



# Still Life

with Linda

One day this winter  
a special fashion  
sitting took place:

Mats Gustafson drew  
Linda Evangelista in  
the new season's clothing.  
Patrick Demarchelier  
photographed the work in progress.

By Amy Fine Collins

This page: White honeycomb-pattern  
cotton sweater, about \$88, black  
wool crepe skirt, about \$152.  
Both, Dana Buchman.



The distinctive structure and precise contours of Linda Evangelista's face inspired illustrator Mats Gustafson to create—with his signature reductive line—nearly abstract diagrams of her beauty. "Linda has slanted, almond-shaped eyes, extremely beautiful nostrils that tilt another way, and a mouth that angles in a third direction," he says. Though his abbreviated, almost masklike portraits "are not intended to be deep psychological investigations," Gustafson did analyze closely the contradictory character of her face—"femininity combined with strength, womanliness mixed with girlishness." Evangelista's well-known chameleonic versatility, he believes, mirrors the multiplicity of fashion today. "She can epitomize high fashion or embody banal, pop, pinup trashiness." He also sees traces of beauties from the past—Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Kim Novak—superimposed on her transformable physiognomy. "I think this is why we all respond so much to Linda—we read into her face all those received charismatic images. With these images and all the preexisting pictures of Linda in the back of my mind, I found it easy to distill her features to a very simple form."

Fascinated as Gustafson may have been by Evangelista, his sketches owe their apparent facility less to her remarkable countenance than to a lifetime devoted to scrutinizing and recording



Top, sketch: Black tuxedo jacket, about \$880, trousers, about \$320. Both, Griffith & Gray. Left: Cream sweater, about \$600, navy pinstriped trousers, about \$500. Both, Hanae Mori Cashmere & Weekend. Sandals, Yves Saint Laurent. Above: Lemon cardigan, about \$440, ivory blouse, about \$240, yellow skirt, about \$235. All, Louis Féraud SET. Opposite page: Peach dress, about \$470, Bazar de Christian Lacroix.





feminine beauty. For Gustafson, a gift for drawing is an a priori condition; he can no more remember himself without a pencil than the rest of us can recall life before speech. "I grew up in the Swedish countryside," he explains. "But I was never outdoors—I was always inside drawing. I created my own universe," an imaginary realm inhabited by glamour, elegance, fashion—not exactly natural resources in Sweden. "Though Swedish people are beautiful, they're not particularly interested in fashion. We do not spend money on clothes like they do in Latin countries, where clothes are part of an erotic game. There are not enough complications in Swedish culture to create that mystique. People are too close to nature to permit artifice and vanity to breed. In order to evolve I had to leave."

Still, Gustafson first tried to place himself within the artistic life of his country by studying stage design. But inevitably he ended up supplementing his income by illustrating fashion ads for newspapers. Then, emboldened by enthusiastic responses to his work, he left for New York at the dawn of the '80s. "I had visited New York from the mid-'70s on and had always told myself, 'I want more of this.'"

New York, in turn, found something it needed from him. Gustafson's work—"sparse, linear, dry pastels on a very white background"—was soon in such demand that "I began to see my drawings everywhere—only they weren't mine." Divining that, unless he intervened, his work could quickly descend into caricature, he developed a lush, more atmospheric, and less imitable style, which immediately became linked with the opulently quirky, culturally cross-referencing designs of Romeo Gigli. Together Gigli and Gustafson reconfigured the female body as languidly soft and slope-shouldered, when the predominant silhouette was square-



Top: Black slip, about \$300, Donna Karan Intimates. Above: Ivory dress, about \$218, Susie Tompkins Esprit de Corp. Opposite page: Black blouse, about \$140, white leggings, about \$150. Both, Sportmax.





