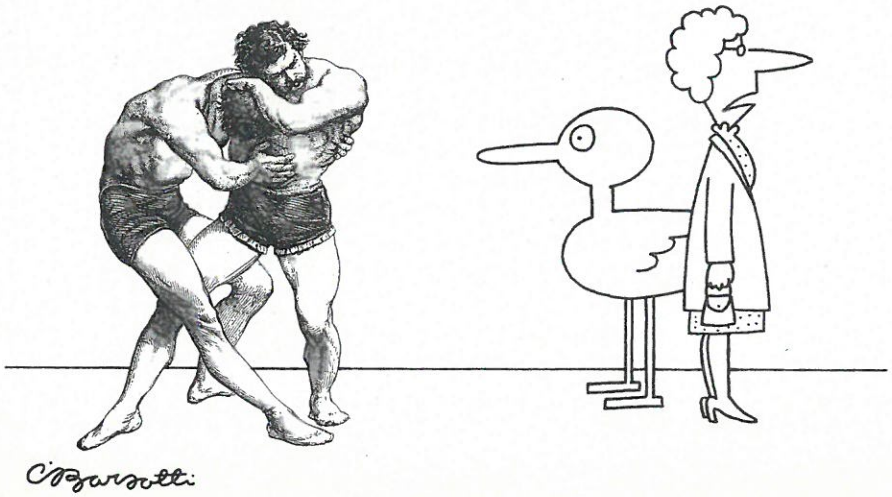
IN FASHION

The Eye of the Beholder

IN the video for George Michael's "Freedom," released last November, Michael himself is nowhere to be seen, but his voice carries us along as the camera cuts from one girl to the next in a glamorous relay, with five unofficial members of an international modelling cartel mouthing in succession the words to his latest hit song. Linda Evangelista sits huddled inside a big cowl-neck sweater, waiting for a kettle to boil; her hair, which started a trend when she cropped it nearly three years ago, is now platinum blond. Cindy Crawford, the Revlon girl, with her trademark mole above her lip, soaks in a bathtub. Tatjana Patitz, a voluptuous German blonde, with narrow, almond eyes, lies in bed, staring at the ceiling and smoking a cigarette. Naomi Campbell, a black soubrette with a penchant for wigs, and Christy Turlington, a radiant, pixie-faced ingénue, her full lower lip in a natural pout, complete the cast (along with a few forgettable men). They move through rooms that are very sparsely furnished, like a gang of beautiful girls squatting in an abandoned sorority house. These are the girls who all posed together for the cover of the January, 1990, issue of British *Vogue*—the faces for a new decade. Someday, we'll see a rerun of this video and think, That was the year of those girls—the way we look at old photographs and magazines and think, Those were the days when Earth shoes were all the rage, or That was the year of the Dorothy Hamill haircut.

Now that movie stars, baring their battered souls to Barbara Walters or writing memoirs of their stay at the Betty Ford Center, have succeeded in convincing us that they're no better than the rest of us, the glamour surrounding fashion models is greater than any Hollywood starlet's. Now that men and women who forty years ago could have blithely gone about their careers as sex symbols have taken to wearing horn-rimmed glasses and attending poetry readings and lobbying on behalf of the rain forest, fashion models seem to be among the few remaining guilt-free good-time girls. And now that actresses have grown increasingly determined to present themselves as real people wearing plain clothes, it's the models who look consistently stunning. For some time now, fashion designers have been celebrities in their own right, but it's just lately, with Gianni Versace coöpting the music business and Giorgio Armani the movie industry, that they and the models who surround them have begun not only to move in the same circles as rock stars and actors but to be seen as their equals.

There have been models who attained a kind of stardom in the past: Marion Morehouse in the twenties and thirties; Lisa Fonssagrives in the forties; Suzy Parker and Dovima in the fifties; Twiggy, Veruschka, and Jean Shrimpton in the sixties; Lauren Hutton, Cheryl Tiegs, and Christie Brinkley in the seventies. But it's only with the current generation that the most successful models have transcended fashion and become pop stars. On the runway, in the pages of magazines, on MTV, they exercise their fascination. With fashion in such a state of disarray, these girls define the moment we're living in as much as, if not more than, any designer. An outfit that's simple or classic, not particularly new, looks timely when it's worn by one of them. And they have what amounts to a virtual monopoly, with any one of them appearing in ads for competing houses. "You'd think that there weren't any other models working," a fashion publicist remarked recently, leafing through the pages of a magazine.



"*Ignore them.*"

BACKSTAGE on the morning of the Comme des Garçons show, in the Cour Carrée of the Louvre, where the French ready-to-wear collections are bivouacked for eight days twice a year, the atmosphere is surprisingly serene. The models start arriving at the tent a little before seven—unusually early for a show scheduled to start at half past ten. They greet one another cordially, exchanging compliments on their latest magazine photographs, trading news about their bookings and their boyfriends. Seen in this context, Kristen McMenamy looks rather average: yet another girl who's five feet ten, with a long, narrow neck, like the stem of a flower; a small head; long arms and legs; large hands and feet; small breasts; no thighs. She makes her way to the tables set up along one wall, where seven hairdressers work side by side, combing gobs of gel through dampened hair with their fingers and shaping waves with aluminum clips. Five makeup artists, lined up opposite, dab on foundation and paint lips and fingernails an inky shade of purple. In the center of the room, stainless-steel rolling racks, one for each girl, are arranged in rows, each with a poster-board chart listing every outfit and its accessories. ARIANE, CORDULA, CHRISTY, YASMEEN, KRISTEN, HELENA, MARPESSA, the charts say, both in large letters and in Japanese characters—first names only. In modelling, as in classical ballet—another career in which success comes at an age when other people are still deciding what they want to be when they grow up—the women are called girls.

Rei Kawakubo, the Japanese designer behind the Comme des Garçons

label, stands silently off to one side, surveying the racks, like a general inspecting her troops on the morning of a battle. Dressed entirely in black, with a black leather jacket over her shoulders, she seems both formidable and shy. Her employees move in a wide orbit around her, leaving her alone, out of what appears to be a mixture of awe and fear. She says nothing to the models; they say nothing to her. Kristen gives her a wide berth. At eight-thirty, Kawakubo calls a rehearsal, and the director, an apprehensive-looking Japanese man in a maroon shirt and a checked sports coat, with a pair of sunglasses hanging from a lanyard around his neck, calls the models into a huddle for a pep talk under one of several portable heaters hanging from the ceiling.

