

frieze

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BOTH WAYS

Viviane Sassen talks to
Aaron Schuman

Viviane Sassen is one of those rare photographers who moves fluidly between the worlds of fashion and art. She began her career photographing for magazines including Dazed & Confused, i-D and Purple, as well as founding her own zines. Her 2008 series 'Flamboya' and her 2011 book Parasomnia – which features portraits, still lifes and abstract compositions, and combines stark contrasts of light and shadow, vivid colours, geometric patterns and an intimacy with her subjects – saw her work move increasingly towards art. Her photographs feature in two solo exhibitions in London, UK: 'Analemma: Fashion Photography 1992–2012' at The Photographers' Gallery (until 18 January) and 'Viviane Sassen: Pikin Slee' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) (3 February – 12 April 2015). Aaron Schuman spoke to her about her recent series and how she navigates between her 'introvert' and 'extrovert' work.

AARON SCHUMAN:

You're often described as someone who bridges the gap between fashion photography and contemporary art photography. Do you distinguish between those two genres?

VIVIANE SASSEN:

For me, they merge: I'm using the same brain and eyes to make both kinds of work and I've always developed these two strands of my practice simultaneously. In the 1990s, when I started taking pictures, people like Nobuyoshi Araki, Jim Goldberg and Nan Goldin – all these kinds of ego-documentarian, 'snapshot' art photographers – were very prominent and influenced fashion photography. So, in a way, it all blurred together for me at the time, and has done so ever since.

AS *How did you initially get involved in fashion, art and photography?*

VS When I was a teenager, I was always drawing and making things, so it was very clear that I would do something creative and go to art school. But, at the time, the idea of becoming an artist was too far out for me; I felt that I needed some limitations to work within, so I decided to become a fashion designer. I quickly realized, however, that I wasn't born to be a fashion designer, because I was interested in images and style, rather than in clothes or fashion itself. By that time, I had also started to work as a model, so I met a lot of photographers, and some of them showed me how to use a camera and develop my own pictures in a darkroom. I realized that I wanted to be the one creating the images, so I decided to quit fashion and pursue photography. The photography department at my art school didn't have that much to do with fashion or advertising – it was more conceptual and documentary-based – so it was there that I learned to think about photography as more of a personal process within which you develop your own style, like an author or an artist.

Etan / mint 12:00
from the series 'Etan & Me', 2013,
c-type print, 45 × 30 cm

All images
© Viviane Sassen;
courtesy:
Stevenson, Cape Town and
Johannesburg

AS *Your two major solo exhibitions in London seem to emphasize a distinction between your fashion photography and your artistic practice. Do you approach the two kinds of work differently?*

