



The Image Makers: Deborah Turbeville

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In a new series, Style.com sits down with the best in the field of contemporary fashion photography to talk about both the process and the product. Here: Deborah Turbeville.

Considering the high romance of Deborah Turbeville's work, it might seem odd to think of her as a little bit punk rock. But to hear the 73-year-old photographer describe her untrained, just-go-for-it DIY beginnings, comparing Turbeville to Sid Vicious doesn't seem so far off. "There would be a strange cropping or one girl in focus and three out or a blur," she said at a recent interview at her Upper West Side apartment. "But I would end up liking the mistakes and



incorporating them into my work." Well, and there's also the time she got arrested in Texas with Bob Richardson, with whom she worked with regularly while a stylist at *Harper's Bazaar*. It was actually Richardson and his "cinematic" way of working that precipitated her eventual leap from fashion editor to fashion photographer in the early seventies. (She also had encouragement from Richard Avedon and *Harper's Bazaar* art director Marvin Israel.) But even though she's shot editorials for *Vogue*, Italian *Vogue*, and *W* and campaigns for Barneys New York, Oscar de la Renta, and Valentino—for whom she did the current Spring campaign—Turbeville still bristles at the F word of fashion. It's one of the reasons it's taken her so long to put out her most recent book, *Deborah Turbeville: The Fashion Pictures* (\$85, www.rizzoliusa.com). Style.com caught up with Turbeville to talk about being Claire McCardell's fit model, what's so great about St. Petersburg, and the very Hollywood shoot for her new Valentino campaign.

—Meenal Mistry

Why do *The Fashion Pictures* now?

I have difficulty with realizing that's what I'm supposed to do. [*Laughs.*] I don't really think of myself as a fashion photographer. I'm kind of in denial about it. People kept saying, "You should do a book of fashion pictures. We'd like to see them, after all." A friend of mine was doing books with Rizzoli, and he said, "You know, that would be a fun little airy project, to do something on my house in Mexico." I knew I had a lot of photographs hanging about. So I made an appointment to go in to see Charles Miers, the publisher, and he said, "I'll do the book, but would you also do a book on your fashion pictures?" And that's how it happened.

They did a nice job. I like the scrapbook format.

Well, the book is really a way to show how my work developed. How it all started. It goes chronologically. It just shows more or less the progression of my work. It's a bit autobiographical. And I always do that anyway, putting pictures together in a narrative way.

It's funny, I never realized that your first job was working for Claire McCardell for three years.

Yes, I was a fit model but I also did the shows. But because I had such a long waist, it was hard for the other models to fit the clothes. In the end, she said, I'm going to fire you and hire you back as my assistant. So I was very happy. She was one of the few designers who would use a lot of European fabrics. She used incredible fabrics. She was really a Renaissance woman. She designed shoes for Capezio. She was probably the first one to put girls in flats, in ballet slippers. We all wore flats. Or we wore tiny little heels that were stacked, made out of lizard. She did jewelry, this Chanel kind of jewelry. She was like the Chanel of the United States at that point. It was an incredible learning experience.

Was there a point that you considered being a designer or were you just figuring things out?

No, that was never my thing. I was still not focused. I liked the fashion world, but I really liked her and what she was doing. Then I went on to the magazines. I wanted to work at the magazines as a fashion editor.

What was it like to be at a fashion magazine back then?

When I went to work for *Bazaar* [in 1963], it was an incredible period for fashion photography. *Bazaar* was very exciting. They had had the Russian, [Alexey] Brodovitch, working for them. And then Marvin Israel and Henry Wolf. Twice a year there was a huge children's portfolio. They said, "Come up with an idea and we'll assign you a photographer." So I said, "Let's do something controversial." So we found a little Indian girl who was very special-looking. Bob Richardson was doing the pictures and he always worked like it was a scenario in a film. He would give me the script, and I would run around town and get the clothes. The pictures were a tremendous hit. Then we were on a roll. And you have to understand it was Diane Arbus, Melvin Sokolsky, Bob Richardson, Jimmy Moore, Avedon, Hiro. All these incredible people, even Robert Frank, were doing pictures for them. The art directors really wanted those people used but it wasn't easy to get them into the book with straight fashion. So the children's portfolio was an opportunity to use them. But Bob was my favorite. We carried on like that for two years. Going to Spain, ranches on Texas. We went everywhere. Finally, I got fired for it because they said it had gone too far.

