



# WHAT HAPPENED AT VERSAI



*Left:* The private apartments of Madame du Barry—entirely gilded on her insistence despite the objections of the King's own architect

From the book *Unseen Versailles*  
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LLES?

Deborah Turbeville's Unseen Versailles—  
a disturbing and dramatic visual meditation  
on history, photography, and the taste of our times.  
On these six pages—the photographer and her photographs

# What happened at Versailles?

What did it mean then?

What does it mean to us?

BY BARBARA ROSE

*Unseen Versailles* is a remarkable book with two related themes: a meditation on the meaning of a famous historical monument wrenched out of its familiar *ancien régime* context, as well as a meditation on the history of photography. In her poetic re-creation, or more precisely transformation, of Louis XIV's pleasure palace into a spectral graveyard haunted by the ghosts of the past who evoke the specters of the future, Deborah Turbeville reveals herself as a genuine and original artist. Not only her capacity to transform the images of the royal apartments and galleries, documented so often that they have degenerated into the purest cliché, but also the very photographic processes by means of which she has transformed these images are astounding. The images themselves—cut, scratched, distorted, faded out, artificially altered to resemble old photographs—contradict the technical perfection available today to even the amateur photographer. Turbeville exposes the lie of technique with the artist's determination to create an imaginative content resonant with ambiguity, which is superior to any technology. Indeed, their sense of going "against the grain" of technology is what makes her photographs so significant.

The images in these photographs are so still they seem to be about stasis itself. Yet

their stillness belies an undercurrent of violence: this tension between an artificial frozen strangeness and the intimation of violence creates their drama and their peculiar mood, at once alluring and horrifying. Everything happens offstage, where violence takes place in tragedy: Marie-Antoinette and the guillotine are at the Conciergerie; only peripheral clues allude to the Terror. This violence is doubled by the artist in her art. She violates her own pictures: she mistreats and abuses her negatives to create "bad," faded, imperfect impressions of variable density and scratches or exposes her prints so that they look neglected or aged. This dual theme of secret violence, the similarly ironic treatment of both the subject and the medium, runs throughout the book. It is a brilliant leitmotiv as well as a singular marriage of content and medium.

Melodramatic, staged set-ups, these images are the very antithesis of the candid or documentary "straight" photograph that dominates contemporary photography. Their consciously manipulated surfaces and theatrical staging with "actors" and "sets" are related to the erotic and nostalgic picture stories of Lucas Samaras and Duane Michals. Like them, Turbeville has made of still photography a narrative art. However, it is history not psy- (Continued on page 337)

"The tension between stillness and intimations of violence create the peculiar mood—both alluring and horrifying."

Right: Statues removed from the entrance façade of Versailles during its renovation.





"A woman's photographs are completely different from a man's.  
In a woman's, there's always a sense of waiting...."

# TURBEVILLE

## AN INTERVIEW

BY AMY GROSS

At the moment, Deborah Turbeville is living in a sublet, a long dark tunnel of an apartment in New York that breaks into light and a garden at its southern end. Only slightly and awkwardly furnished, yellowed walls. This suits her. She's a tall woman, 5' 10½", with a long Virginia Woolf-like line and the skittering walk of a rare big bird. For the last six or seven years, she's been shuttling between New York and Paris. This suits her too. She likes being unsettled down, not belonging to "any place or group," she says, "and the same thing could be applied to my personal life. And it's true of time too. I don't want to belong completely to the present. There are things I love about the past. Atmosphere—I crave atmosphere the way some people crave food or sex," she laughs. "When I'm in Europe, I just like to go out and smell the cities—even if it's an oppressive atmosphere—too grey, too damp, too foggy...."

If you're dislocated, everything becomes theater. You remain vivid against your background. You don't lose self-consciousness.

"All those cities become a little bit of a stage set," Deborah says. "That's the way I always feel in Paris, anyway. Slightly surreal and dislocated, which is my favorite way to feel." She laughs again. "People will tell me . . . someone said recently, 'You should go to Buenos Aires.' I said why? He said, 'You'd like it there. You'd feel dislocated there.'"

