

Extreme Beauty in Vogue / Edited by Phyllis Posnick.—Milan, Italy: Skira, October 2009.—200 p.: ill.—ISBN 978-8-857-20032-3 (cl.): \$55.00.

EXTREME BEAUTY IN VOGUE



“Extreme beauty” is not exactly a unique title or unique concept, yet, the discourse remains active and poignant, especially when characterized by the intersection of fashion and photography. The latest exhibit and accompanying catalog, *Extreme Beauty in Vogue*, recognizes *Vogue* magazine’s “most memorable images of the past eight decades” and examines beauty from the perspectives of key photographers who contributed to *Vogue* over the years. The work of photographers such as Edward Steichen, Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton, Irving Penn, Steven Klein, Ellen von Unwerth, and Annie Leibovitz distinctly challenge notions of beauty and even focus on contradictions present in ideas of iconic beauty that verge on

the aggressive, violent, or “extreme”. Contributing writer, Eva Respini, associate curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, points out that the “volume is a celebration of beauty but also a revolt against its rules.” Respini’s text “Paradox and Provocation” is concise but informative enough before becoming immersed in the pages of images that follow to the end of the unpaginated book. The strength of the catalog is not in the text or scholarly presentation because it does not include a bibliography, artist chronologies, or any thorough discussion about the history of *Vogue* or the photographers or the imagery. The richness of the catalog is in its quarto size format of approximately 100 images that joins fashion-photography greats on a provocative and always evolving subject.

Eight decades of intelligently-selected imagery provides plentiful complexity to explore concerning culture, convention, aesthetics, women, feminism, beauty, fashion, and photography. Two key pieces of literature on the topic that share the same title will complement this less text-driven but visually evocative presentation on the subject: the catalog from the exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), and the academic compendium, *Extreme Beauty: Aesthetics, Politics, Death* (Continuum, 2002) that traces the development of historical interpretations of beauty. Viewed, shared, and studied in context with these other resources will strengthen the value of this book, though, its open-ended presentation allows for uninterrupted discovery. There is a lot to be said for this approach.

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