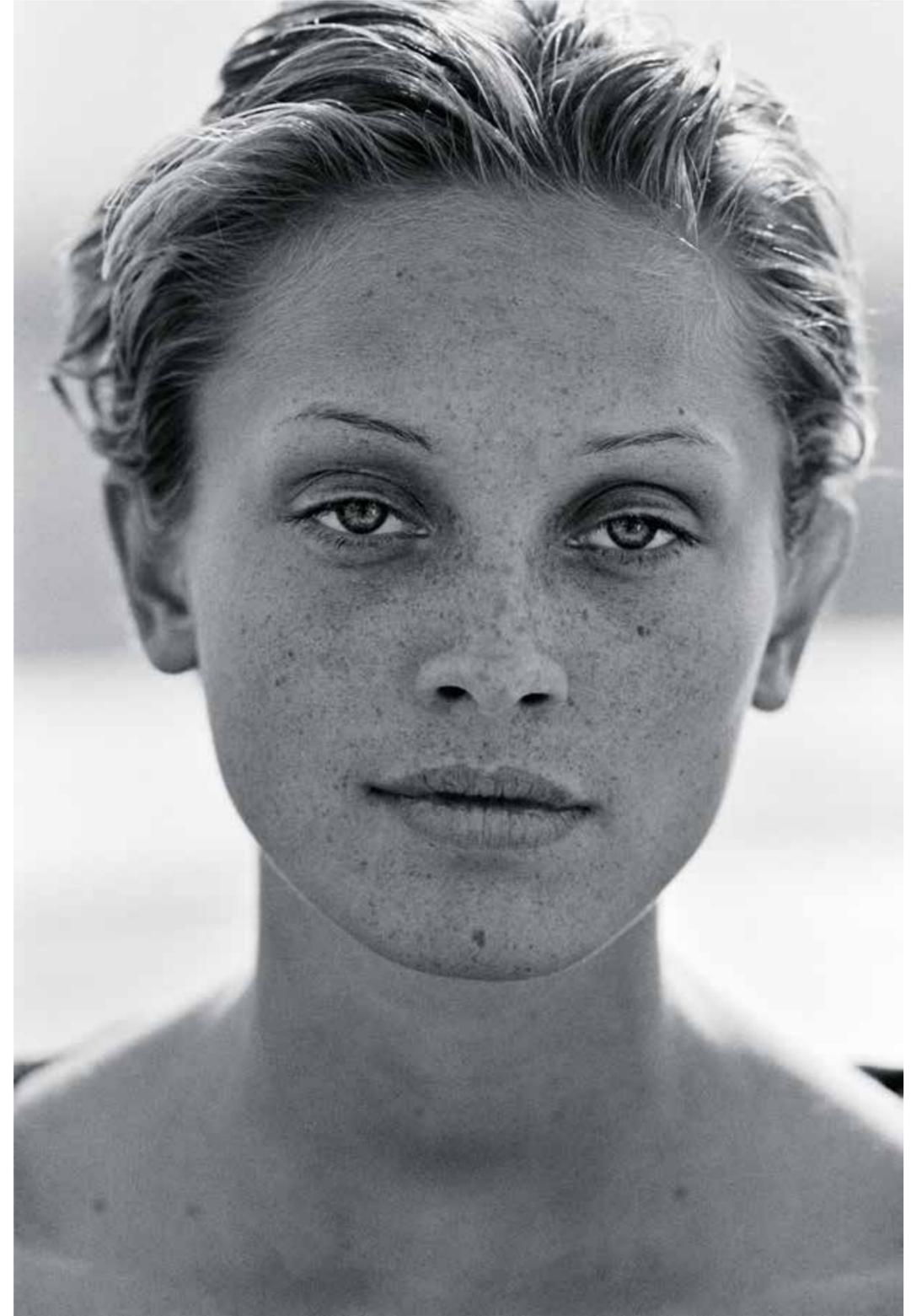
