

PATRICK NAGEL

THE CLEAN LINES, SLEEK COLORS, AND OVERT SEXUAL COOL OF MASTER STYLE PAINTER PATRICK NAGEL DEFINED THE FAST, FREE-FALL CLIMATE OF THE '70s AND '80s

In December of 1982, at a private event at Morton's in Los Angeles, Joan Collins ceremoniously unveiled her portrait by the acclaimed artist Patrick Nagel. Titled *Collins*, it was nearly unrecognizable as to its subject. Who was it who stared blankly from under an inky cloud of hair with no more than slashes for earrings, bare gray shoulders, and the glazed lips that the artist described as having an anatomy all their own? He had transformed the actress—as he did all of his subjects, with bold unbroken lines and pools of nail polish color—into the Nagel woman. They all got lost in his lacquer. “There were girls that he used more frequently than others, but by the time they were stylized they began to look like one person,” recalls Jennifer Dumas, the model who inspired the original Nagel woman and who was married to the artist until his death in 1984 at 38 years old; he suffered a heart attack in his car after completing a televised celebrity charity Aerobathon in Santa Monica, California.

Los Angeles, where Nagel lived and worked, was an exciting place for fashion and illustration in the '70s and '80s. In addition to the stimulation of the artifice of everyday life in and around Hollywood, the local art scene was still feeling the influence of West Coast minimalism, known as the “Finish Fetish,” which favored a high polish created with techniques borrowed from the custom-car and surfing industries. There were also the parties,

like those hosted by his neighbor, the photographer Paul Jasmin, that gathered the beautiful and the self-assured, like Berry and Marisa Berenson, Gore Vidal, Pele, Divine, and Pat Ast; the lunches at the Playboy mansion; and the grander diversions, like a scavenger hunt Nagel and his wife staged with a hired fleet of limousines to speed their guests throughout the city (the winner that evening was David Copperfield, who Nagel collaborated with on his magical television specials).

But Nagel could just as easily stay put. “He was an embodiment of a Noel Coward kind of character,” Dumas adds. “He worked all night long, he smoked, he ate M&M’s, and he drank martinis. He had a laconic style. He was very elegant, but very self-effacing.” He was also industrious, managing to produce paintings, commercial and monthly magazine work, countless exhibitions, a series of posters by Mirage Editions, and even two bronze sculptures. He was looking forward to having Jessica Lange and Cher sit for him one day and had been discussing a Mick Jagger album project over dinner the night before he passed away. “He was a driven man who always knew what he wanted,” Dumas says.

Some concluded that Nagel was European, although he was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1945 and raised in southern California. (He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from California State

University at Fullerton.) Was it because of the cropped hairstyles that he sometimes preferred for his models, or was it the intrepid sexuality he expressed? It probably has more to do with Duran Duran, who used a Nagel painting for the cover of its star-making 1982 album *Rio*. It was the first time that much of the public had seen his work, and so it was understandable when they simply, inevitably, and perhaps unconsciously associated the artist with the band’s worldly, yacht-driving mythology. It certainly made him much more pop. The two have been enmeshed since.

Nagel’s popularity took off after he began painting women in various states of undress, and in a variety of frank sexual poses, for *Playboy* magazine’s monthly Advisor question and answer column—an eight-year relationship that began in 1976 when he was a 30-year-old freelancer with clients that included IBM, MGM, *Architectural Digest*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Oui*. (Not surprisingly, Hugh Hefner presumably owns the largest collection of his work.) As the magazine wrote in his obituary, which included a portfolio of erotic fantasy images he was assigned before his death, “Not since Alberto Vargas has an artist so captured the sensuous in lines so simple as did Patrick Nagel.” Artist Istvan Banyai has illustrated the Advisor for the last ten years, and although his women have more in common with the





taut figures of Egon Schiele than the poster art of the turn of the 19th century, a legacy is apparent. "To draw a really good-looking girl you have to feel desire for her like Pygmalion," Banyai says. "You have to wish she would come alive."

He stood apart from other artists of the '70s and early '80s who treated the interplay of women and power with a high gloss. The subjects of photographers like Guy Bourdin or Helmut Newton could appear provoked or aggressive. But the Nagel woman was disarmingly still and unbothered, even in his raciest images, an effect underscored by a flat application of color inspired by Japanese woodblock prints. "Patrick always thought her to be very much the liberated woman who just happened to be very sexy," Dumas says.

"I don't think I want to know these women too well," Nagel is remembered to have said of his red-lipped army. "They never come out in the sunlight. They just stay up late and smoke and drink a lot." Which would explain their pallor. He worked from photographs, mostly of models hired from agencies or sent over from the Playboy mansion. Sometimes he bought the wardrobe, like a pair of high-heeled shoes, which was always useful, and brought in hair and makeup artists to fine tune his fine-tuned look. He distilled the results into sketches and distilled the sketches

into the decorative sexuality that became his legacy.

Since his death, there has been no concerted effort to orchestrate a resurgence of Nagel's work, not that it would be necessary, as his visual style now defines the period during which it was born. It's an eternal. Dumas, who holds the copyrights to Nagel's corpus, has not pursued publishing opportunities and has disregarded license requests for everything from Nagel T-shirts to Nagel brand lingerie; she dedicates most of her time to campaigning for the protection of the Santa Clara River that runs through the farm community where she now resides. Dumas did, however, recently sign a deal with Start Mobile for a Nagel "mobile art gallery" to provide his images for download to cell phones.

Back to Joan. In 1982 Ms. Collins would again unveil *Collins*, which she once appreciatively described as "sensuous but austere," this time for Johnny Carson as a guest on *The Tonight Show*. "He was a sleight of hand artist," she has said about her late friend, "painting less while revealing more." **Mark Jacobs**

Artwork Patrick Nagel

For information: www.patricknagel.com