers like Meisel the genre of fashion photography will be nourished with works challenging, analysing, and always putting the finger on the situation in question—often ingeniously staged and enriched with a narrative character brushing the edge of superficiality. The quality of the works overlaps with the ones of contemporary photographers such as Jeff Wall, whose large-format lightboxes make reference to the early techniques in the advertising industry. At the same time Meisel’s works are composed as cross references to compositions by well-known fashion photographers such as Irving Penn or Horst P. Horst. His calm manifesto reached international acclaim for his straightforward-

ness and provocative vein to intentionally taking up particular imagery created in the 50s and 60s. The current exhibition at the Nicola Erni Collection presents a unique overview of Meisel’s profundity and visual language that caught the fashion and art circles from the beginning of his creative work.

As one of a few fashion photographers in today’s age of digitization, Steven Meisel managed to push the publisher giant Condé Nast to its limit when all copies of the special issue of the Italian *Vogue* entitled “Black Beauty” in 2008 were sold out and 40,000 more copies had to be reprinted immediately. The sticker on the covers with the words “First Reprint. The Most Wanted Issue Ever” shows the popularity and great significance this issue had among regular *Vogue* readers. This campaign shows his great talent to invent new sceneries that provocatively address certain deeply rooted clichés within the fashion world. One image where the model Toccara Jones is lying in a car trunk surrounded by white mechanics centralizes and glorifies her sensual gaze and pose with a humoristic touch. The display of the label’s fashion though does not fade into the background of Meisel’s social, political, and historical layers.

If we agree that Meisel uses the fashion shot to convey constructed layers of a different nature as mentioned above, the role of the models—or perhaps better defined as actors—is therefore closely linked to the message he aims to communicate through his images. Meisel is widely known for promoting potential, yet prominent supermodels, including Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell or Christy Turlington, to name just a few. Beside the fact of promoting these icons in the fashion world, in which a link can also be made to numerous other well-known photographers, Steven Meisel’s accomplishment lies in capturing individual preferences of a personal and physical nature, equipping them with his own iconography and finally contextualizing fashion clothing—indeed all these aspects are combined within one single image. There is a selection of such powerful images within the Nicola Erni Collection which demonstrate Meisel’s instruments to differentiate individual personalities. Naomi Campbell is captured as if she were born in tribal clothing and in the appropriate pose, and Linda Evangelista’s facial expression while pulling her cheeks has become characteristic for her. It is not only the look but the physiognomy of Sophia Loren that captured Linda Evangelista in a way that had certainly inspired her before this shot. Imitating another person on the one hand, one can observe Evangelista from the back while she is applying her make-up in front of a mirror highlighting her self-awareness, independence, and naturalness.

Steven Meisel’s close relationship to his models results in visual dedications spread across a dozen pages emphasizing the narrative aspect through their layout. To construct extended stories, whether working on a campaign or taking single images, is Meisel’s signature for which he has been appreciated since the beginning of his work as a photographer. The shot constructed as an homage to the designer Alexander McQueen, who died unexpectedly in 2010, shows his great attribute as a storyteller, dedicating his works to long-time collaborators. The five works within the Nicola Erni Collection included under the title “Alexander The Great” for the May 2011 issue of the American *Vogue* pay tribute to particularly extraordinary haute-couture costumes designed in different years. The setting of the shooting was entirely designed in grey including the props

around the models who were standing on open staircases or empty wooden crates. The dark background seems to function like a memorial setup for the presented garments by the famous designer.

