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**THE *BEAUTIFUL CORPSE*: VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN IN FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Fashion photography is often disparaged as a commercial endeavor, intended solely to whet the public's appetite for consumer goods and expensive apparel. Only within the past couple of decades has it emerged as a subject of historical analysis. When looking back over decades of fashion photography, it becomes clear that it is a medium that expresses the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, providing an almost uncanny tool for exposing changes in artistic influence, commercial impact, and social and cultural customs in society. It is an important cultural feedback loop that both reflects self-identity and helps shape it. Fashion photography's stylistic evolution from pictorialism of the early 20th century to today's provocative depictions of violence shows us that our notion of morality "is not a set of fixed absolutes stating a monolithic culture's unchanging standards of acceptability, but, rather, constantly shifting beliefs that can be molded and challenged to reflect the myriad social and cultural groups of western culture" (Arnold xiii). For my senior thesis, I want to examine current depictions of sexualized violence against women in fashion photography. Images of bloodied, bruised, and dead-looking models have proliferated in fashion magazine editorials and advertisements since the 1970s and I want to explore why sexualized violence is seen as sexy and compelling advertising, in light of the fact that domestic violence is the greatest cause of injury to women in America and that more than one-third of women slain in this country are killed by their husbands or boyfriends (Kilbourne 277). With these statistics in mind, I hope to disrupt the viewer's apathetic acceptance of violent, sexualized depictions of women in fashion photography by producing my own fashion photographs in locations where actual women were slain in Los Angeles County during the past five years. My hope is that this juxtaposition will drive home the point that violent images are an unacceptable form of commercial speech.

The history of fashion photography is, essentially, a record of photographs made to show or sell clothing or accessories. Fashion photography dates back to the 1850s, but it was not until 1881 that fashion photographs reached widespread circulation with Frederic Eugene Ives' invention and patenting of the halftone printing process, which allowed a photograph to be reproduced and printed on a page the same way as type. With this process, fashion photography made its first appearance in the French periodical *La Mode Pratique* in 1892 (Hall-Duncan 26), yet it wasn't until Condé Nast's purchase of *Vogue*—at the time a small magazine with a circulation of only 14,000—in 1909 that fashion photography began adorning the covers of magazines, which rejuvenated the style of *Vogue* and helped attract a wider, upscale audience (Hall-Duncan 40). From its inception, fashion photography was belittled as transient, superficial and intended to seduce viewers into buying frivolous products. While this criticism informed one aspect of fashion photography, it failed to address the fact that fashion photography has its own artistic integrity and social importance. Many social developments can be traced through fashion, for example, the changing social freedoms of the 1920s are reflected by the loose dress of the flapper and the new liberties sanctioned by the sexual revolution, the women's movement, and the drug culture are reflected by the “anti-fashion” eclecticism of the 1960s.

The fashion photography trend that concerns me had its roots in the 1960s, an era of tumultuous change that even affected the visual arts. The country was fractured as a younger generation challenged past beliefs, traditions, and values. As the nation's “baby boomers” grew up, many sought to change inequities in American society. Worldwide, new film movements began challenging the mainstream notions of filmmaking, epitomized by the French New Wave (Le Nouvelle Vague), from roughly 1959 to 1968, and the New Hollywood movement, from 1967 to 1975, which also shook up film criticism and theory by introducing self-critical,

unconventional narratives led by counter-culture protagonists. As a belated response to the horrors of World War II, many film-makers mounted inquiries into their own national pasts, and the result was large-scale depictions of violence and death (Graham 576). Fashion was influenced by the rise and normalization of violent imagery in the Media. By the 1990s, the fashion industry became “permeated by the themes of decay, decadence and death in an elaboration of what the critic D.A. Miller presciently named ‘morbid culture’” (Evans 194). Brutalized, dead bodies began filling the pages of magazines like *The Face* and *Dazed & Confused*, in the same way that violent images pervaded the modern media, and critics worried that Americans were becoming desensitized to violence.

