Tall

Girl

Makes

Good

CHRISTOPHER COX



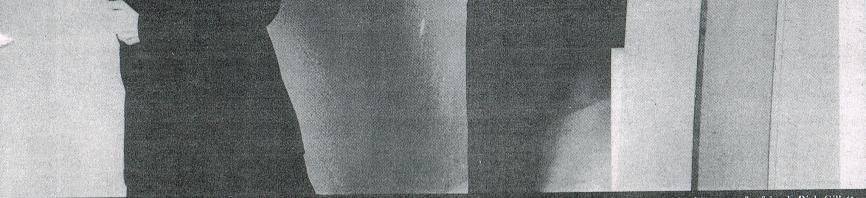
FEW days before the opening of her show at the Sonnabend Gallery. Debo'rah Turbeville sat su1rnunded by unframed photographs; some of them were curled, others bent, a few torn and put

back together. Geoffrey Leathec an interior designer who has assisted the photographer in designing her shows for the elast five years, was assembling a wooden table. Against the wall were propped a few sheets of glass. As the day, wore on, brown wrapping paper was ripped off the glass and laid in pieces on the floor. Turbevill and Leather began to group a few photographs on each sheet. The pietures were of all sizes and subjects. most of thern taken from her new ook. Unseen Versailles, others which had not be en included. Some of the photographs, which had been

formal with me. " She reaches into the large portfolio box and brings out three large' photographs taken on the grounds of: Versailles. each a different shot of statues: covered in plastic for th winter; they look like headless soldiers in Napoleonic garb. Turbeville tears one photograph in half,; folds another, and places them together so that they form an invented panoramic view of the grounds of Versaille&. "A you can see. I'm noi interested in the perfect print.: •.

For the past ten years Deboral) Turbeville has been astonishing us with her photographs in Vogue, Bazaar, and Mademoiselle, "A. long with such photographers as Guy Bourdin. Helmet Newton, and Sara Moon, she has changed the face of fashion magazines. Turbeville takes clothes out of the studio, not to a beach in the Caribbean orto a sun-bleached villa in lbizi .-but to less glamorous environments - a dtimniy formfactory of an abandoned atrium overgrown with weeds. Uniike::' the lucid. straightfor, ward, -approach to . • fashion that characterized an earlier genera-





Deborah Turbeville and her best friend, the ex-karate champion of the world. The self styled portrait taken by ex-assistant Scott Heiser in the space of a friend, Rick Gillette

'A woman I.Worked.with told me to buy a Nikon but I got mixe d up and bought a camera which is for close-up material. It's impossible to focus with, it. But I started using it anyway'

hand-tinted for the book in gilt and pinks and blues by Michael Flana gan. were still on layout sheets. overlaid with opaqL1e paper. scribbled on with a red wax pen. Turbeville crushed the paper back over the photograph. Occas-ionally she discovered a photograph that amused her. like a picture of a statue at Versailles covered with graffiti around the crotch: "Qui ventfaiser avec moi? signe A. Delon." "Moi. signe G. Pompidou."

As the floor became covered with uneven sheets of brown paper and 'photographs. some gallery visitors wandered through. looking baffl'ed. There will be no frames in this show. The photographs will be stapled and pinned and taped to the brown paper a'nd put on the walls. Then strands of fish wire will be strung from the ceiling to ho. Id the glass over toe photographs. Some people seemed worried. Someone from the gallery asked Turbeville for h ci-leftover prints so that they could frame them.