"We want to do something different," he explains. "Basically, you walk in the middle, you turn right or left—it's easy but something a little bit aggressive."

"Aggressive?" one of the girls asks.

"But we don't want it to shake hip and too much feminine. But could you try something new, future style?" The girls look bewildered. "Anyway, I know you are professionals," he barrels on. "You rest a little. I know you understand what I want to do. O.K.!" He claps his hands. "Let's go!"

"Future style," Ariane echoes uncertainly.

The members of the press department, the managers of Comme des Garçons boutiques all over the world, and forty-odd assistants and fitters imported for the occasion from Tokyo move out front to watch the rehearsal. From a chair in the third row on the left side of the runway, Kawakubo follows the sequence of outfits on a list, making notes as she watches. The girls, the aluminum clips still in their hair, travel the catwalk—sixty-five feet long, covered in silver lamé, and protected by a sheet of clear plastic—coming down the center and going back up again in two "lanes," one on either side. Kristen, who has not yet passed through the hands of the makeup artists, looks a little red around the eyes and nose. None of the models smile or pivot, as they do for designers like Valentino and Givenchy; Helena Christensen, the dark-haired Danish model, a relatively recent arrival who is rapidly closing in on the big stars, has modified her walk to make it a bit more flat-footed than usual. For the penultimate passage—a group of floating ball gowns, their skirts quilted and padded and painted like wedding kimonos with traditional Japanese motifs (a crane or cedar trees or Mt. Fuji) in red, gold, black, and white—the music switches from Euro rock to the "Blue Danube" waltz.

A notorious perfectionist, Kawakubo insists on at least one fitting and two rehearsals in the days leading up to her show; most other designers require one or two fittings and no rehearsals. At the end of the rehearsal, she gathers her assistants around her in a circle on the floor backstage and reviews her notes. The assistants get busy, making last-minute adjustments. The models change back into their own clothes for the time being—Kristen into a black cashmere cardigan sweater, vintage nineteen fifty-something, which she wears tied at the waist to expose a black lace-trimmed bra; pumpkin-colored stretch shorts; and two pairs of tights, black fishnet over black opaque. Helena asks Kristen where she got her bra. "J. C. Penney's," Kristen tells her.

Kristen sits on top of a table, her legs folded under her, waiting her turn in the makeup assembly line, and rehearsing dialogue from a dog-eared movie script in preparation for a screen test she has scheduled for later that afternoon. Bruno Nuytten, the French director who made "Camille Claudel," is considering her for his next movie, in the role of an American model in her mid-twenties living in Paris. Except that the character commits suicide at the end, Kristen says, the part is her all over. As she practices her lines aloud, one of the makeup artists, a curly-haired Frenchman, listens and corrects her pronunciation. She has lived in Paris for five years all told, but her command of the French language is still tentative, her pronunciation approximate. (She calls the *haute couture* the "hot couture.") "*Si tu te sens capable de porter tous les deuils,*" she reads. The makeup artist corrects her on the word *deuils.* "DIE" she writes next to it in the script, and tries it again. "That's good?" she asks.

"*Ça va,*" he replies.

The press attaché, standing nearby, tells her about Jean Seberg's accent in "Breathless," and she seems reassured.

A woman in black jeans and a gray

sweatshirt, with a sweater knotted around her waist, silences Kristen long enough to trace the outline of her lips with a brown pencil, then says, "Open."

Kristen describes her face as a blank, her features as plain, without definition, when she's wearing no makeup—an assessment that is, to be honest, fairly accurate. Her skin is astonishingly white, like a painter's canvas; her eyebrows are rather vague; her eyes are a pale quartz blue but not especially large or striking; her mouth is quite wide, with two possible lip lines—one the boundary of her lips' natural color, the other the outer edge of their contour. "Makeup artists love my face, because they can draw on it," she says. The woman in the gray sweatshirt applies a patch of deep-purple lipstick to the back of her left hand, which she uses as a palette, and, cradling Kristen's jaw to steady it, transfers the color to Kristen's lips with a brush. "Oh, you got Wet 'n' Wild!" Kristen says, recognizing the tube. "Ninety-nine cents at Woolworth's! Looks like black, but it's a little plum. It's dry, but . . ."

"All dark colors are very drying," the makeup artist says, shrugging. She paints Kristen's nails with a coat of black polish, followed by one of red. "So, you are learning French now?" she asks.

"*Un peu*," Kristen answers, making little waving motions with her hands to dry her nails.

The girls stare off into space as the makeup artists work on their faces. At a table in one corner, a Japanese man in a shirt and tie steams a gray silk shantung jacket trimmed with transparent vinyl; another man, with a tape measure draped around his neck, sits bent over a long red vinyl skirt, stitching up the slit at the back.

The woman who books the models for both the women's and the men's shows for Comme des Garçons tells me, as we stand off to one side, surveying the action, that the male models are a completely different breed. For them, modelling is a job, she explains—it's something they do for the money. And the girls? I ask. For the girls, she says, it's *them*—the way they look is who they are. (Later in the day, during one of the early passages in Yohji Yamamoto's show, the photographers—ready to riot over the places they've been assigned—suddenly break into a raucous chorus of boos and hissing. Ariane, who was on the runway when the commotion started, comes running to her rack, which is next to Kristen's, in tears. Sobbing, she changes into her next outfit. The models nearby gather around her, trying to comfort her. "Ariane," Kristen insists, "it isn't *you!*")

At ten-ten, six seamstresses crouch around one of the ball gowns, spread out on brown paper on the floor—three of them guiding the fabric into place, the three others sewing furiously. Most of the models are doing the things that people do when they have time on their hands: listening to a Walkman, rereading a letter, copying names and telephone numbers from torn scraps of the paper tablecloth at last night's bistro dinner into an address book. No one is reading a newspaper. But then there is no real incentive for most of these girls to take an interest in the outside world. A reporter spending a week in the *cabine* comes reluctantly to the conclusion that the cliché about models being superficial is not without some basis.

Kristen watches Yasmeen, a Canadian model, applying eyeshadow and brow pencil from a kit of her own, in defiance of the makeup artists' specifications. "The tramp!" she mutters, with an indignation that is only partly feigned. In fact, many of the girls make a practice of adapting the designer's vision to the way they prefer to see themselves. Kristen and two other models who have left their faces exactly as the makeup artists did them complain that alongside these girls who have added extra makeup to emphasize their eyes they're going to look dead on the runway. "It's not fair to the designer, it's not fair to the makeup artist," Kristen says, shaking her head.