Fashion photography’s reflective nature is exemplified by a Diesel advertisement from the early 1990s that seems to parody both American excess and America’s morbid fascination with death and crime scenes (Evans 195). The advertisement depicts a multiple car crash with dead models impossibly strewn across cars’ shiny exteriors and the ground.¹ In one corner of the photo, men in business suits, presumably photojournalists, document the scene, while in the other corner of the picture, a vendor sells refreshments to a group of people sitting in lawn chairs, observing the scene. The popcorn that litters the ground suggests that the portly group of observers is American. This is further suggested by the briefcase at the bottom of the photograph that reads “1-800-SUE THEM.” While the birds-eye perspective of the shot channels crime scene photography, the excessive, staged aspect of the image makes it distinctly a fashion photograph that seems to parody the public’s morbid, voyeuristic interest in accidents and crime scenes. The image suggests that the Media’s focus on cartoonish, violent imagery has become a kind of entertainment spectacle in itself, permitting people to exploit victims and make money off misfortune.

While violent, sexualized depictions of women in fashion did not become commonplace until the 1990s, the perverse fascination with women and death was nothing new. In the late nineteenth century, Edgar Allen Poe wrote that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” French caricaturist J.J. Grandville’s 1830 drawing *Journey to Eternity (Voyage pour l’éternité)* of a death-inflicting prostitute portrayed as a skeleton disguised by her beautiful dress and John Everett Millais’ 1851 painting *Ophelia*, which portrays the dreamy and romanticized death by drowning of the Shakespearean figure, are two examples of the period’s fascination with death²⁻³. Sometimes death was attributed to the sexuality of the *femme fatale* character, which was construed to be immoral, echoing fears of the social, economic, and sexual emancipation of women at the turn of the century (Evans 132-136). While many of today’s fashion photographs are reminiscent of Millais’ painting, portraying beautiful female corpses in lush, serene environments, juxtaposing life with the actual deathliness of the scene, a key difference in the motivations behind 19th century depictions distinguishes them from one another. The 19th century painters and writers were trying to come to terms with the terrible finality of death in a world in which many women died in their prime from child birth and diseases like typhus and diphtheria. They grappled with melancholy and grief over the transience of life and beauty in a world plagued by disease and wanton destruction. Today’s depictions have less to do with the tragedy of a life cut short and more to do with a perverse, voyeuristic fascination with violence and gore in female crime scenes. In effect, the current fascination reflects the normalization and de facto acceptance of violence against women.

Japanese artist Izima Kaoru paired death and fashion in his 1995-2008 series of photographs *Landscape with a Corpse*⁴. Kaoru collaborated with actresses and models to act out their ideal deaths, combining high fashion beauty with horror. The title of each image simply

lists the participant's name and the outfit she is wearing, for example, "Tomita Yasuko wears Prada." The deaths vary from gruesome murders to natural seeming deaths, and while there is no reference to the manner of death, some, such as gunshot wounds, are made obvious, while others are left for the viewer's imagination. The images are compositionally romantic and stylized and many use highly saturated and bright colors, reflecting cinematic and fashion influences. When asked what he hopes viewer's see in his photographs in *Interview* magazine, Kaoru stated:

The dignity of death. I think we should not avoid death because we are scared of it but take it as something more peaceful and beautiful, by being conscious of it as a matter close to everyone. What I want to say here is that the 'tragic corpse' can be something disgusting or to feel sorry for but the spirit of the body is most likely already free from the physical pain and is free and in peace. I [feel] that I visualize such a spiritual concept.

I am imagining the point of view of the dead's spirit (Kaoru, "Death Becomes Her").

