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## Deborah Turbeville: *Collages*

### Highlighting the psychic toll exacted on women in patriarchal societies

by Benjamin Clifford  
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Deborah Turbeville, *Passport*, 1977. Collage of eight gelatin silver prints mounted on paper, 18 x 13 inches. Courtesy Deborah Bell Photographs, New York.

On view

**Deborah Bell Photographs**  
May 3 – June 29, 2019

The collages by Deborah Turbeville currently on view at Deborah Bell draw mainly from the photographer's work in fashion. Turbeville's images are shrouded in a gothic atmosphere of deep shadows and Romantic decay, and her models typically convey alienation or psychological dissociation—not precisely the glamour we expect of luxury advertising. However, Turbeville made her reputation in the 1970s, a decade that saw the fashion world fixated on dark and threatening corners of the collective unconscious. For example, prominent male photographers like Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin, and Chris von Wangenheim—perhaps best known for photographing models with their limbs locked in the jaws of a snarling Doberman—produced images that indulge a variety of voyeuristic, morbid, and sadistic sexual fantasies. Turbeville addresses this violent sensibility using the disjunctive logic of collage, well established by the historical avant-garde as a tool of critique. However, she casts an equally skeptical eye on avant-garde practice itself, and in particular the sexist themes of Surrealism, long influential in the world of fashion.

In Turbeville's work, the female body is fragmented and doubled, uncanny devices that suggest physical or mental trauma. In more than one work, identical or near-identical figures appear next to one another. Typically, one is shown as part of a larger scene while the other is isolated, a remnant that shadows its doppelgänger to unsettling effect. The most striking example of this device appears in *Charles Jourdan/Woolfe Form Dummy Factory* (1974), which draws from images taken for the eponymous designer of women's shoes. In the upper right corner of this collage, two photographs have been partially superimposed, bringing images of the same woman into close proximity. The twinned figures are separated by the torn edge of one of the prints, a rough cleavage that seems to thematize the violence of psychological turmoil. In another work, titled *Passport* (1977), a single face is multiplied into a series of ghostly and ambiguous reflections. The self is thus presented as fractured and inevitably multiple, a subversive play on the notion of unitary identity invoked by the work's title.

Turbeville also frequently presents the body itself as fragmented or partial. We see this, for example, in another collage drawn from the Charles Jourdan shoot, titled *Dummy Factory* (1974). This work features two photographs of contorted models gathered around the limbless torso of a dummy or mannequin, a motif that alludes to the crucial influence of Surrealism on earlier fashion photographers like Horst P. Horst, George Platt Lynes, and, of course, Man Ray. At Deborah Bell a number of images featuring disembodied feet also appear, recalling Surrealist touchstones like Jacques-André Boiffard's 1929 *Big Toe* or Salvador Dalí's contemporaneous, and distinctly pedate, *Bathers*. For these artists, the foot was representative of unconscious impulses rooted in the body, forces antagonistic to rationality, to visual perception, and to the eye. Turbeville, appropriately, frames a number of images—in *Comme des Garçons* (1980) and *L'École de Beaux-Arts, Paris* (1977)—so that the head of her model is cut off, an amputation of both the seat of rational thought and the sense of vision.



Deborah Turbeville, *Comme des Garçons*, 1980. Collage of six gelatin silver prints affixed with

adhesive and/or T-pins to Kraft paper mount, 18 3/16 x 25 5/8 inches. Courtesy Deborah Bell Photographs, New York.

Such attacks on vision are a commonplace of Surrealist art, and were often carried out on the female body. For example, the most famous scene in Dali and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* shows a woman's eye slit open with a razor. Similarly, Max Ernst's 1929 collage cycle *La Femme 100 Têtes* puns on the motif of decapitation—when read aloud, the title approximates the French for "The Woman Without a Head"—and includes frequent allusions to the removal or destruction of eyes. This impulse to mutilation of the female body would reach its climax in the 1930s, with works like André Masson's *Gradiva* and Hans Bellmer's photographs of gruesomely reconfigured dolls: both dramatic testaments to the central role that gendered violence plays in Surrealism.

Turbeville operates at the point where Surrealist misogyny meets the sexualized sadism of a Helmut Newton, but she nonetheless avoids reproducing the symbolic language of male domination. Instead, she highlights the psychic toll exacted on women in patriarchal societies. This is communicated with great clarity by the disaffected and distorted poses she favors for her models—critics have compared their affect to that of drug users—by the atmosphere of ruin and neglect that suffuses her work, and by her insistent characterization of the self as fissured, fractured, or wracked by internal conflict. Crucially, Turbeville shows us that the effects of masculinist ideology are systematic: supposedly radical Surrealists were no less willing than commercially-minded advertisers to develop violent, sexist themes in their representation of the female body. The avant-garde promise of liberation from the values of mainstream society is revealed, ultimately, as yet another prerogative of the male artist.

## Contributor

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