



# TIM WALKER

THE GARDEN  
OF EARTHLY  
DELIGHTS





Melanie Gaydos, *amber serpent, ear and dagger*, Valentino dress  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen

In January 2015, Tim Walker was approached by Nicola Erni, who wanted to commission a series of his own choosing. He was given carte blanche to work on whatever he wanted, and the budget to match. What do you do, as an artist, when someone offers to help you realise your dream project? You return to the things that have held your attention longest. For Tim this was the work of the 15th-century Netherlandish master, Hieronymus Bosch. “I remember the first time I saw *The Garden of Earthly Delights*,” he says, “and I just never forgot it. It fascinates me, and used to scare me so much. I found even the depiction of heaven scary.” He worked on the commission for a year, and so this series of images was born, a photographic response to *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, as seen through the lens of Tim Walker.

Tim’s series of photos helps to bridge the great divide between painting and photography, which reaches back centuries. When the great 19th century painter Paul Delaroche first saw an early photograph, a daguerreotype, he famously exclaimed, “This is the death of painting!” Broadly speaking, since the first daguerreotype was taken in 1839, paint has battled to exclude photography from the realm of “Fine Art,” while photography has clamoured to be taken seriously.

It would be hard to overestimate the impact that early photography had on its audience. It immediately took on the role of documenter; it could provide a true and objective documentation of reality. The use of the photograph in war journalism and portraiture stands as testament to this belief in its objectivity: photography could be used to truthfully communicate a distant scene or an absent person. Ever since, photographs have always been relied on as truthful reproductions of reality.

In contrast, it has always been expected that great paintings should be expressive, moving, poetic and probably confer some greater truth or moralizing impulse upon the viewer. In theory.

So what happens when the photograph deliberately becomes painterly? When it assumes the qualities of painting? In fashion photography, at least, you head towards the work of Drew Jarrett, Paolo Roversi and Sarah Moon. You get a slightly soft focus, a wistfulness maybe, a greater depth of colour and a richness of texture.

But what about when a photographer deliberately responds to a specific painting? *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is a triptych, painted sometime between 1490 and 1510, now hanging in the Prado Museum in Madrid. The left-hand panel shows God presenting Eve to Adam in the Garden of Eden. The central, and largest panel, shows *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a fantastical scene of hedonism, joy, eroticism and fetishism, made up of small groupings of humans and animals. Depending on where your morals lie, it can either be read as a scene of naive joy and freedom, or as a playground of corruption and sexual deviance. It is poised on that knife-edge where hedonism meets horror, like the fourth day of a festival when culture disappears and bestiality rules, where every human has become an animal. The right hand panel depicts Hell: evil and eternal damnation. When read from left to right, from God’s forewarning in the Garden of Eden, through lustfulness and sinning in the central panel, and on to Hell, the triptych can be interpreted as a cautionary tale of Christian morality, a warning to the viewer of a life spent indulging in the sins of the flesh. Oops.

Tim Walker is a photographer known for his ability to tell a story through a still image. But the stories he tells are usually lighter, more positive, and seldom moralistic. They’re often fairy tales, set in the far-flung lands of his imagination. It doesn’t necessarily seem obvious that he would have been forever obsessed with Hieronymus Bosch. But ever since he first saw *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as a child, “it has always been Bosch. It’s always been with me, that weird dark mood that pops up again and again, that could slightly ruin your day. It’s there when you’re watching a Terry Gilliam film, when you’re looking at a Grayson Perry, when you’re reading Roald Dahl. That to me is the same thread of darkness. It’s something to do with nature and humanity, turning civilised man back into animals.”

But how do you go about creating a photographic response to a painting? And in particular this painting, with its moral warning, its visual complexity, and the powerful effect it has on the viewer that can, as Tim puts it, “ruin your day?” Where do you begin?

Tim started by breaking down the aspects of Bosch’s painting that seemed most typically “Bosch” to him, all the key ingredients that made up his world: the veiny bubble, the clam shell, the enormous strawberries,

the vines and flowers that adorn and entrap people, the bubblegum-pink castles, the snakes and strange fruit. Working with set designer Shona Heath, he recreated these key elements to form a Boschian world.