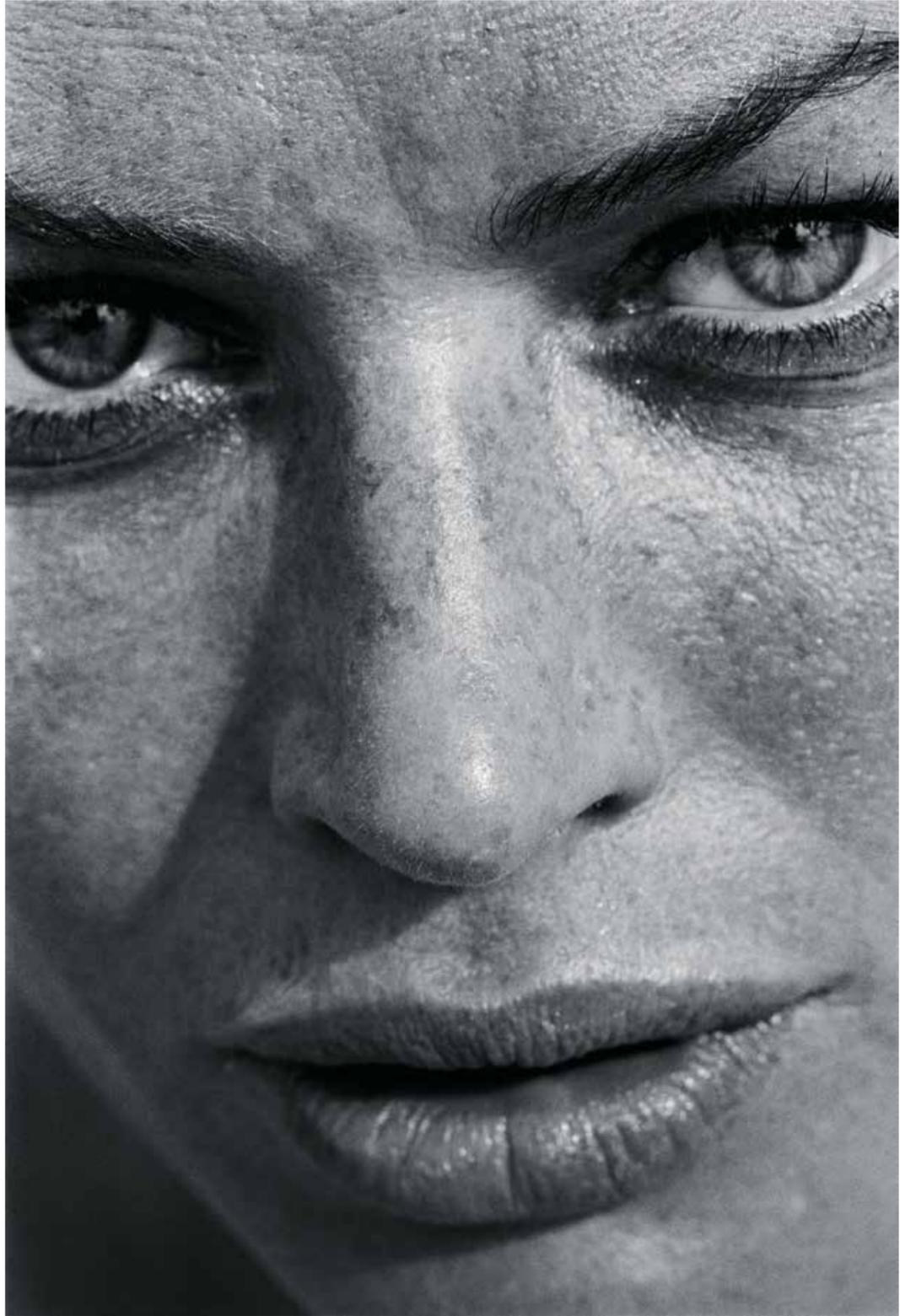