"It's hard to stay innovative." Turbeville says. "Everybody wants you to 'g'et very formal and set. People arc very relaxed 'about other conceptual artists. but they tend to get

he book in gilt and pinks and lition of photographers. Turbeville's grainy blurred images render a fantastic reality in which eccentric-looking models in st_riking the a red wax pen. Turbeville clothes seem to be involved in a rnelodrama that will never be resolved.

and -black stockings and shoes. she looks something like an Alice in Wonderland grown up. Her voice is pleasant, singsongy. And she seems to find the world slightly silly. Born in Boston, slie grew up on the rock-bound coast of Maine:

i t guess it was there that I got accustomed to stark landscapes." she says. "Ogunquit had a heyday when I was a child. then it went through a bad period. Tl:1c tourists would descend. then go away. It was like living in a deserted city. We were dislocated because my fathei didn-1 know what he wanted to do. and my mother and I would walk down these empty streets after the tourists .left. There would be only one person on the street. "".ho...

SOHO NEWS STYLE SUPPLEMENT

wouldn't speak. You got a real feeling of desertion and abandonment. I would always say, 'Why do we want to stay here?' And mother would say, '.Why it's lovely, dear. Irs-'the-b-est time of year. Lc(s..go to the beach - the beaches are empty.' So I enjoyed empty beaches and empty streets in poetic little communities. I have compared notes with other New Englanders. I think the suspicion and mystery and all those things I inadvertently put into my works come from being a New England woman. Everything has to be questioned. I'm always delving into the background of anything somebody says. or what they do, or how they look. There are about ten layers behind everything, as far as I'm concerned."

After an unhappy six months at college, Turbeville got a job in New York working as a model and apprentice to the late Claire McCardell, desigiler and one of the great innovators in American fashion. "It was like going to Paris and getting a job with Chanel," she says. "It wasn't !TIY plan to become involved in fashion, but she was fascinating. I think my taste in clothes developed from that point.' Just to watch her wrap a dress. It was like watching an artist or sculptor. I would stand there and become this st tue. All the height I had, all my shoulders, would be taken advantage of. She understood that kind of figure and what to do with it. Then she would begin to accessorize. She made all her own accessories, and she introduced you to the most whimsical things. She was the first to go to Capezio and have street shoes made from ballet slippers. She also had old lizards made into little pumps with spool heels. And her jewelry was beautiful and eclectic, jadc and ivory, things like that, and lots of it, and chains around the neck. It was an incredible study in personal style. 1 never got over it."

Working with McCardell led to an editorial career at fashion magazines. At Harper's Bazaar Turb<:.ville edited the Fashion lodependent section; which featured each month a smart society woman lolling about in her expensive glad rags. "My' approach to it seemed different from other people's," Turbeville says. "I didn't see why it had to he a

I start; d using it anyway.. The photographer who went with me tci Yugoslavia was interested ii1 posing the model l;lgainst the landscape, and I kept saying, no, no, no. Pretend it's ajilm: Just have her smokillg ci;r:arettes or something."

To make sure she got what she wanted, Turbeville took some pictures on her own. Unfortunately, Diplomat had folded when she returned, and the pictures were never used. A friend saw the pictures, however, and suggested that she take a seminar on photography with Richard Avedon and art director Marvin israel.

"I thought the pictures were awful," she says. "They were out-of-focus and they weren't composed. But they loved them. They said, 'My god, look at this, and look at this.' I took the course, a |nd the first night they held up my work and said how important it is to have *your* own vision - you can get the technique later. 'This is the only person in class so far who has it.' Of course

that made me very unpopular. I never understood what it was they thought I had, and I kept trying to emulate this the entire course of six months. But I never got anywhere. I never could figure out what they wanted. So. I just kept taking these painful pictures and kept saying, maybe it's the cropping, or maybe it's this."

As an editor and photographer for *Made*job and to build up her portfolio. After a few years, when the magazine had fired h. r and rehired her as a freelance editor, she went to Europe, and Nova commissioned her to photograph 12 pages of ballgowns by Zandra Rhodes and Bill Gibbs. "We did an homage to the Diaghilev ballet," she remembers. " I used two crazy Ukrainian girls and a wonderful man who is quite well known as a figure around New York, Richard Merkin, You've probably seen him at galleries. With the eyeglasses, the mustache, and the black pa-

tent-leather hair? We did our interpretation of the ballets at a seaside resort outside of Dorset, England."

