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PHOTO BOOTH

## DEBORAH TURBEVILLE'S HAUNTED FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY



By Vince Aletti December 13, 2016



*"Mantova, Italy," 1978, from the series "L'heure Entre Chien et Loup."*

Deborah Turbeville

Although she began her career in the editorial departments at *Mademoiselle* and *Harper's Bazaar*, Deborah Turbeville (1932-2013) always saw herself as a fashion outsider, a maverick. When she turned to photography, at *Vogue* in the nineteen-seventies, that couldn't have been more evident. Her work, almost always in black and white, was atmospheric, theatrical, and more than a little dark. She cast wan, soulful young women who looked more like bookworms or ballet dancers than models, and photographed them in grand but ruined spaces: a shuttered bathhouse, a formal garden going to seed, mansions falling into disrepair. Published alongside the glossy provocations of Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin, Turbeville's haunted, hazy pictures looked like they'd been discovered in an attic and barely dusted off. In between fashion assignments, she photographed at Versailles, in St. Petersburg, and in the estates at Newport, channelling their histories, imagining their dramas. "I wanted to take photographs that were outside time, of people in today's world with the atmosphere of the past reflected in their faces, of palaces and gardens abandoned and overgrown," she wrote. "Photographs that retain a history."

It wasn't until these images were displayed in galleries—whether elegantly framed or simply tacked to the wall—that the full extent of Turbeville's idiosyncrasy was revealed. Nearly thirty of her prints are at Deborah Bell Photographs through January 28th, and many of them are unique, involving collage, unusual processing, handmade paper mounts, handwritten titles or texts, or T-pin fasteners. A portrait of Diana Vreeland is in seventeen parts, arranged in a scrambled grid on an irregular sheet of brown paper; each reveals a different facet of the woman and her long pearl necklace. Turbeville was not interested in the pristine print; she liked rough textures, uneven borders, grain, flare, blur, accidents. As a result, every picture has a spark of life, a lovely quirk. A more orderly grid sets twelve small pictures of a model's face and the sweeping staircase of a Belle Époque Parisian interior into what looks like the storyboard of a Hitchcock dream sequence. But even the single, more straightforward images in the show have a visionary quality, as if these women, these places, were hallucinated, not documented.



Vince Aletti reviews photography exhibitions for *Goings On About Town*. [More](#)