Meisel’s natural approach to work with the pre-existing, simplifying it in his images, can also be seen in his ambition to present labels and their fashion in a totally different context, glamorizing them with his straightforwardness to achieve a surprisingly new perception. For the October 1992 issue of the American *Vogue*, Linda Evangelista and Kristen McMenamy were vested with the finest haute couture designed by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel or the famous hat designer Philip Treacy. On the grounds of the Château de Champs in Champs-sur-Marne the two models stroll through the outside area of the castle as if a walk wearing high-quality fabrics and meticulously finished hats were the most normal thing in the world. The reduced setting of a few trees with the apocalyptic strong back light-ing underlines Meisel’s aim to connect high fashion to the simple beauty of nature—the richly dressed heads resemble the crown of the trees, against one of which they are both leaning. In another image, Linda Evangelista mimes a soccer kick while looking lasciviously into the camera. With Evangelista in the centre of the image the trees in the background form an avenue articulating her long neck where the two groups of trees meet. Performing everyday activities around a neoclassical château transforms the high-end fashion worn into a site-specific work of art, as if Meisel’s imagery had inspired the designers for the haute couture shown.

The creation of dependency between fashion and imagery constructed on the idea of the photographer results in a visual stringency flowing into Steven Meisel’s more recent works. The models of the shot for the September issue of *Vogue Italia* in 2005 appear as figures out of the staged graffiti works presenting the latest Chanel haute couture. The large-scale works in the background, together with the painted graffiti on the taxi, embed and contextualize the clothing in the world of street art. Playing with fore- and background sizing, the head of the model lying on the taxi reflects the painted figure smoking on the top of a second car. In the same manner, the painted figure on the car captures the blue-yellow face painting on the model swinging from a ladder in a second image out of this editorial. Limiting any individualization through the lack of any facial expression and through hidden hair, the models are either dressed to disappear into the street art works or directly emerge from them as anonymous creatures with animal-like features. The site-specific qualities evolve from Meisel’s carefully staged imagery jumping between the models, the labels and its fashion, and the setting.

Walking this fine line between addressing controversial topics and staging fashion in a subtle way, Meisel creates a great and still surprising variety of expressive layers which convey his personal thoughts about social grievances or the structural changes in certain industries. The mass media and its current order is a recurring subject he likes to thematise in his works. This variety is turned into a visual signature identifying Steven Meisel’s humorous and often sarcastic language which is, at the same time, liable to misinterpretation. Rather than following the footsteps of the modern fashion photographers, Meisel finds his personal message in the existing imagery and staged fashion of the early masters. It is quite obvious that the neck corset worn

by Stella Tennant in this one photograph shot in 2011 is inspired by the legendary image entitled *Mainbocher Corset* by the photographer Horst P. Horst. Against the traditional use of the corset, Meisel’s version shows the corset as a brace supporting the neck. Only seeing her back aiming to anonymize the model, the new use of the corset brutally questions the role of the model and her self-determination within the fashion business.

With a slight twist of perception Steven Meisel creates significant statements resulting in conceptual images, sometimes using the instruments of appropriation art. The images with their narrative aspect are charged with symbolic elements that need to be identified as such to finally understand their deeper meaning. Meisel’s motivation to find elements to identify, analyze, and understand his visual conversions is transferred to the viewer as if his aim was to create a distinct iconography—a term used within art history related to identification and its imagery. It would be inappropriate to call Meisel a pure fashion photographer after all these explanations. As a contemporary iconographer, he prefers to speak through his images rather than in person. Their well-planned significance stands on the same level as their aesthetic quality—the results brilliantly complementing each other.



1 Michael Gross in: *New York Magazine*, October 1992, p. 31

2 Franca Sozzani in: *Coming into Fashion: A Century of Photography at Condé Nast*, Thames & Hudson, 2012, p. 219

Auto Shop (Toccara Jones), for *Italian Vogue*, 2008
Hand-coated archival pigment print