What Kaoru fails to address, however, is that his images represent more than just spirits set free. They depict murders and deaths of women. We live in a world in which adolescent girls and young women face the horrors of domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse, date rape, marital rape, sexual exploitation, trafficking, female genital mutilation, "honor" killings, femicide, and murder on a daily basis. In the U.S., 81.2 percent of female homicides are sex related and 64.8 percent of the victims and offenders shared an intimate relationship ("Homicide Trends in the U.S."). Kaoru's photographs glamorize a horrifying truth, making death and murder seem more like a perverse dream than a terrifying reality. When asked what his own death fantasy was, Kaoru responded that he didn't fantasize about his own death, making his focus on the deaths of young, beautiful women all the more disturbing.

While death is a very important subject for artistic exploration, whether in literature, film, or art, in recent years advertising has turned toward sexualized depictions of violence and domination over women with shocking frequency. With the mainstreaming of images once confined to pornography, references to bondage are now used to sell men's neckties, shoes, perfume, and watches⁵. The sexual connotation of these ads, however, is "more about disconnection and distance than connection and closeness. It is also more often about power than passion, about violence than violins" (Kilbourne 270). Male violence is subtly encouraged by ads that suggest the most alluring men are forceful and dominant. In one Dolce & Gabbana ad, a man looms over a woman pinned to the ground, as four men watch closely behind him⁶. In an ad that looks so much like gang rape, it begs the question, are the men in the background awaiting their turn? The "bad boy" character in pop culture is often portrayed as the most desirable and sexy, despite the fact that he is known to be the worst kind of man to seek as a romantic partner. He is powerful and dangerous and is encouraged not to take "no" for an answer. Take, for example, a perfume ad whose copy reads: "Apply generously to your neck so he can smell the scent as you shake your head 'no'" or an Old Spice deodorant ad that shows a man leaning over a woman against the wall with "NO" in big type "sweat" in very small print at the bottom of the page⁷. Men are encouraged never to take no for an answer and these ads imply that girls and women don't really mean "no" when they say it.

While some ads are more subtle in their quest to overpower women, others are blatantly violent. An ad that ran in the Czech version of *Elle* magazine portrayed three men attacking a woman. Shockingly, the ad was being used to sell jeans to women. Perhaps the ad was trying to say that the jeans were so desirable that the men meant to steal them, but it is hard to look at an image like that without it evoking a rape scene. The high-fashion world loves to think of itself as

a leader of the provocative and contrarian and often aims to shock in order to receive attention and ad revenue, but the means in which this is achieved should be called into question.

In recent years, ads and editorials have shown women as dead or in the process of being killed. In the 1970s, photographers such as Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin depicted models in sexualized, violent scenes, ranging from Newton's photographs of naked models with guns to Bourdin's images of bloodied and seemingly-dead models⁸⁻⁹. It is a trope that contemporary photographer Steven Klein continues to probe, for example, in his 2006 *Vogue Italia* editorial "State of Emergency" that featured models being arrested, searched and groped by policemen¹⁰. In the most unnerving image of the series, a policeman pins the model to the ground by stepping on her neck. The rise of the "beautiful corpse" has become so common that it was even imitated on *America's Next Top Model* in 2005, in which the contestants posed as corpses in grotesque crime scenes¹¹. Dead-looking models have been used in ads for fashion labels including: Jimmy Choo, Dolce & Gabbana, Lanvin, Louis Vuitton, Duncan Quinn, Missoni, Diesel, Wrangler, Patrick Cox, Calvin Klein, Superette, etc, in addition to editorials in magazines such as *The Face*, *Vogue*, *W*, *Marie Claire*, *Lula*, *Pop*, *Dazed & Confused*, and more. Recently, Bulgarian fashion magazine *I2* received criticism for its appalling "beauty" editorial, which usually serves to highlight trending jewelry or makeup, for its depiction of models with horrific injuries titled "Victim of Beauty."¹² The editorial featured portraits of models with bruised eyes, slit throats, "Glasgow smiles," the wound that results from slashing a person's face from the edges of the mouth to the ears, and models that appeared to have facial piercings brutally ripped out or acid thrown on their faces. This creators of the photo shoot may have considered the shoot tongue-in-cheek because of its title, but not only are the images sickening, they serve no real purpose when it comes to advertising, seeing as the "look" was achieved with special-effects makeup.