Wow. What happened?

It's a long story. We were arrested in Texas. We were supposed to be doing the King Ranch family and Bob insulted the host and hostess and we were asked to leave in the middle of the night. The next morning we drove out to the country and just parked the car and took two of the children and started photographing them, and this woman appeared out of nowhere and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "We're from *Harper's Bazaar*. This is Mr. Richardson." She said, "Well, I have to talk to my husband and I'll be back." So she came back with the sheriff and arrested us. It got to be a big story and that's when I was asked to leave the magazine.

That's a pretty cool exit. At least in retrospect.

Then I worked with Diane Arbus a lot. I did several stories with her. I did a big story with Avedon for the What's Happening issue. He called me and said, "Everyone is talking about the things you do. I'm dying to work with you." And then he became kind of a mentor and helped my career a lot. When I started taking pictures, I took a special class with him.

But how did you eventually make the leap?

Somebody said, "Why don't you take pictures yourself?" I said, "Well, I'm not technical." And she said, "Well, they have these cameras now with inside meters." So I went out and bought this little Pentax camera and had the man explain it to me. Then I went to work for a small magazine, where I was fashion editor. I suggested a couple stories and one was in Yugoslavia. When I got back, the magazine folded, but I had the pictures. Avedon was giving a professional course, and he looked at the pictures and thought they were amazing. They weren't amazing at all! They were totally out of focus. I didn't know what I was doing. But he liked the freedom in them and the idea behind it. Then I started taking things really seriously and testing. By the time I went to work at *Mademoiselle* later that year, I was able to ask them if ever I could do a sitting of my own and take the pictures. That's how I built my portfolio at *Mademoiselle*, shooting my own sittings.

I didn't realize that you overlapped doing both styling and shooting. Though I guess that makes sense.

That helped me, because I didn't have to earn a living being a photographer at first. I never could have done that because I was too special. My pictures were in soft focus. It was a completely new thing. Had I been out on my own, I might have had to compromise my work.

How did you develop your style? Because it really is very particular.

It started because of the way I used the camera. I had a very soft-focus lens. And I liked soft focus and everything came out very soft. And I liked high-grade films that were very grainy. A lot of times there were big mistakes, but I would show the art director and he'd say, "Yeah, let's go with it." There would be a strange cropping or one girl in focus and three out or a blur. But I would end up liking the mistakes and incorporating them into my work. And I became known for it.

There's a great way that Franca Sozzani describes it in the foreword: "Every detail is perfect and yet wrong at the same time."

Because it is. That's how you create a style, anyway. I give a lot of lectures. I'm going now to St. Petersburg to give one. I always tell them, if they can, it's good not to concentrate on the commercial in the beginning. Because once you're out there, it's too late.

Do you think you have a particularly feminine point of view?

Yes, definitely. My photographs are extremely feminine. But it doesn't have to do with any kind of conviction on my part. It's all instinctive and spontaneous with me. There is a certain approach that women have. They do get into some kind of inner thing more than the male photographers do. It's a more personal approach.

How do you view these pictures in the context of the rest of your work?

Well, doing this book made me see that my work is in balance with my private work. I was mad one time about something, and one of my galleries said to me, "Well, you'll have to go through the same thing that Penn and Avedon went through." No matter what Penn and Avedon ever did, if they were photographing men in the Midwest or Peruvian Indians or flowers, no matter what they do, they're still stylists. And stylists, just by their nature, no matter where they go, they'll still be considered—even with personal work—part of the fashion photography syndrome. It's the same sensibility. I don't think the fashion photographs stand so far off the mark of anything else I do.

You've spent so much time in St. Petersburg and you also talk about your affinity for these moody cities like Paris. What draws you to them?