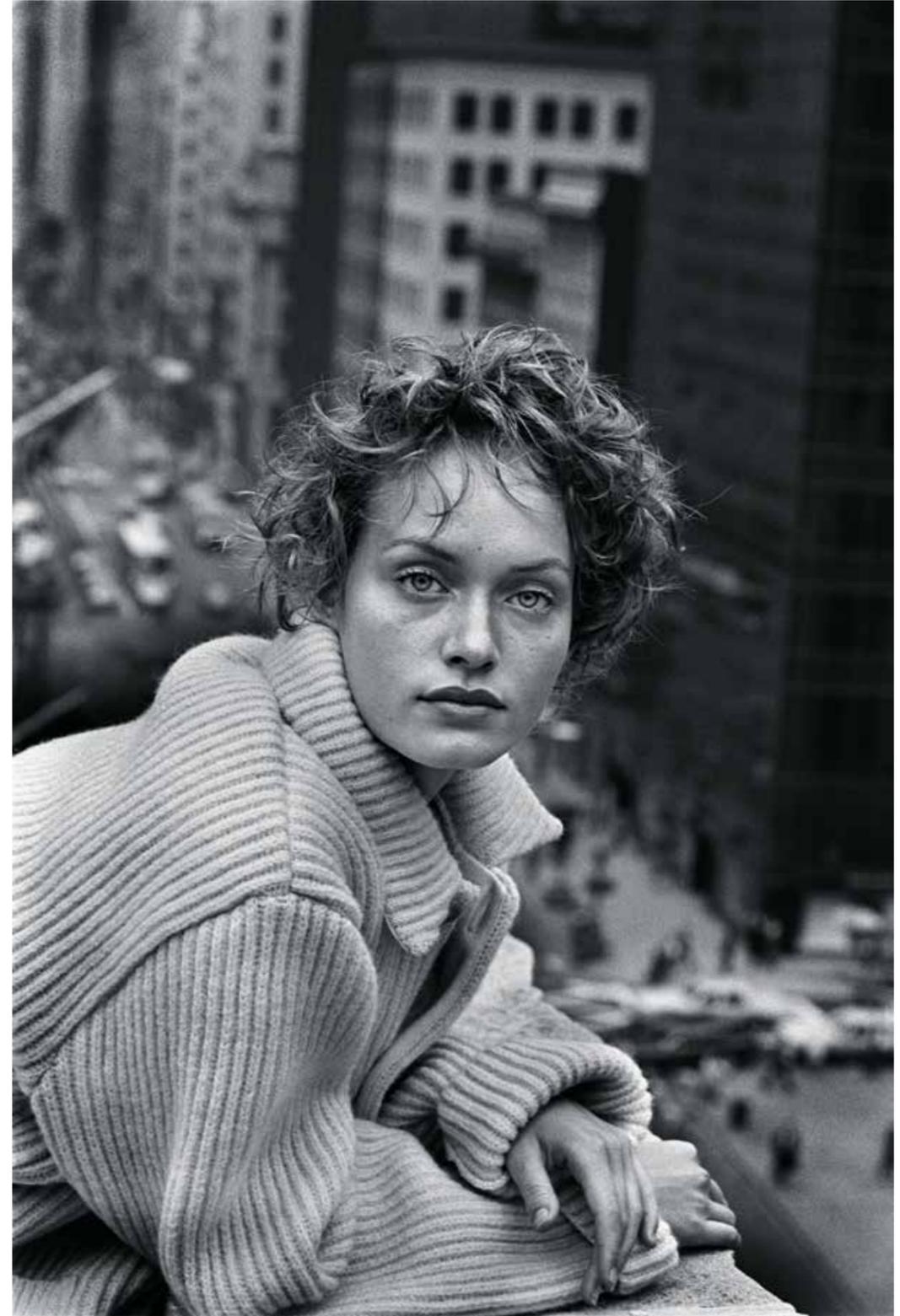
# PETER LINDBERGH

Peter Lindbergh, editorial photograph for "Wanted," *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1993.





Peter Lindbergh, photograph for Pirelli calendar, 1996.



Peter Lindbergh, editorial photograph for "Angels," Harper's Bazaar, December 1993.

**I WAS SHOCKED BY THE AMERICANS.** The invasion of Conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Douglas Huebler hit me right after school (at the College of Art in Krefeld). Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, with its powerful and simple message, fascinated me.

I was in my midtwenties, and had just read a very moving and in-depth essay by Klaus Honnef, one of the most interesting German art critics of the time, about Conceptual art. That essay turned everything I’d just learned about art upside down. As much as I was inspired and intrigued by the idea of Concept art, though, I hesitated to go in that direction with my own work, and decided to take some time to figure out how I wanted to continue. Kosuth and Weiner had ruined my quiet life as an artist!

Eight months later, I was still sitting around recovering when, totally by accident, I found out that a photographer I knew through a friend was looking for an assistant. I went to see him without any technical knowledge; I knew nothing. I had no idea about cameras or lighting. But I got the job and quickly figured out that photography was something I could engage easily and obviously, so I stuck with it.

Even beforehand, I had caught a glimpse of the tensions between “fine art” and “commercial” photography. In 1969, while I was still a student, the art dealer Hans Mayer came to visit. He saw what I was doing—at the time, monotypes—and offered me a solo exhibition at his gallery in Düsseldorf. That was really shocking. Much later, in 1991 or ’92, I was doing photography professionally and living in Paris. Hans came to me again and said, “Let’s do an exhibition.” But by that time I wasn’t keen on doing anything except shooting for magazines. I said, “The magazines are the galleries and the pages are my exhibitions, no?” and he said, “Come on! Are you a magazine salesman or something? Let’s just make a great exhibition.” He was right. So that was what we did.

