

Tall Girl Makes Good

SOHO NEWS STYLE "SUPPLEMENT"

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A FEW days before the opening of her show at the Sonnabend Gallery, Deborah Turbeville sat surrounded by unframed photographs; some of them were curled, others bent, a few torn and put back together. Geoffrey Leather, an interior designer who has assisted the photographer in designing her shows for the last 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. Turbeville and Leather began to group a few photographs on each sheet. The pictures were of all sizes and subjects, most of them taken from her new book, *Unseen Versailles*, others which had not been 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 the 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 Versailles. "A you can see. I'm not interested in the perfect print."

For the past ten years Deborah Turbeville has been astonishing us with her photographs in *Vogue*, *Bazaar*, and *Mademoiselle*. "A long with such photographers as Guy Bourdin, Helmut 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 or to a sun-bleached villa in Ibiza, but to less glamorous environments - a dimly lit room, a factory of an abandoned atrium overgrown with weeds. Unlike the lucid, straightforward approach to fashion that characterized an earlier genera-



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. It's the best time of year. Let'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, designer 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 my 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 statue. 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, jade and ivory, things like that, and lots of it, and chains around the neck. It was an incredible study in personal style. I never got over it."

Working with McCardell led to an editorial career at fashion magazines. At *Harper's Bazaar* Turbeville edited the Fashion Independent 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 be a

I started using it anyway. The photographer who went with me to Yugoslavia was interested in posing the model against the landscape, and I kept saying, no, no, no. Pretend it's a film: Just have her smoke cigarettes 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, and 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-moisele*, Turbeville was able to earn money for a job and to build up her portfolio. After a few years, when the magazine had fired her 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 patent-leather hair? We did our interpretation of the ballets at a seaside resort outside of Dorset, England."

She also made a series 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 *Vogue*.

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

graph bathing suits on location in Peru, but the trip had been cancelled. Alexander Lieberman, the editorial director, wanted to shoot a horizontal spread that would show five bathing suits in one picture and told her she could 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 old bathhouse. I was astonished by it, as I am when I find a new environment: It was all skylit, and the white marble had graffiti on it, and there were all these shower stalls done in marble. *Vogue* 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 or confined in concentration-camp surroundings as they stood in the shower stalls, vacated and red-faced from the steam, or sat slumped against the tile walls, their eyes gazing into space. "A lot of people were upset," Turbeville says. "I heard that Wilhelmina thought they were disgusting. One of her models was in the picture, and she told her never to work for me



