



PHOTO DEPT.
SPECTRAL



Richard Avedon and Irving Penn both drew a distinction between the pictures they took for fashion magazines and their art photography. Fashion paid the bills, but they rather looked down on it. Deborah Turbeville's fashion pictures of the past thirty-five years—cryptic hybrids of wit and melancholy, nostalgia and vandalism, romantic pathos and modern anomie—have earned her a place in their company. But she, too, has qualms about the genre. "Fashion takes itself more seriously than I do," she said the other day, at the opening of her latest show. "I'm not really a fashion photographer."

In Turbeville's show, at the Staley-Wise Gallery, in SoHo, there are twenty-one digital prints drawn from a new book, "Deborah Turbeville: The Fashion Pictures." The earliest, from 1970, were part of a portfolio that she had been invited to show to *Vogue* in anticipation of her first assignment. They are misty black-and-white portraits of a local family in Ogunquit, Maine, where her own family—New England Yankees of Huguenot descent—had a summer house. The most recent, in color, are from a painterly shoot of evening gowns by Valentino, published this year by Italian *Vogue*. "We had a lot of fun," Turbeville said (the "we" refers to her printer, Jean-Yves Noblet), "playing with faded Polaroids and scarred negatives that were lying in a drawer, scanning them into a computer with all their imperfections."

Each chapter of the book is a collage of images with the distressed charm of a silent film. The spaces that interest Tur-

beville are the bare ruined choirs of a lost world. At the behest of Jacqueline Onassis, she produced a book on the "unseen" Versailles and its "ghosts." Foggy Venetian alleys, the gardens of Cliveden, a palazzo in Mantua where Bertolucci shot "1900," and an abandoned factory are among her locations. She seems to choose models more for their spectral languor than for their sex appeal, and in 1975, when she photographed a swimwear feature at a derelict bathhouse on East Twenty-third Street, critics complained that the girls looked like prisoners in a gas chamber. ("For me," she writes in "The Fashion Pictures," "it was just a problem of fitting five girls across a double-page spread.") Her former studio in Paris was an opulently decrepit, near-vacant flat near the drag bars of Pigalle. For a decade, she spent several months every year in St. Petersburg: "I love it because it's crawling with eccentric artists living hidden lives." She currently divides her time between homes in New York and Mexico.

The artists with whom Turbeville consorts in her imagination tend to be French and Russian (Proust and Nabokov among the writers; Resnais and Tarkovsky among the filmmakers). But the one designer whom she cites as a formative influence is a sunny, democratic American: the sportswear pioneer Claire McCardell. In 1957, at nineteen, Turbeville moved to New York from Boston, hoping to study drama, and "fell into" a job as McCardell's assistant and sample model. "Claire liked using me," said Turbeville, who is five feet eleven, "because my torso was longer than the other girls." She left after three years and, in 1963, went to work as an editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, where Richard Avedon and the magazine's former art director Marvin Israel guided her into photography.

A fashion photographer gets paid for making an expensive commodity into an object of desire. But Penn and Avedon always managed to subvert the transaction, and so does Turbeville. If you really insist on knowing who designed the ball gowns, furs, bathing suits, embroidered boleros, cocoon coats, Grecian tunics, harem pants, and riding habits in "The Fashion Pictures," you have to read the fine print of the endnotes.

—Judith Thurman