



Slightly distorted mirror in the summer kitchen on the terrace.

Words Jina Khayyer
Photography Elfie Semotan

Beyond

Beauty

Elfie Semotan photographs

things you don't see

at least not at first glance. Things you must learn to recognize, otherwise you see something else or nothing. This is a bit counterproductive in fashion and advertising photography. That's why Semotan is one of the pioneering fashion photographers of the avant-garde. She has shown courage, right from the start, trying something while others put pressure on her — the model, the light, the location — every detail costs and the result must be worthwhile because a lot of what is shown has to sell.

The Austrian-born photographer began as a model, in Paris, in 1968. She captured her first fashion images as a photographer as early as 1969. For fifty years now she has been working the fashion landscape. Fashion editorials, advertising campaigns, artist portraits: Semotan's images are like essays reflecting her thoughts. Whether for *i-D Magazine*, *Vogue*, or Helmut Lang, whether for commissions or personal work — Semotan never misses an opportunity to act against social conventions and, from her perspective,

narrow-minded guidelines — especially when the representation of women is concerned. Like a shovel scooping its way through snowdrifts, Semotan pushes her ideas forward. Of course, Semotan's pictures are also meant to sell something, but they rarely sell what they should.

We meet for lunch at Café Einstein Unter den Linden, in Berlin. It's a good choice in many ways: the restaurant almost exclusively serves Austrian cuisine. Not that she, as an Austrian, only likes her local cuisine but rather the intimacy and familiarity of the food make Semotan feel at ease. The walls are decorated with black & white photographs. Four are hanging above our table. One of them shows Jackie Kennedy-Onassis and her sister Lee Radziwill. They kneel next to each other in profile. Semotan focuses on this picture for a long time. When I ask her why she looks at this image so closely, she says: ES "In the sixties, I modeled haute couture at the Beverly Hills Hotel, in Los Angeles. I remember noticing how ordinary Jackie Kennedy looked in the audience. I was almost shocked, next to her very beautiful sister, Lee, she looked rather unspectacular but at the same time she was very photogenic. I don't know, perhaps that was the moment when I understood that beauty and being photogenic have nothing to do with each other. But anyway, I never chose my models according to their beauty."

JK *But rather?*

ES "Beauty is very important to me. But I don't stick to the classical beauty. To me, beauty can be anything and every-

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thing and depends strongly on the character of a person. If someone is attractive but you don't get along with them, they are never beautiful. I've also learned to create beauty, even when it's not there, with the help of light, for example. Beauty is a personal matter and I firmly believe that all ugliness can be reversed."

JK *You are a role model for women of different generations because on one hand you lead a self-determined life and on the other you embody a beauty ideal: the image of a woman where her attitude is in the foreground. An image which, in the '90s, was made popular by your close friend Helmut Lang. You played a unique dual role, as you were both Lang's muse, presenting his designs on his catwalk, as well as photographing them backstage.*

ES "Without the help of the English it would certainly not have been possible to establish this image. At that time, the English were the only fashion authority. From London came an enormous fresh wave of innovation: Kate Moss as the new supermodel; photographers like Corinne Day; fashion editors like Katie Grand — women who presented a new image of women and, at first, eliminated all the pomp and kitsch. No jewelry, no bows, everything reduced to the essentials. To me it was interesting that this new view of women did not come from men but from women who not only looked at themselves from a new perspective but also looked at other women in a new way. I like to believe that they met each other with more empathy. Until then, women were making themselves up to seduce men. Finally, women felt the urge to lead a self-deter-

mined life. As a result, fewer and fewer women were interested in the male gaze. They wanted to please themselves. And, suddenly, new questions arose. For example the question of what independence meant. I not only wanted to think about living a free life — I wanted to be able to afford freedom. That was my goal, which I had pursued from the beginning, even as a child.

