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YOU
TALK
ABOUT

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Interview by Joël Vacheron

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CAN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND, AND HOW YOU BECAME A PHOTOGRAPHER?

I am a huge devotee of photography, but I am not a photographer. I spend a large portion of my life dealing with photography, and a lot of people consider me as an image hoarder because that is what is portrayed on social media. However, I am a graphic designer by trade. I was born in Jordan (my parents are Palestinian) and I spent most of my formative years in Europe. When I was living in London as a child, I became obsessed with the visual world. I would take my mother's magazines, cut them up, and rearrange them in a scrapbook. I did not know why I was doing it, but I knew I had an obsession with images. Fast-forward a few years, I went to art school, graduated, and became a graphic designer. In my mind I am still a graphic designer, although I have since ascended to more senior positions in big companies. So, I live this double life, which is corporate executive, senior manager, and creative director for big beauty brands by day and everything else at night. I have been living in New York City for 25 years. We moved here from Paris with my husband when I was pregnant with my first child and thought, "I do not want to live in Paris anymore. This is not the right place to be" (Chirac had just become president). So we moved to New York, where we did not know anyone, and we restarted our careers from scratch.

COULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ACTIVITIES AS A CREATIVE DIRECTOR AND WHY PHOTOGRAPHY IS A PIVOTAL ASPECT OF THIS ACTIVITY?

As a creative director I find that visuals, photography, packaging, colour, and three-dimensional objects are

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prevalent. At the same time, the digital space has also become important, and marketing, PR and publicity are now digitally focused. I find this fascinating because I love the digital world. I also love the tactile world, do not get me wrong, I still love the printed page. When I left art school, there was not a single computer on campus, and at my first job at *Condé Nast* in Paris we were pasting graphics up by hand. The greatest technology that came into our industry at the time was the photocopy machine which changed everything for us since we did not have to resize things with a pencil and a piece of paper. Now, 30 years later, the entire world has changed. In the early 2000's, I worked at *Estée Lauder* and then, for almost a decade, as creative director for another beauty brand. Then, I lived in Japan for two years and was the creative director for *Shiseido*. I think I was their first foreign creative director in their hundred and fifty year history. I am currently the creative director for *Revlon* which is one of the biggest beauty brands in the world: a mass brand. This situation is a first for me because I had always worked in luxury and prestige. Today, *Revlon* is attempting a renaissance of sorts because it has lost its way over the last two decades. It was visually a strong brand for many years. It had many firsts. For example, Richard Avedon photographed the first advertising campaign and *Revlon* actually invented opaque nail polish. I know that it sounds trivial, but nail polish is important to women today; getting your nails done is like brushing your teeth. So *Revlon* was a very forward-thinking company. We are talking about a legacy of extraordinary photographers and extraordinary works that got lost about two decades ago. It was once a creative-driven company but then, like most companies, it became marketing, data, and focus group driven. It is still the case today and it is my biggest battle. I do not think that today's corporate structure works. We have built these bloated and dysfunctional companies

that do not produce good work and COVID-19 has brought this problem to the surface. I believe that America is going to rethink its corporate structures across every company and I hope that it is going to be for the better because for there is nothing I rage against more than a corporate structure. As I have said before, I have this double life. I rage against the man and yet, to some degree, I am the man; but when I am inside I do not consider myself one. The corporations see me as rebellious, but some of them forgive me because I ultimately do good work. The work I do brings results but I have to fight all the way.

IN THE WORLD OF FASHION, INFLUENCERS AND DIFFERENT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, LIKE INSTAGRAM, HAVE COMPLETELY RESHUFFLED THE GAME. YOU ALSO SEEM TO BE PRETTY INVOLVED IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND, SINCE IT LEADS US TO YOUR PROJECT AT MBAL, COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT HOW YOU DEAL WITH IT?

