

# glass



*grace*  
*spring 2010*

maggie cheung / alber elbaz / wayne mcgregor / lillian bassman  
deborah turbeville / sarah moon / prima ballerinas / william eggleston  
yayoi kusama / shigeru ban / issey miyake design / gary numan  
médecins sans frontières / lance fung / sustainable gold



## DEBORAH TURBEVILLE

*Deborah Turbeville retraces her steps from aspiring actress in suburban Massachusetts to Harper's Bazaar at its most definitive, talking Glass through her incredible life and work*

**O**n a balmy evening in Mexico Deborah Turbeville takes a break from preparing her latest exhibition. Her unique brand of eerily dark and beautiful photography defined a new era in fashion reportage. Receiving tutelage from Diane Arbus and acclaim from Richard Avedon early on, but refusing to compromise her style, Turbeville has forged a path few have managed to tread.

**I didn't know you had a Gallery here in Mexico – how long have you had it?**

I've had it for 12 years. Do you know San Miguel? It's a very beautiful town, an old colonial town in the mountains. It's a very craftsman/art kind of town – they have two art schools down here, which people come from everywhere for; there are a lot of people who are good at things like this here.

**What was it that drew you into photography?**

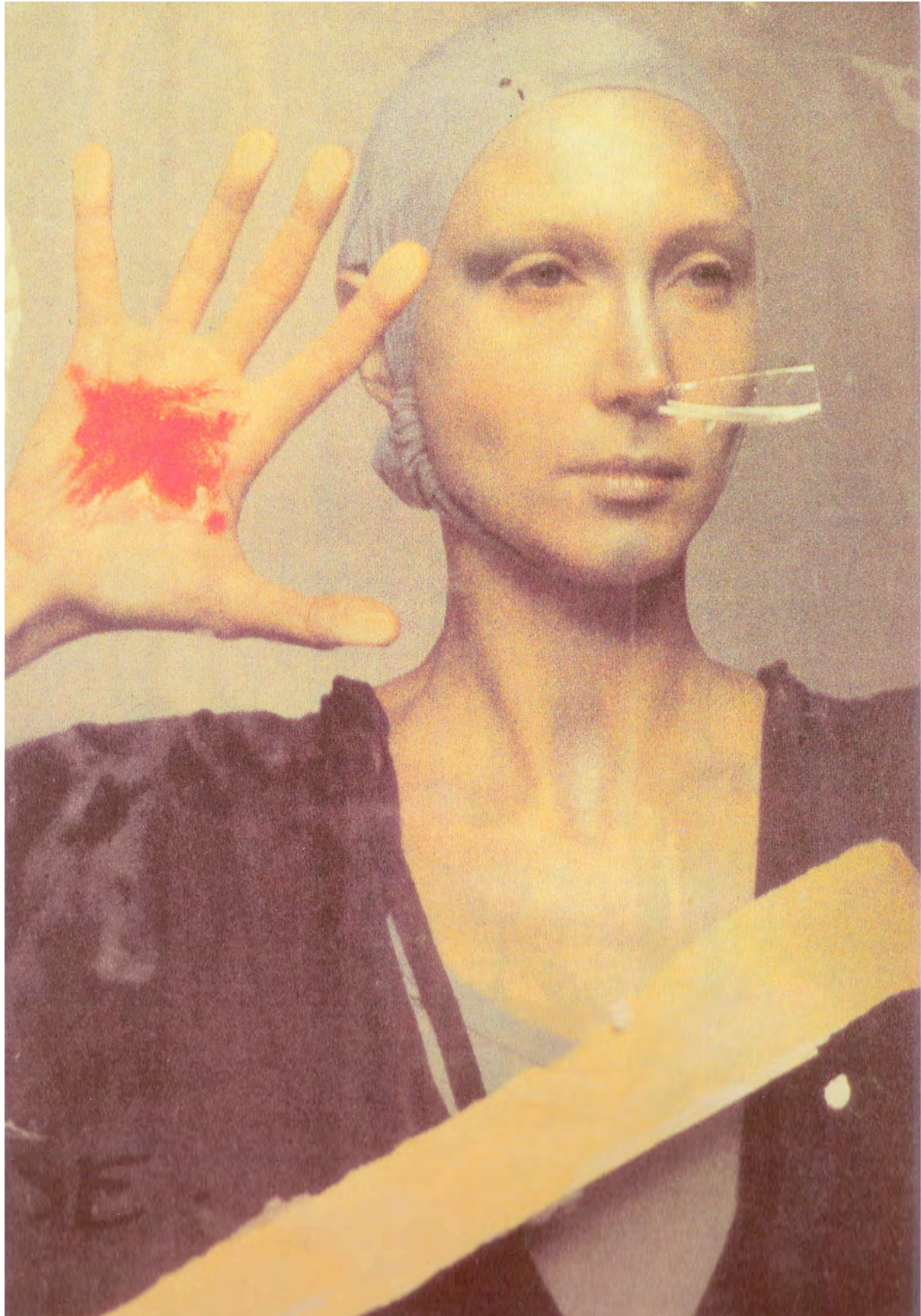
I have had a very odd career; I never studied it, and you'd never have seen me as a child growing up with cameras. I never had any curiosity about a camera, I never knew anything about it, and I'm not a technical person. (Laughs) It's a very strange story that I wound up doing this. Actually I was sort of interested in a career in the theatre so I came down to New York and I thought maybe I would go to a school for it or something, to study more and to try to get some small parts on stage. Then I got side-tracked – within a few months I took a job with a fashion designer who was fabulous and I learnt so much from this designer. She was incredibly creative and I always tell people that that was luck and it really turned my career into something else because – I don't know if you've heard of her, but she was very famous, her name was Claire McCardell. She was kind of the Coco Chanel of the state of New York. She was an extremely talented, sophisticated woman.