At ten-thirty, Kawakubo and six of her assistants are wrapping a length of indigo tulle around a blond model, who stands rooted, like a maypole, as they bustle around her. Through the walls comes music from Daniel Hechter's show, going on in the tent next door: "You're sixteen, you're beautiful, and you're mine!"

"Wow," Kristen says. "They're really hip over there."

"O.K., excuse me, girls!" the director calls out. "Attention, *s'il vous plaît!* Just two or three things. Most are very good. I need more power—more powerful. So I change some part of the music. And one thing: Don't open your mouth. I mean, this makeup, when you open your mouth it looks awful. So be careful." He claps his hands. "O.K.! Thank you for your coöperation."

At ten-fifty, one of the fitters is polishing a black vinyl duckbill cap with a tissue; a waiter in a white apron is standing at a table, arranging plastic cups on a tray. Kristen fidgets. "I thought I could study my script, but I can't," she says. At eleven, the fitters, most of them Japanese students, are positioned beside the racks, holding stockings already gathered and waiting to be stepped into. "Stand by," the director calls. The models go to their racks to dress. Kristen climbs into a pair of pale sheer pantyhose followed by black opaque tights; a fitter holds a shoehorn as she slides into square-toed black flats. Her first outfit is a long black gabardine skirt overlaid in front with a clear vinyl panel. The fitter sprays an anti-static aerosol up the inside of her skirt. "We're all going to be sterile," Kristen laments. A hairdresser makes the rounds, removing clips.

A German model has got her houndstooth dress on wrong. "No! *Mein Gott!*" she cries. Five Japanese women come to her rescue, twisting the top sections, pulling one arm through. Ariane wonders aloud whether the dress she's wearing, a stretchy black-and-white lumberjack-plaid tube, makes her hips look wider. A champagne cork pops, and the tray of plastic cups is passed. "Good luck, everyone!" Kristen calls out. "Be strong, and no open mouths! *Salute!*"

The girls are herded into a line that begins in the wings and trails down the stairs leading to the *cabine*. Cordula smokes a cigarette. Most stand impassively, as if they were queued up at a cash machine. The music starts; the line advances. Kawakubo is stationed at the top step, arranging the way the clothes fall before each model goes onstage. The soundtrack, overhauled since the rehearsal, is now mostly acid rock. Between forays down the runway and back, Kristen rushes from the exit to her rack; steps out of her clothes, leaving them in puddles on the floor for the fitters to pick up later; and, putting a white silk pillow slip over her head, so as not to leave any makeup

smudges on the clothes, wriggles into her next outfit. She steps into black flat-heeled go-go boots; the fitter kneels behind her and zips them up the back. When a silver lamé dress gets stuck on her head, she squeals in panic. One model, already dressed and with time to kill in her gabardine suit for the finale, stands off to one side eating a brioche. In a black shirt with red vinyl sleeves, Kristen watches the girls wearing ball gowns take their places. "Oh, why couldn't I have had a ball gown?" she wails, to no one in particular. The "Blue Danube" waltz begins. "Well," she reasons, "I do have a ball gown at Yohji Yamamoto." She pauses, still thinking, looking not quite consoled. "It's wood," she explains. For Yamamoto's Constructivist finale, she has been assigned a dress of wooden slats which fastens with nuts and bolts.

There is applause backstage as the last group, a series of suits, is sent out. Kawakubo is gently prodded onto the runway for a hasty, modest half bow. Kristen returns, shedding her outfit. "Total success," she announces, climbing into her own clothes for the frantic dash to the tent next door, where Angelo Tarlazzi's show is scheduled to start in twenty minutes.

IN an article in the March issue of French *Vogue*, Gérard Miller, a psychoanalyst and author sent by the magazine's editors to cover the spring haute-couture collections, writes of the sexual standoff between the models and the photographers which occurs in fashion shows: there is, he claims, no more terrifying representation of woman than these women—the purer the face, the more streamlined the body, the more one discovers the threat that every woman engenders in the unconscious mind. Inaccessible women, he calls them, who transform these impotent men, hunched over their cameras, into pillars of salt: "*La beauté absolue et l'horreur de la castration!*" But where do these women come from, he wonders, and who made them?

Kristen McMenamy comes from Easton, Pennsylvania, where, as a teenager, she pored over fashion magazines, studying the girls pictured in them, looking into their faces, as if in their expressions she might find some hidden message addressed to her—some words of encouragement, some advice about what to do or where to go. Mostly, she sat around wishing that she looked like Cindy Boucher, a girl who went to her high school—a blond cheerleader with the perfect body, perfect teeth, perfect smile. "She never talked to me," McMenamy recalls.

All the girls in her neighborhood had the same haircut. McMenamy was as tall at thirteen as she is now; her classmates nicknamed her Skeleton. She would lighten her hair, lie out in the sun for hours, burning her fair skin, and spend all her money on the makeup featured in the magazines she studied. "There was a list of things you were supposed to be: blond, tan, pretty," she recalls. "I'd like to know who made that list." McMenamy's most vivid memories of her years at Notre Dame High School are of eating lunch alone in the cafeteria, because she had no friends. "I forget everyone's name—that's how bad my childhood was," she says. "I've blocked it out." She didn't save her yearbook or buy a class ring, because she was "so ashamed" of that chapter in her life. Not only was she never asked for a date, she was laughed at for being freckled and red-haired. So it seems some roundabout sort of justice that a few years back she caused a minor sensation by appearing on French television in a commercial for George Killian beer, an Irish red ale, or *bière rousse*, and delivering one of those lines that, for no good reason, become etched in the popular memory: "*Je suis rousse, et alors?*"

McMenamy was a straight-A student until, at sixteen, she started hanging out in local night clubs. She sent some pictures to *Cosmopolitan*'s covergirl contest. The winner was a blonde from California. McMenamy combed the list of semifinalists for her name: not there. In Allentown, she went to modelling school. In three weeks, for five hundred dollars, she was taught how to smile, how to walk, how to put her hands on her hips. None of her teachers believed she had a future. "I was even a reject there," she says. When she was seventeen, she went to New York to make the rounds of the big agencies with her portfolio—an album of party snapshots and out-of-focus studio pictures taken by local wedding photographers. Together with a friend, who had come along for moral support, she went from Wilhelmina to Zoli and on to Elite, and, finally, to Ford, growing more and

more discouraged. At the end of the day, Eileen Ford herself came out to look at her book. "I wanted her to be my savior," McMenamy says. Ford suggested that she go back to Easton, go to college, get married, have a family, and forget about modelling. She also told Kristen's friend, who had no interest in such a career, that she had potential. Kristen cried the whole bus ride home.

