

The way of  
Nicola Erni to  
fashion  
photography  
is an art  
collection (an  
interview)

by Stefano Pirovano

# *Nicola Erni views fashion photography through a lens quite different from that of*



*found.*

I stumbled upon Nicola Erni's photography collection ([Nicola Erni Collection](#)) by chance a few months ago, while I was in Zurich for Zurich Art Weekend. When I decided to make the short drive to Steinhausen—less than half an hour from the city—I expected many things, but certainly not to encounter such a distinctive and

personal approach to collecting. You can read more about Nicola Erni's perspective on fashion photography in the following interview. But before that, I believe it's worth pausing to consider the very nature of the building that houses her collection.

CFA



Rather than a purely functional museum space—like the Fondation Beyeler, with its Renzo Piano-designed wing (as we await the opening of Peter Zumthor's addition), or the new Kunsthaus Basel extension by David Chipperfield—the Erni Collection, designed by Senn Architekten AG, feels more like a hotel. Its shared spaces are conceived not just for display, but also for conviviality. It gives the impression that one is engaging with guests, not just visitors. The rooms are furnished, not merely equipped, and the counter at the entrance feels more like a concierge desk than a ticket office. It's precisely this shift in perspective that invites reflection—because it's the same shift that defines Nicola Erni's approach to collecting. Erni views fashion photography through a lens quite different from that of art directors, journalists, or boutique clientele. An image that once

appeared on the glossy page of a magazine—destined for only fleeting attention before fading into obscurity—now re-emerges, or perhaps more accurately, is reborn, elevated to a new and more enduring status.



images original nature. So, dear readers, is this not also a way of satisfying that timeless impulse shared by great collectors across the ages—the desire for discovery? After all, the collector sees before they collect.

**What impressed me while visiting your collection is how the essence of an image may change when it's printed in large formats, properly framed and “relocated” in a museum. Its artistic value is somehow revealed and expanded. When it comes to print from original negatives, how do you decide the size, format, and framing of those shots that, for instance, were originally taken for the cover of a magazine, or were part of a photo shoot?**

When it comes to prints from original negatives, I decide on size and format according to how I feel the image would look at its best. I go from my gut feeling; sometimes I decide upon the space the work will hang in or the wall it would fit perfectly on. For the frames, I work with the same framer for years, and it is always a pleasure to choose the framing with him, mostly in his studio. In general, I prefer to keep the framing simple. Currently, we have a wall dedicated to the juxtaposition of the original prints and magazine covers, revealing the artistic value of those works.

**That wall is mesmerizing. It reveals the full artistic value of an image people are used to get as a part of a relatively cheap object, thus the fashion magazine. The disposable is magically turned into the eternal. You took a great responsibility...**



**Are you used to establishing a relationship with the photographers you collect, if**



after having had conversations with the artists, I then decide on the print size.

**Could you please pick up a single photograph in your collection and elaborate on why you like it?**

Emma Summerton, Janice with a Lister Lady, for Vogue Australia, 2014. This was the first work I purchased by Emma Summerton, and we established a great friendship and collection together after. I saw the image in the magazine first, and it appealed to me immediately. With the graffiti of Anthony Lister in the background, reminding me of the graffiti work in New York of the late 70s and early 80s by artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. I'm always keen on discovering young fashion photographers.

**Who are the younger fashion photographers you're interested in at the moment?**

I dedicated one chapter of the current exhibition Mix & Match to the next generation of fashion photographers like Tyler Shields, Tyler Mitchel, Carlijn Jacobs, Nadine Ijewere and Harley Weir. I follow with great interest how they evolve in their work.

**What would you say is defining this new wave of fashion photographers?**

The new era of fashion photography reflects the mood of the time, and opens a discourse on actual themes of society spoken through the lens of fashion and photography. New media and technological change are defining this chapter too. Photographers like Carlijn Jacobs work with AI and she actually shot the first Vogue cover which uses AI. Others, like Harley Weir work mostly with analog cameras, almost like a countermovement to the rapid technological improvements.

**Given these current changes that affect both the ways images are created and the ways we experience and engage with them, how would you describe today's fashion photography?**

With the approach of social media and influencers, fashion photography has become images that come and go very fast. Much more than they did before. As we rather see them on our phones screen through social media than in the printed magazine versions. Photographers who put an emphasis on fashion are seldom to be found these days as the demand of printed media for such photographs has become scars. Printed magazines have become thinner and thinner year after year, and digital media has taken

the overhand. The time and professionalism of a fashion photographer is not requested that much anymore. I'm curious how AI and new technology will influence this in the future.



Installation view, Mix & Match exhibition. From left, works by Arthur Elgort, Pipilotti Rist, Tim Walker. Courtesy of Nicola Erni Collection.

Installation view, Mix & Match exhibition. Courtesy of Nicola Erni Collection.

**Following up with your clear view, it may seem that the role once played by the fashion photographer is now played by content creators and influencers, while photography in itself has become a merely artisanal practice at the service of these**

**new actors – while the printed press is slowly fading away. Would you open your collection to fashion blogs and Instagram accounts at some point?**

Our website gives a clear and detailed insight in my collection as well as my philosophy.



everyone attending. One of the photographers who is well represented in the collection is Scott Schuhman (@thesartorialist). He started his career by posting street style photography on his blog back in the 2000s.

**I know you're about to publish a new book. Would you like to introduce it?**

With pleasure! The publication is titled "Mix & Match: Fashion Photography meets Contemporary Art". I'm very grateful to the editor Phaidon who has done a wonderful job. It perfectly reflects my collecting philosophy and the way I constantly mix and match photography and contemporary art at the exhibitions I realize at the Nicola Erni Collection with my team. The book gives you a detailed overview on the history of fashion photography from the 1930s to now. The design is as colorful and joyful as the ways I show works in my museum. I can't wait for it to go public early September 10th.



Mix & Match: Fashion Photography meets Contemporary Art, Phaidon Press, Nicola Erni Collection, London, 2025

**Do you also collect photography books? Could you describe your criteria in choosing them?**

Yes! Our library consists of more than 5000 publications of which a large number are fashion magazines such as Vogue and Harper's Bazaar from the 1950s to today. The emphasis lies on photography, not leaving out important books on artists of the collection. I mainly concentrate on books relating to artists present in the collection as well as on themes that have a direct link to photography and contemporary art.

**It's likely that in a few years many important archives of photographs, both for professional fashion photographers and magazines, will have to find someone taking care of them. As a collector, and a museum owner, are you interested in this side of fashion photography?**

So far, I have not looked into this aspect of collecting, on top of that nothing like this has come up so far.

**Last update:**



Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by  
altering our perceptions.

*Sol Lewitt*

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