An abysmally recorded Prokofiev piece is playing on a tiny tape recorder. The piano notes are pitiful; they seem to come from a low corner of a vast emptiness, squelched by space. The apartment is equipped with a serious stereo, but

Deborah prefers "this tinny kind of thing. It sounds like bad ballet-school music."

The most theatrical of contemporary photographers, Deborah comes from the world of fashion. Her first job, after abandoning college halfway through her freshman year, was as a model for the designer Claire McCardell. She went on to magazines as a stylist and editor, never losing a certain ditsy quality—an obliviousness to the rules, a kind of naïveté—that made her pages breathe. They attracted attention, those pages—mostly admiring, some appalled—with their eccentricity, their humor, the staging that layers meaning, melodrama, the tail ends of dreams and memories onto clothes.

She was always thinking pictures, she says; not clothes but scenario. All her pages, now and then, are theater pieces. Years ago, Richard Avedon chose her for his photography seminar—where she finally defined herself as a photographer—because something was going on in her pictures even then (I think it was Oscar Wilde who said, "Only mediocrities develop.") Deborah already had a world. It was a beautiful and vague world where time bent. This season's suit, through her camera, flew back in time to catch the wit of Charlie Chaplin's walk, or the romance of Tolstoy's Russia or a Fitzgerald summer. Versailles's old buildings and rooms, through Deborah's eyes, shoot forward into a modern's vision of post-civilization, littered with broken gods. And the women she photographs—the way she photographs them—are ghosts of women now, the shadow selves to be resisted as both danger and temptation.

"You're always photographing your times," she says. "You don't think you

are . . . I always think I'm having a romance with the past. But I'm explaining the past in the present." And explaining the present in the vocabulary of the past.

Deborah once described a woman she was photographing as having "a small girl's soul." I think the same could be said about Deborah. You can see a child in her schoolgirl bangs, the plum-brown eyes that are as large as a child's, the beautiful skin with the high coloring of an excited child. I have a theory that you can spot a woman's secret idea of herself in the character of her shoes. Deborah—wonderfully turned out in a black suit cut like an Edwardian ice-skating costume—is wearing opaque black tights and black suède Mary-Janes.

I'm watching her, the night of the opening of her show at the Sonnabend gallery, of photographs from *Unseen Versailles*. She's posing for six, eight photographers, looking flat-out radiant one minute and the next, for art's sake, lowering her eyes in Burne-Jones melancholy. She poses alone and then with her "boyfriend" Stephen, about whom I know only that he is Yugoslavian, gets around New York on a bike, and looks hammered roughly and massively out of stone, which is not a bad way to look. Deborah, who can wallow as deeply into mystique as anyone, can also think like a mechanic. Pulling out a photo she's taken of Stephen, she notes in his face the same "impassive, pensive" mood she finds in her "girls" (as she calls her models). "Impenetrable, too," a visitor says. "Well, that's something in the Slav bone structure . . . and the fact that they have small eyes."

"She just (Continued on page 335)

At Versailles, a dream of Louise de la Vallière, a royal mistress, who, it was said, "should be visited only by moonlight."



## DEBORAH TURBEVILLE

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had her hair done," one of Deborah's friends whispers to another. "She likes *bad perms*." She likes, I suppose, that semi-demented look you get from a bad perm. "Demented" is one of her words, a schoolgirl's word.

*Interviewer:* How do you feel about getting older?

*Deborah:* It's hard for me, because I really am very childlike. I have to deal with it twenty-four hours a day. I am childlike in my mind, in the way I photograph, in the way I confront an image and snap—it's very straightforward, an instinctive approach. Even my way of working with ripped pictures is childlike.

I remember doing some posters in chalk when I was in grade school. They were supposed to be about America, or Christmas . . . I don't know what I did but the teacher called my mother and said she didn't like the tone of them—that they were really kind of weird—and I was asked to stay out of school for a few weeks. I sometimes think of myself now as that same kid who was doing those posters, quietly going ahead and doing something people don't like and would later tell me not to do.