My social media channel is very personal. It is interesting because corporations have been struggling with questions like, “What do we do with people who do not share their companies’ opinions and who are too outspoken, volatile, and risky?” In America – I do not know if this is the same in Europe because I have not worked there in 25 years – the company owns you to a large degree. Your views have to match with theirs. This is absolutely not the case with my social media. I have thought about it but I refused to adhere to these unwritten rules. My social media reflects my perspective. For example, when I work for one specific beauty brand, it does not stop me from featuring rival brands I admire. Many people came to me and said, “How can you do that if you work for this brand?” My point of view is that we

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all live in the same world. We cannot negate what is going on, and if I feel that something is aesthetically pleasing or that it speaks to me, I am not going to ignore it or pretend that it does not exist. That is ridiculous. I also like to hack the system. On Instagram, for example, you are supposed to adhere to a square format but I decided that it was too rigid for me. I took that square and broke it up to create a format that works for me. It is a mental challenge for me and for anyone interested in delivering at delivers a more nuanced message. We are living in very interesting times right now: COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, Defund the Police, the riots and the protests etc. have basically opened up the situation and allowed everybody to say whatever they want. Corporations are afraid to offend at this point, so everyone is screaming whatever is on their mind and in their hearts. I have been posting about political things, I screamed at the NYPD...no one has tapped on my shoulder yet and told me to stop! And as far as Instagram’s ‘Influencers’ are concerned, I personally have nothing to do with any of this and I hope that this bubble will burst very very soon.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT HOW YOU STARTED TO DOCUMENT THE RIOTS? WHAT DROVE YOU TO TAKE YOUR CAMERA AND GO?

There are so many layers to this story. Friday, March 13th was the last day we were in the office; our lives changed dramatically after that. We were told to go home and to come back in a week or two, but I woke up on Monday morning and New York City had literally changed overnight. I live in SoHo which is usually filled with tourists, noise, and 24-hour activity. When I looked outside of my window, it was deathly silent. I could actually hear the birds for the first time ever. Initially we

all panicked. We did not know what to do with ourselves. That Monday morning after we were all sent home, I did not know how I was going to function because I had gotten so used to this routine of getting up, having breakfast, going to work, etc. seeing people, going out to restaurants. The city shut down from one day to the next. The stores closed. Things were strained because New York City was the number one hot spot for COVID in the world. The city was in a state of emergency; there were not enough ventilators or PPE, and all you could hear were the ambulances. I got used to things after a while, but I could also feel this pent-up energy brewing underneath the surface. Forty percent of rich New Yorkers left the city and my neighborhood was empty. The *Rolls-Royces*, *Porsches*, *Maseratis* and *Lamborghinis* all disappeared from the streets. Everything disappeared from the streets. SoHo is interesting, part of it is still gritty and part of it is obscenely rich. A lot of artists have lived here for 50 years. I have neighbours who have been living here while there was no electricity! Then, on the other side, there are people whose apartments worth 10 million dollars. So we had this feeling of solidarity – we were the New Yorkers who stayed here; we were the New Yorkers who were taking supplies to the nurses and distributing food and water to the unemployed.

... AND TWO MONTHS AGO THE TRAGIC KILLING OF GEORGE FLOYD HAS TOTALLY SHATTERED THIS FRAGILE SITUATION

Yes, it was the catalyst that changed everything. The city was simmering and everybody was sitting at home under quarantine, frustrated and angry and afraid. This created a perfect storm of rage against the government, against the abomination of Trump's election, against the frustration of feeling helpless facing COVID... there were all these feelings of frustration, rage, and fear

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coming to the surface and the death of George Floyd was the spark that lit the flame. People went into the streets. I saw the youth react for the first time in my 25 years of living here. I saw them react because they were sitting at home and they did not have anything else to do but to feel this rage. I participated in the demonstrations that happened every day. They were on my doorstep and many of the people demonstrating were my friends. If at the beginning the NYPD let them happen, they quickly decided to prevent Americans to exercise their right to demonstrate. The city underestimated how people would react. I will go on record to say that I loathe and despise the NYPD. I watched people getting arrested and beaten up, and things rapidly escalated. Within a few days, I watched New York City burn down. I saw things that were frankly shocking to me but I felt that there was a justification for what was happening. The people who were constantly ignored were not going to take it anymore. Again, SoHo, is filled with luxury stores: there is a *Louis Vuitton* around the corner, a *Balenciaga* down the street, a *Chanel*...one next to the other. I watched kids break into stores, destroy windows, and take what they could. I do not think it was about having material goods but rather about making a point. I saw kids stand on the steps of the *Gucci* store, take items out of it and throw it out onto the street. This was a collective rage. This was the rage of the ignored and unheard.