She also made a seri;:s of photographs in antique courtyards and empty rooms, two environments that show up often in her work, and when she returned to New York, she took her work to Voque.

Within a few months after she began working for Voque, Turbeville caused a sensation. She hacl been assigned to photo-

graph bathing suits on locatiori in Peru, btt the trip had been cancelled. Alexander 'O Lieberman, the editorial director, wanted to :;; shoot a horizontal spread that would how moiselle, Turbeville was ablilo rearnori rne foTir"or. five b11thi'rrg suits in one picture and told her she co ld build a set. "I worked with a Japanese boy who.did something with Bob Wilson, but it didn',t' seem right. Then I found an olp bathhouse. I was astonished by it, as I am when I find a new environn:icnt: It was all skylit, and the white marble had 0' graffiti on it, and there were all these sho:-ver 0' stalls done in marble. Yogue accepted it, we brought in the girls, and we did the pictures. Mr. Lieberman said they were extraordinary and he would run them."

No sooner had advance copies of the issue gone out, however, than the phone calls began. People said that the woman in the pictures looked drugged orconfined in concentrati9n-camp surroundings as they stood in the shower stalls, vacanH; yed and red-faced from the steam, or sat slumped against the tile walls, their eyes gazing into spac. "A lot of people were upset," Turbeville'says. "I heard that Wilhelmina thought thewere disgusting. One of her rrlodelswas in the picture, and she told her never to work for i:ne



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mat in Yugoslavia. "It seemed like a perfect job for me because they were esoteric. They wanted it to be a kind of eclectic magazine like Realities, with a section on art and so on. I was the fashion editor, anp 1 started doing my stories again. The idea I had for this piece was to do it with long lenses. I wanted to show this girl traveling by herself through strange towns in outrageous clothes. The girl was weari.ng short skirts because it was 1966, and these old ladies who scrub streets in Dubrovnik would be down on the ground and see this incredible, tall girl coming down the street with her skirt practically up to her

- "I had just begun to take pictures myself. A woman I worked with on a photographic assignment said that I was almost taking the pictures anyway. She said the cameras they have now, you just have to push buttons. She told me to buy a Nikon, but I got mixed up and bought a camera, which is for clo se-up material. It's impossible to focus with it. But

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came to Turbeville from an editor at Doubleday, Jacqueline Onassis. 'I've followed Deborah's career for years,' Mrs. Onassis says,' 'and I've always thought she was wonderful at photographing architecture'

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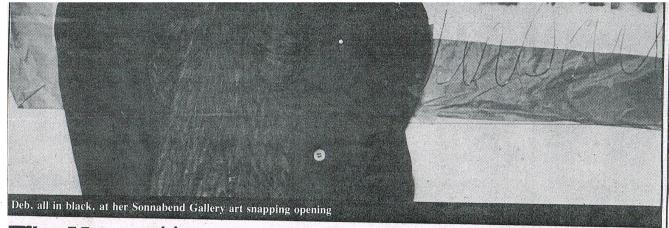
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Onassis says,' 'and I've atways thought she was wonderful at photoa raph1 no h to t

again." She laughs at the memory and'. throws up her hands. 'I had to put five or six giFls in one picture and de::sign it so they all fitted in. I guess the problem had something to do with the bathhoue, though y9u see those Ingres women in the baths and no one thinks it at all peculiar. Being as sophisticated as he is, I think Mr. Lieberman knew what would happen, but I don't think he knew how violent the reaction would be..We all tried to analyze it. All those women in a condensed space, involved in themselves. involved in their own world and not tuned in to the people around them. Som people read this as manic or drugged; to them it said something about the hum an condition. I just thought how beautiful those white suits

looked in this beautiful sunlit bathhouse."

Turbeville casts her photographs as she would a film. For her, clothes have to suit the woman and tell a story about her. Everything appears in Turbeville's first book *Wallflow*-

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