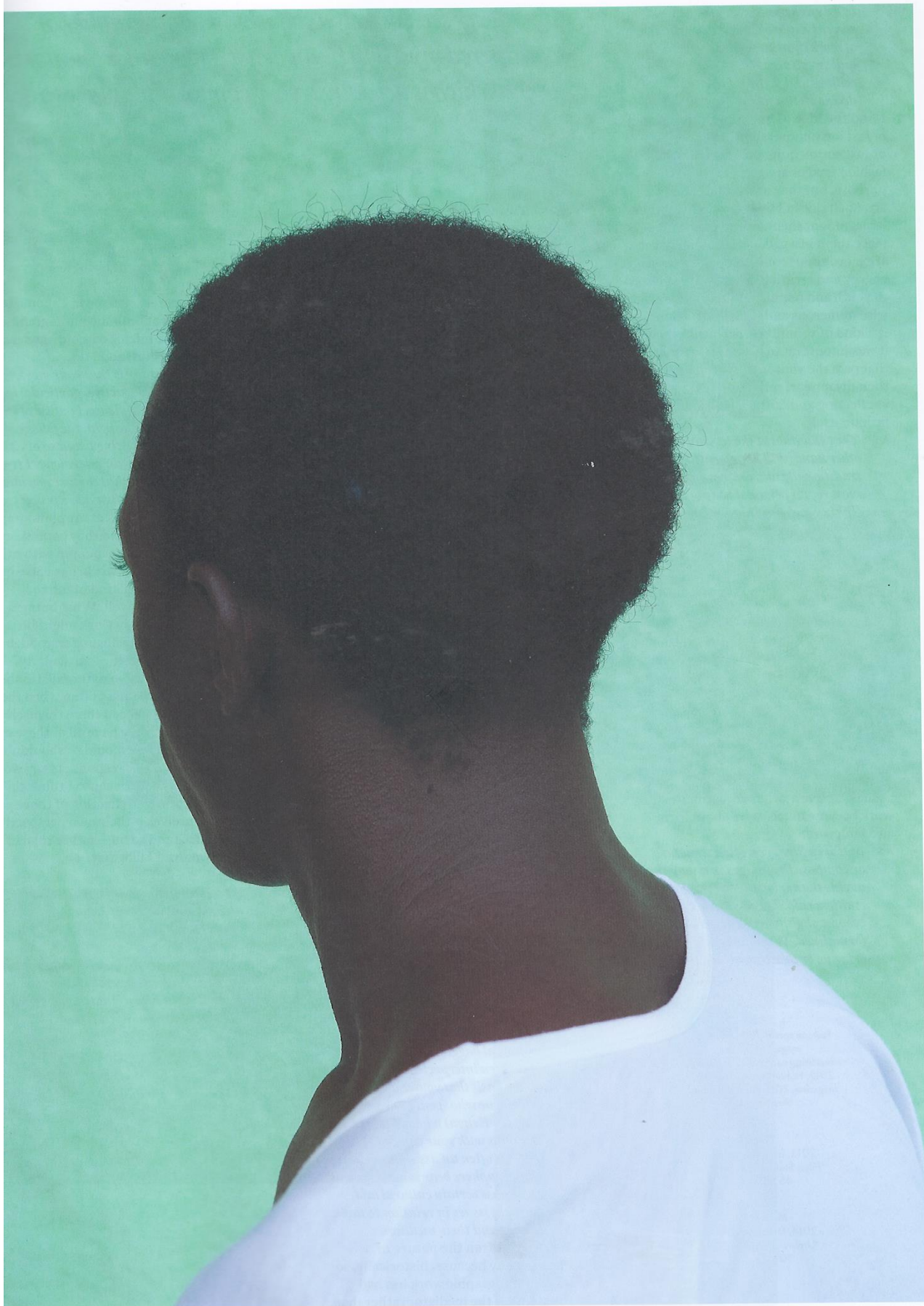
VS Of course, the formal and stylistic aspects of both feed into one other. Making my artworks, which I usually shoot on film, is much more of a solitary process; I normally do it on my own while I'm travelling. The fashion work is different – not only because it's shot digitally, but because there are so many people involved. My personal practice requires contemplation, whereas my fashion work is more outgoing and playful; it has a swiftness to its execution. Sometimes, it feels like the two approaches represent two aspects of my personality – the introvert and the extrovert.

But, to be honest, I've never really seen myself as a fashion photographer, and I've also never really considered myself to be an artist. I feel that I'm neither one nor the other, which is actually a very comfortable place to be, because then it's for other people to determine.

AS *You mentioned that you worked as a model when you were a teenager. Did being a photographic subject yourself have an impact on the way you photograph your subjects now?*

VS It helps me in the sense that I know how people feel when they are in front of the camera. But I was a lousy model because I was very shy. Thinking back on that time, I see myself as a very shy exhibitionist, which is interesting to me now because I think my work is all about these paradoxes and ambiguities.

AS *In your show at The Photographers' Gallery, a selection of your fashion photographs are exhibited as an installation: the viewer is immersed*



in an environment of mirrors and screens in which looping projections of more than 300 images revolve and sweep across the gallery walls, ceilings and floors. How did you decide on this form of presentation?

VS I find the idea of having an exhibition of fashion photography in a museum or institution quite problematic. Most fashion images are great and suit their purpose, but they are not intended as art. So, it doesn't feel right to print them large, mount them, frame them and place them in a gallery. Fashion images are more about consuming; they have an energy and creativity that is often related to youth and popular culture but are likewise numerous and fleeting. 'Analemma' is a kind of spinning slideshow; I thought it was important to display a lot of images that pass the viewer at a certain speed then disappear, reflecting the exciting, yet fleeting and 'disposable' quality of fashion itself.

