

Whatever you do, don't say the word "fashion." But nevertheless, we show up in a car with a stylist and a trunk full of fashion items we'll unpack later, under a blazing sun. We're back in Austin, Texas, known territory. Even if they're not always familiar, the streets, colors and faces produce a certain feeling of déjà vu. Back in Austin, a city with its own distinct rules, rituals and enduring underground teenage culture. We run into girls who've posed for you before. They haven't changed much; they're just slightly older, some of them about to emerge from adolescence, others already women. A few have left - we'll go all the way to California to shoot one of them. Later we'll meet new girls, by chance on the streets and through friends. In turn, they, too, will pose for you. It's just like five years ago, in 2003, only a little different, like a slightly modified replication of what we did then.

So we never talk about fashion. A way of distancing yourself from a world where you don't necessarily feel at home, of not getting the models too psyched up, and, finally and above all, of not too hastily defining a territory with its stereotypes and habits. To give it a name would mean circumscribing a practice in advance - locking in it. That's how it's always been with Lise Sarfati. She seems reluctant to put what she does into words, except in negative terms: this isn't fashion photography, she explains. So what is it? Full-length portraits? Why not? We shouldn't let the models' lack of expression confuse us. These photos have a highly sociological dimension, and are infused with psychological content. But that term is too aesthetically freighted, too linked to other kinds of art and other, older practices, to be appropriate here. Should we call them "figure studies," in the sense of the old term for what was once considered a genre in itself? Maybe that would be more accurate. Each of these photos literally records the distance between a body and the space that surrounds it, and in that way, metaphorically (and this time very consciously) constructs a relationship between the model and the world around her. In the choreography of the bodies, these shots of teenagers, whether taken in Moscow, Ikcha, Saint Petersburg, Vilnius, Berkeley, Oakland or Austin, convey a feeling of being out of phase with the world. Obvious or suggested, playful, painful or indifferent, this sense, often bordering on an absence from the world, is what all the models have in common. In this account, adolescence is a constant state of becoming. These teenage girls resist any attempt to pin them down, and pose an awesome challenge to the act of photographically recording them.

All these girls are located simultaneously in the here and now of the picture and an indefinable elsewhere. This fundamental ubiquity is, to my mind, the reason for Sarfati's interest in young models. She likes to cite Gombrowicz and his fondness for the concept of immaturity - a secret revolt, a silent refusal, a game played with life and reality, and especially the idea of a subject both malleable and yet elusive, who always, in the end, slips away. Thus the idea of adolescence as a territory we've all explored but that now remains beyond our reach and comprehension. If all portraiture can be conceived as a confrontation between various selves (the social self, the private self - here we recall Barthes' words, "In front of the camera I am simultaneously who I think I am and who I'd like people to think I am"), with teenage models this confrontation takes on a unique dimension.

This basic dimension, present in her previous series, reappears here as well. This is not work with amateur models done in the name of a search for some truth or other, "real life" contrasted to the supposedly artificial world of fashion. That's already been done a hundred times, sometimes successfully, and there's not much reason to do it again. Of far more interest here is the very close, very powerful internal link between

this new set of photos and Sarfati's previous work, particularly the pictures she made in several American cities, including Austin, published in her 2005 book *The New Life*. Actually, what most attracts our eye and our attention is exactly this proximity, the odd impression that with this Fashion Magazine commission Sarfati consciously went back to the same sites she photographed before, to redo what she did five years ago. Like a throbbing feeling of *déjà vu*, a stuttering in time, looking at these photos is like the experience of meeting someone you think you know and at the same time feeling confused because the apparently familiar face seems to have slightly changed.

These girls aren't exactly the same. Obviously the fact that an identical repetition is impossible is not the only reason. The models from last time have gotten older and changed; others have replaced them. New settings and interiors have succeeded the old ones. But more, Sarfati's approach itself has also slightly shifted. Adolescence is a period of constant role-playing, of being traversed by multiple, contradictory and fleeting identities assumed one after another depending on the interlocutor, often dramatically contrasting. Teenagers are insincere by definition, and how they dress is a privileged mode of expression of that insincerity. Sarfati knows that and plays with it. Sheathed in new clothes, these models are no longer completely themselves. Now they're acting, undoubtedly a little more today than at other times. They're not just wearing a different pair of shoes, blouse or dress. They've slipped into a different skin - they become someone else. The artist's interest in the figure of the double, manifested by the presence of narcissistic mirror reflections and the motif of sisters, accentuates, in many of these pictures, this impression of a copy or a double.

