

IRVING  
PENN  
Beyond  
Beauty

February 24–May 29, 2017  
Upper-Level Galleries



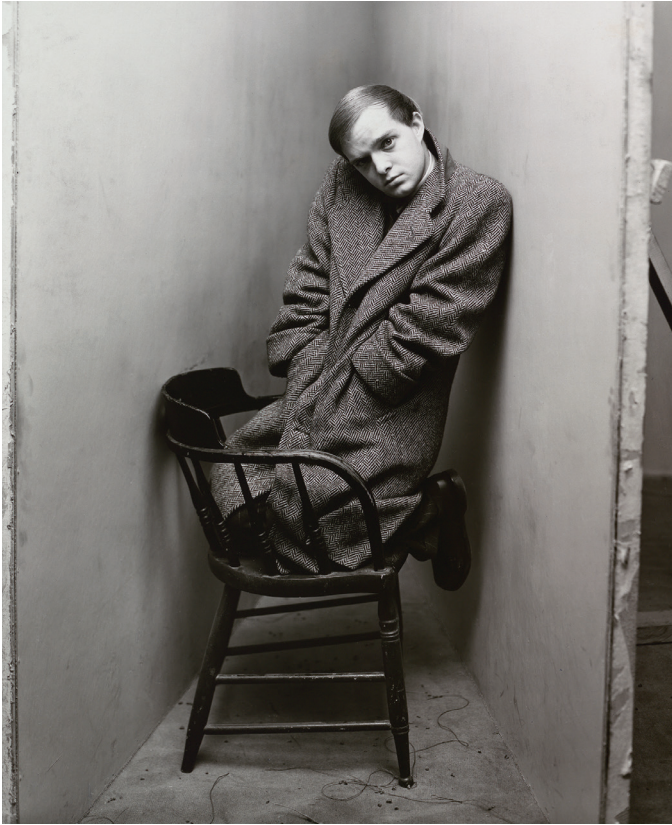
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One of America's most renowned photographers, Irving Penn (b. 1917, Plainfield, NJ; d. 2009, New York, NY) consistently created images that are distinguished by their restrained elegance and compositional freshness. The exhibition *Irving Penn: Beyond Beauty* considers not only Penn's exquisite portraiture and fashion photography but his extensive achievements as a whole. He captured the lives of ordinary people and street settings in New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. He explored cultural difference and universal points of connection in works made while traveling in Europe, Asia, and South America. And he produced an extraordinary body of still-life images that, inspired by the centuries-old tradition of *vanitas*—instilling beauty with decay as a reminder of mortality—continue to startle with their austere boldness.

His earliest works—urban street scenes from the late 1930s and photographs of the American South made during a road trip from New York to Mexico in 1941–42—show Penn to be attuned to the photography of his own time, especially the documentary approach of Walker Evans and the New York Photo League. At the same time, they echo Surrealism's fascination with provocative juxtaposition and symbolic meaning, particularly in images of the messages—overt and subliminal—on storefront windows and commercial signs.

Penn is best known, however, for his professional magazine work, especially at *Vogue*, where he worked from 1943 into the twenty-first century. He developed a distinct identity through what he called a "graphic stylization" of women in fashion, marrying the cool cosmopolitanism of his beautiful models to the inventiveness of postwar couture in New York and Paris.<sup>1</sup> Even in his most commercial images, Penn upended convention with a penchant for formal surprise. This is seen in *Harlequin Dress (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn)* (1950), with its graphic checkerboard pattern echoing the striking angularity of the model's face and her wide-brimmed hat (fig. 1).

Penn's equally assertive portraits show cultural figures such as dancer Rudolph Nureyev, singer Leontyne Price, and painter Francis Bacon in intimate close-up. Rather than containing clues about their creative enterprise, the portraits allow nuanced facial expressions to convey deep introspection. Among the most psychologically charged of these are Penn's "corner



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world is something almost unbearable to me. There is too much accidental painfulness in it.”<sup>2</sup> He remediated this discomfort with an exacting control over the poses of his models and arrangements of still-life objects, the conditions of the studio, the quality of his prints, and many other factors that would help him in his search for pictorial perfection. Penn’s still lifes in particular epitomize his wish to distill the subject so it becomes a concept. His *vanitas*-themed works feature such objects as broken eggshells, overturned pitchers, skulls, and bones, replacing accidental pain with purposeful meditations on

portraits.” Taken in the late 1940s, these photographs depict artists, writers, and others posed in a constructed corner, often in positions suggesting discomfort and claustrophobia. Works like *Truman Capote* (1948) reflect the existentialist entrapment felt by many in the late 1940s, whether due to a generalized sense of postwar anxiety or, as in the case of Capote, demons of a more personal nature (fig. 2).

Penn has said, “As a photographer, the realism of the real

the relationship between aesthetics and decay. Platinum prints of magnified trash and cigarette butts from the 1970s stretch this interest toward the edge of propriety, with rich tones and fine details seducing the viewer into a prolonged contemplation of these abject materials.

In his iconic *Bee*, made for *Vogue* in 1995, Penn displays a similar ambivalence about the subject and object of beauty (fig. 3). The work shows in unnerving close-up the red, swollen lips of a model, with a bee perched on them as if pollinating a blooming



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rose. The juxtaposition evokes the phrase “bee-stung lips,” linking sexual allure with pain. The work reflects the vampy decadence that permeated much fashion photography of the nineties, which often approached the erotically transgressive.

Bee highlights a lifetime of works in which the boundary between commercial photography and fine art was made malleable. Throughout his career, Penn stayed in touch with the changing aesthetics of society and fashion, while producing images that offer a consistent combination of elegance, virtuosity, and vision.

*Irving Penn: Beyond Beauty*, organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and Merry Foresta, the museum’s curator of photography from 1983 to 1999, is the first retrospective of Penn’s work in nearly twenty years. It includes more than 140 photographs from SAAM’s collection, including 100 photographs recently donated by The Irving Penn Foundation.

MARK SCALA, chief curator

#### Notes

1. Quoted in Merry Foresta, *Irving Penn: Beyond Beauty* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, in association with The Irving Penn Foundation, New York, 2015), 23.
2. *Ibid.*, 28.

#### Illustrations

**Fig. 1:** *Harlequin Dress* (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), New York, 1950, printed 1979. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist. © Condé Nast **Fig. 2:** *Truman Capote*, New York, 1948. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Irving Penn Foundation. © The Irving Penn Foundation **Fig. 3:** *Bee*, New York, 1995, printed 2001. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Irving Penn Foundation. © The Irving Penn Foundation **Opposite:** *Head in Ice*, New York, 2002, printed 2003. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Irving Penn Foundation. © Condé Nast **Back Cover:** *Kerchief Glove* (Dior), Paris, 1950, printed 1984. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of The Irving Penn Foundation. © Condé Nast



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