



Photographer Mona Kuhn Is Known for Her Nude Portraiture, But Dips Into Fashion for Bottega Veneta

By James Lim

Brazilian-born photographer Mona Kuhn is known for her serene nude portraits. Though a veteran of fine art photography, Kuhn recently completed her first fashion project: Bottega Veneta's resort 2012 campaign (she has a fan in the label's head designer, Tomas Maier). Kuhn's work has been exhibited many times in New York and Berlin, and most recently in London's Flowers Gallery, which is showing images from her fifth book, *Bordeaux*, published by Steidl. We spoke with Kuhn while she was on a shoot for French *Numéro* with model [Malgosia Bela](#) about doubts she may have had in starting fashion photography work and her latest book. In the (NSFW) slideshow, see a collection of Kuhn's favorite work from over the years, curated by the photographer herself.

What was the environment like on the Bottega campaign set?

It was very comfortable. I think Tomas is a calm person. He's a little bit of an understated person; very classy and elegant. Doug [Lloyd, the Creative Director at branding firm Lloyd and Company] is very comfortable in the many campaigns he has done before. There was no attitude. We did the work and finished early, around 3:30 p.m., and then I said, "Oh let's just continue because, you know, we have everything here. Let's do some more." They're like, "Well, probably we don't need more because we have what we need, Mona." And I said, "Alright, let me do a few images that I think I would do if it was me." And that's actually when we did the campaign images that are coming out now.

Did you have any hesitations going into high fashion?

When they contacted me, I was, first of all, honored and said, "Of course I'm available, I would love to do it." But I don't do that much commercial work. Most of the commercial work I do comes from my personal work. Maybe it's an art collector who also happens to be a creative director, or an art director who says, "I've always wanted to work with you and I finally have something where it makes sense." So I think that that was the case.

What were your inspirations for the Bottega shoot?

I wanted there to be light, I wanted the images to be almost floating. We wanted it to have reflections — that was an inspiration from Tomas. I wanted it to be layered, to have a foreground and background, and have layering between the people. But, also, the idea of having space; to be a little sparse and spatial. Because, to me, it gives the idea of physical space, but also, a bit of mental space, too. I think things are so clogged nowadays, packed with things, so I wanted it to be a little empty.

Did you run into any difficulties?

When you're working for a client, you're not just thinking, "I'm liking it." You also have to think ...

... Are they liking it?

Yes, exactly. And they're also looking at things I don't usually look at. I look at body language, I look at facial expressions. I'm not trained to look at if the clothes are being presented in the best way. The experience was like this incredible acceptance and understanding of working with an artist and letting them do their thing and kind of guiding them if needed. It was very, very nice.

Do you feel you were able to retain your artistic sensibilities for this shoot?

Yes, absolutely. I think when they collaborate with artists, as they've been doing for years now; they want the images to be recognizably the artist's images. So I think that was the point, not to divert too much from what I would do.

You also recently released your new book, *Bordeaux Series*.

It's a very reductive series where I photographed a group of people very young going all the way into old. I think maybe the youngest is 8 years old and the oldest person is maybe 80. It's a series of portraits done in one room on one chair in a small chateau outside of Bordeaux. And I combined it with very traditional portraiture, and I combined it with traditional landscapes of the region.

How did you get into nude portraiture?

Honestly, when I was going to school to study photography and art history, it was really difficult. It was a time where everyone, the institutions, really wanted to push for students to go more conceptual and not photograph the body anymore. At the time, it was very non-trendy for me to be photographing what I wanted to do, which were people, humans, and anatomy, in a sense. It's the idea of totally disrobing your status symbols, where by being naked you're just like the other person. You don't have a watch to compare, you don't have the latest trendy jeans, and you don't have the latest shoes. There are no status symbols. So it's basically you, having to honestly look at each other and say, "Can we get along as people? Is what you're talking about interesting to me? Are you a beautiful person on the inside?" Those are a lot deeper emotions and feelings that I think fashion doesn't want or need to get into.

What inspires you to shoot someone? Is it instinctual?

I think it's a little bit intuitive, but I would say; if we get along and if I like them and if I think their personality is beautiful, I will shoot them. A lot of people say, "When we meet the people you photograph, they're not as beautiful as in the images," but that's not true. In my images, I'm photographing my subject how I view them, and I attempt to translate this into my images.

Any trends in fashion you're ready to see retired?

I don't like the oversize shoulder pads very much. I think it's so beautiful to show the body as the body, instead of adding things to the body, you know?