In 1975, *Vogue* asked Deborah to photograph some bathing suits. It was thought that Peru would make a nice background, but the Peruvian government chose that moment to fall. What to do? A few months later, the famous "bath-house" pictures appeared in *Vogue*. A lot of people thought the tone was really weird. The five models in the tiled New York Public Bath House—Peru's stand-in—broke every rule of how women in bathing suits are supposed to look: tantalizing, succulent, either vampish or fun-loving or vampishly fun-loving . . . in short, *there* for men.

Deborah's models, *au contraire*, were withdrawn, lost in their own thoughts (none manifestly cheerful). They draped themselves weakly against walls or stretched in quiet, static exercise. If sex was on anybody's mind, it would be only as a memory of loss or futility. A few women were bone-thin, not trim for a man's eye but verging on anorexia, a refusal of adult womanhood and men.

What a lot of talk those pictures caused. "People started talking about Auschwitz and lesbians and drugs," Deborah remembers, "and all I was doing was trying to design five figures in space. Sometimes the best things you do, the most controversial, are done in complete innocence." The timing was terrific. "It was just the moment when fashion photography was beginning to be collected." Deborah became an overnight collectible.

Her success shocks her. "I always just took pictures the way I saw things and it shocked me when people were able to use my work, when it became controversial, when I got into galleries. It's been one shock after another," she laughs. "I've never done big commercial jobs, and I never will. What I do is always stylized. I just do what I want to do, and either that pays off for you or it doesn't. I think that's the high and the low of that."

She was thinking about why she was such a maverick. "It's because of will. It takes will, for anyone who's exploratory, inventive, to oppose the conventions, the norms. In the beginning, I went a little away from tradition and people said, 'Her pictures are rather pretty, nostalgic.' I didn't want that—I had to force it further, I wanted them to be timeless, to throw them into a time warp. It takes a certain amount of energy, deter-

mination, to push them that much further. . . ."

Pushing her own question further, you find she is the product of an education in opposition. (Doesn't there have to be someone around who is *not* made anxious by the really weird posters, who says, 'You're right, keep going, ignore the outside voices'?) Deborah was raised by people who were proud of being different. They did not belong where they were—that's the first thing she says about her family. Her Texan father and her Bostonian mother were both exiles in a small town outside of Boston, prisoners of circumstances.

"My grandfather left my grandmother with seven children and went to Paris. He thought he was Paul Gauguin and started painting. My grandmother sold the house in Boston and they all moved to this big house in this small town. My mother just hated mediocrity, and that's what such towns meant to her. We were always going into Boston for ballet, film. . . . Whatever my parents did, I went along with them. If it ever seemed that I was becoming committed to a group at school, they'd lure me away from that dangerous area with theater tickets. . . ."

"I grew up in that little world of my parents, my aunts, and grandmother, where they all protected me and I did what I wanted and I never conformed to what the other kids did and I never looked like them. My mother always wanted me to be special. She loved clothes and had she been an emancipated woman she'd probably have worked on a magazine. If she bought me a bright red plaid suit, she'd put yellow chamois gloves with it."

The message was: "Never to try to look like everyone else, always try to look like yourself, be *personal*. And I learned to live with what goes with that—people who think there's something wrong with you. It didn't bother me . . . it did

bother me, it still bothers me, but the reward was, I could be a different person."

"I had a thought. . . ." she will call to say, a few hours before she's to return to Paris for a job. "One has weak points, insecurities, and you try to rid yourself of them. But one that's never left me, that falls back into my work, is that I am terribly self-conscious. I am afraid, often, of people. That is in the pictures I take—a sense almost of humiliation and embarrassment. The women look down, or away—they can't face the camera. . . . And I can't push the girls to look in the camera, or look like everything is great and isn't it all terrific. I felt the same with Versailles, seeing it when it was being renovated, its grandeur lost. . . . I was almost embarrassed to see it in that condition."

The Versailles project began with a call from Jacqueline Onassis, an editor at Doubleday. "She said she'd been to Versailles and seen the old rooms, those strange little rooms nobody ever sees, with squeaking floorboards and cobwebs—so mysterious—and, she said, you can see the life that must have gone on, the people slipping away down back stairs, the maid listening at the keyhole, the steaming water in the wash stand . . . all the intrigue and gossip and secret letters. She said she immediately thought of me and that it could be a wonderful book and was I interested?"