Sometimes, even the well-being and treatment of young models have been called into question. A recent *Pop* editorial shot by photographer Tyrone Lebon depicts 16-year-old model Hailey Clauson being strangled by an unseen man¹³. While the very nature of the image is offensive for its glamorization of violence, the fact that Clauson is only 16 and relatively new to the industry (therefore powerless) makes the scene all the more disturbing. Worldwide, up to 50 percent of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16, making young girls one of the most likely groups to suffer from violence at the hands of men (“Fast facts: statistics on violence against women and girls”).

While depictions of violence range broadly in severity among advertisements and editorials, from subtle messages that encourage males to be dominant to blatantly bloody and violent crime scenes, the widespread victimization of women to sexualized violence in an overwhelmingly female industry is very troubling. While the general public prefers to consider itself immune to advertising’s many tricks, most of us are shocked by these illustrations of violence when we pay conscious attention to them. As Joan Didion pointed out in her book *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, “it is possible for people to be the unconscious instruments of values they would strenuously reject on a conscious level” (86-87). While Rebecca Arnold argued in her book *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century* that “Such images represent dark dreams of taking control of the chaos of contemporary life by resorting to violence” (32), she fails to address the fact that nearly all of these violent images portray scenes of violence *against* women. There is nothing empowering in the ad that ran in *Vogue Italia* that depicts a man pointing a gun at a nude woman wrapped in plastic with only a leather briefcase covering her face. Domestic violence is a harrowing part of life for countless

victims in a culture where a rape is reported about once every five minutes, and where nearly one in six women is a victim of rape or attempted rape during her lifetime (“Facts & Quotes”).

While depictions of violence against women in fashion photography do not directly cause violence, one hopes, the constant barrage of terrifying images leads to a normalization and acceptance of objectification, which is the first step in justifying the act of violence itself. Many of us become numb to these images, just as we become numb to the litany of news reporting women being raped, battered, and killed. Domestic violence is the leading cause of female injury in just about every country in the world, and while we may become desensitized to these facts on a conscious level, most women live in a state of continuous subliminal fear. We try not to travel alone after dark, we carry pepper spray, rape whistles, and our keys in our hands. We are told not to dress a certain way, should it send a man the “wrong message” that could result in attack or rape. After all, we live in a rape culture, where the author of a *New York Times* article felt the need to mention that residents of Cleveland, Texas, where an 11-year-old girl was raped by a group of 18 young men and teenage boys in 2011, thought that the victim “dressed older than her age, wearing makeup and fashions more appropriate to a woman in her 20s. She would hang out with teenage boys at a playground” (McKinley Jr.), as if the gang rape of a child was due to that child’s behavior and not due to the behavior of the rapists in question. All women are vulnerable in a culture where “there is such widespread objectification of women’s bodies, such glorification of disconnection, so much violence against women, and such blaming of the victim” (Kilbourne 281). It’s time to consider what message is being sent and picked up by viewers, whether consciously or subliminally, through images that continuously portray women in positions of powerlessness and subjugation, and which suggest women are rightful targets for aggression and violence because they are inferior to men and not only deserve to be dominated,

but want to be. In our culture, men are constantly encouraged that “no” really means “yes” and when a rape or murder happens, often, the blame is placed on the actions of the woman rather than the perpetrator, as “It is women’s bodies, their internal and external parts, that have come to represent the space of danger, desire and unconscious fears about both sexuality and mortality” (Evans 224), upholding the deeply held believe that all women, regardless of age, are the daughters of Eve, corruptive and seductive temptresses in disguise.

