

The Melancholy Glamour of Deborah Turbeville

A new exhibition roams through the fashion photographer's uncanny realm, highlighting her lesser-known body of collaged works

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BY ROSALIND JANA IN OPINION | 28 NOV 23



Ghosts do not photograph well. By their nature, they are fugitive, often looming in the background, glimpsed at windows or partially obscured by bannisters. Given their varying states of translucence, ghosts' features are usually indistinct, their moods hard to gauge. Mere presence is enough, though. If the camera manages to capture a phantom – no matter how fuzzy or unreadable – the lens has alighted on something worth talking about.

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The Melancholy Glamour of Deborah Turbeville
par Rosalind Jana
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The photographer Deborah Turbeville frequently created images that hovered on the edge of haunted. In 1982, Turbeville told *Artograph* she wanted her images to be 'perverse, strange, eerie'. In the introduction to *Wallflower* (1978), she wrote about depicting figures in limbo 'thinking that perhaps they are out of their time'. Beginning her career as a model and then a fashion editor – including a stint at *Harper's Bazaar*, where she worked with Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus, before being fired in 1965 when a shoot with the latter resulted in litigation – Turbeville switched her attention to her own photography in the late 1960s.



Deborah Turbeville, *Escalier dans Passage Vivienne*, from the 'Comme des Garçons' series, 1980. Courtesy: MUUS Collection
© Deborah Turbeville/MUUS Collection

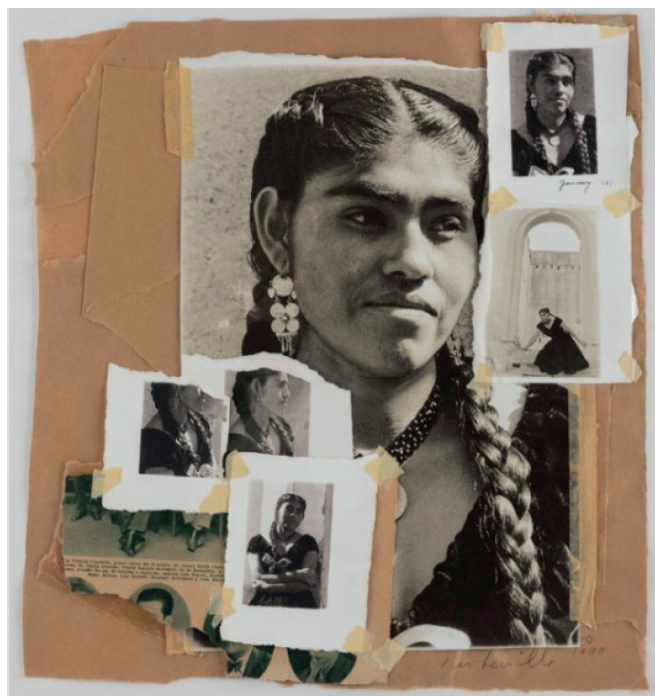
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She quickly developed a distinctively spectral style: solitary figures or strange groups of listless women arranged in sparse woodland, crumbling ballrooms, abandoned buildings and so on. Like ghosts, these women usually appeared ever-so-slightly out of sync with their surroundings, as though floating on a separate plane, dislocated in the mist. Turbeville created most of these images for fashion publications and brands, including Calvin Klein, Charles Jourdan and Comme des Garçons. To her, fashion photography was not so much aspirational or illustrative as theatrical: designer clothes were costumes assisting in the realization of her gloomy fairy tales.

In 1975, she shot a controversial swimwear editorial for US Vogue that cemented her reputation. Set in a condemned New York bathhouse and featuring a series of lithe models who slouched and sensuously draped themselves across the tiles, the photos scandalized readers who accused the shoot of glorifying, among other things, heroin addiction and lesbianism. Such outrage pre-dated the 'heroin chic' panic by two decades, placing Turbeville way ahead of her time in her implication that beauty and luxury didn't have to be upbeat but could, instead, be used to tap into more melancholy and erotically complicated places. In doing so, she afforded her models depths that remained impenetrable to the viewer, complex inner worlds hinted at in a heavy-lidded gaze or the angle of one body to another.

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Deborah Turbeville, *Luisa, Posos*, 1991. Courtesy: MUUS Collection © Deborah Turbeville/MUUS Collection

A new exhibition of Turbeville's work at Photo Élysée in Lausanne, curated by Nathalie Herschdorfer, roams through her uncanny realm, highlighting her singular images and production technique. 'Deborah Turbeville: Photocollage' includes some of her most famous fashion shots but also focuses on the photographer's lesser-known body of collaged works. Turbeville frequently cut, tore and juxtaposed her images on kraft paper, fixing them with glue and pins that left their marks. In the case of *Unseen Versailles*, a book project commissioned in 1981 by Jacqueline Onassis, the whole publication became a collage: passages of handwritten text taken from contemporary accounts of the toppling of the French monarchy appear interspersed between models collapsed in dusty back rooms of the Palace of Versailles and busts tumbled together beneath plastic like so many guillotined heads. By centring these collaged works, Herschdorfer illuminates Turbeville's craft and innate understanding of a photograph's narrative potential.

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Deborah Turbeville, *Giselle, Cafe Tacuba*, 1992. Courtesy: MUUS Collection © Deborah Turbeville/MUUS Collection

Turbeville revered the physical processes of photography, from the possibilities of soft focus and overexposure, double exposure and long exposure (all, incidentally, staples of ghost photo trickery) to the long hours she spent in post-production working surfaces until her carefully constructed images looked more like found photos or the kind of antique postcard you might find in the back of a mildewed book. Grainy, soft-focused, scratched, faded, monochrome or sepia-tinted: the corporeality of a photograph was as important as its composition, telling its own story of time stilled but not immune to decay. 'The idea of disintegration is really the core of my work,' she is purported to have said, a comment equally applicable to the ripped edges of a photo as to the mysterious subjects and scenarios it might depict.

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Deborah Turbeville, from the 'Passport' series, 1990. Courtesy: MUUS Collection © Deborah Turbeville/MUUS Collection

In more recent years, commentators – including Brian Dillon in a 2006 review for this magazine – have described Turbeville's approach as antithetical to that of her male contemporaries, Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin. It's an understandable comparison: vanishing wraiths versus flesh-and-blood glamour; soft feminine transparency versus hard sexual substance mediated by male eyes. Yet, while Turbeville aspired to something eerier than Newton's controlled gloss and full-frontal candour, she shares more than she opposes with Bourdin. Both explored fashion photography's capacity for spinning shadowy cinematic scenes and strayed into the kingdom of the mysterious and macabre, where the story depicted always appeared paused, never resolved. However, she lacked Bourdin's sense of play; her works were laced with anhedonia rather than humour. In this respect, her work is closer to an earlier generation of photographers, such as Josef Sudek and Germaine Krull, who found enchantment in the more haunted corners of the world.

Deborah Turbeville's Photocollage is on view at Photo Élysée until 25 February 2024

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