

BEAUTY

# Why the Women of Deborah Turbeville Are Timeless: From Her Bathhouse Beauties to Her Memorable Nudes

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At the same time that Helmut Newton's photographs were exposing sexual taboos, Deborah Turbeville's images were capturing women's psyches.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEBORAH TURBEVILLE

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Photographed by Deborah Turbeville, *Vogue*, May 1975

Deborah Turbeville's photographs, which are the subject of a new exhibition at New York's Staley Wise gallery, are as evocative as a lingering trace of fragrance. Not the clean, bright burst of a summer floral, but something moody and mysterious that captures the essence of the decaying bloom and the soft-focus haze of memory.

"Feeling surreal and dislocated—it's my favorite way to feel," the photographer once told *Vogue*, and she gave visual form to those emotions in her atmospheric images, which, like the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, have an unsettling dream-like quality in which location and composition take precedence over the figure. In Turbeville's photos, models almost never look at the camera, and the clothes—those innocuous, powder-hued separates of the seventies and eighties—play a secondary role to the women who wear them.

Offering a foil to the work of her contemporary, Helmut Newton, whose provocative photos exposed taboos and played with sexual innuendo, Turbeville's work grappled with the interior life of women and their changing place at a time when longstanding gender roles were as distorted as the reflections from a disco ball.

"All women are involved women," *Vogue* wrote in 1975, the year Turbeville's work was first published in the magazine, of the shift toward a new aesthetic romanticism that aimed to provide a sartorial counterbalance to the increasingly hectic demands of the day. "The point is, they don't have to look it, forever rushing, pushing, gasping from one appointment to another, over- or under-apologizing, uneasy and unsure. However busy you are, catch your breath and enforce a moment of stillness on yourself. You'll be surprised how good it feels." Turbeville's strength, and her difference, was her ability to address those anxieties—the private versus the public face—in seemingly static photographs that pulsed with a quiet, but insistent feminine power.

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