"My mother was an extreme example of an independent woman, one I didn't want to copy: she had to prove her independence by leaving my sister and me behind, which was certainly difficult, but she did it. I did not want to leave my children, but I still wanted to be free. Before I found answers to my questions, I had to learn that autonomous women were not accepted nor liked by our society. But I didn't have a choice: I was an independent woman and, after my husband's death, I was also a single mother. I started questioning the clichés of womanhood. So rather than question what femininity is, I focused on how others perceived femininity. The '80s and '90s were very exciting times; not only did a new image of women arise but it was also the beginning of popular fashion magazines. Until the '80s all we knew were *Vogue* and *Harp-er's Bazaar*, but now there were groundbreaking magazines coming from the UK, like *i-D* and *The Face*. The reason why this was so exciting was because, for the first time, these two extreme worlds of convention (*Vogue*) and avant-garde (*i-D*), or Audrey Hepburn versus Kate Moss, collided."

JK *An impressive editorial of yours from that period, titled 'Male Gestures' features Shalom Harlow as a new kind of heroine: A stereo-*

typical feminine model portrayed as the stereotypical male American movie hero.

ES "It has always fascinated me that there are typically male and typically female gestures. At that time, I was particularly interested in male gestures: How Marlon Brando lays on the floor but then rises heroically; how Clint Eastwood leans against a railing; how James Dean chews on something. I wanted to see what would happen if a woman embodied these gestures. To ask a woman to let go of the femininity that is expected of her, to let go of everything delicate and elegant... Would she still be feminine? This is actually one of my favorite fashion editorials. I find it very tender."

JK *Which photographers have influenced you?*

ES "The American ones. Robert Frank, who travelled the country photographing its people and the scenery. This has shaped my reportage-like approach, my need to tell a coherent story, not just an image without any context."

JK *At times, your storytelling is so strong that the stories are killed by the editors, as was the case of 'Bad Seeds', a fashion editorial, where Natalia Vodianova was portrayed as a vicious child. It was never published because the modeling agency wanted a different image for Vodianova.*

ES "At the time Natalia was still at the beginning of her career but her agency already had a concrete idea of who she should be. They had decided how she should be represented. The agency wanted to establish Vodianova as one of the most expensive faces in the world. So, my rebellious story was



Above: A heart with wings from Helmut, an early airplane drawing by a young August, and an old thermometer.

Below: Still life with wooden ball on a print showing another still life.





Above: A tin bottle used as a target. Below: A bed in one the children's rooms.



Above: A still life with pots. Below: A still life with lamp and toaster.



never published. I was very disappointed. Natalia Vodianova had never before and has never since given such a convincing performance as in those pictures.”

JK *How important is the clothing in the photographs?*

ES “It is important that the fashion is neither absurd nor ridiculous.”

JK *Is fashion photography about fashion at all?*

ES “It’s all about fashion; you can see what the models are wearing. But, ideally, it’s about society. How do you represent a society? That applies to fashion photography as well as advertising photography. I have always firmly believed that I can improve the world in this area. I can portray it as I would like it to be. I can photograph the people I like, and they don’t have to be models, but people who do the things that interest me. That’s a statement about whom I photograph and how. For me, photography is about the representation of people. Fashion is a key element in this. Ideally, fashion expresses the attitude, how one wants to present oneself; desirable, intellectual, eccentric — fashion is like a language. Your choices speak.”