AS *The exhibition at the ICA, on the other hand, will be presented more traditionally and centres on your most recent personal body of work, 'Pikin Slee', made in Suriname in 2012–13. The series feels quieter, subtler and utilizes more black and white photography than your earlier work.*

VS Yes, it's a completely different thing. The first time I visited the village of Pikin Slee in Suriname, I was in the midst of editing my book *In and Out of Fashion* (2012). I was pretty sick and tired of looking at all of my fashion images, with their explosions of colours and so on; it was just too much. I longed for a simpler way of looking and I wanted to find a way to get back to basics: to reset my eye, and my mind. By taking colour out, as well as making a few other adjustments, the work became much more about form and sculpture.

AS *In 'Pikin Slee', you often structure or compose the images in a way that avoids the horizon – the perspective is either raised or lowered – so they become slightly abstracted and formalized. What does this strategy bring to, or take away from, the images?*

1, 2, 5 & 6
fashion spread from Numéro
magazine, 2011;
advertising campaign for Carven,
2012; fashion spreads for Pop
magazine, 2012, from the series
'Analemma'

3
Sling
2013, from the series
'Pikin Slee', c-type print,
45 × 30 cm

4
Marianne
2014, from the series
'Umbra', c-type print,
30 × 45 cm

'I've never seen myself as a fashion photographer or considered myself to be an artist. I'm neither one nor the other, which is actually a very comfortable place to be.'

VS On an intuitive level, I want to make pictures that are what I refer to as 'round'. I want to leave out distractions and simplify my images, so viewers can't really grasp or relate to the situation. They're lost, in a sense, which I like. For me, it's a way to make these works less about a specific subject and more about a feeling and a broader meaning, so they become more archetypal.

AS *What drew you to Suriname?*

VS Suriname used to be a Dutch colony, and I had wanted to go there for a long time because of its connection to Africa, which is where I lived as a child and where I made much of my previous work. The village of Pikin Slee was founded by the Maroon people – former African slaves who escaped from the Dutch plantations, fled into the woods and made settlements. So, I was interested in it because it was both very personal and also had everything to do with the colonial past. I was awestruck by the fact that I could actually speak Dutch in the middle of the South American jungle with people of African descent. It was such a weird experience, but that's the effect of history.

AS *Is your work specifically intended to address that political and cultural history?*

VS No, not really. The history of the Maroon – as well as our mutual history, and the connections to Africa that I share with them – are of personal interest to me, and that's partly what drew me to Pikin Slee. I'm not particularly concerned with addressing those issues, however. I try to avoid making work that is political. That said, I'm always very aware of the fact that the subject matter itself comes with these political issues, as it did when I took photographs in Africa.

AS *You could argue that the medium of photography comes with similar political, colonial, cultural and historical baggage. Your work has often been interpreted and critiqued on the basis that you're a 'Westerner' (albeit one who spent her earliest years in Kenya) who visits 'exotic' locations with your camera. There's often an assumption that photographers bear some responsibility to address certain cultural and political issues in relation to their subject and their medium.*

VS Yes, that's often the nature of photography because, historically, so much photographic work has had the status of the mediator rather than

the messenger. I do feel that I have a responsibility towards the people I photograph – and the images that I make of them – which I take very seriously. But it's a really personal thing and, ultimately, as I see it, I should be able to look at both my photographs and myself in the mirror without any sense of guilt or regret; and I do.

AS *The paradox is that your work is incredibly seductive, particularly for a Western audience, because of the colours, the light, the foliage of the 'exotic' settings, and so on. You once stated in an interview: 'I try to make images that confuse me, and I hope they confuse other people too.'*

VS Exactly. When I look at my photographs, they intrigue me, and they confuse me. There will always be people with other opinions about my work, but I also hope that it can act as a kind of mirror for the viewer as well. What bothers me most is not that my work might be misinterpreted or misunderstood, but that so many people – particularly in the West – are so paternalistic about 'Africa' and 'Africans', often when they have never even been there themselves. Nevertheless, they have all of these opinions about what I should or shouldn't do. I actually find this response to my work very interesting, because I think that it really serves as a reflection of those people themselves – their own perspectives, prejudices and so on – rather than of my own. And I like that. ♦

Aaron Schuman is an artist, writer and curator, and the founder and editor of SeeSaw Magazine.

Viviane Sassen is a Dutch photographer based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her solo exhibition 'Analemma: Fashion Photography 1992–2012' is at The Photographers' Gallery, London, UK, until 18 January 2015. 'Viviane Sassen: Pikin Slee' is at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, from 3 February – 12 April 2015.



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