Perhaps because of these experiences crossing over between magazines and galleries, I don’t see why the fact that a work is commissioned should disqualify it from being considered “fine art,” itself a loaded term. To establish a class war between “commissioned” photography and “fine art” photography is a dangerous form of snobbery. Right now I’m working on an exhibition for the Kunsthal Rotterdam, which will open in September. To make the catalogue, we are looking really far back into my archive, and I’ve realized yet again that there is absolutely no distinction

between my commissioned and noncommissioned images. Separating photography into different categories makes little sense anymore. The uninteresting photographs will end up in wastebaskets and the interesting ones in museums and galleries.

Photographers are chosen for very specific reasons for commissions. Their role is to execute a predetermined concept with little to no space for interpretation. Or they’re chosen for their own unique and established reputation or “brand,” which they may adapt, or not, to the needs of whoever is employing their services. But this does not at all mean that what you’re doing could not be art. After all, art has always been commissioned—from the precise contracts of the old masters to the murals of the twentieth century. Art can be realized under all kinds of circumstances.

Art is, simply put, when someone does something that did not exist in the same way before. For example, I didn’t always get the philosophical idea of documentation-based photography. And I’m not really sure that I like it. But I liked Bernd and Hilla Becher’s work. They did it. They changed the way you look at disappearing water towers, or a house. When I was in art school, I saw an exhibition of Richard Long, a circle of raised earth in a garden. I started seeing walls in the country totally differently. You take things that look exactly the same, but the context is different, and that makes it art—somebody sees something and it changes their perception.

**COMMISSIONS THEMSELVES** can entail a great deal of independence. One of the first times I enjoyed total freedom was while working on a commercial project for *Comme des Garçons* in 1980. Rei Kawakubo asked me to meet with her in Paris; I went to her hotel and, through her translator, she said, “You are my favorite photographer; I want you to do my campaign.” And I said, “Yes, but what’s the campaign about?” She let me see the collection, hanging on a rack in the room. I immediately understood that these clothes had nothing to do with anything I had seen before. I was stunned, and asked her, “So what do you imagine?” And she replied, “You have carte blanche.” Again, I was stunned. Around this time, I was very interested in factories, probably recovering from the dark visuals of my childhood in postwar Germany. I wanted to go back there to start my collaboration with Rei, so I shot the campaign in the factories I remembered. In 1986, the images were shown in a different context, in a solo show at the Centre Pompidou.

**Where does the story come from? Never from the clothes.**

In 1987, I got a call from Alexander Liberman, then the creative director of Condé Nast. He couldn’t understand why I didn’t want to work for American *Vogue*. I told him, “I just can’t take the types of photographs of women that are in your magazine.” This was honest and not intended as a judgment. I simply felt uninspired by the ways women were being photographed. He said: “OK, show me what you mean, show me what kind of women you’re talking about.” I wanted a change from a formal, particularly styled, supposedly “perfect” woman—too concerned about social integration and acceptance—to a more outspoken and adventurous woman, in control of her own life and emancipated from masculine control. A woman who could speak for herself.

A few months later, following Mr. Liberman’s proposition, I put together a group of young and interesting models and we went to the beach in Santa Monica. I shot very simple images; the models wore hardly any makeup, and I wanted everyone dressed the same, in white shirts. This was quite unusual at the time. Linda Evangelista, Christy Turlington, Tatjana Patitz, and Karen Alexander were all there that day.

Back in New York, *Vogue’s* editor in chief at the time, Grace Mirabella, refused to print the images. But six months later, Anna Wintour became the magazine’s editor and discovered the proofs somewhere in a drawer. She put one of them in Condé Nast’s big retrospective book *On the Edge: Images from 100 Years of Vogue* (1992), calling it the most important photograph of the decade. The “super-models” would go on to represent the powerful woman that I had articulated, and their images dominated fashion visuals for the next fifteen years.

For me, it’s really about storytelling. Without a story, it can be quite boring to shoot forty pages for a magazine. A narrative changes everything. My first was for Italian *Vogue* in 1990, and it went like this: Helena Christensen discovered a little Martian who had obviously crashed his UFO somewhere in the Southern California desert. She drove him to Los Angeles and showed him the Santa Monica Pier and Hollywood Boulevard, and then she took him to her home, an old trailer in the middle of nowhere. He fell in love with her. But the Martian received signals through a transmitter radio in the trailer and had no choice but to reunite with his friends, who were desperately trying to rescue him.