In Deborah's Versailles photographs, you see time hanging in the air like dust. The face of a building looks crazed, as though with one tap the whole thing would cave in. Another building seems to be consumed by frills of heat, a raging fire. There are photographs of fragments of stone—the head of (Continued on page 336)

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## DEBORAH TURBEVILLE

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a statue, an arm, dislocated. She'll "fragment a picture up," rip it, distress the edges: "The first thing an art student is ever supposed to know is what the *edge* is going to be like. And in my work, the edge would be *shaky*."

The aim of her techniques is to make a statement stronger than nostalgia. "You're always photographing your time." Fragmentation, ripping, dislocation, forms blurring, shaky edges, monuments caving in, statues of gods stuck away in unvisited rooms: this is our time.

"I think the plastic-wrapped heads of statues are the epitome of the times we are living in. . . . The statues say more about Versailles than anything else, because they're so terribly human. All those people whose lives went on there—the overambitiousness, pettiness, and grandeur—you can see it all in the statues."

She worked at Versailles over one winter, commuting from Paris. The weather was perfect—bleak, grey, rainy, murky, eerie. If the sun ever shone in a Turbeville photograph, it would be to hurt the eyes of her girls.

The statues of Versailles are blood relatives of her girls and the plastic torsos she photographed in a dummy factory some years ago. "I always have this thing about people being locked up inside of themselves"—the self "buried alive" in an imperious shell of one kind or another, layered away so deeply it can't come to the surface. "Even in ourselves we have that. An analyst will say you're blocked, and you can't get whatever it is out. That's the most obvious thing. But certain of my blocks I want to keep. Maybe they make my life a

little more inconvenient, but they also give me something to bury in my photographs."

She once had an idea to paint her bedroom in Paris with layers of writing, old letters, and then paint over them so just fragments came through. The past is hovering constantly if obscurely in the present.

As Deborah visualizes the Versailles statues as "alive and full of consciousness," she turns her girls into statues. "Other people give the models life, and I sort of push them back from reality. I say, 'Don't move—just stand there,' and after a while they go into a kind of trance, and it's almost as if they're buried alive in the environment, or frozen in space. They just stand there and the whole thing becomes *fade*."

"I've read that Sarah Moon does the same thing. We don't photograph alike at all, but people sometimes confuse us. We both do very feminine photographs, and I think it has to do with the sense of waiting. It must be something instinctive in being a woman, that you always feel your life's a little on hold, that you're waiting to have something happen. The biggest emotional statement in my pictures, I think, is the waiting."

It is true, as she says, that women no longer have to wait—in a sense she is photographing the past; except that her ghostly women, who were taught to wait, don't vanish. They fade, but like the old letters on the wall, they hover.

Today she is wearing an indigo silk dirndl skirt and a black wool sweater pulled way down—the silhouette of a schoolgirl uniform in fall. "I always say I like to look like an out-of-season resort." The image she dresses from is part dance (she was heading for a choreographer's life before she left college), part literary (Bloomsbury, Colette, Isak Dinesen), and part comfort (the ease she says she learned from Miss McCardell).

Whether she is pulling together herself, her models, a Versailles room, or a gallery show, she is fascinated with layering, the slight sculpture of texture on texture, the seeming haphazardness of a heap, the mysteriousness of shadows and folds. For as long as she's been working, she's wrapped heads with yards or bits of fabric to suggest tribal head-gear, sweating dancers, Marat-Sade, lobotomies, nuns, cocoons. For the Sonnabend show, she tacked photographs onto ripped manila paper. She layered tracing paper over the photograph of Louise de la Vallière and crayoned on it: "Fragile—do not touch." Which is fragile—the photo or poor fallen Louise? It's not clear. "I really like the obscure," she says.

She's always put faces behind glass, fixing the image like a specimen under a microscope, not to be touched directly. Does everyone have a sense of: I am in here, I can't be reached, I am not what I seem out there? Deborah says, "Where was I reading about a woman who always had to run to the mirror to see if she was still here? I understood that perfectly. I've done that all my life. I'm terribly narcissistic. I suppose that's why so many of my pictures are women looking in mirrors."