About a year and a half later, she got a call from the head of a small agency called Legends, in New York, who had seen the pictures she'd submitted to *Cosmopolitan*. For the first time, she went to the appointment wearing no makeup, as she'd always been instructed to do. The agent made her no promises but took her on, and sent her straight to a hair colorist, who turned her from a bleached blonde back into a redhead. She was, by her own description, overweight, pigeon-toed, and shy, with her hair in her face. No bookings followed, but she did a lot of test photographs; after a few months, the agency sent her to Paris on a one-way ticket and told her to get some tear sheets—a common strategy for models who are just starting out and don't fit the glorified-girl-next-door description of beauty which still prevails in America. In Europe, the notions of what's attractive aren't so narrow. The model who returns to New York, which is where the money is, on the strength of a reputation abroad often finds that clients who weren't willing to take a chance on someone so unconventional before—or perhaps weren't able to see her appeal—suddenly come around.

In Paris, after a year of demoralizing go-sees for yogurt ads, McMenamy at last came to the attention of Peter Lindbergh, a much admired German fashion photographer, who works in a dramatic, darkly original style, and it was he who saw in her something that the others had overlooked and brought it out into broad daylight. From then on, she was overwhelmed with work. By the time she made the decision to come back to New York, three years ago, she was known within the industry as one of the most successful models in Europe.

But in New York her career began to falter. It was, she says, a matter of the way she was used. "I would be booked for sportswear catalogues and put in a pink jumpsuit," she recalls. Tessa Jowers, the director of model management at Elite, which now represents McMenamy in New York, says that to a large extent it's the nature of the work in America. A lot of the bookings here are for ads for some department store's Mother's Day sale or for Cover Girl or Maybelline or J. Crew—"the kinds of things that are appealing to white-bread America, the one-hundred-per-cent-cotton kind of crowd," she explains. "A lot of fashion here seems to be aimed at the masses. People worry about pleasing Middle America—you've got to sell to those people to stay in business. Whereas in Paris they'll bank everything on the artistic value, and then, by doing that, they make something chic and it sells."

McMenamy admits to being choosy about the jobs she accepted. "I wouldn't fly to Chicago to do a sweater for Macy's," she says.

Jowers thinks she was justified. "There are some girls who are only going to go so far, and they should take whatever comes along and get what they can out of it," she says. "But Kristen is going for a high-profile, top-model career—editorial with the top photographers, advertising under contract to a designer or a fragrance—and it's by holding out for the important jobs in periods when she wasn't busy that she has got to this level."

After two years in New York, McMenamy says, she felt as if she were back in high school, trying to conform. In the spring of last year, she packed her bags and returned to Paris, and has been there ever since. The work that comes her way there is more interesting, she says, and she's appreciated for her idiosyncrasies. She is still choosy. She routinely refuses to go to Germany to do catalogues, though they pay very well. "I don't think about the money I'm making," she insists. In fact, she says, she would do the jobs she loves for practically nothing. When she works with a photographer like Peter Lindbergh, for instance, she wants every picture "to make history." On the days when she knows she hasn't worked well, she says, she feels like giving the money back. She is not, Lindbergh agrees, a commercial model. "She has always that artistic side, which is very strong," he explains. "You can put her nowhere and say 'Do something,' and you get the most incredible pictures."

Martine Sitbon, the designer, and Marc Ascoli, the art director responsible for both the line Sitbon designs under her own name and the line she designs for Chloé, call themselves members of Kristen McMenamy's fan club. They tell the story of the time last season when she came for a preliminary fitting for the benefit of the executives at Chloé. Not having been forewarned that their tastes ran to the more conventional, she acted out what Ascoli calls "*une vision de la couture complètement phantasmagorique, extraterrestre*"—advancing, striking a haughty pose, giving the president a pointed look, retreating, every movement at a pace that was unbelievably, inhumanly slow. She heard "Chloé," Ascoli explains, and thought "Couture!" The executives, fascinated and appalled, could not be persuaded to hire her for the show. This season, Ascoli and Sitbon advised McMenamy to present herself in a manner that was a little more "standard," and there was no problem. Even so, what's "standard" for McMenamy would be quirky for anyone else. At her most conventional, she has the unmistakable air of an oddball. This is not an impression created by her physical proportions or by the geometry of her features. Unlike the models Jean-Paul Gaultier promotes—girls who look peculiar but carry themselves with all the grace and poise of a legendary beauty—McMenamy looks lovely, if not quite usual; her eccentricities spring from something inside, which occasionally contorts her features and makes her movements slightly convoluted.

"Personality" is the word that comes up time and again when people talk about McMenamy. Lindbergh says it's what he looks for in a model and what he saw in her. "First, personality. And then what people call 'beauty,' but I think you can't detach one from the other," he explains. "When you see her face, it's like the interior is outside. Many of the other girls, they have more of a façade, but she looks the way she is inside—the inside is on the face, and it's very touching. That's what I think is beautiful. Otherwise, what could be beautiful, I have no idea. It's not a question of no wrinkles, or something like that."

EVERY few years or so, a model or a fashion-magazine editor or somebody else in a position to talk about what women look like issues a statement to the effect that when it comes to our standards of beauty we're making progress. Mostly, such remarks serve as the occasion for us to congratulate not the women we find beautiful but ourselves—for being so highly evolved, so humane and sophisticated and open-minded, that we're able to recognize their beauty. Cindy Crawford has been known to flatter her constituency with the remark that only fifteen or twenty years ago a girl like her could not have had a successful career as a model without first having her mole removed—the most recent installment of the agitprop that in the seventies seized on the space between Lauren Hutton's front teeth as a sign of how far the world had come. The desire to think that human nature is getting better, that we're more enlightened than the people who came before us, is not new, nor is it confined to our perceptions of fashion, though fashion tends to play on it. Lois W. Banner, in her book "American Beauty," a social history of American ideals of beauty, recapitulates the theories of various nineteenth-century optimists who hypothesized that America was becoming "an amalgamation of racial types," and that out of that mixture would come "a higher kind of beauty"; similarly, she notes, certain Darwinians were convinced that the human race would become progressively more beautiful, since beautiful men and women chose each other as mates and passed their beauty on to their children, "while ugly people, unchosen, had no progeny." We see the folly of ideas like these quite clearly, and find the notion that people should be getting better-looking with each successive generation quaint and amusing. The sorts of looks that people in the nineteenth century considered ravishing (Lillian Russell's, Lillie Langtry's) for the most part leave us indifferent today. That our taste in faces and bodies changes from one era to the next is clear; that it changes for the better, however, is not. Still, we pride ourselves on being able to appreciate beauty that a hundred years ago would have gone unremarked, as if we were right and the people back then were wrong.

