

Q & A: Philip-Lorca diCorcia

By CATHY HORYN

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On Thursday night, at the start of Fashion Week, several hundred people came to the David Zwirner Gallery to see an exhibition of Philip-Lorca diCorcia's photographs. Originally published in *W* magazine, between 1997 and 2008, the images are a remarkable record of a free-spirited period in publishing that seemed to come to an end with the recession and, as well, the Internet. They speak directly to the eye of Mr. diCorcia, with their capacity to excite and disturb, and to seek truth about human behavior in the most banal of scenes. These photographs were also the result of a fortuitous collaboration between Mr. diCorcia and Dennis Freedman, the former art director of *W*, who gave the artist carte blanche to shoot fashion stories in places like Havana, Cairo and New York. They have collected all 11 shoots in a new book, "Eleven" (Damiani Editions).

Are they fashion stories? In a way, yes, although you rarely notice the clothes. They are really about a vacuum in the middle of contemporary life, of which fashion has been a key element. That is one interpretation anyway. I spoke to Mr. diCorcia — or PL, as he is universally known — about the work then and now. Young artists should feel gratified when he said of the creative process: "It's exactly what it's always been. It's just hard work."

Cathy Horyn: In the 90s, your pictures of hustlers in Los

Angeles influenced a number of fashion photographers. Yet you weren't necessarily interested in working for fashion magazines. You lived for a while with your family in Naples, Italy. Then you got a call from Dennis Freedman of W.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia: It was in 1997. I didn't know Dennis at all. I never had an agent, and I didn't really need one. When I got back from Italy there were suddenly a bunch of demands on me, so I went to Leslie Simitch, a friend since college, who was working as an agent. Without Leslie I'm not sure I would have talked to Dennis, or anyone else for that matter, or would have even known what was going on. I wasn't actually doing anything at the time but there was sort of this competition to get me to do something, and Dennis stepped into that. Basically he said, 'You can do what you want.' One of W's virtues then was its size and the degree to which they would give the photographer full license. Dennis had the capability to assure you that your pictures were not going to be cropped. That was not something that you could get from anyone else.

Still, did you have concerns?

I had always worked for magazines, but fashion magazines were kind of a different thing. They were asking you to make photographs that looked as much as possible like your other work. And I really didn't know if I was going to be biting my own tail. And I was still trying to establish myself in the art world. I had only had a gallery since 1993, and I had had some success, but I don't think people really realize how much momentum you need to overcome professional inertia in the art world. It's not like a person gives you a show and you're on a roll. It just doesn't work that way. I wasn't very active about advancing it.

So Dennis got in touch.

Leslie was, like, "You should do this. I'll be honest, it's partly because you could make some money because people will see this.' The usual equation between low-paying editorial and high-paying advertising would kick in. Which I have to say never really happened [laughs].

How did you and Dennis discuss a shoot?

I think we both know it changes once you get there. Even he says the stories seemed kind of silly as they were outlined in the beginning. They're jumping-off points in terms of choosing the clothes. But, in truth, back in the day, the stylists didn't make too many decisions beforehand. They just brought everything. It was ridiculous how much stuff they brought! It seemed like this massive expedition — and greatly complicated by the fact that you were bringing in and out of countries like Cuba lots of expensive stuff.

But the clothes never seemed the point anyway. Not in the Havana series, with the incredible picture of the girl at the bar, or in Cairo. You were telling stories about these places and the people: Wealth. Class. Very structured lives. A happiness that wasn't. Of course, fashion is essential to the perception of success and happiness. I particularly like the images done in New York and the country called "A Perfect World." And you included these cityscapes that look so one-dimensional and depopulated.

It's strange that the cover of the book is of the World Trade Center and the first image in the book is Cairo on fire. All that we're hearing now about what has been happening in Egypt under Mubarak was happening then. If I was absolving my conscience of something it was to suggest that not everything is perfect and fashion isn't just about clothes and beautiful people.

The New York images ...

They were so retouched [by Pascal Danguin of Box Studios], to take out logos and signs, people in the intersections. It was all made perfect. And the models are the kind of models who work in catalogs or they're soap opera extras. Picking those clothes was as easy as it got. Start with Ralph Lauren and fill in the rest.