AT WHICH POINT YOU THOUGHT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO DOCUMENT WHAT WAS HAPPENING AND HOW DID YOU PROCEED?

A month prior to this, Nick Knight, a revered photographer who founded SHOWstudio, called me and said, "Would you like to do a takeover of our social media at the beginning of May? I see what you are doing – you

are walking around and photographing the death of New York City.” I was photographing empty streets, which in their entire history had never looked like this. I could see ten blocks down a street without encountering another human being. He said, “I want you to do something that speaks to your experience in NYC, you clearly love the city.” I started working on a program for the social media takeover, it was a lot of work to produce content for a whole week. The night before I was supposed to start posting, I was in the streets recording one of the most violent riots I had ever seen and I remembered about SHOWstudio. I realised I could not post what I had originally programmed because it was no longer relevant. The world had changed overnight. So I logged into SHOWstudio’s account, turned my camera on, and said “It is 1:30AM in the morning in SoHo, and this is what is going on.” I live recorded from about 1:30AM to about 5AM and thought, “Nick and the SHOWstudio people are going to wake up in the morning and say ‘what did she just do?’” But this is the world we live in. If they do not like it, they can delete it.” I live Instagrammed all night, and they woke up to what I had witnessed and experienced. The rest of the riots continued, I recorded what I saw and grabbed my son’s friends from the skate park so they could do the same. I made sure we all had cameras and we went out on bikes. I think the oldest one was 20. Their work is going to be featured in this exhibit which will not just be about my material. Many people documented this; it is a sum of different parts. It was a group effort with the people who have stayed and have stuck it out. When Nathalie Herschdorfer called me about this exhibit, I was quite surprised and it took me a few days to respond. To be included in an exhibit at a museum would indicate that I am an artist, but I have never used that word to describe myself. Other people are artists. I have always been on the sidelines. As a creative director or graphic designer, I am the frame for

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the art. When I design a book, I take someone else’s work and make it look as beautiful as I can. Now, all of a sudden, my role was being reversed. In order to find my comfort level again, I had to curate. I had to bring other people on board and give them the opportunity to speak as well.

YOU HAVE ALSO DOCUMENTED THE EXPLOSION OF CREATIVITY RESULTING FROM THE UNIQUE SPACES OF EXPRESSION OFFERED BY THE BOARDS USED TO PROTECT THE STORES...

Indeed, when New York City shut down before the riots, some of the luxury stores boarded up their windows. I thought at the time, “This is going to be amazing because what these stores have done is to create canvases for artists.” I called my friend Steve Powers (ESPO – he is a very well known graffiti artist in New York City) and told him, “We should go paint these storefronts! Let’s go.” ESPO is brilliant, and his message is one of love and bringing people together, so it would have been great. He said, “You and I are thinking the same thing. I have tried – I called *Louis Vuitton* and they said no, and I called another place and they said no.” I asked him why we could not do it illegally and he replied that he did not want to deal with the NYPD. He did get permission to do one massive storefront here in SoHo, so it became a destination. I filmed him painting it from beginning to end and turned it into a short film for SHOWstudio. The stores were not allowing painters to take over, but the graffiti kids were going out into the street. I would watch them from my window on Canal Street at 1 o’clock in the morning. They would come on their bikes and skateboards, paint a whole storefront and leave. The NYPD and first responders were worried about COVID, so they were not going to arrest them. The graffiti is still all over