By staging my photography project in locations where actual women were slain, or their lifeless bodies were found, particularly those nearest to Claremont, I strive to remind viewers that photographs that glamorize violence against women should not be some sort of morbid fantasy to be played out in fashion and advertising, but, in fact, represent the horrifying fate for countless women each year, so near to where we live and study. With the use of *The Los Angeles Times* online homicide database, I identified recent slayings resulting from domestic violence. Since 2007, 607 women have been slain in Los Angeles County, alone. The database allows searches based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, cause, neighborhood, etc., to help track trends in homicides and provide a forum for readers to remember victims and discuss violence in their communities. The first image of the series was based on the murder of Carmen Placencia, a 44-year-old Latina, whose body was found dumped near the eastbound 210 Freeway near the Monte Vista off-ramp in Claremont on Tuesday, June 29, 2010. Her body was discovered because it was set on fire, although the actual cause of death was a gunshot wound to the neck. While I was unable to stage my photo shoot in the exact location due to safety reasons, I restaged the murder on a gravel road about a block away from the Monte Vista off-ramp. The model lies on sunset-lit pavement, pale and seemingly lifeless, with bruised looking eyes and blood dripping down her neck. She wears a BOSS Orange chunky knit sweater, one of fall’s trending looks, black J Brand

skinny jeans, which are now considered a staple of every woman's wardrobe, and a knit hat. Her look is simple and minimalist; the only piece of jewelry highlighted in her Etsy clock necklace, signifying the stopping of time with the end of her life. The color palette is subdued, allowing her clothing to blend in with the sun-lit pavement, emphasizing the blood on her neck¹⁴.

The second image depicts a woman lying in an empty street in front of a dark house at the intersection of Glenpark Street and Bellevue Avenue in Pomona, where Roberta Romero, a 24-year-old Latina from West Covina, was shot to death on Monday, May 11, 2009. The model wears a tan Avant Premiere trench coat, an item synonymous with fall, matching tan Mango dress and belt, Bettie Page pumps, and a grey Longchamp Paris handbag. The photo is dark and ominous and the void of color matches the deathliness of the scene and the shadows evoke a fear of the unknown killer¹⁵.

The third image portrays the murder of Lorraine Minjarez, a 32-year-old Latina, whose body was found at the 1.34-mile marker on Mt. Baldy Road in the Angeles National Forest on Saturday, November 7, 2009. Ed Winter, a spokesman for the coroner's office, said she was strangled and her neck had been slashed several times. In the restaged image, the deathliness of the scene is reinforced by the desolation of the mountain scene. The model's disfigured body lies on top of a heap of jagged rocks and rubble. The redness of the blood coming from her strangled neck is highlighted by one vintage red Etsy bracelet and red suede J. Crew flats. She wears a fur Vince vest, what *Glamour* magazine dubbed a "must-have" this season, along with 7 For All Mankind navy skinny jeans and a sheer cotton Urban Outfitters tank¹⁶.

The fourth image is set at a Motel 6 in the 2400 block of South Garvey Avenue in Pomona, where Nelssa Tovar, a 31-year-old Latina, died of a gunshot wound to the head on Saturday, February 28, 2009. Tovar was found at the motel at about 1:30 a.m. and had multiple

gunshot wounds. For my photo shoot, the model's corpse lies in front of two dark rooms, blood seeping out of her head onto the ground, forming a black puddle. She wears a timeless "little black dress" by Gap, with a black Adrienne Landau fur coat, black Donald J Pliner kitten heels, and a Frye clutch. Her classic, all-black evening look is juxtaposed against the medicinal green motel doors and eerie fluorescent lighting. She seems out of place, highlighting the disjunction between the setting and the clothing¹⁷.

The fifth and final image depicts the murder of Felicitas Vallejo, a 51-year-old Latina woman, who was allegedly stabbed to death in a domestic dispute. She was pronounced dead in the 2100 block of Powers Street in Pomona at 6:33am on Monday, May 12, 2008. In the photograph, the model's corpse lies in the street, her gold Haute Hippie dress emphasized by the gold fall leaves that surround her. A knife is stuck in her leg, immediately drawing attention the red streaks of blood that cover her legs down to her Steve Madden black pumps. Her skin is blanched and deathly and she appears greatly out of place in this suburban landscape in her Calvin Klein leather jacket and Ray Ban sunglasses that lie in the palm of one hand¹⁸.