So where does the story come from? Never from the clothes, as much as I deeply respect the designers. (I haven’t gone to fashion shows for fifteen years!) Never from other images. Well, you can be inspired by a preexisting image, of course; the idea for the Martian narrative came from a *Skywatcher* magazine that someone had left in a waiting room at the American Hospital in Paris. But it’s really about the story you create at a given moment, beyond any source material.

**DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY** looks heartless and terrible. In my studio, we’ve managed through Photoshop to make a digital image look analog—you would never think it’s digital. I wouldn’t call this mimicking, because I didn’t ask to stop using film. I didn’t ask for digital. It’s just a continuation. I often like images that are printed extremely dark and low contrast, an effect that is very different from the cinematic, high-contrast style of Irving Penn or Richard Avedon. My photographs clearly show texture: fabrics, surfaces, skin, pores, imperfections.

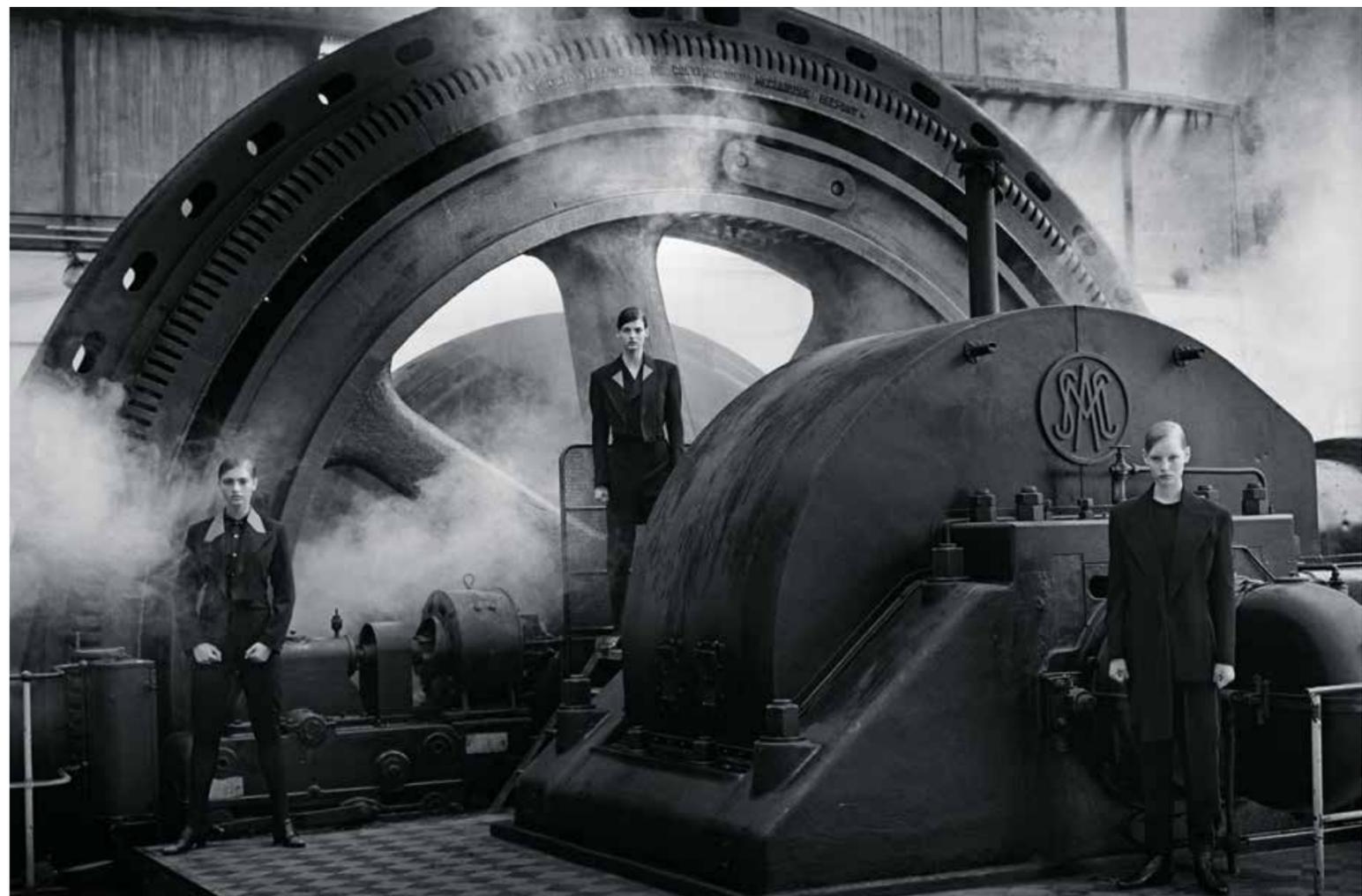
Digital or analog aside, I’ve always preferred 35 mm. On occasion, I’ve used medium or large format. Using 35 mm is more like talking—conversational photography—while larger formats are like a presentation. Thirty-five millimeter is like a part of your body. You talk, and you take pictures; how people react to you and to your camera, that’s what you can get on 35 mm. Many photographers are fetishists. They’re always talking about the camera and not about the pictures. I have an old Nikon. It’s perfect. Don’t worry. It’s not about the camera.