Despite the geographic and temporal distance that separates Sarfati's work from that of the Victorian photographer Lady Hawarden, when you see the latter's tableaux vivants, with their indeterminate content, made in her London apartment in the 1850s, it's hard not to draw a parallel. Both women use similar elements and artifices in an attempt to define the respective territories of childhood, adolescence and adult womanhood, and to record possible becomings. If we had to add a more contemporary filiation, perhaps we should look to the Yale school, a tradition very much in the American spirit, initially dominated by the documentary style of Walker Evans, that later evolved towards a more pronounced theatricality with photographers like Phillip Lorca diCorcia (and even more with Gregory Crewdson). The images in Sarfati's current series, with their restrained narrative and subtly suggested staging, can be situated somewhere in that neighborhood.

This theatricality is in no way ostentatious or simply fabricated. In that sense, many of these photos could have easily appeared in *The New Life*. Yet the simple choice of a different, exterior item of clothing imperceptibly shifts them elsewhere, detaches them just slightly from their quotidian context, as if the normal course of events had gone off track just a little. There's no obvious disparity or mannerist dissonance between the clothing, the model and her environment in these photos. The contrast between the sophistication of certain getups and the middle class reality of American suburbia is there, but it's totally unlabored. The clothing always seems to have been chosen to match the model, and the logic is one of verisimilitude - each young woman projects a character she has chosen, but remains completely in harmony with her own natural context and setting. In accord with Sarfati's photographic maieutics, they're all full participants in the final photo's *mise en scène*, in what the artist calls "a ritual made new and different every time." The shot is more the result of an exchange than "the domination of a subject by a camera operator."

Thus the change induced by the apparel has nothing in common with metamorphosis. It is even impercep-

tible sometimes. In any case, the clothing never seems to be a disguise under which the model disappears. Shoes with exaggeratedly high heels, a slightly too sophisticated blouse, a print that's not quite appropriate, a little too much makeup - all these are furtive signs that serve, for the attentive viewer, as signals, as punctums, to use Barthes' term, that render the real slightly uncertain. Here clothing is never more than an accessory, literally and figuratively. Incidental and in many of these photos secondary, still it turns out to be totally necessary to the crystallization of the fiction, the element that allows the viewer to access a possible narrative.

Sarfati is fully conscious of the fictional pull that is more pronounced in this work than previously. When talking about these girls, she usually refers to them as characters. She calls the stylist who accompanies her a costumer. These slips reveal what's going on here, which becomes obvious in the layout choices when the photos are arranged into magazine spreads. Whereas *The New Life* emphasized isolated moments, offering a fragmented, kaleidoscopic vision in which certain models reappear several times in the course of the book, here she opts for a more sequential approach, a series of consecutive photos, each of a different girl, in which every shot could be a movie still. This reinforces the openness to narrative. As the pages go by, the models increasingly assume the status of characters and one short story follows another. Further, the format is like that of a collection of short stories, the kind where the important part is what's not said, like in a Raymond Carter book. The ensemble is intercut with other images, which, we realize little by little, are ads. Obeying, in their formal choices, the same rules as photos of fashion models, they don't interrupt the visual continuum but nonetheless act like short intermissions - still photos, still lifes - between two narrative takes.

In considering this ensemble, it seems appropriate to cite other American references, particularly Cindy Sherman's work, such as her 1970s *Film Stills*. In an oeuvre thoroughly marked by the disguising and staging of the self, Sherman has repeatedly taken an interest in fashion and the aesthetics of fashion photography, notably in the *Fashion* series (1983-84 and 1993-94), *Pink Robes* (1994) and her more commercial and recent work for Balenciaga in 2007. But this Sarfati series has more in common with the *Stills* than Sherman's fashion-oriented production. While the pieces in this ensemble, with their fictional charge, do seem like stills, the fiction here is of an entirely different quality, less epic, stripped of artistic and filmic references, less critical and referential, in a way less postmodern. Whereas Sherman's pseudo set photography evokes post-war classic movies (with leading lady types ranging from Italian neorealism to Hollywood), Sarfati's images offer a more modest and vernacular fiction anchored in the quotidian of the comfortable middle class American way of life. A sort of narrative sketch, neither baroque nor extravagant, in which fashion items, by introducing a subtle perturbation in relation to her previous series, serve as the vehicle or even the detonator. As if, quite literally and consciously, Sarfati had opted to revisit her previous work, a kind of costumed remake of *The New Life*.

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