Because I'm such a movie buff. I was always drawn to films with mystery. I always liked a certain kind of art film. I think I learned a lot from studying those films for years. One thing I wanted to be prevalent in any photograph was atmosphere. Whether the person had atmosphere in the face, or emotion in the body, or whether it was the atmosphere of the place. And it had to be mysterious. That's why I was drawn to those cities. They had those qualities. In the book I call it St. Petersburg Studio because the city itself was like a studio. They offered these old palaces which were unrestored, for pennies, like the Stroganov Palace with broken floorboards and chandeliers on the floor.

You've cited directors like Fassbinder, Cocteau, and Visconti as influences, but are there any modern filmmakers who inspire you?

I like Lars von Trier. I just saw *Melancholia*. It's usually foreign directors. There's a Turkish director but I forget his name.

I like that you called the Bathhouse pictures a spoiled brat. I guess every artist has that one thing. Is there a shoot you think deserves favorite child status?

This other book I did, this Steidl book, called *Past Imperfect*, is full of them. It's all done like story narratives.

You've worked with quite a few great stylists, Polly Mellen included. How would you describe your working relationship with the stylist on set?

I've always been lucky because the stylists that worked with me always worked for the picture. Polly always worked for the picture. She understood every photographer's style, and tried to get it happening for them in the pictures. Those kind of stylists I work well with and they work well with me.

Do you look at a lot of fashion magazines now?

No, not at all.

How did the recent Valentino advertising campaign come about?

Franca Sozzani works very closely with them. She had helped them with a collection, given them some images of my Russian portfolio. Their creative director and advertising agency were in their studio one day and they saw that all their pictures up on their board were my pictures. So they said, "Well, that's the photographer that should be doing your ad!" So they said, we'd like to revisit the Mexico of Tina Modotti and Georgia O'Keeffe. Well, Georgia O'Keeffe was not from Mexico...

Close enough for fashion purposes.

I said, I know where I would do it, out in Pozos [Mexico], this little abandoned mining town that had all these ruins in the landscape, and it's free from tourists. So they came, this entourage of 14—the two designers and all the people from the advertising agency. It was a huge sitting with all these people being put up and limousines and vans. We had to cater the food out in the middle of nowhere, and have presses and steam irons, everything, and all the equipment...It was a very big deal. Like an old-fashioned sitting from the past. Like you used to have these sittings where you'd go to Cairo or something. It was just two days. But it was very Hollywood.

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Slideshow of Turbeville's work through the years, accompanied by commentary from the photographer



DEBORAH TURBEVILLE

She was mentored by Avedon, arrested with Bob Richardson, and on set with Diane Arbus, Polly Mellen, and Isabella Blow. Photographer Deborah Turbeville is one of fashion's lenswoman legends—one who got her start in modeling and design (at the hem of Claire McCardell) and did time as a fashion editor (at *Harper's Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*). For decades, Turbeville's signature soft focus and gauzy romanticism have won her the admiration of art directors, editors, stylists, and designers. Here, she speaks with Style.com about her career and reflects on 13 of her favorite images, from the bathhouse shoot that scandalized *Vogue* readers to the new Valentino campaign.



"Nova was a major fashion magazine back in the seventies, the hottest magazine at that point. It was before I was known at all. I wanted to do something related to the Diaghilev ballet. The fashion director said, get me a bunch of pictures of what they look like, so I went to the Victoria and Albert Museum and got pictures and sent them to her. And she went to all the designers in London and had all the clothes made. We shot it out in her hometown, which was right on the water. It was supposed to be a take on Diaghilev ballet, and it was called 'A Touch of Ballet Class.' "

CLEVEDON, ENGLAND
—NOVA, 1973



BATHHOUSE
NEW YORK
—VOGUE, 1975

"It took five days to do this shoot because each spread took a day. Polly Mellen [styled] it, and it was such a labor of love. When it came out, a lot of people pulled their subscriptions. They said it was offensive and it looked like Dachau, like concentration camps. Or it looked like drug addicts. I knew that what we were doing was different, but I never guessed it would come to that. It was the most controversial thing that the magazine ever had—they never heard the end of it. I've sort of had to live with this picture because the only picture that American Vogue ever wants from me when they have a book that they're doing is this one."