For Tim, the only way to dissect *The Garden* was in a purely intuitive way. He selected the elements that seemed to him to be the most potent and magical. His was a purely subjective selection, rejecting an academic or analytical approach. “I did start to read about Bosch but I just got so bogged down. I think it’s always been so instinctive to me. Looking at those paintings you know exactly what it makes you feel, and you probably know way more instinctively than you could ever read about. And when we went to the Prado Museum, we had a guide who took us round and I just thought she told us such a load of dire bollocks. Suddenly the painting started to lose its charm to me. I think an instinctive response to looking at a painting often gets you much closer to the mark.”

The shoot took place over five days, at Eglington Hall in Northumberland, one of Tim’s favourite places to shoot. There was a cast of 13 girls and boys, the product of a painstaking selection process. “They were all incredible, and they all gave themselves to the project. Everything counted on them believing it, and believing the world.” The cast is always important to Tim to ensure the image has an immediate impact upon the viewer, and the way he shoots is very particular to him. He will have an idea of what the image should be, and then he will look through the lens at the set, and let the model move around the set until he or she finds a place or a position that might work. At that point he might see empty spaces that need filling, and add something—a person, a flower, a mirror, maybe a clamshell. The way in which he builds a picture is painterly of itself: he places elements together, building the image up incrementally until the composition feels complete.

But as much as he puts the picture together piece by piece, it is still an incidental process. If we take the picture of Guinevere Van Seenus with her bum in the air and a lily flower sprouting out as an example, Tim speaks about how she “found that position after a while. Because I was shooting on such a wide lens, I realised that we could get someone up in the background. So someone ran down to the kitchen to get Grace [Bol]. It wasn’t, ‘Oh, what does that mean when she’s up there?’ It doesn’t mean anything. I could just see a space for a person.” It’s refreshing to hear an artist speak so candidly about their creative process, and how this process relies in many ways on happy accidents. “I find,” he says, “that any preordained or preconsidered aspect for something you’re about to create will just go tits up. I think the only way you can create anything is by running on instinct.”

The project throws into stark light the dividing lines between inspiration and imitation. Can we say that Tim’s pictures are imitative, in that they openly recreate Bosch’s settings? Did it worry Tim that this series had such a fixed genesis in someone else’s work, especially given the high

premium placed on “originality” in art? Was he reacting to, or rejecting, the creative world’s—and the fashion world’s—insatiable appetite for the new, for something that feels innovative or modern? “Bosch was the main ingredient, but Bill Brandt is in there. So is Terry Gilliam, Disney’s *Snow White*, Melvin Sokolsky, and William Morris’s ‘Strawberry Thief’ design. Because Bosch has been around for so long, his aesthetic has permeated into the arts and stewed away for five centuries into the average European’s concept of a bad dream. Beauty is an ever-evolving conversation, and sometimes some voices are louder than others. I was really conscious of the way recreating a world, to recreate a painting in a photograph, teeters on the edge of being something really naff to me. It’s the freestyling in creation that is exciting. You add a bit of this, a bit of that. A pure recreation of Bosch would be irrelevant.”

Tim Walker is a photographer who trades heavily on fantasy and the imagination. He creates fictional worlds, and magical worlds, where bodies transcend their physicality to become supernatural. Mermaids float in tanks, people are levitated, humans metamorphose into animals, and animals become human. He has always managed to transcend the widely accepted idea that photography reflects “reality”. But in exploring Bosch’s world, he encountered physical limits to the possibilities of photography. And it is these moments where Tim failed to translate painting into a photograph that reveal the limits of photography as a medium.

The first of these moments relates to the way in which bodies were grouped. One of the elements of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* that Tim had identified as a key Bosch technique was the way in which heads were stacked one on top of the other, as a nightmarish bird drops berries into their gaping mouths. It was a great disappointment to Tim not to be able to create similar groupings of people, “all clustered together and tumbled up together. I thought that would be really easy to do. But it didn’t work. It ended up looking really lame and overly composed. I think being yourself is the essence of a picture working or not. Any time someone did something that belonged to them, you could then very quietly build the picture up by bringing someone else in.”

It was in trying to use real flesh, real bodies, to recreate these Bosch scenes that Tim found the limits of his medium. Apparently Bosch painted each figure one at a time, rather than visualising them as a group. Consequently Bosch’s groups are like a collage of two-dimensional people, layered person upon person. He would not have painted from life, so perhaps in drawing from his imagination Bosch’s bodies lost a part of their corporeality, and became much more malleable, with fewer physical limitations. But Tim discovered he couldn’t transcend the limitations of using real human bodies in his shoot.