The photographs are largely monochromatic and devoid of color, with the exception of red highlights that stand out against the gold hue of the leaves or sunset-lit pavement. The time of day ranges from morning to night in each image, recalling the time of day of the actual homicides. The models seem out of place in their environments, which contrasts fashion's glamorous depictions of crime scenes and violence with the banal settings of actual homicides. The photographs are creepy and unsettling to look at, but, simultaneously, pique a perverse interest in the viewer. During the shooting of the project, I was struck by the amount of concern we received from bystanders and passersby. I was approached by several people in each location, who expressed obvious concern for what happened and asked if we needed help. The concern of

others was reassuring yet very saddening because it showed that horrible scenes like this were not outside the realm of possibility for many people. In contrast to Claremont's four homicides since 2007, Pomona counts 107. We live in a world plagued by violence and by creating my own violent, fashion photographs in actual homicide locations, I hoped to jar the viewer out of neutrality and expose violent advertisements and editorials for what they are: objectifying, exploitative, and perverse expressions of hostility against women. The images abuse and demean commercial speech privileges and glamorize and trivialize horrific, actual experiences of violence suffered by countless women.

Picture Index



¹Pierre Winther, Diesel *Successful Living* advertising campaign, 1994.



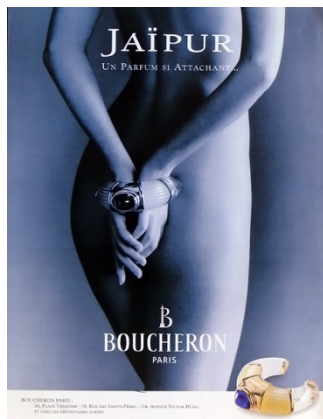
²J.J. Grandville, *Journey to Eternity (Voyage pour l'éternité)*, 1830



³John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851



⁴Izima Kaoru, *Landscape with a Corpse*, 1995-2008



⁵MAX Shoes, unknown
Jaipur by Boucheron, 1995



⁶Steven Klein, Dolce & Gabbana, 2007



⁷Fetish
Perfume by
Dana, 1997



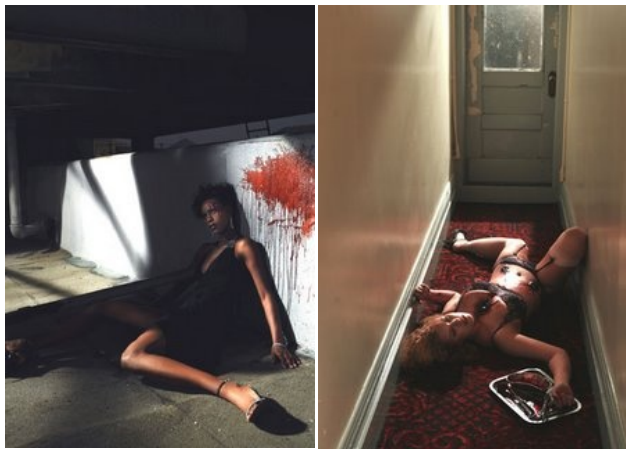
⁸Helmut Newton, unknown



⁹Guy Bourdin, unknown



¹⁰Steven Klein, *State of Emergency*, Vogue Italia, 2006.



¹¹America's Next Top Model, 2005.



¹²Vasil Germanov, *Victim of Beauty*, 12 Magazine, 2012.



¹³Tyrone Lebon, *This is pop too: LDN ^ _ ^*, Pop Magazine, 2012.



¹⁴Susan Bryant, 2012.



¹⁵Susan Bryant, 2012.



¹⁶Susan Bryant, 2012.



¹⁷Susan Bryant, 2012.



¹⁸Susan Bryant, 2012.

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