But I think photography has to happen *in* the camera. It doesn’t happen in Photoshop or postproduction. I’m far from being finished with the camera. That’s a kind of restraint, and when you reduce yourself to something, that’s when it gets interesting.

A fashion photographer should contribute to defining the image of the contemporary woman or man in their time, to reflect a certain social or human reality. How surrealistic is today’s commercial agenda to retouch all signs of life and of experience, to retouch the very personal truth of the face itself? □

—*As told to Isabel Flower and Michelle Kuo*

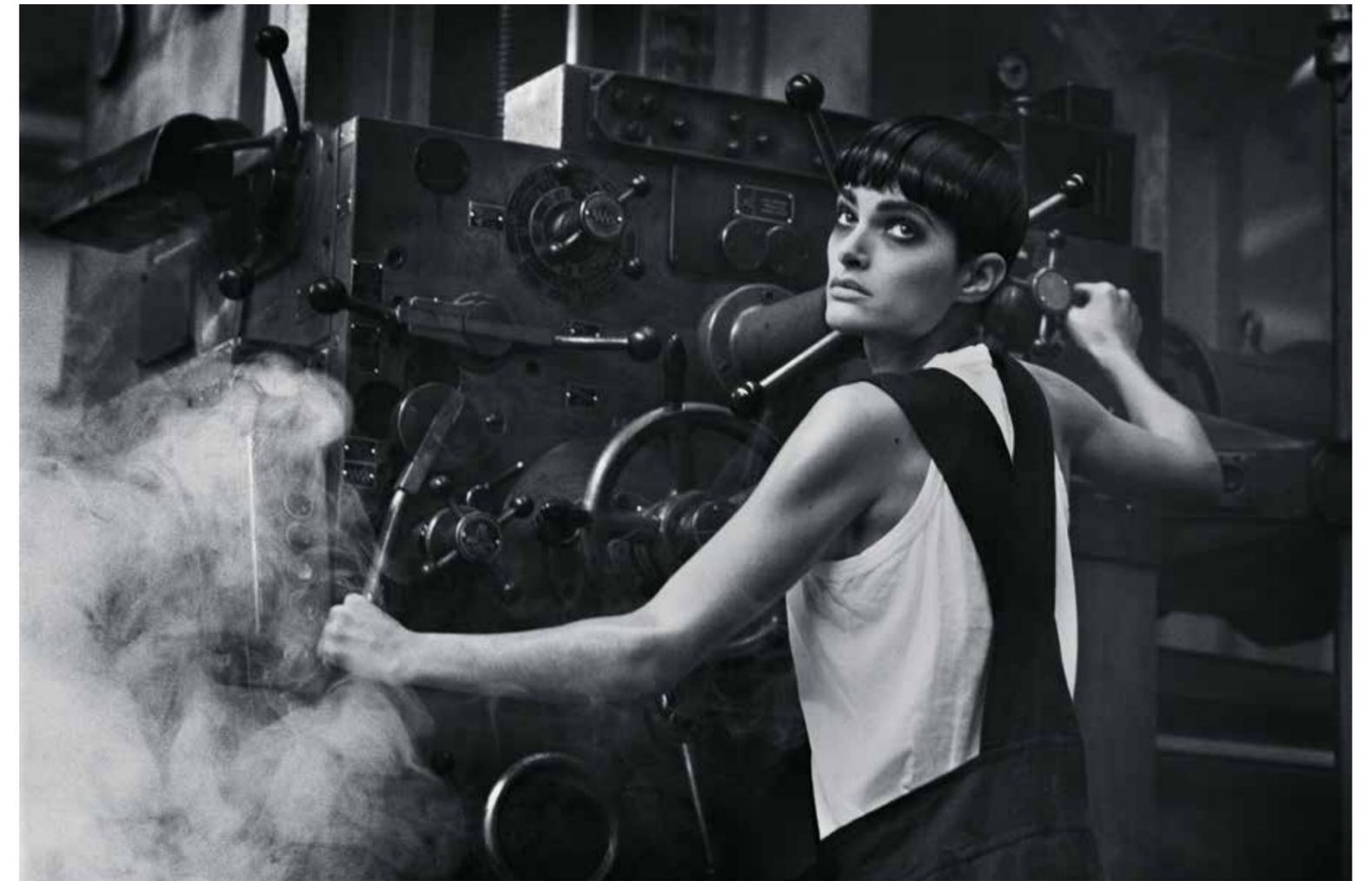
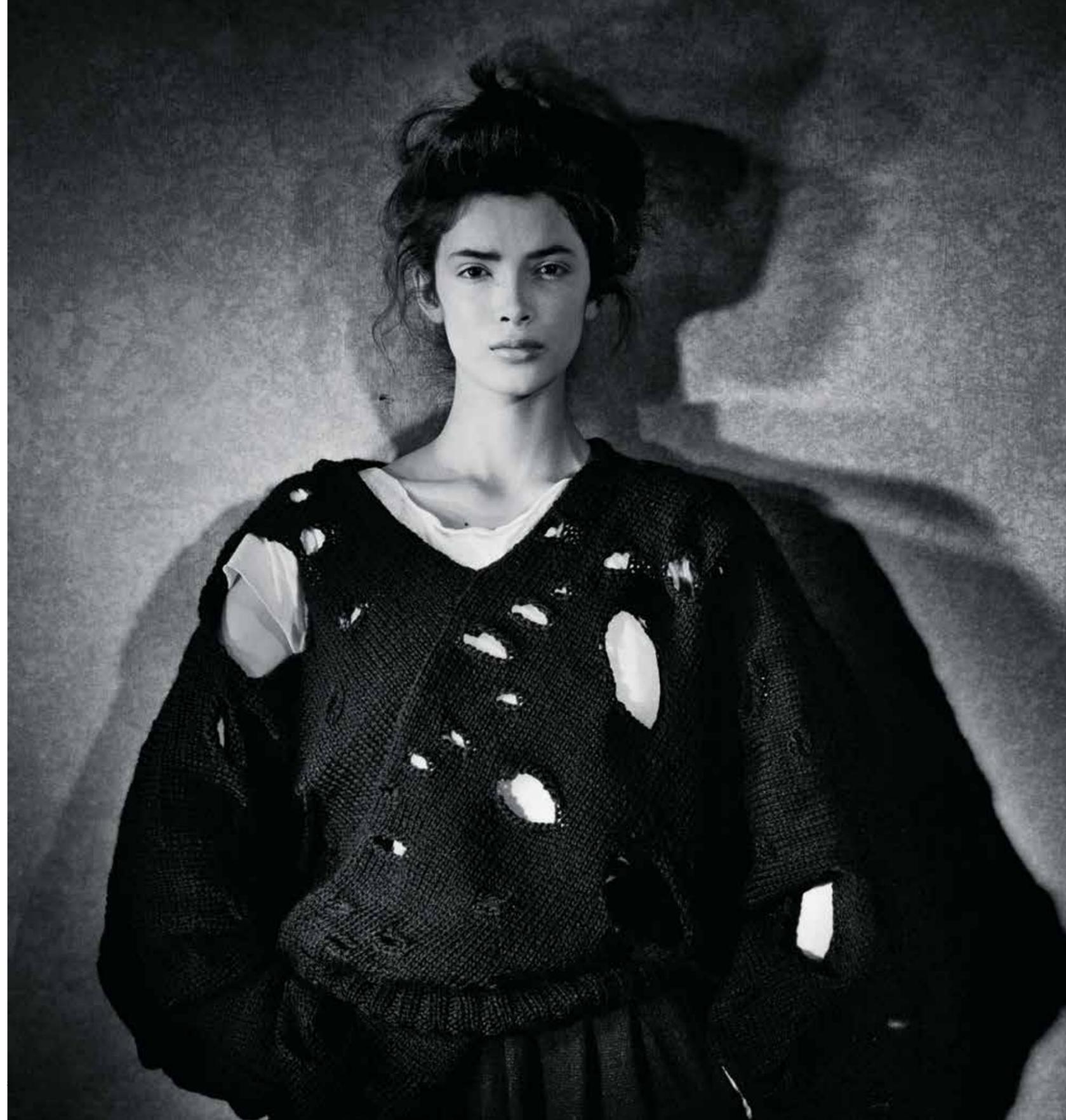
PETER LINDBERGH IS A PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILMMAKER BASED IN PARIS; ARLES, FRANCE; AND NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