Someone who knows Deborah only tangentially judges her to be a woman of happy appetite, great resources—her mind is "well-furnished" in the phrase of a friend of mine—greatly excited by the images in her mind, or a book, or a movie. She is always telling stories about something "amazing" she's seen, like the ancient woman on the bridge in Paris who was holding in front of her face the mask of a young girl . . . or the French movie that climaxed in a thrilling scene where "the husband walks in, in broad daylight, and



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there's an *eye* on the stairs, and then an *arm*. . . . She talks during these visions in a floating hypnotic voice, like a trail of smoke. If she's interrupted by a telephone or a question, she poises like a needle over a record and returns precisely to the groove where she left off. This is fierce concentration, eagerness . . . is it not?

She's surprised by the vigor of the impression she's made. She describes herself as being like her girls—"a bit of a moth. The work is maybe my strongest lively point. It's all downhill from there. I have a terrible time focusing on what other people say. I can't stay out *there* very long. In my day-to-day life, I am always going into trances. My mother did the same thing. I always used to come in, late afternoons, and find my mother sitting in the dark, smoking cigarettes. I'd see this big haze of smoke in the room and that would be my mother looking out of a window. And I've done that all my life. In my school yearbook, in that section where the other kids characterize you, under 'Place Found,' for me they wrote, 'In a daze.' I have that same strange Jean Rhys quality the girls do, that inability to move. I've had to learn to *take* my life, or otherwise I wouldn't walk down the street."

Deborah's women are dream girls, wandering through aristocratic ruins, unable or unwilling to get out, too tender for the roughness of the outer world, or maybe too self-absorbed to remember there is an out. They're princesses in the tower. "They can no more leave than the statues can leave Versailles. They stay in those rooms," Deborah says, "and live out their fantasies."

The seduction of these women is that they seem to have succumbed. They're romantic figures, not afraid of the ordinary demons—convention, and its discontents. They're blatantly eccentric, self-ordained, strange, right at the edge. ("Madness is the wrong word," Deborah says. "Madness requires more energy than those girls have.") They have a deep fury or stubborn sadness, a relentless attachment to the past. They refuse to give up the past, some disappointment . . . is that it?

"They need support, a thrust from some strong hand—from a father," Deborah says. They can't lean on men—there are no men here to count on. They seem beyond sex. "Yes, that's probably it, I'm not beyond sex," Deborah laughs, "but they are." And still they wait, "quaveringly." Debo-

rah's word. "I think that's part of what is in me, transplanted on to them—this kind of anxiety of being on their own. It's what I am—a strong woman on her own, who can do all of it, and then all of a sudden I become this kind of quavering female who can't do it, and can't get moving." She sees an impossible conflict between the demands of being the boss—the strong central figure—and "what I want to be—womanly."

Her life is, in a way, a living-out of her mother's fantasies. "Not marrying, being independent. . . . That's what my mother preached all my life. Independence! Paying your own bills! She always wanted to buy pretty things and she'd hide them under the bed. She'd say, 'Deb' [a finger crooks, beckons in conspiracy]—and we'd go upstairs to see what she'd bought. I like the protection of a man but I don't like to be trapped. I like to be trapped but I don't like it."

She is fascinated by what people do and don't do to keep themselves young. It's the more subtle—obscure—measures she studies. "Certain people are doing something . . . not to make themselves

more, and needed more than anything to be a blotter, to soak up as much as I could to make my work—to make me, my whole being—a presence . . . to *produce* me eventually. I'm just a slow bloomer, and slowly it evolved.

It would be a dream for her to take time off, return to Paris, and "do the kind of work that someone like Atget did. You live modestly and just go out every day and take the pictures you want, and assemble them for some book or project, without the pressure, the competition, and all the other things that go on in New York.

"I can only do so much. My material is so specialized, I can't just run out and find it. That's why I get a little nervous when people say, 'Oh, you should do this and that'—I can't. Because I don't have a huge vocabulary. It's a small world that I record. I don't want to confuse it. If I incorporate something, whether it's in the print quality or in the vision, I do it very slowly. It's more a question of editing out what you don't want in your life than what you pull in."