the city. “When commerce dies, art is going to take over the city.” This is what I told ESPO. The kids have been frustrated because the city has cracked down on graffiti. It is considered a felony now, so the risk was not worth it. But now...the trains were painted again for the first time since the 80’s and I was thrilled. The day after one of the biggest riots, I woke up fairly early and left my house to see what was going on. Several police cars were burned to the ground on the street. I could see where things had been lit on fire, where boards had been removed from the storefronts, and where property had been destroyed. It was sunny and quiet. As I walked through SoHo, I saw that every intact storefront had been painted with brushes, rollers, and spray cans. What I had predicted had actually happened. What were the NYPD and storeowners going to do? Were they going to stop the kids from writing Black Lives Matter? They are still doing it to this day. Yesterday, I was driving in the East Village and saw two girls painting a storefront, essentially turning it into a monument dedicated to this moment in history. I hope that the Museum of the City of New York will take these paintings and put them into their collection in the same way they took the dedications and memorials after 9/11.

WHAT WERE THE MESSAGES ON THE STOREFRONTS LIKE?

The messages were very clear. They were aggressive, at first, and they had to do with George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, Fuck 12, Defund the NYPD, etc. There were paintings of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Colin Kaepernick kneeling...storefront owners were not taking them down or covering them up. As the riots stopped and things started to calm down, the messages began to change. “Imagine Peace”, “One World”, “Vote”, and “Black Lives Matter” became more prevalent. Some of the art

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was incredibly detailed and powerful, but over time, it became more institutional. They recently painted a massive “Black Lives Matter” sign on the street in front of the main courthouse downtown. They also did the same in front of the Trump Tower uptown. These signs were actually mandated by the city of New York and I think that the mayor even painted one of the letters. So the art became more institutionalized and the messages calmer, cleaner. There were more flowers and rainbows... it went from punk to hippy in about 3 weeks.

HOW WAS THE MOOD IN THE CITY AFTER THOSE EXTREMELY INTENSE WEEKS?

New York City entered its Phase 4 of opening, it looks more normal but it is a very abnormal normal. I do not think that it will ever be normal again in the way that it was before; too many questions have been raised.

LET’S CLOSE THE LOOP, AND TALK ABOUT HOW THESE EVENTS MAY HAVE AFFECTED YOUR ACTIVITIES AS A CREATIVE DIRECTOR AND, MORE GENERALLY, THE WAY OF WORKING IN THE FASHION WORLD?

This is an issue that has affected all the brands. They were forced by social media to publish the numbers of Black people employed in their executive boardrooms, which were, unsurprisingly, very low. They do not know how to solve this issue. They have all thrown money at *Black Lives Matter* and said, “We promise to hire more minorities”...but I do not believe them and I think the problem runs deeper than that. Let’s say that candidates come forward for a VP position or above. The educational system in this country is so bad that there are not a lot of minority candidates qualified to fill that position. Many people of colour have not been given a

chance in life to be well educated and to acquire the experience needed to land that position. The whole system is flawed. This is actually systematic racism. So I said to my company, "We should take a stand and create a fund to mentor people and bring them up through the ranks. We should build them up to be VPs and SVPs." We need to educate from the very beginning. We must to change the system at its core, but I doubt they will go that far. There is also a lot of tokenism happening, let's not forget. I know many agents in the industry, and they are being told, "Who is Black? We need a Black photographer. We need a Black stylist..."and that is disingenuous. I am also getting a lot of marketing emails from agents who tell me, "Here is our Black team. Here is our Brown team." That is not how we should hire! This should maybe be my closing statement, but one of the biggest things we ignore in this country and around the world is that Black culture is a global culture. This has been happening since the beginning of modern history. Music, art, fashion, and the vernacular – these belong to Black culture; from jazz to Elvis Presley, who essentially copied Black music. We have to recognize that today's global influence industry and culture is Black, and that it continues to be stolen and appropriated. Once this is recognized, people need to be compensated. Unfortunately, I do not think we are there yet. However, we need to get there because we have reached the tipping point and there is no turning back.