Opposite page, top: Rose wrap top, about \$345, State of Claude Montana. Ivory knit dress, about \$360, Nic Janik. Sandals, Charles David by Nathalie M. This page, right: Black crepe jacket, about \$355, matching skirt, about \$145. Both, Linda Allard for Ellen Tracy. Clutch, Bally. Below, left: Black tuxedo jacket, about \$880, trousers, about \$320. Both, Griffith & Gray. Below, right: Ivory skirt, about \$100, Kenar. Ivory satin blouse, about \$80, Kenar Studio. Slip, Donna Karan Intimates.



shouldered, hard, and masculine. In Gustafson's late-'80s watercolor renderings of the Italian designer's collections, blurry, aqueous washes of color bleed beyond indefinite contours, dreamily suggesting the textures of velvet, silk, feathers, and skin. The illustrations endowed Gigli's clothes with the highbrow spirit of the artist's atelier and aligned Gustafson's own sensibility with the fashion world's cerebral, avant-garde element. "It was the most direct collaboration I've ever had with a designer," he recalls.

Yet Gustafson's reaction to this fruitful association—an aesthetic turning point comparable to the seminal alliance between Gruau and Dior that began in the '40s—was to withdraw temporarily from fashion. "The best way to get away from fashion was to do nudes," he says. "For too long I had let clothes decide what the body looked like. I needed to go back to anatomy, to structure, to get closer to flesh, blood, and bone." The life studies of men and women that resulted—mostly single figures executed in pen or brush and ink, or watercolor, on paper—have the calligraphic economy of Matisse without his Mediterranean lyricism, the incisiveness of Egon Schiele with none of the angst. "I'm not imposing my inner life on pictures, though lately I've been able to reveal myself a little more," he says, citing the erotic nudes

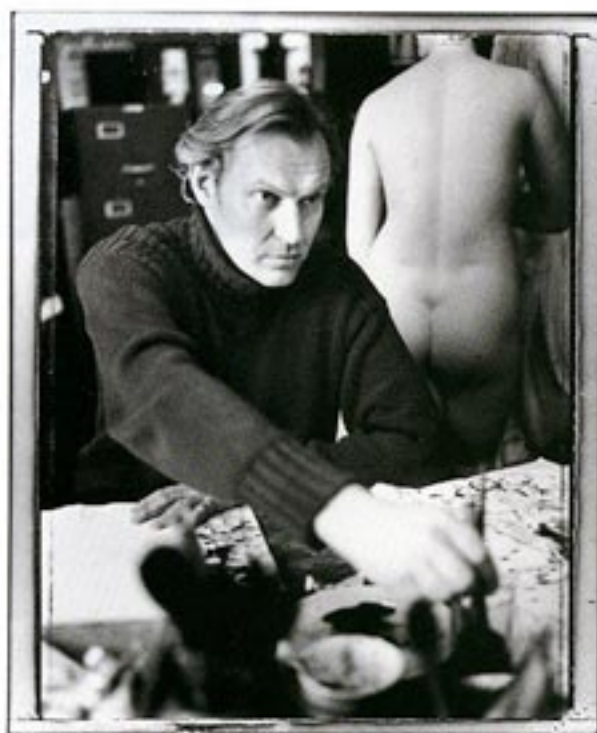




that appeared in *Visionaire* magazine last year and the drawings now on exhibition in Stockholm's Charlotte Lund Gallery.

This private work is more a respite from than a rejection of his fashion commissions. "I am still a commercial artist. I do not want to liberate myself completely from fashion. But I am also Swedish—an outsider. I am most happy when my work keeps a certain distance. And I will continue to separate my personal work from my commissioned work, while allowing each one to influence the other. I fight the idea of having a trademark style by coming up with something new periodically, without completely reinventing myself." Gustafson also mistrusts his technical virtuosity, which he reins in with an occasional judiciously hesitant line or expressive distortion. "An illustrator has to do something the camera can't do. The human eye needs to see what the human hand can do."

Creating a portrait of Linda Evangelista challenged him, too, by forcing him to adopt new working methods, and in some respects put Gustafson in direct competition with photography. "First of all, I am not used to working surrounded by other people! I usually draw in solitude, with at most a model and an assistant. And second, I almost always work with unknown models. Linda is an icon—a magic face that plays many roles. I suppose I will simply add to the icon by doing my own version of that face." ■



Opposite page: Iridescent peach car coat, about \$400, Laurel. Black silk/lace slip, about \$200, Patricia Fieldwalker. Black wool skirt, about \$190, Griffith & Gray. This portfolio: Photographed at the shop of Steven H. Bluttal, NYC; hair, Guido for Toni & Guy; makeup, Dick Page. See Buylines for details and stores.