JK *One of my favorite works is the Raft of the Medusa, which you created together with your late husband, artist Martin Kippenberger. I like the series because it depicts the human drama, the fear of failure, and the fear of death. Kippenberger is anything but heroic in the photographs — a typical Semotan model, the heroic anti-hero.*

ES “Anti-hero is technically correct, but this is already a preconception as we have Adonis in mind when we think of masculinity. Hollywood still obeys this stereotypical image when

JK *Not only are your subjects’ poses striking but you never deprive them of their dignity. Take, for example, your photographs of artist Maria Lassnig crouching on the floor. How important is respect in photography?*

ES “Respect is the most important instrument. I don’t want to take advantage of anyone: I want to show my subjects the way they like to see themselves. In Maria Lassnig’s case it was not easy. She mostly painted herself naked but to photograph her naked was no question for me. I suggested that she put on a skin-colored dress by Helmut. The result is great. But it took Lassnig two years to approve the image. She felt more naked in my photographs than in her paintings. That’s the way it is, the view of one’s self never corresponds to others’ view of you. Lassnig painted herself as she wanted to see herself. My photo, on the other hand, was like a merciless mirror for her.”

JK *Recently, you have mainly photographed objects, still lifes, things that are not alive but which you portray so vividly. It almost seems as if you are in front of the camera again, disguised as a chair, as a flower. What do these new works mean to you?*

ES “They mean a lot and are very close to me. These are almost all personal items from my houses. I live between Vienna, Burgenland, New York and Upstate and I have a different relationship to each place. Basically, these photographs represent those relationships.”

JK *Does it require the same effort to document life without people?*

ES “I find it wonderful because I can take all the time I need. Nobody pushes me.”

“As a photographer, I learned never to leave my subjects alone. As a model you are quite alone and in loneliness you ask yourself questions: What do I look like? How do I come across?”

it casts its heroes. To me, you don’t recognize heroes by their bodies but by their performance. So, Martin may look like an anti-hero, but he is, of course, a hero in what he created and how he lived. Even without the heroic body, Martin always embodies a hero to me.”

JK *Last summer you celebrated your first major retrospective at C/O Berlin. On this occasion, a monograph, Contradiction, was published and within it your entire visual language is a protest. This absence of vanity is a revolutionary approach in fashion photography. How do you manage portraying people free of vanity?*

ES “Vanity is always and everywhere present and I have nothing against it. It belongs to consciousness and to self-expression. But you must leave it out of the picture because it appears superficial. In the image, vanity must not steal the spotlight but instead make room for the facial expression that brings forth the personality. My experience as a model shaped me — because I didn’t like being a model, at all. Although I was grateful that I could do it and earn the money, which allowed me to live in Paris, I quickly realized that my possibilities to unfold as a model were limited unless the photographer guided me. As a photographer, I learned never to leave my subjects alone. As a model you are quite alone and in loneliness you ask yourself questions: What do I look like? How do I come across? This is completely human. But those who ask themselves these questions usually come across as superficial. Understanding that I have to take my subjects by the hand helped me to create pictures absent of vanity.”

JK *The objects in your images are often more erotic than the people in them, why is that?*

ES “Perhaps because I can photograph them uninhibitedly, they are objects that are at my mercy, and with which I can do what I want.”

JK *You’re currently working on a self-portrait series. What are you looking for when you look at yourself?*

ES “I look for everything I appreciate in a human being: wisdom, beauty, courage, self-confidence. But, at the moment, the self-portraits make me anxious. It is so difficult to photograph yourself. And, basically, I’m just using myself as an experiment to try out an idea based on Claude Monet’s paintings of the Cathedral of Rouen, which he painted during different seasons and times of day. I’m trying to photograph myself in different moods of light. The complexity is that you never know what you’re looking at because you look completely different when the light falls on you from the front, from above, or from below. Light can make a person beautiful, or not. It is very important in which light you are portrayed in. And so, I ask myself the same questions again, like at the beginning of my career: In which light do I want to present myself? At the same time this is a trick question because my face is now old and very pronounced, so the light is over-shadowed by my facial expressions.” ■

Learn more at semotan.com Jina Khayyer is a contributor to Gentlewoman, 032C, and Zeit magazine. jinakhayyer.com



Above: A self portrait surrounded by pieces and findings from the whole family. “The beauty of these flowers are even more breathtaking because they are in front of this neglected wall.” Below: The terrace with fallen blossoms from the cherry tree.

