

When Fashion Got Real

V&A Exhibit Salutes the Photographers Who Sparked a Style Revolution

BY LESLEY DOWNER

LONDON

In 1990 an unknown photographer named Corinne Day photographed a waiflike 15-year-old girl running around on a beach wearing nothing from the waist up but a feather head-dress and a huge irrepressible grin. The girl was Kate Moss, and the pictures, published in *The Face* magazine, at the time the highly influential "voice of youth," sparked a minor revolution in our concepts of beauty, fashion and fashion photography. The decade that followed is the subject of "Imperfect Beauty: The Making of Contemporary Fashion Photographs," at the Victoria and Albert Museum (through March 18, 2001).

REVIEW

A-R-T

Utterly different from the impossibly glamorous models who stared glassily out of '80s photographs, Ms. Moss was gawky, vulnerable and far too young. The point about her beauty was that it was imperfect. She was a real person with a quirky personality, and it showed. "Fashion photography has always been about fantasy. I wanted to take it in the opposite direction," says Ms. Day, who was recently reunited with Ms. Moss to do a fashion shoot for the December issue of *British Vogue*. "The best thing I did for fashion was bringing it down to earth, bringing a documentary quality to it. I wanted to put in that feeling of youth culture. After my pictures came out, the sales of Birkenstock sandals skyrocketed!"

Ms. Day and her followers defined the new aesthetic by choosing models with a more "real" look, photographing them in bleakly real surroundings and using the medium of fashion photography to tell a story. "Casting from the street," they looked for that expressive unknown face that somehow embodied the zeitgeist, as Ms. Moss's had done. Fashion itself also changed, reflecting the power of youth culture. "In the '80s it was about shoulder pads and stilettos, uncomfortable clothes," says Ms. Day. "At the beginning of the '90s, fashion became very functional. It was baggy T-shirts and baggy jeans — that was what everyone wore."

Rather than displaying the end-product photographs, however, "Imperfect Beauty" seeks to recreate the excitement — and demystify the procedure — of the creative process itself. There are pinboards covered in jottings and sketches; assemblages of Polaroids and transparencies scattered across lightboxes. Like movie making, fashion photography is a collaborative effort, and in this show each crew member — stylist, art director, hairdresser and make-up artist — gets his moment in the spotlight.



"Untitled," by Vanina Sorrenti, 1997-1999 (top), "Sarf Coastin'" by Elaine Constantine (above), "Kate Moss" by Corinne Day, (right) ©CORINNE DAY



Unlike Ms. Day, who used deliberately spontaneous and naïve methods to lend an air of reportage to her work, most of the photographers on show here create their apparently artless images with considerable deliberation and planning in the artificial environment of the studio. Nevertheless, her influence has been all-pervasive in the choice of models, story and imagery.

For example, one display shows the process of a photo shoot around the theme of love. Inspired by the erotic Indian miniatures of "The Perfumed Garden," part of the *Kamasutra*, the photographer, Jean-Francois Carly, provides notes and

sketches suggesting "the theme of desire and sensuality and an idea of opulence as well." The stylist comes up with a suitably exotic backdrop — the lush drapes of the Portobello Hotel in London's Notting Hill — while the make-up artist turns the models into Cleopatras who gaze at each other languidly, echoing the book's erotic poses.

The clothes — a cashmere top by Matthew Williamson, leather trousers by Yves St. Laurent, a sequined top and trousers by Clements Ribeiro — are almost incidental.

Then there are Philip Lorca di Corcia's sinister "Blade Runner"-esque photographs for a 1988 edition of *Vogues Hommes International*. The model, sporting a variety of suits by the likes of Hugo Boss and Helmut Lang, lurks in a street market, stands menacingly in the transparent stairwell of a skyscraper or crouches behind a wall near a Coca-Cola machine. In the final shot, he stands in a telephone box, bathed in its eerie light, while a German shepherd, in the next box, stares equally blankly into the night. The clothes are subsumed to the story — though we are left to guess exactly what that is.

Further still from the simplicity of Ms. Day's original inspiration is the work of Glen Luchford, responsible for a succession of Prada campaigns. In one series of photographs the model floats like Ophelia along a stream, her plain black dress clinging wetly to her body. Most extravagant of all is a haunting image inspired by Stanley Kubrick's film "The Shining," for which a hedge was painstakingly put together twig by twig over five days and sprayed with foam to give the illusion of snow — all to create a final shot in which the model stands shivering in a simple dark coat and trousers. Apparently Muccia Prada loved it.

Ms. Day herself gave up fashion photography in 1993, after a controversial shoot of Kate Moss in her underwear in a seedy London flat resulted in accusations of child pornography, despite the fact that Ms. Moss was 19 at the time. A little too real for some, Ms. Day's photos of skinny models with black-ringed eyes sprawling in dirty bedsits were among the first to be labeled "heroin chic."

Since then, as Ms. Day points out, fashion photography has come full circle and returned to using women as part of a graphic image. "Whereas," she says, "I wanted a person's presence." No doubt the change was in part a response to the furor over heroin chic and accusations that fashion photography was encouraging anorexia and drug abuse. But inevitably, as the decade wore on, what had started out as spontaneous became as contrived in its own way as the fashion photographs of earlier generations.

As for Ms. Day, though she abandoned fashion she remained true to her original goal of capturing real people and their lives on film. "Corinne Day's Diary," currently on show at the Photographer's Gallery (until Nov. 26), features herself and her friends in all the grittiness of their lives — living, eating, making love, taking drugs and dying. Imperfect beauty, indeed.