Our notions of what's beautiful are still fairly narrow, particularly in America, where generations of immigrants eager to fit in aspired to a homogenized ideal, without prominent features of the sort that could be construed as "ethnic," or lower-class. The reversal in fashion which came about in the sixties, with new ideas being launched in what the ancien-régime haute-couture houses grandly referred to as "the street," revised our standards of beauty as well. The aristocrat, which had been the predominant type, was joined by two others: the moppet and the earth mother.

It is tempting to view Kristen McMenamy as the harbinger of a new era, or a new set of standards, but—for the time being, at least—she seems more an exception to the rule. The path of her career has been uphill; her success is within

"It's as though everything nice about you had been just some kind of introductory offer."

limits that don't seem to apply to the big stars. "I'm a cult model," she explains. I ask her if the stardom that girls like Evangelista and Turlington and Campbell have attained is within her reach. "No, never," she replies. Why not? What do they have that she doesn't? "Natural beauty." McMenamy says that she always longed to be the kind of girl who wakes up in the morning looking beautiful, and that she has finally got around to accepting the fact that she's not. Even Tessa Jowers acknowledges that the so-called natural beauty isn't McMenamy's type. "You don't want to see Kristen in her bathrobe," she says. "You want to see her in a beaded miniskirt."

Marc Ascoli says that there are certain "divas" on the runway who are truly beautiful, incommensurably beautiful—it is, he remarks, almost a kind of magic to be as beautiful as that—and they also have personality, but they don't push it, because it's enough to be beautiful. He calls McMenamy a model with the ability to please or disturb—even, he says, to embarrass, to inspire in her audience anxiety that at the slightest mishap she might go to pieces. (Indeed, when at Gaultier's show this season McMenamy slipped on the synthetic-ice floor—laid for the benefit of skaters who were part of the entertainment—and nearly fell, there was a heart-stopping moment of panic which, it occurred to me, wouldn't have been nearly so acute if Evangelista or Turlington, who carry themselves with such aplomb, had stumbled.) It is this bizarre, slightly precarious quality that comes across on the runway and in photographs—that comes crashing through high fashion's decorum and veneer—and Ascoli says that because of this quality McMenamy is in fact more important than the superstar models, "*les grandes poupées belles, avec la beauté impeccable, plastique.*" McMenamy is, in his words, "*étrangement belle.*" There are, he acknowledges, people who even find her ugly.

"Yes, I think she's beautiful," David Seidner, who photographed her for Claude Montana's current ad campaign, says. "But it's certainly not a classic beauty—it's a kind of awkward, esoteric beauty. And also very contemporary. I don't think she looks like a beauty from another time. She has a kind of decadent look about her, because of the color of her hair and the color of her eyes and the way her mouth scowls slightly." He calls her a cross between Lucille Ball and Sandra Bernhard.

I asked a makeup artist who has worked with McMenamy if he thought she was beautiful.

"What is beautiful?" he replied rhetorically.

I asked him if he thought Christy Turlington was beautiful.

"Yes," he said.

THE day after the Comme des Garçons show, McMenamy is at her boyfriend's house, a whitewashed villa surrounded by a lawn and high walls in Paris's Sixteenth Arrondissement, for a shooting for the French edition of *Glamour*. The photographer is Manuela Pavesi, a fashion editor for Italian *Vogue* who has recently taken the camera into her own hands. Since the story is about McMenamy's distinctive sense of style, Kristen is wearing clothes from her own wardrobe: a burnt-orange acrylic bodysuit, black fishnet tights, and—a souvenir of the last Chanel haute-couture collection—black satin high-heeled shoes with bows at the instep. Her hair, shoulder-length, has been teased and combed over a fall; the makeup artist has not stinted on the eyeshadow. McMenamy sits on the floor as Pavesi, standing on a chair, registers her approval by clicking the shutter. Changing position, McMenamy moves her legs, establishing a rhythm.

She moves. The shutter whirrs. Move. Whirr. Move. Whirr, whirr, whirr. Move. Silence. She moves again. Whirr.

Back and forth, McMenamy and Pavesi carry on this wordless conversation. Occasionally, Pavesi will interrupt. "I prefer—" she begins.

"You like it the other way?" McMenamy asks, resuming an earlier pose.

"That's great," Pavesi says, and then the words subside and the exchange between McMenamy and the camera resumes. The longer you look at McMenamy, Pavesi says, the more interesting she becomes. "She has this ability to be very concentrated, but in a natural way—a way of being naïve and sophisticated together," she explains. "She's like an actress to me." Pavesi says she has watched McMenamy work with other photographers, "sometimes not very important photographers—and she always made the picture look good."

For the next shot, McMenamy pulls her bodysuit down over her seat, so that the sleeves are hanging, and knots a black cashmere cardigan over her black lace bra. The crew moves to the terrace. McMenamy leans against a wall lit by the late-afternoon sun. Pavesi positions herself about ten feet away, and stations her assistant in between, to hold down the fronds of a potted palm, which is too heavy to move, so that they don't jut into the bottom of the picture. McMenamy folds her arms in front of her waist; Pavesi responds with the camera. "What happens now if you are trying to hold the sweater, almost to keep it closed with your hands?" she asks. "Is a Marilyn Monroe shot." McMenamy tries it. "That's nice," Pavesi says. Whirr, whirr. McMenamy makes small adjustments in the position of her jaw. She looks deep into the camera and, changing the message in her eyes, runs through a series of expressions: dreamy, provocative, direct, accusatory, questioning. Is this the way you want me to look? she seems to be asking. She moves her lips, pursing them almost imperceptibly. "I really like it now because you are so vulnerable, you know?" Pavesi says. "And it's really you." The light is nearly gone. McMenamy lowers her eyes, then quickly looks up into the camera again. "That's great, Kristen," Pavesi says. "Thank you."

