

'I'm a photography junkie'

Corinne Day was the world's hottest fashion photographer. Then she was vilified for a picture of Kate Moss, got into drugs, and suffered a brain tumour. Her new book of photographs lays her life bare

By Sheryl Garatt

IN 1996, the photographer Corinne Day collapsed in her apartment in New York and had a seizure. Her flatmate called the paramedics, and when she regained consciousness, she immediately asked him to bring her camera into the ambulance to record it all. Not the first instinct most of us would have in the circumstances, but then Day has never claimed to be ordinary. 'The camera becomes a part of your life,' she says matter-of-factly. 'I'm a photography junkie. I'm just driven. I don't know why.'

And so it is, in her new book *Diary*, that you can see Day lying in a bed in Belvue hospital looking frightened and confused seconds after being told she had a brain tumour. You can see the needle being pushed into her forehead just before the operation to remove it, and you see her looking terrified in the lift going down to the theatre. These pictures were taken by her boyfriend of 13 years, Mark Szasz, who says it was hard to do because his hands were shaking with emotion. 'But I knew if I did it, it would take her mind off what was happening.'

Diary consists of 100 photographs taken over a 10-year period, a raw, unflinching look at the lives of Day and her friends. It's a high-quality art book, beautifully presented, but most of the images make uncomfortable viewing. Some are painfully intimate, some unbecomingly sad, many focusing around Tara St Hill, a single mother in her early twenties, struggling to bring up her baby daughter with little money and the pain of Crohn's Disease.

Nothing is taboo, too private to show in this book. There's a picture of Day pretending to masturbate. Another shows her bloody knickers. We see Day and her friends taking drugs, having parties, in the bath, injured after accidents and fights. We see Tara pregnant, Tara crying, Tara having sex, Tara on the loo. 'To me, photography is about showing us things that we don't normally see,' explains Day. 'Getting as close as you can to real life. What I found interesting was to capture people's most intimate moments. And sometimes intimacy is sad. In photos, we're usually laughing and happy and having a good time. We don't normally see the other side, when we're not having such a good time.'

CORINNE DAY has always been unconventional. She was brought up by her nan in the village of Ickenham just to the west of London. Her mother, she claims, ran a brothel. Her father was 'in and out of trouble' in his youth, then busy building a legitimate business empire. He wasn't that interested in kids, and she didn't really get to know him until she was older. It was his obsession with money, she says, that made her so indifferent to it. 'My dad was incredibly driven by money, and I felt like I lost him to it. When I was a kid he had a big house, but I hated going there. It never felt like home. There was no love there.'

'Too busy being naughty' to learn much at school, she earned a meagre living afterwards flying round the world as a courier. A photographer she met on a plane suggested she take up modelling, and although she was considered short at 5ft 6in, she did a lot of catalogue work, living in Japan for a while - where she met Mark Szasz - and then in L.A. It was the mid-Eighties, when glamour was compulsory, but Day's face didn't take the required layers of make-up too well.

'I don't have great cheekbones, or huge lips to pile lipstick on - it didn't suit me. I wasn't really a conven-



tional beauty, I was quite plain-looking for a model. When I first saw Christy Turlington, all my hopes of ever getting on the cover of *Vogue* were gone. So I just made the best of it, and enjoyed it - I loved the travelling. We went to Australia, Spain, and ended up in Milan. That's where I started to take pictures. Mark had a camera, and he taught me how to use it.'

Her subjects were other struggling models, photographed in their own clothes in the seedy hostels where they lived. 'I started to realise that it was ambiguous, the life. Even though you're surrounded by all this glamour, there was a lot of sadness. We couldn't buy the clothes that we were photographed in, couldn't afford to go out and do the things we would have liked to do as teenagers.'

She took her work to *The Face's* art director Phil Bicker, who was opening up the magazine to a new generation of young, innovative talent at the end of the Eighties. Bicker asked her to shoot some fashion pictures, but having been away from England for five years, she had no contacts with models. So she trawled the London agencies looking for new talent, eventually spotting a Polaroid of a teenager from Croydon. At 14, Kate Moss was 10 years younger than Day, but they connected almost instantly.