In *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Bosch painted a man bent double, carrying a giant mussel shell on his back, out of which protrudes the legs of two naked people. Attempting to reimagine this in the studio was the

most disappointing part of the project for Tim. “It felt like I’d failed. It was a fucking nightmare. It should have been really easy.” Shona Heath had built a giant mussel shell, but because it had been decided that flesh looked best when it was very shiny, all the models were oiled up. “But that meant that the shell became like a slide, so there were three people writhing around, slipping about like a granny slipping in the bath. Cocks and balls and boobs and bums. There was just no sense of beauty and calmness.” In a way that is a perfect Boschian moment: reducing people to their sheer physicality. Control was lost, and revealed a scene that is only bodily, as humans are once again exposed as animals.

In its darkness, this series represents new territory for Tim. It is not a fairy tale. And this kind of darkness is not something that you see much in fashion imagery, because of the concern with glamour and beauty. More than that, the sexuality and sensuality you see displayed in fashion magazines is a very healthy sexuality; positive and cinematic. But as Tim says, “Bosch’s is such a dark sensuality, it’s not pretty. And that’s not really represented in photography or film, that idea of people becoming animalistic in their sensuality.”

There’s a lot in here: sex, nudity, darkness, and light. And those are the most potent parts of Bosch’s painting. But in a way it is nice to leave those things open, because they are the things that we can react to in an entirely human way, based on our own experience of the world. To overinterpret might kill the mood. Many art historians have interpreted *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as a scene of naive sexuality and childlike innocence. That is not what I see when I look at Bosch’s painting, and neither does Tim. But sex, innocence, darkness, and light are the human elements, and these are the things that we are all best equipped to respond to ourselves, as humans. They do not need explaining. And so we return to the idea of instinct, of the beauty found in watching an artist like Tim trusting his intuition.

Eddie Campbell

*Love Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2016









*Sam Collet, veiled with lily*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen

OPPOSITE  
*Maarten Convens in pink castle bubble fantasy*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen



*Grace Bol, Sam Collet and Anna Cleveland, velvet peach, blackberry and horse chestnut*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen













*Cierra Skye, Anna Cleveland, Guinevere van Seenus, owl and die*  
 Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
 Pigment print on gesso coated linen

OPPOSITE

*Guinevere van Seenus, Maarten Convens, Anna Cleveland in mussel shells*  
 Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
 Pigment print on gesso coated linen









*Melanie Gaydos, finger on pearl at green velvet table*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen

OPPOSITE

*Cierra Skye in thistle bubble, pearl in mouth*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen



*Guinevere van Seenus and Grace Bol, shiny lily bum*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen







*Anna Cleveland, Kesse Donkour (twice), gilded crotch, conch shell & pearls*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen