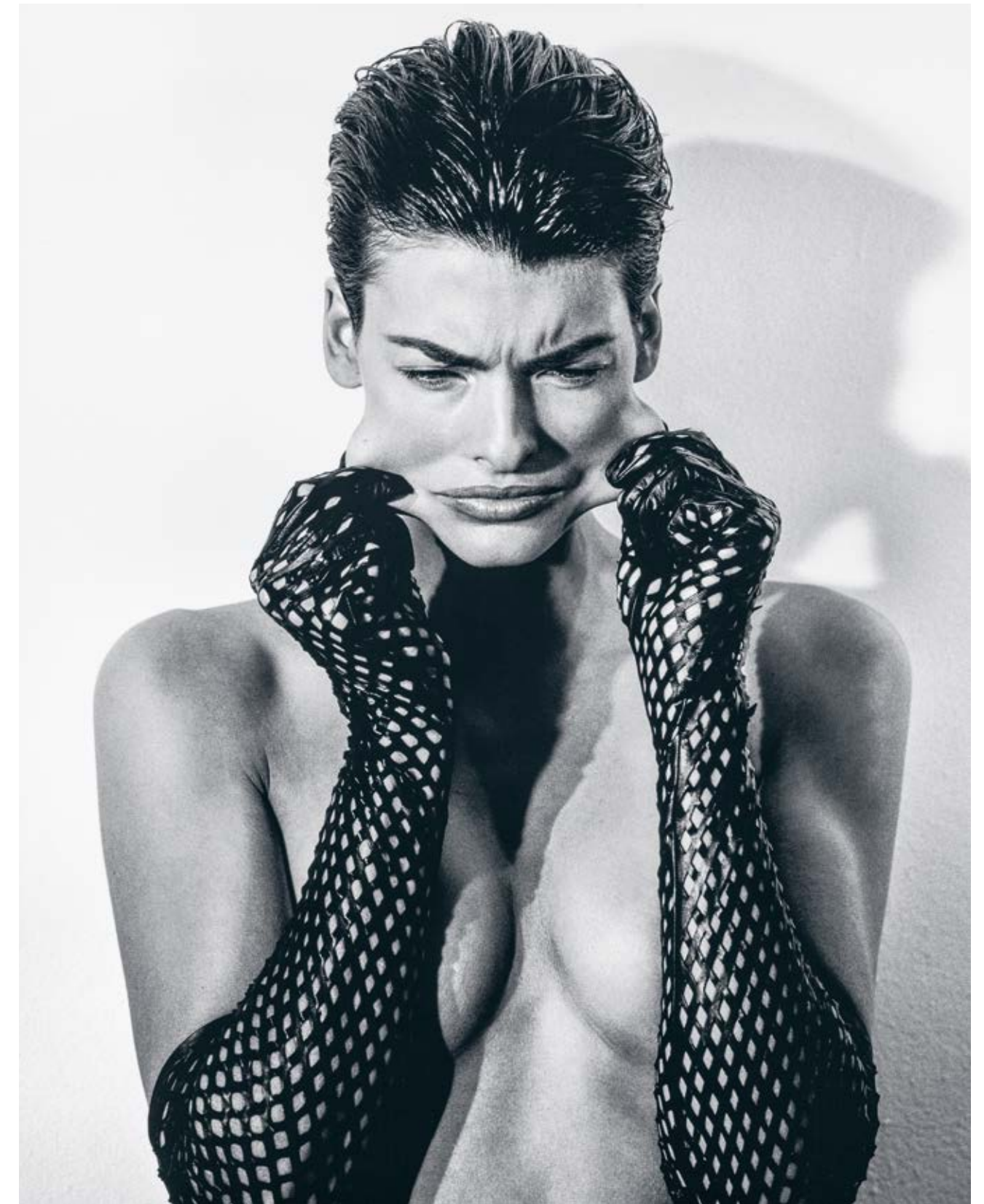


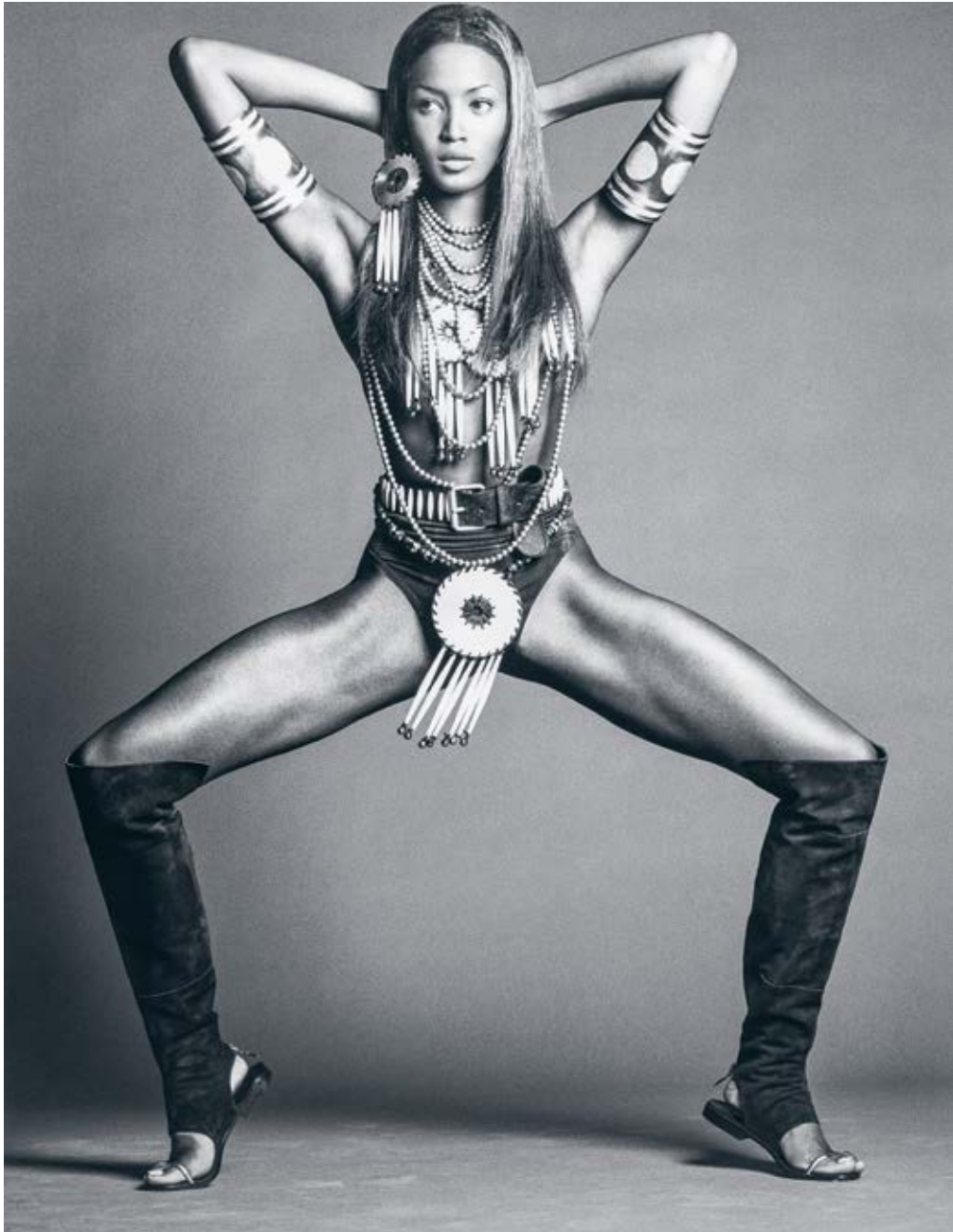
< *Bookcase* (Linda Evangelista), for Gianfranco Ferre, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print

> *Linda as Sophia* (Linda Evangelista), for Italian *Vogue*, New York, 1990
Hand-coated archival pigment print



- < *Model Muse* (Linda Evangelista), for Dolce & Gabbana, 1991
Hand-coated archival pigment print
- > *Pulling Face* (Linda Evangelista), for French Vogue, New York, 1989
Hand-coated archival pigment print





< *Tribal Stance* (Naomi Campbell), for *Italian Vogue*, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print

<< *Push and Pull* (Susan Holmes), for *Italian Vogue*, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print

> *Chanel Shopping Bags* (Christy Turlington), for *Italian Vogue*, Paris, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print