'She was a beauty, but there was also something quite ordinary about her: her hair was a bit scrappy, and with no make-up she just looked like the girl next door. I encouraged her to be natural. I'd chat to her and then take the pictures in the middle of the con-

versation. I was trying to get the person to just bring themselves to the camera.' Bicker made Kate Moss the face of *The Face*, and Day's best images of her summed up the mood of British youth after the rave explosion. But Moss and her agency weren't always happy with the pictures. Moss got teased at school for exposing her flat chest in one classic 1990 shoot, and the agency worried that the photographer deliberately left imperfections like bags under the eyes that others would have retouched. But for Day, this was the point. It was something I just felt so deep inside, being a model and hating the way I was made up. The photographer always made me into someone I wasn't. I wanted to go in the opposite direction.'

Working with stylist Melanie Ward, Day and a handful of other photographers such as David Sims began using second-hand clothes and ungrooved, unconventional-looking models discovered in the street. The look they pioneered began to take off, christened 'waif' at first, then merging seamlessly with the US grunge scene. At the Paris shows, Ward and Day would laugh to see the second-hand clothes they'd shot six months before being imitated on the catwalk.

But Day was ambivalent about her growing success. She photographed the couture collections for *Vogue*, but hated it. She did a shoot with Linda Evangelista, and found it pointless. 'She just didn't excite me. Photographing someone you don't know and never plan to see again is so impersonal. The photograph means nothing. When Kate and I did our first *Vogue* cover, that was exciting.'

As the look was assimilated into the mainstream, so were the group who created it. Kate Moss signed to Calvin Klein. Melanie Ward moved to New York to work for *Harper's Bazaar*. The photographers Day had come up with became the new stars of the fashion world, shooting big budget advertising campaigns. Unimpressed by money or fame, Day instead became increasingly drawn to the kind of documentary art photographs taken by Nan Goldin.

BY 1993, she had alienated almost everyone she worked with - although she would probably say that they all let her down. She shot a sad-looking Kate Moss for *Vogue* wearing cheap undies, baggy tights and no make-up. Published during the summer lull when all news is gratefully pounced upon by the media, the story provoked outrage, with claims that it was promoting anorexia, drugs, even paedophilia. It was the end of her relationship with *Vogue*, and, for a while, with Moss.

Corinne Day met Tara St Hill in 1991 and began photographing her and her boyfriend. By 1993, they were all involved with a dark, heavy British rock band called Pusherman, and as Day's fashion family fell apart, she replaced it instead with this new gang of friends. Everyone partied and took drugs - cannabis, ketamine, heroin - although Day says she never developed a habit. 'I never liked heroin that much. It's a very overrated drug.'

The pictures she took over the next four years form the basis of *Diary*, and publishing them seems to have freed

Clockwise from left: Corinne Day photographed by Barli; Day in a hospital lift on her way to brain surgery, 1996; Tara St Hill photographed by Day in 1997; and a famous early Day shot of Kate Moss.

her to move on. Day and Szasz haven't done drugs for over a year. He's making a documentary about her work. She's starting to take fashion pictures again. She did a shoot for *Vogue* recently, working with Kate Moss for the first time in seven years. It was fun, she says, like no time had passed at all. She's shooting for the magazines now, not for herself.

'My attitude is more businesslike, not so aggressive. I'm keeping within the boundaries. It's interesting - I've actually come to a point in my life where I want to make money.' She laughs. 'I've realised that it can be quite useful.'

She and Szasz want a dog now. A house with a garden, possibly in L.A. And then maybe a child. The last shot in *Diary* shows a beautiful, palm-fringed beach littered with tin cans. It's a metaphor, she says, for the whole book. If there's a message she wants the viewer to take away, it is that life can be beautiful, and yet it's also fragile, and we often trash it. 'We don't realise how precious it is.'

Corinne Day's work is on show at the Photographer's Gallery in London, 5 Oct to 26 Nov, and at Gimpel Films in London, 6 Oct to 17 Nov. *Diary* is published next month by Kruse Verlag. *Imperfect Beauty*, a collection of pictures by the generation of photographers, stylists and art directors who came through in the early Nineties, includes Corinne Day and is published by V&A Books this month, with an exhibition at the V&A museum. To order *Diary* for £33.50 or *Imperfect Beauty* for £20.95, plus 99p p&g each, call Observer CultureShop on 0800 3168 171.

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