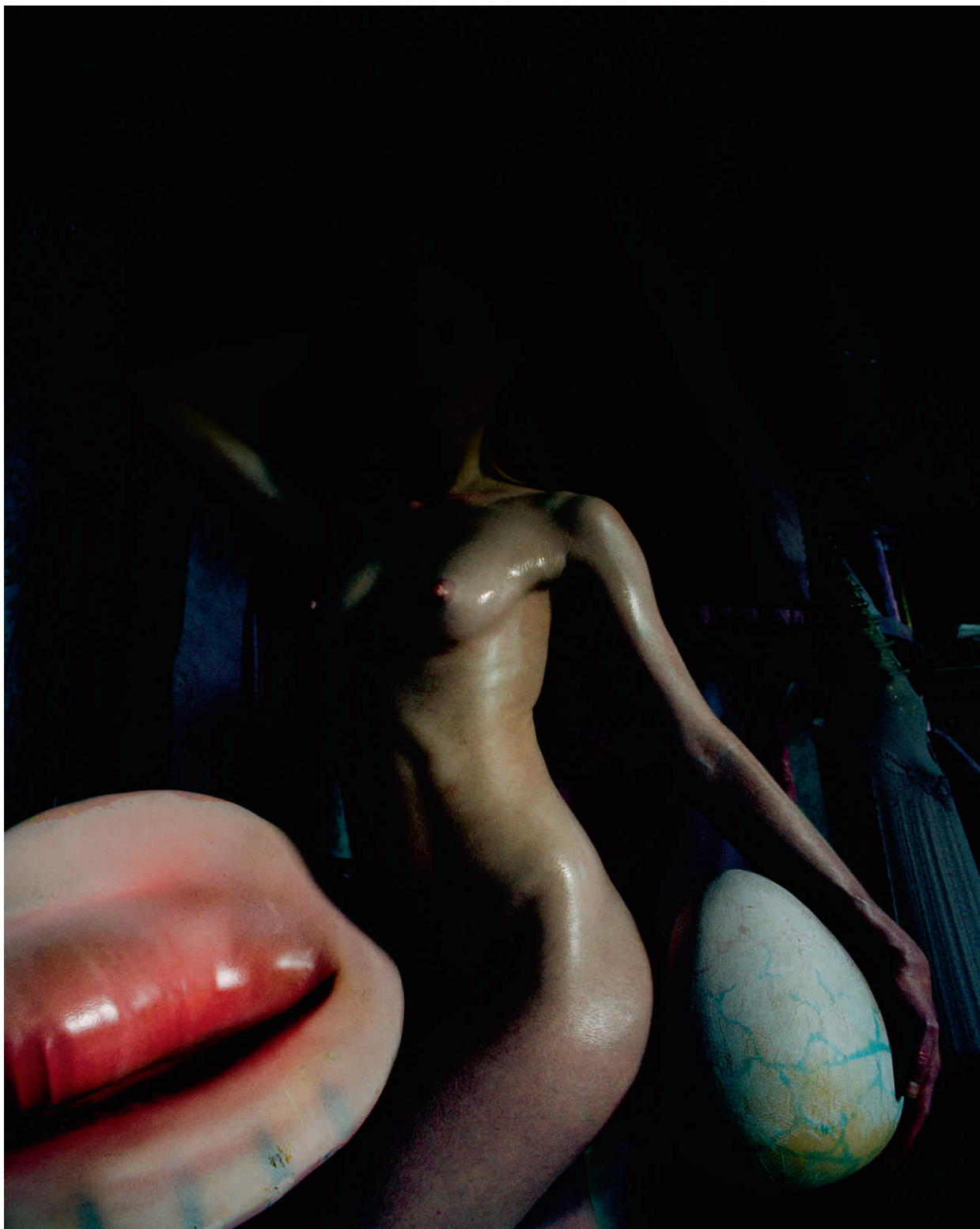






*Anne Lise Maulin nude—egg and conch shell, light*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen





*Anne Lise Maulin nude—egg and conch shell, dark*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen



*Cierra Skye, apples and serpent reflected in mirror*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen













*Anne Lise Maulin, Anna Cleveland, Yana Dobroliubova, Maarten Convens, Jelle Haen, giant strawberry and key*  
 Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
 Pigment print on gesso coated linen

OPPOSITE

*Melanie Gaydos, amber serpent, ear and dagger, Valentino dress*  
 Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
 Pigment print on gesso coated linen



Yana Dobroliubova, Cierra Skye, Maarten  
Convens, Guinevere van Seenus, thistle  
bubble and key  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen

OPPOSITE

Yana Dobroliubova, Cierra Skye, Guinevere  
van Seenus, thistle bubble and key  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen









*Anna Cleveland, Cierra Skye, Grace Bol in Valentino capes*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen







*Guinevere van Seenus reclines nude with giant cherry and snake*  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen













*Isaac Neal bowl cut portrait*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen

OPPOSITE

*Cierra Skye on Bosch hillock in Valentino cape*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen





Anna Cleveland, Jelle Haen and Kesse Donkour suspended on impaling tree  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen





Connor Newall, Isaac Neal, Guinevere van Seenus, Sam Collet, Jelle Haen, Cierra Skye, Maarten Convens, Anna Cleveland, Melanie Gaydos, Yana Dobroliubova, Grace Bol, Anne Lise Maulin, drawing room gathering  
Eglington, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen



*Jelle Haen, Anne Lise Maulin, Anna Cleveland, Yana Dobroliubova,  
Grace Bol, Melanie Gaydos, Connor Newall, Guinevere van Seenus,  
Maarten Convens, Sam Collet, group Bosch portrait*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen













*Cierra Skye, red velvet and 97 pearls*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen

OPPOSITE

*Maarten Convens reclining pollinated by Monarch butterfly*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen



*Yana Dobroliubova on red carpet in red Valentino "bib" cape*  
Eglingham, Northumberland, 2015  
Pigment print on gesso coated linen