"This old Parisian flat was one of my studios at the time, and it appears in a lot of my pictures. Violetta [pictured] and Aurelia were more actresses than models. They had this way of developing a mood in a picture; it wasn't about modeling clothes at all."

PIGALLE
PARIS
—VOGUE PELLE, 1982



WOMEN IN
THE WOODS
NORMANDY

—VOGUE ITALIA, 1978

"This is all Valentino. It was done in the forests around Versailles. It was very cold in late November and it was dark. When I brought the pictures back, I had this publisher and he said, 'Well, every Frenchwoman knows what that's about.' And I said, 'What?' And he said, 'The collaborators in the second World War, except they don't have shaved heads.' "



"This was an abandoned factory outside of Paris. I shot Anh Duong. I shot her quite a few times. And it was done through Mylar and mirrors. We reflected it and I shot into the reflection."

PARIS
—UNGARO, 1984



WOMEN IN FURS
PARIS
—VOGUE ITALIA, 1984

"I always said that this was influenced by Fassbinder. He did a lot of things with women as crazy prostitutes. The idea that they're inside rooms wearing fur coats is something I like."



ROMEO GIGLI
PARIS

—MIRABELLA, 1989

"I did this Romeo Gigli sitting for *Mirabella*. It was an incredible collection, so I did them in Paris at the Beaux-Arts. I remember when I saw the collection, I thought it was amazing. Actually, these are the girls they used in the show."



THE BLOWS
PAINSWICK, ENGLAND

—MIRABELLA, 1992

"This was done with Isabella Blow, but she wasn't there because she had to go to Sri Lanka to see her mother-in-law. These clothes were all designed by Selina Blow. She did riding coats. The cemetery is in Painswick in Gloucestershire. The family house was there."



THE
KRAKOW
STORY
POLAND

—W magazine, 1998

"The clothing trunks didn't get through customs, and we just had the lingerie that Michel [Botbol, the fashion editor] brought from Paris, which was perfect. If you had a lot of fashion, it wouldn't have been the same story. I've had some pretty close calls, but this is a very memorable shoot. Everything about it is very magic: the [older actor] twins, the places we shot in, and the whole thing that we didn't have any clothes. It was amazing to be in Krakow, and lots of fun."



RAINY DAY
PEOPLE
LANCASTER, MASSACHUSETTS

—VOGUE, 1995

"I didn't usually work with models, but Michele [Hicks] came about because I was working with Paul Sinclair, who was a hot stylist at the time, and he said, 'Oh, I think you'll like Michele because she works like an actress.' We went out to this kind of beat-up dairy farm and it was raining. The atmosphere was perfect. Michele knew how to work. You could give her direction and she really knew how to do it."



ARTISTS KERIM RAGIMOV
AND OLGA RASTROSTA
AT THEIR STUDIO

ST. PETERSBURG
—L'UOMO VOGUE, 1996

"These were two Russian artists who lived together. They really reminded me of something out of Dostoyevsky. They were the first people I found when I got to Russia. I photographed them for my book. Then Italian *Vogue* came over and we did a *L'Uomo Vogue* story and an Italian *Vogue* story."



BALENCIAGA
COLLECTION

ST. PETERSBURG
—NOVA, 1999

"It's a funny story. One of these girls, Anna Anisimova, is a very famous daughter of a very rich oligarch. The woman at the hotel came up and said, 'The father of this girl Anna is driving me crazy. He's got six bodyguards and he insists they follow you around on the photo shoot because his other daughter was murdered.' So we went around all day with these bodyguards. We were even on the canals and the guy driving our boat got a parking ticket because I wanted to go off the boat. So these six guys got off their yacht and came over and straightened things out. I said, 'Well, you know something? That's the way to go. I'll always shoot with bodyguards.' "



"Pozos is this little abandoned mining town that had all these ruins in the landscape, and it's free from tourists. So [for the Valentino Spring campaign shoot], they came, this entourage of 14—the two designers and all the people from the advertising agency. It was a huge sitting with all these people being put up and limousines and vans. We had to cater the food out in the middle of nowhere and have presses and steam irons, everything, and all the equipment...It was a very big deal. Like an old-fashioned sitting from the past."

POZOS, MEXICO
—VALENTINO, 2011