Taxis are called, and McMenamy takes hers directly to a photographer's studio, near République, where Helmut Lang, the Austrian designer, is fitting his collection, scheduled for presentation the following afternoon. He and Michèle Montagne, who organizes his show, greet McMenamy warmly. "What do you want to wear?" he asks her.

"The sexy things," she replies.

The three of them reminisce about Lang's show in Japan. "Not even *Tokyo*," McMenamy complains, rolling her eyes.

"Kobe," Montagne explains.

"We're on a plane for eleven hours," McMenamy continues, "then spend three hours on a train, and then we get to this place where you couldn't even shop."

McMenamy tries on her first outfit, a perforated tunic in cocoa-brown synthetic suède over a gold knit minidress,

with brown suède boots; an assistant takes a Polaroid of her in it. She changes into a dress like a giant pom-pom, covered with long brown fabric fringe, and walks the length of the studio for Lang, parting the fringe at her stomach to reveal a plain sheath underneath. He tells her not to do that, to leave what's underneath a mystery, and trims the top layer so that the shape isn't quite so bushy. Next, she tries on a sheer silver organza shift with angel wings outlined in silver sequins on the back. "We try something under it," he tells her. "If it would be less nude, it would be greater."

"Yeah, really," Kristen says. "What happened to the mystery?"

"I think for us she is bringing something really special to the clothes—a kind of sickness," Montagne says. "But a nice sickness. If you have a quite elegant outfit and you put it on a classical, elegant girl, it becomes really boring, somehow, but if you put it on Kristen it becomes modern. Plus, we like her. We have really a kind of family. We are not rethinking our casting every season. Sometimes the agency calls and says 'This girl put on weight,' or 'This girl cut the hair,' or 'This girl is pregnant.' We say, 'Well, we don't care.' Normally, when we like somebody we like them for what they are."

THE fashion-show-as-theatrical-production, which we now take for granted, is in fact a fairly recent development. Before the ready-to-wear raised the stakes—back in the days when fashion's precincts were no bigger than the salons of the haute couture—new collections were presented in the houses themselves, with no music and, often, no bravado. Each model carried a card displaying the number of the outfit; the audience was seated on narrow gilt chairs, two or three rows deep. A veteran fashion editor recalls that when she arrived in Paris in the late forties the models at most houses were an assortment of body types—some short, some tall. At that time, fashion still considered itself a service industry: designers conceived their collections for different kinds of women, and the clothes were presented on the body types for which they were conceived. At the show, a short, small-boned client would pay special attention to the outfits worn by the models who were short and small-

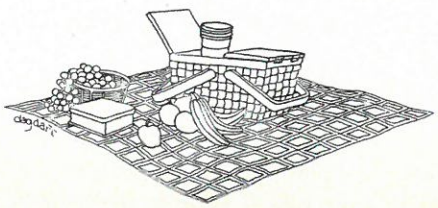
boned: those were the ones that would suit her best. It wasn't until sometime in the seventies that the current standard came to be the rule, and the tall girls prevailed. Not surprisingly, the change came at the time when fashion shows were moving out of the salon and into larger arenas—a convention center in Milan, hotel ballrooms in New York, the tents in Paris. Seen from these longer distances, the tall girls commanded the stage. Today, most runway models start at a hundred and seventy-eight centimetres, or five feet ten, and the manner in which the shows are presented has come to influence the design of the clothes. Martine Sitbon concedes that from time to time she scraps an idea because it's not something that would look good worn by a tall girl on the runway. Only Sybilla and Romeo Gigli defy the norm, setting a hundred and seventy-eight centimetres as a maximum. Gigli says that on a taller girl the proportions of the jackets he designs get distorted.

It was the Japanese—Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto—who first booked photography models for their runway shows, when they brought their collections to Paris in the early eighties. Until then, there had been runway models, girls trained to parade the clothes, who had perfect bodies but not necessarily beautiful faces, and photography models, beautiful girls who, in the language of the business, "didn't know how to walk." Soon the models who dominated the pages of fashion magazines took over the runways as well, and now girls like Evangelista and Turlington seem to be everywhere, conferring their glamour on the collections of the major-league and the would-be-major-league designers so liberally that a big show without them by this time looks a little second-rate, as if the house couldn't afford them.

The lights go down, the music starts, and the excitement sets in: something is about to happen. But, for all the showmanship, the choreography, and the special effects, the experience inevitably feels empty. This is not a ballet or an opera or a play. What we see is not a meditation on the nature of human experience but a fantasy that is sometimes hard to decipher. Instead of being transported to some imaginary setting, outside time, we enter a world in which the here and now is made to seem more urgent than ever. Instead of the technique required to present the choreographer's or the composer's or the playwright's intentions, we get the technique required to present the designer's. Mostly, this consists of walking. Most people, until they've seen a fashion show, never realize that walking could be so complicated. Whether to step with the toes first or with the heel, how to put one foot directly in front of the other, as on a tightrope, so that the hips sway more than usual from side to side, what to do with the arms—these are the technical questions that models confront in the course of their work, and though their "roles" in most cases consist of nothing more than navigating the runway, there's no denying that the way they walk amounts to a performance.

At Jil Sander's show in Milan this season, a burst of applause greets Linda Evangelista's every entrance. Cool, self-possessed, chin down, eyes level, her platinum hair like some Hollywood movie star's halo in a portrait by George Hurrell, she steps out onto the runway as if she owned it, swinging one leg around the other. This season, there seems to be something new in her gaze, something bored or vaguely hostile. "Lin-da! Lin-da!" the photographers call after her as she pivots at the end of the runway and begins the journey upstage. She turns, not immediately but a few seconds later, to let them know that she has thought it over and decided to turn, that she's honoring their request this time but doesn't do everything they ask.

Helena Christensen walks with a rolling, seamless gait, her hips twisting slightly; she gives the photographers a lingering look over her shoulder as she turns. Gisèle, a short-haired Brazilian model with a prominent nose, adjusts her back heel slightly inward with every step forward. The photographers call her name; she smiles in reply. But their favorite by far is Marpessa, with her foxy stride. At the end of the runway she poses—arms akimbo, hips jutting way out to one side, torso at an angle—and basks in their hungry attention.