## "Feeling surreal and dislocated— it's my favorite way to feel"

look younger but to make themselves look more *emphatic*: it turns them from an aging woman into a *presence* that gives off something that replaces being younger. You give up something—your girlhood and young womanhood—and so you have to figure out what you can get in return. I think that's one of the driving forces in my work—finding that. If I didn't have the replenishment in my work, I'd probably be in trouble. But as I grow older, I grow more forceful because that gives me a strength to grow older. That's what my gift to myself has to be—force."

*Interviewer:* Can you really give yourself force?

*Deborah:* I think I have. I came to New York feeling like a dishrag, this sort of wobbly duckling, a very tall girl, kind of pretty, kind of different looking, little bit of style, but needed to learn a lot

"What's really strange about photography—the exciting thing about it—is that it instantly reveals the photographer, what the thing is that jars him: the trigger finger hits and that is the truth, my truth, my reality. It's amazing what you'll snap or why you'll snap it. My work always begins with a maximum amount of control, but I've recognized over the years that after you make all the decisions and assemble the props, and put in all the theater, then you just have to let play what plays and record what your eyes see. You have to pretend you never saw anything before and just snap. The layers fall away from the thing and you get to the essence of what it is, the simplest thing of what it is. And that's generally more interesting than anything you could have planned, and more real—if you're ever going to call anything I do real." ▽

## VERSAILLES

(Continued from page 246)

chology that interests her. Compressing into a single frame the drama of an epic novel, she creates a whole costumed history film in a single shot.

In their dense concentration of associations—What happened at Versailles? What did it mean to them? What does it mean to us?—Turbeville's loaded images leave a stronger impression than hours and hours of lugubrious historical melodrama, pages and pages of tedious descriptive text. Her sharp eye selects and arranges the detail that will evoke a range of contradictory associations: of glamour and decay, of glory and decadence—of the past as an empty shell, dead without the living culture that inspired it, but also as a still fascinating relic, like the aging film star whose charisma remains after time has brought ruin to her beauty.

Versailles a ruin! A thought inconceivable even to the Parisian mobs who stormed the great châteaueau and brought down its rulers. Yet this is how Turbeville has chosen to see Versailles—as an aging crone in *déshabillé*, undusted, unkempt, gone

to seed, perhaps even going to bed with the rough peasants who leave their dirty trousers on the beds, replacing the gowns of the absent owners, who have left the furniture covered as if some day they might return.

Ruins, of course, are the stock subject of romantic art: they evoke nostalgia for the past as well as alluding to the truth that finally, everything—including the greatest civilizations—is doomed to die and to decay. In Turbeville's photographs, Versailles is treated not so much as a building, but as a *grande dame* in funerary splendor. They are about the history of fashion photography as an art.

Early art photographs like those of Steichen and his contemporaries were intimately related to the world of fashion. They were posed, staged, and arranged in formal terms like a fashion "sitting." This has essentially been Turbeville's approach to Versailles: she has stripped the famous site of its normal garb of glamorous finery; she has "recostumed" her subject to play a new role. The surprise is that these spectral corridors, reflecting an unreal glow, are those of the Galerie des Glaces. The irony is that while Turbeville has reseen the familiar in images that are torn and tattered around the edges, dingy and deprived of

their normal gilt and royal color, in reality Versailles itself has just been restored to impeccable splendor, its halls and ballrooms jammed with ever greater masses of tourists from every part of the globe. It is as alive in reality as a tourists' curiosity as it is dead and deserted in Turbeville's photographs.

Another splendid irony is the contrast between the decadence of Turbeville's images and the liveliness of her artistic ambition. Manipulating and altering her photographs in a manner defying any dicta of purity of medium, she scratches and scours their surfaces, introducing values of surface differentiation, spatial complexity and discontinuity (no one has used the mirror trick with as much sophistication as she), and artificial coloring, which introduce a new kind of painterliness into photography that is a dimension of freshness: A jolt of energy is paradoxically expressed in the perfumed images of a romantic decadence. Out of the image of fashion—which is the prevailing canon of our age as much as it was that of the *ancien régime*—Deborah Turbeville has extracted an astonishing poetic metaphor of our taste and time viewed through the mirror of history, which she has silvered to reflect disturbing images. ▽