So I worked with her as a model and then I worked with her on her collections, helping her in the backrooms, putting together her fashion shows and helping her with all kinds of projects. Anyway, to make a long story short, I stayed there for years and I sort of wanted a career in fashion so I was introduced

to a lot of very important people through her that were heads of magazines or big editors and I met Diana Vreeland. I was very, well... very impressed with her. I was showing her some clothes, I guess I was modelling for her, then the man who was Mrs McCardell's partner said "Deborah would like to go on from us and work on the magazine." And Mrs Vreeland said, "That's fine, and I am sure she can, but you know, she will get such an incredible experience here that nobody else could get that I advise her to stay on."

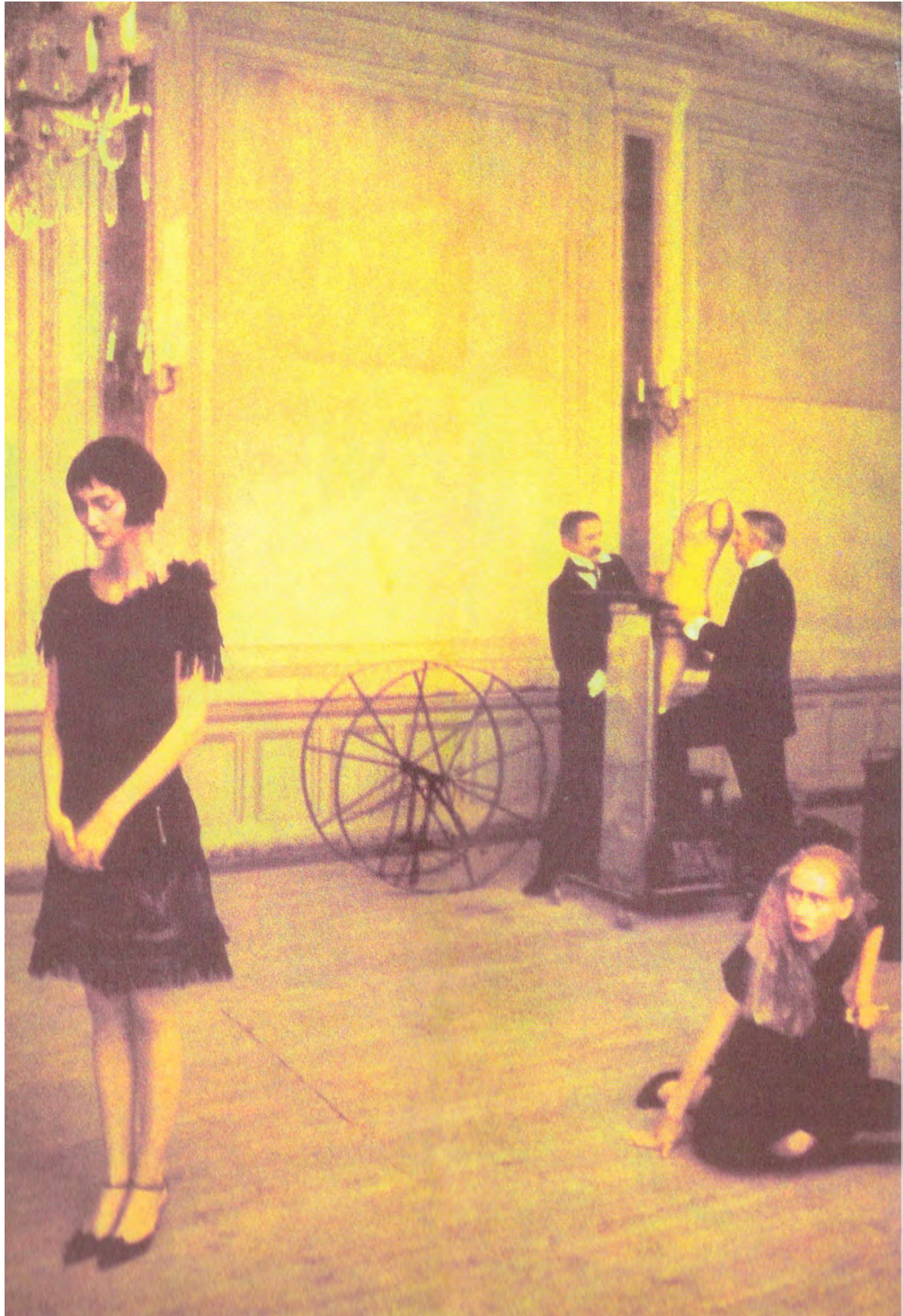
I finally went to the magazine. I started as an assistant editor and worked for a very crazy woman. She photographed as well, and she was the editor so I went to Paris with her during the seasons when the couture was on and things like that. Then she left very quickly and someone else took her place but this other editor decided to leave. I was her assistant and she asked me if I was interested in working for Harper's Bazaar and I said yes, and she said "well I've been offered a job at Bazaar but it isn't enough money for me and I need a lot of money so I'm going to an advertising agency. So if you would like I'll call them and recommend you." So because she recommended me and they thought so much of her, they kind of took me on unseen so when I got there I guess I already had the job! (Laughs).