The photographs of the male prostitute on display in an affluent living room, presumably on the Upper East Side, are disturbing. I remember they were disturbing at the time. He was just a pretty object. I'm not sure you could tell a story like that

today in a fashion magazine, because maybe the clothes don't inspire stories. The focus is bluntly on products.

I kind of saw it as the obvious class conflict and also that the fashion world is to no small degree gay. The male photographer objectifies the female as the standard way of projecting the audience's desire onto the image. But I saw it as an opportunity to do something different. This is an object of desire but not completely different from the aspirational desires that led people to suddenly start paying \$30,000 for a handbag.

It was an interesting time, and very creative.

I consider the experience lucky in three ways. I met someone like Dennis who is more or less atypical of art directors. You don't find many like him who can actually get something done. And then I kind of caught the first stage of the digital revolution and had access to Pascal Dangin, who is extremely ambitious about the use of that technology. Then, maybe as a result of the affluence of the '90s, nobody was asking questions about spending the money and having no fashion credits in magazines. I mean, credits are now the biggest motivations of the decisions made in fashion photography. They weren't at all then.

You moved away at some point from these highly constructed-looking scenes.

I didn't feel I had to protect that way of working anymore. And I wasn't the only exponent of the style. Also, you wind up saying the same thing over and over. I mean, the more you control things, the more you limit yourself to what you already know. And what you already know is not going to be that much different than what anybody else might know. You're either the perfect illustrator of a commonly held belief or you let yourself be susceptible to whim or circumstance. And that is probably one of the more effective ways to be both valuable to yourself and anyone else who wants to put in the time.

What kind of camera do you use?

I started out using the kind of camera that I used when I worked on the

hustler images, a Linhof Technika 23. It's very cumbersome. You couldn't burn up the film fast enough. Then I switched to a camera that I could use with a motor drive and a large film-back — a Mamiya RZ. I use that quite a lot.

So, did you get advertising work from fashion houses?

I did do a couple of campaigns. I did Fendi one year. It was just after 9/11, and, of course, they didn't sell anything that year. I mean, my timing can be almost spooky. I think the first fashion show I went to was the night before 9/11. It was a guy who eventually lost his company...

Miguel Adrover?

Yeah, he called and invited me to the show. He said he'd like to do something with me at some point. I remember he had models in Bedouin outfits, with sheep on the runway.

His boss ended up chasing a sheep down the runway. One photographer who seems to have a lot of freedom with his advertising work is Juergen Teller.

Not to diminish Juergen's ability but the reason the Marc Jacobs's campaign is so successful is that it doesn't look like anybody else's. It's not even close. He's certainly not about showing the clothes, he's about creating attitude. But, in general, I think it's a pretty hard sell these days. Even in the best ads it's like the size of the pocketbook in relation to the rest of the image has increased exponentially. You'd have to be a complete idiot to miss it. And there's got to be a reason for that. I don't know if there's a calculated decision not to be a little less aggressive and simple-minded about the ads because it's less effective, or a new generation has taken over and doesn't know the difference.

What are you working on now?

I'm trying to get my attention wrapped around a project called East of Eden, which I started three years ago. It's a return to setting up images. It was kind of provoked by the collapse of everything, which seems to me a loss of

I recently had a conversation with Pascal about the state of fashion advertising — he’s a little discouraged, given the lack of creativity at the moment. He said he could conceive of a time when big luxury houses might have their own photographic departments, run by technicians.

I think there will always be a place for fashion photographers, if they’re even called that. I don’t think corporate minds have the capability of creating autonomous desire for a product that has no connection to practicality. I’m not sure it’s necessarily the photographer who has that ability, but I’m sure it’s not going to be the subdivision of a corporate world. And good photographers are always looking at things.

But I think everything looks digital now. Two-thirds of my career happened before there was digital. I don’t like it for other reasons. I don’t like the way it renders spaces. It’s a technical thing, but I am a little bit off the perfection that comes with it. These new cameras make images that are so sharp, so crisp. I think hyper-realism can only exist in contrast to a kind of realism that is fairly flawed. When everything is hyper there is no hyper. To me that’s not interesting at all.