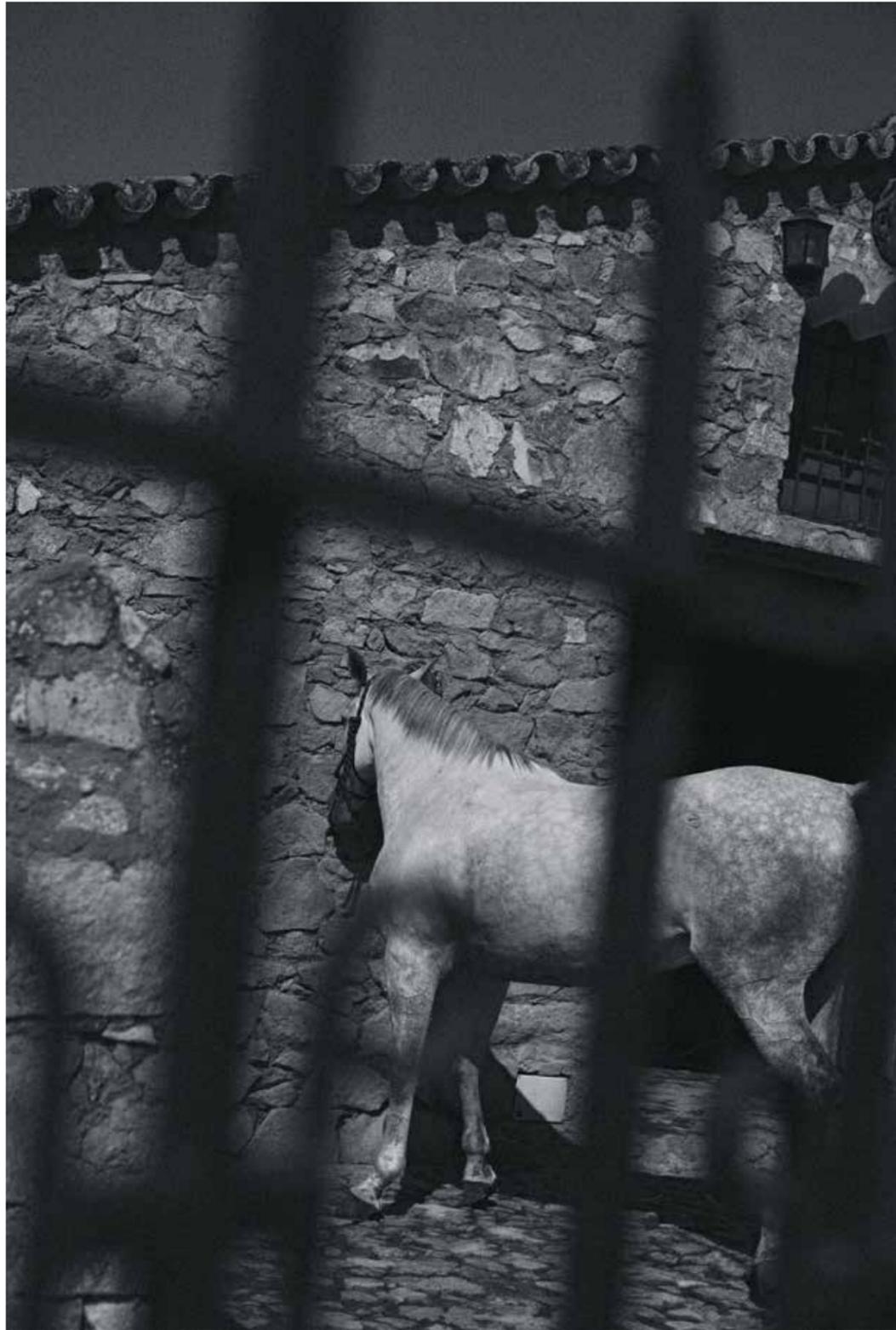
Peter Lindbergh, photograph for Comme des Garçons advertising campaign, spring/summer 1988.



Peter Lindbergh, editorial photograph for "Verso II 2000," *Vogue Italia*, March 1990.



Opposite page: Peter Lindbergh, photograph for Comme des Garçons advertising campaign, fall/winter 1982-83.  
Above: Peter Lindbergh, photograph for Comme des Garçons advertising campaign, spring/summer 1985.



Peter Lindbergh, editorial photograph for "Spain . . .", *Vogue España*, December 2010.

Peter Lindbergh, photograph for Comme des Garçons advertising campaign, fall/winter, 1987-88.