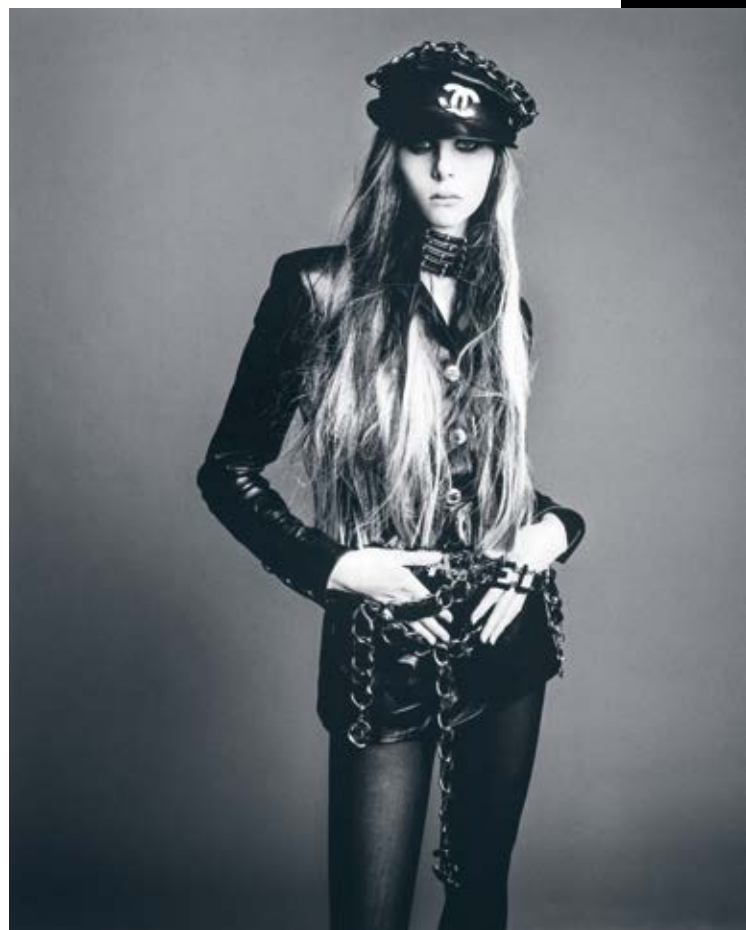




< *Dancing in Paris* (Linda Evangelista), for *American Vogue*, France, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print

<< *Plane Tree in Paris* (Linda Evangelista & Kristen McMenamy), for *American Vogue*, France, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print

> *Walking in Paris* (Linda Evangelista & Kristen McMenamy), for *American Vogue*, France, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print



- < *Chanel Biker* (Benedicte Loyer), for *Italian Vogue*, 1992
Hand-coated archival pigment print
- << *Chanel Underwear* (Benedicte Loyer), for *Italian Vogue*, 1993
Hand-coated archival pigment print
- > *Veil & Cigarette* (Trish Goff), for *Italian Vogue*, 1995
Hand-coated archival pigment print





< *Ladder Swing* (Hana Soukupova), for Italian Vogue, 2005
 Hand-coated archival pigment print

 > *Graffiti Taxi* (Hana Soukupova), for Italian Vogue, 2005
 Hand-coated archival pigment print