There is Naomi Campbell's giddy half trot, as if she were ready to dance and were obliged to walk instead, with the sort of sexy syncopation that Tennessee Ernie Ford used to call "a hitch in her git-along." There is Yasmin LeBon's cautious advance, a worried look on her face until she reaches the end of the runway, where her brow clears and she breaks into a small, wry smile, as if to let us know that she is above these clothes she's wearing and this job she's doing. There is Christy Turlington's indolent glide, her arms quiet. Claudia Schiffer, the Brigitte Bardot look-alike with a slight case of piano legs, stumps down the runway—appallingly clumsy. Kirsten Owen, a Canadian girl with short-cropped blond hair, makes her way gravely, chin level, shoulders pinned back, eyes straight forward or down, with a little bounce at the bottom of each step, as if she were sinking into the spongy turf of a putting green after a rainstorm.

In the midst of this company comes McMenamy, with her jangly gait, energetically awkward, almost goony at times but touching somehow—her arms swinging in a rhythm not quite synchronized with her legs, her legs frisky and not quite under control, as if they might run off with her at any moment. The impression she leaves is one of knees and elbows. She travels the route down the runway and back with an air of preoccupation, as if her mind were at work on a difficult problem or were constructing some elaborate fantasy from which she can't afford to be distracted. Gérard Miller, the psychoanalyst who was French *Vogue's* emissary to the haute couture, describes the mannequins' attitude as *au-delà*—their attention is focussed elsewhere, somewhere beyond the room where the show is taking place. They do not play to the audience. Neither does McMenamy. Her manner is equally remote, but, unlike the rest of the girls, who seem to have gone outside themselves as a means of transcending the scrutinizing stares, she seems to have travelled inward, where nobody can follow her.

BEHIND the scenes at Chanel, the supernumeraries are all wearing Chanel jackets and lots of jewelry. One of the hairdressers wears a printed silk Chanel vest over a white T-shirt.

Even the reporters—and the *cabine* is crawling with them, all scrounging for some human-interest detail that will make their stories come poignantly to life—are turned out in what looks to be all the Chanel they could muster. Some have assembled entire outfits, head to toe; others sport a token pair of earrings or a quilted leather bag, worn as a badge, in tribute to, or perhaps as a subtle means of ingratiating themselves with, Karl Lagerfeld, the line's designer.

Yasmin LeBon, who is English and is married to Simon LeBon, the lead singer of Duran Duran, has reported for work this morning with her baby daughter in a carriage. As the TV crews swarm around LeBon, who is sitting still for one of the makeup artists while her daughter plays with a blusher brush, and Evangelista, who is wearing a pink tweed Chanel jacket and jeans, McMenamy tells one of the hairdressers about her screen test. It went well, she says. The director has decided to use subtitles—in French—during her French speeches.

Lagerfeld, sporting his signature ponytail and sunglasses, is sipping a Diet Coke with ice and answering one reporter's questions as others crowd around, waiting their turn. He interrupts the interview to get a fan, which he opens and flicks as he talks. A blond American woman with a TV crew in tow asks him about hemlines. He tells her that any horizontal line cuts a woman, and that he prefers to think vertically, to concentrate on the long, tight line of the arms and legs.

"Some people would say that's a cop-out," she replies. "Where do you see hemlines now, Karl Lagerfeld?"

"I don't see the hemlines anymore," he insists, evidently impatient with her line of questioning.

"You know," she persists, "these American women are *fixated* on hemlines."

He changes the subject, and talks about makeup.

On the outer fringe of the group of journalists clustered around Lagerfeld are two reporters trading information. One has just finished interviewing Christy Turlington. "She's twenty-two, she's engaged, and she's quit smoking," she tells the other.

The blonde interviewing Lagerfeld fires her last question: "Have you gone too funky this time, funky Karl?"

Gilles Dufour, Lagerfeld's right hand

at Chanel, says that McMenamy, who modelled for the pictures in this season's press kit, has "a fantastic way of posing for photographs, a new way of acting with her hands, her face, her legs." He goes on to say, "Every two or three years, there's a new person to come along, and she's the new girl now. We go in her direction."

Lagerfeld calls her "a chameleon, an actress." She is not, he says, "a robo-model." He chose her not only for Chanel but for the publicity photographs for the line he designs under his own name and for the Fendi collection, which he also designs, because, he explains, she's the only model who could look so different, who could give each line a distinct identity. "She is ready to do anything," he says. "For her, the most important thing is the next photo." He flicks his fan. "Also," he adds, "there is something very touching, very vulnerable about her."

In the next room, sitting at one of the tables as a makeup artist puts the finishing touches on her eyes, which are shaded with brown and outlined in black, McMenamy says of Lagerfeld, "He's given me back my pride after I lost it in New York." A hairdresser fits a short black wig over a blue nylon cap covering her hair.

"*Vous allez chercher vos mannequins, s'il vous plaît!*" Dufour calls out, like a town crier, circulating through the crowd. "*On va commencer!*"

McMenamy moves next door and locates her rack, with its poster-board chart listing every outfit: there are separate columns for stockings, scarves, bags, belts, gloves, hats, shoes, and jewelry, and a row of earrings is clipped to the right side. She puts on her first number: a double-breasted black coat, slit to the thigh, lined in red, with an Astrakhan collar, and red snakeskin platform ankle boots, capped, Chanel style, in black at the toe and the heel. A quilted gold leather dog collar is too big and slips down her neck; an assistant pinches it in back and staples it tighter.

"Christy! Helena!" calls a woman clutching a list of the girls in sequence. "Kristen! Gisèle!"

McMenamy falls in line, holding the end of a "leash" attached to the dog collar—a gold chain threaded with black leather—in one hand, like a poodle taking herself for a walk.

"Lisa! Lisa! Karen! Emma! Nadège!"

Gisèle opens her black ciré raincoat like a flasher to reveal a black fishnet body stocking with two black silk camellias—Chanel's signature flower—as pasties.

"Stephanie! Yasmeen!"

This season, Lagerfeld has found his inspiration in the street: in the B-boy style worn by the guys who sell fake-Chanel sweatshirts on the sidewalks in New York; in bikers; in club kids dressed in early-seventies, late-hippie clothes that they bought at the flea market. There are silver quilted leather duckbill caps; black leather motorcycle boots with double-C medallions connecting the ankle straps; rectangular "CHANEL" plates like ID bracelets, the letters cut out, dangling from gold chains; denim suits; bluejeans with the side seams traced in the gold chain that Coco Chanel used to weight the bottom of her classic jacket; chunky gold cuff bracelets in pairs, connected, like handcuffs, by a long chain draping across the back; platform shoes in tweeds that match the suits.

