

Michel Comte

Icons

Opening Thursday 7th March 2019, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 8th March – 18th May 2019

Shadowy shoulders and neckline and a dramatic headpiece frame a familiar face: is it really her? Michel Comte presents the supermodel Naomi Campbell as a mysterious diva from the Charleston era. As dark waves cascading down either side of her face and one of her hands holds a cigarette, she gazes dreamily at the viewer.

Comte is a master of visual seduction, combining glamour and mystery, finding the unseen in familiar images. The celebrated photographer has created works for major fashion houses or famous magazines such as Vogue. Many are now imprinted on our collective memory. Take Cindy Crawford, for example: in 1992 Comte presented the beauty in a sexy Latino bikini. Look at Daryl Hannah's classic pin-up pose from the same year, surrounded by waves of blonde hair and black frills.

Beauties, celebrities, the most talented – Comte's camera has captured them all. His images exude perfection and daring elegance, and symbolise fascinating eroticism and lustful joie de vivre. He portrayed Sylvester Stallone with rose petals. Isabella Rossellini looks sophisticated even in a tiger-striped cloak. His sitters hold Champagne flutes that sparkle like diamonds. Cigarettes are still thought of as "freedom torches". Comte's photographs reflect the edgy 1980s and 1990s, an era of glamorous excess and opulent nonchalance.

Comte's iconic images are celebratory, and his photoshoots often resembled lavish parties. He loved to take his fifteen-strong crew and all his kit to spectacular locations, even to a glacier in the Swiss Engadine valley. He would usually take two suites at the Ritz in Paris. One was his studio; in the other he kept his equipment and took his breaks. He himself often stayed at the Ritz as well. He loved the traditional location charged with history and with stories that created a warmth and an atmosphere in which he captured uncommonly relaxed portraits. He would often ask celebrities and photogenic beauties on a whim to step in front of his camera.

Those who have worked with this storied photographer say that, like no other, he can create a friendly set atmosphere. An artist himself, he speaks the language of creative people. Even a stranger usually leaves a photoshoot as Comte's friend. And he employs music – sometimes with unexpected consequences: Gaia Trussardi, the Italian fashion designer's daughter, responded to the music with floods of tears.

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Born in Zurich in 1954, Comte is a self-taught photographer. He was discovered by Karl Lagerfeld, which launched his meteoric career in fashion's global centres. The success of many of the best-known PR campaigns rests on his images. For many decades, alongside those activities he has also portrayed the stars of art, film and showbusiness: Sophia Loren, Tina Turner, George Clooney, Louise Bourgeois, Carla Bruni, Roger Federer. One of the secrets of his success must be the fact that he gets really close to his subjects – but never too close. Whether Catherine Deneuve in thoughtful mood, or Hollywood rebel Mickey Rourke squeezed into a shower cubicle, or the star artist Jeff Koons embracing his perfectly trimmed poodles as though he were his own work of art – Comte's sitters always retain a certain appeal and mystery. The same is true also for his "nudes", which are both subtle and seductive, and in which Comte uses curves and contours, light and shade to such a sophisticated effect that it is not always easy to tell who the beauty might be in the photograph.

The long-standing star photographer has studios in Los Angeles, Paris and New York City. He is also passionate about reportage and nature photography, and often travels on behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Most recently he has turned his attention to visualising the worrying impacts of climate change and global warming. However, the first solo exhibition of Comte's works at Galerie Andres Thalmann focuses on his glamourous past, and presents a selection of his most iconic images from the raucous 1980s and 1990s.

Alice Henkes

Page 2/2