So that's what I did, and I never had any idea, or it just never occurred to me that I was doing the fashion pages – all I knew about was that I wanted to do beautiful pictures with the photographers – I wanted to do something exciting. It was just about the pictures. So I gained this reputation by working with people like Bob Richardson for instance, and Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus – and all of the pictures I did weren't specifically about clothes. So in the end after two years after many, many stories and many, many adventures the Editor in Chief let me go because she said she didn't feel that I was producing enough fashion. But all of the photographers were sorry because they all loved working with me – they all thought they did their most exciting pictures with me because I let them have complete freedom to do what they wanted.









“I never had any curiosity about a camera,  
I never knew anything about it”

– Deborah Turbeville

Anyway, so I straddled along... it's such a long story I can't bear to go through it but...

I went to another magazine and I got my own pages again and I recommended we take a trip because there was nothing to do; and I applied to the Yugoslavian tourist board because they were dying to get some people to come over there, so they sponsored the trip. I went with a camera and I just started taking some pictures and the only reason why I took them was for fun! So I took these out of focus pictures in Dubrovnik and all these different places and when I came back, at this point Avedon was offering a seminar for photographers, young professionals, so he knew me and was curious to see what I would do with the camera, so I got into the class and he used to wave these out of focus pictures in front of everybody and say; 'This girl she knows nothing about the technology and nothing about the camera and she's taken the most interesting pictures in the course!' Which sounds rather ... *douceur*.

But then he called me once the seminars were over and said; 'You know you're going to make it!' I fell on the floor, and every time I went to his seminars I started to laugh because everybody else in class had so much more experience. He said; 'You definitely have it, but you have to calm down and study some technical things. Maybe you don't want to do that, but you have to'. Well I didn't take his advice, I never did study – I would just go on and take my pictures.

**The way you pose the models has an eerie kind of feel to it. How did you find your particular style?**

Because I started working in Europe, I worked in some strange places in New York and things like that but then I started going to Paris. It was much more Europe and I was running off these little stories for these magazines. I would go around scouting beforehand and loved to walk, and I walked through these old neighbourhoods and there would be these sort of sad courtyards, isolated, and there was no one there, not a soul – they were terribly surreal and I decided to use them for my pictures. I would place the models in them and something strange happened – they all started to respond to this quality and this mystery and surrealism. They would stand there and become these poetic women. There was something that

imposed on them, those empty courtyards gave this quality to them. I think that's true with anybody who develops a strong style. There is a certain moment when you recognise it: I started to realise something about my work. I became familiar with what I had to do to make my pictures identifiable to me.

It's a kind of spontaneous thing – you just feel it – you don't go; 'I'm going to do this and place the model like this', you just feel something. It's kind of spiritual, even though I hate that word because Americans overdo that word so much. It's poetry, it's about a mood and displacement and it's about women who have a strange or special atmosphere in their faces and it's about

not relating so much. A lot of pictures are about relating and looking at one another and laughing at one another and so on. Mine was the opposite.

**What would it mean to you if someone told you you could never take a photograph ever again?**

Oh, that would be terrible! It's like your arms or legs. It's something I have done all my life. Maybe I was doing it unconsciously before I took pictures, but I love, I'm

obsessive about looking. I look all the time. I look at everything. I look at people in the airports. I look at people on the streets and I think that today when you see people walking on the streets they seem to have no curiosity; they are very self involved and look at themselves. I am always looking at people's faces – or the way they are dressed, their clothes describe them. I don't have to be taking pictures all the time. I don't have to be there with my camera all the time.

**Is elegance important to you?**

Somebody told me, this is interesting because there is a wonderful architect here in San Miguel, she once told me something when I was putting my house together down here.

I like things that are sort of crooked, I don't like perfection, that's the last thing I like. So she said; my dear, have you never heard of this quotation:

“It is far better to have grace without perfection, then perfection without grace”

And that for me summed it all up. Not everybody has to be like me, and that's my little corner, it's the thing that I do, the thing that I like.



*The Astor Levy Public Bathhouse, Deborah Turbeville, New York, March 1976*