"Jennifer! Kristen! Yasmin LeBon!"

The girls run from the exit to their racks, ripping off earrings, bracelets, necklaces as they go. Chain belts fall to the floor with a clank. Kristen lies down on the floor, and the fitter takes hold of the jeans she's wearing, studded all over with Chanel buttons, and yanks them off with one mighty tug.

"Gisèle! Christy! Helena!"

Victoire de Castellane, one of Lagerfeld's assistants, who often models in the show, stands waiting her turn, wearing a black satin cocktail dress over a black fishnet body stocking, with big earrings clipped to the lobes of black satin Mickey Mouse ears on a headband.

"Gisèle! Gisèle! Gisèle! Gisèle!"

The final passage is a group of full-skirted evening gowns worn with motorcycle boots and quilted leather bomber jackets.

"Karen! Linda!"

Lagerfeld turns up the collar on Evangelista's white leather jacket, banded in black.

"Karen! Karen!"

"*Oui!*" Karen shrieks.

Yasmin LeBon scoops up her daughter, who has been dressed in a pink jumpsuit banded with black satin and fastened with Chanel buttons, and

carries her down the runway, to cheers and applause that combine to make what from backstage sounds like one big, undifferentiated din. Lagerfeld follows. Moments later, a horde from out front surges backstage to congratulate him. André Leon Talley, the creative director of American *Vogue*, arrives, escorting Sylvester Stallone, whose girlfriend modelled in the show.

FASHION models are professionally silent. In photographs and on the runway, they never speak, and so do nothing to contradict the benefit of the doubt we give them on the basis of their looks. We are slow to believe that anyone as beautiful as, say, Helena Christensen or Christy Turlington could be ruthless or stupid or cruel—though we're perfectly prepared to accuse the people we meet as we go about our everyday lives of being all these things. The equation of beauty with virtue is sooner or later, for all of us, disproved by experience, but the idea lingers in some corner of our minds beyond the reach of logic—a remnant of the stories we were told as children, in which we could always count on the witches to be ugly and the good fairies beautiful. In real life, there is no such justice, but there is, in America, at any rate, a long-standing faith that the practice of virtue produces beauty in those who weren't born with it—that, as the saying goes, people by the time they're fifty have the face they deserve. Writing about the early part of this century, Banner says in "American Beauty," "Both feminists and beauty experts argued that spiritual qualities were more important to creating and maintaining the appearance of beauty than were physical attributes. Both argued that beauty was potentially available to any woman, if she followed the proper ethical path."

In a turn-of-the-century beauty manual, which Banner quotes, Ella Adelia Fletcher wrote that a girl's "very earliest observations and intuitions teach her this fact, that Beauty's path through life is a sort of rose-bordered one, a royal progress; for to Beauty the world, big and little, high and low, pays homage." These days, Beauty's path is a narrow catwalk, built several feet above the ground and bordered not by roses but by photographers, and the homage takes the form of fame, movie-star boyfriends, and fees that can range as high as the

fifty thousand dollars Turlington reportedly received for Gianni Versace's show this season. "As the girl ripens into the woman," Fletcher continued, "every experience in life teaches her that her share of its successes and pleasures will be in proportion to her own ability to win favor, to please, and that the first and most potent influence is physical beauty." For all the apparent headway that has been made in women's lives in the past century, this much remains unchanged: beauty is still a crucial issue, dividing girls early on into haves and have-nots, and, to the same extent that some girls' personalities are shaped by their beauty, other girls' personalities are shaped by their lack of it.

Until the world came around and reversed its verdict on her looks, McMenamy was one of the have-nots. Though she has been vindicated, she still carries with her the memory of childhood slights and insults. In fact, it's only lately that she has come to think of herself as "beautiful" at all, and one senses that it's a notion that hasn't entirely sunk in. To all appearances, she has ascended into the ranks of the great beauties of our time, but not without some misgivings, some reluctance to lay claim to the privileges that come with this prime territory. She tries constantly to come up with new poses. Lindbergh says that at a shooting "she's very nervous always that she will not be good enough, that the picture will not be perfect enough." She has, he says, somehow managed to keep a level head, as most successful girls in this business do not; she is not conceited. "She has always doubts about everything," he explains. She has worked hard to justify herself as a model. Contemplating the behavior of some of her colleagues at a shooting, she says, "How dare they just stand there and look beautiful?" Many, if not most, of them are girls who grew up beautiful, girls whose entrance into a room was consistently greeted with smiles. Strangers offered to carry their suitcases. Men wrote them letters and sent them flowers and begged to be allowed to spend the rest of their lives with them, so that over time these girls came to expect the attention, the kindness, the favors that the rest of us, as we grew up, experienced so rarely, so gratefully. Even now, presiding over the runway at Chanel, decked out in the height of the haute couture, at the center of attention, McMenamy seems to find something vaguely amiss in the world's reflex response to a beautiful girl. While the other models greet the crowd's approval as nothing more than they deserve, she seems slightly dazed by it.

Even if she were inclined to take it for granted, though, the fact is that she's never allowed to get used to it for long. Off the runway, she says, she is never noticed. The discrepancy between who McMenamy is in her photographs and who she is in her life is wider for her than it is for most models. "Linda's Linda," she observes. "She looks the same in the street as she does in the picture." The discrepancy may be one of the reasons that McMenamy isn't more widely known as a model. She looks so different from one picture to the next that sometimes her own mother doesn't recognize her.

It often happens that men ask to be introduced to McMenamy on the basis of how she looks in one of her pictures, and when they finally meet her they're disappointed. "They come up to me and say, 'In that beer ad, you were my dream,'" she says. "*Were.* I walk down the street with no makeup on, and people don't look at me twice. And yet when they see me in magazines they think, Hey, I'd really like to get to know *her.* I'm very photogenic, I know, and I look sexy in front of the camera. I'm an exhibitionist. And I love playing." It's easier, she acknowledges, to play at being somebody else in front of the camera than to do it in real life. "What I do in my profession is a little bit wrong, because I'm selling things you don't really need," she says, but without the ring of conviction, as if this were something that someone once accused her of at a dinner party. "If you've got big boobs, it sells bathing suits," she explains. "If you've got a nice face, it sells magazines." But here she becomes more animated, and the words again sound like her own. "I'm selling unreality," she continues matter-of-factly. "But I don't think about that. It's fun for me, because I can be anything. Because it's an illusion. *I'm* an illusion."

—Holly Brubach