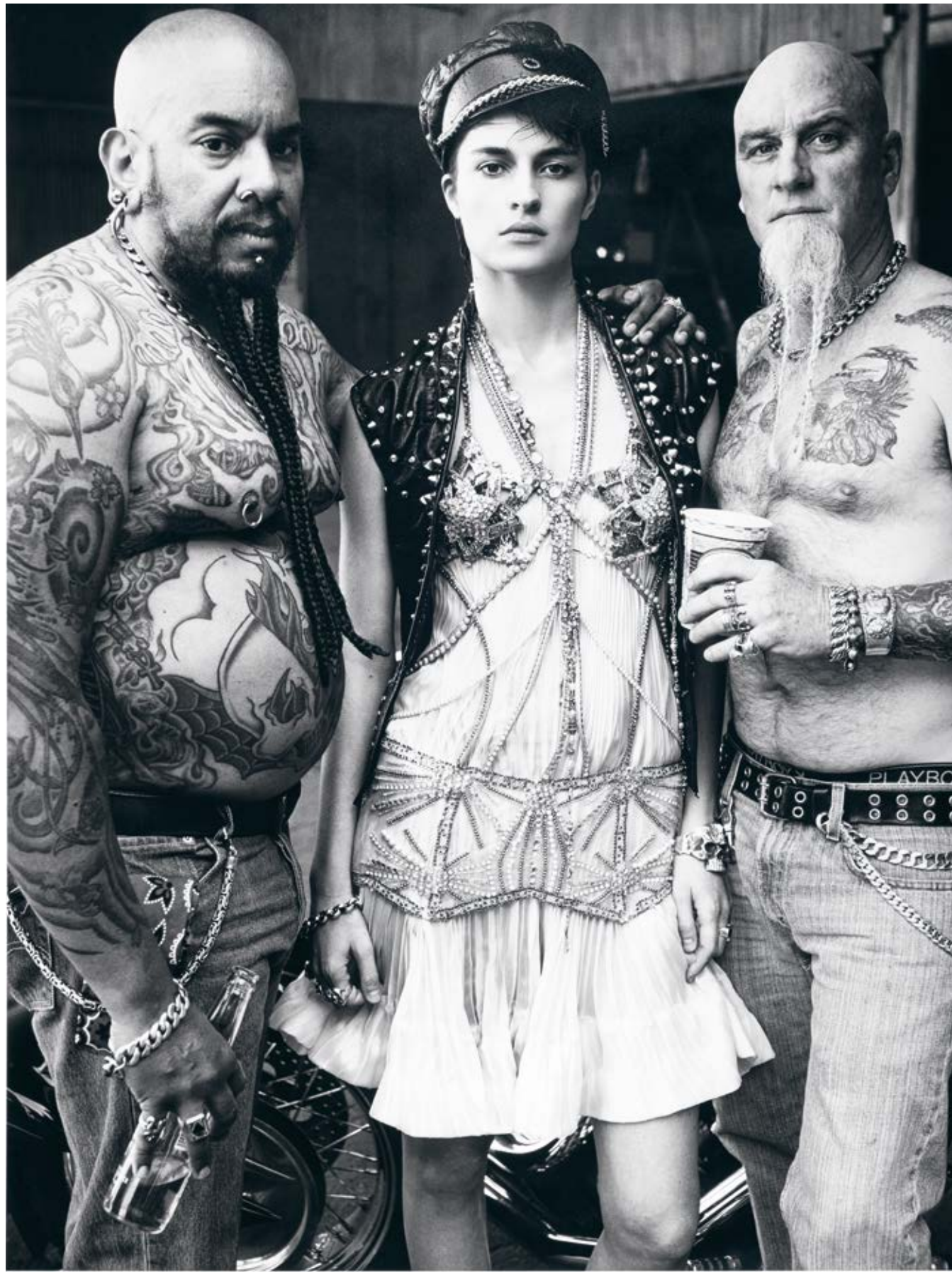
N° 13 (Karlie Kloss), by Alexander McQueen, for American Vogue, 2011
Hand-coated archival pigment print



- < *Widows of Culloden* (Karen Elson), by Alexander McQueen, for *American Vogue*, 2011
Hand-coated archival pigment print
- > *Plato's Atlantis* (Saskia de Brauw), by Alexander McQueen, for *American Vogue*, 2011
Hand-coated archival pigment print
- >> *Voss* (Coco Rocha), by Alexander McQueen, for *American Vogue*, 2011
Hand-coated archival pigment print



Voss Red Dress (Stella Tennant), by Alexander McQueen, for *American Vogue*, 2011
Hand-coated archival pigment print



- < *Hey Dude* (Lester Roque, Amanda Moore, & Jeff Horton), for *Italian Vogue*, 2006
Hand-coated archival pigment print
- > *Neck Corset* (Stella Tennant), for *Italian Vogue*, New York, 2011
Hand-coated archival pigment print