

PICTURE PERFECT

ARTIST **IRAN ISSA-KHAN** TRANSLATES THE BEAUTY THAT SURROUNDS US THROUGH HER PHOTOGRAPHY, AS SHE CONTINUES TO STRIVE TO CAPTURE THAT ELUSIVE BEST IMAGE. **BY ERIC NEWILL**

Nothing seems to stay constant in the frenetic and fast-evolving flurry of Miami—nothing, that is, except the energetic and effervescent whirlwind that is Iran Issa-Khan. An acclaimed artist, who has photographed everything from sheiks to shells, from countesses to coconuts, she has in her life blazed a path from Tehran to Paris to New York to Miami, picking up countless celebrated friends and admirers along the way.

The chattering classes see her in action at myriad society shindigs—be it a black-tie gala, an edgy Wynwood opening, or an intimate dinner party—where she’s always the center of attention, regaling the crowd while pronouncing each new fashionable butterfly that wafts into her orbit “fabulous.” But that is merely the public Iran Issa-Khan. For one to truly understand her worldview, one must look at the art. There, amid the robust veins of a plant or the luminous colors of a molusk, lies her overwhelming passion: beauty.

Indeed, it is an aesthetic to which she was born. She spent her youth among the glittering last epoch of prerevolutionary Tehran, when the Shah would throw elaborate parties at his palace under a brightly burning Persian moon. Frequent trips with her mother to Paris to pur-



Yucca Yang, 2001.



Iran Issa-Khan’s large-format photography meditates on the elegance of nature.

“I never took myself as a photographer. I took myself as someone who loved beauty and wanted to show it to the world.” —**IRAN ISSA-KHAN**

chase the latest haute couture and sample the most chic cuisine only refined her taste for the exquisite. “These experiences taught me to appreciate the way things were served, the way you ate, drank, partied, dressed,” she says. “That has everything to do with how you see the world, and it allowed me to make my subjects feel comfortable.”

Ah, yes, her subjects: In the late 1970s, having relocated to the US, she studied photography in order to capture the beauty she experienced around her. Soon, renowned editor Pilar Larraín del Solar asked her to contribute portraiture to the international editions of *Harper’s Bazaar*. Her first assignment? Shooting Carolina Herrera in the lavish Venezuelan ancestral home of her husband, Reinaldo. “We broke the story that she was going to become a designer,” Issa-Khan says. “After that, we moved on to Patty and Gustavo Cisneros, and the spreads were such a success that before I knew it, we were asked to photograph Nancy Reagan at The White House.” Between her contacts, those of her friends, and the evident mastery of her portraits,

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Issa-Khan photographed Olympia and David de Rothschild for *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1980s.

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one door after another opened: She documented David and Olympia de Rothschild at their home in Paris, the duke and duchess of Marlborough at Blenheim Palace, and fashion scions such as the Ferragamos and the Fendis. The secret to the success of these images, she says, was that she made all her subjects feel incredibly relaxed.

“I knew them socially, and I never took myself as a photographer,” she says. “I took myself as someone who loved beauty and wanted to show it to the world. And the lifestyle was extraordinary: fresh flowers everywhere, fabulous food, interesting people everywhere you went. The '80s were truly another world.”

One of her favorite subjects was Paloma Picasso, who liked the images Issa-Khan created of her so much that she gave her the international campaigns for her accessories. From there Issa-Khan began shooting fashion with all the top models of the day, from Paulina Porizkova and Andie MacDowell to Stephanie Seymour and Linda Evangelista. “Word got around, so whenever I'd ask agencies to send me girls they'd send me the best ones. We'd shoot all the collections after Fashion Week in Milan, New York, Paris. We'd shoot all night,” she recalls. “It was really another time: The photography was glamorous, the models were glamorous. People became superstars and stayed that way. Today everything is so fast and in-your-face that you lose the mystery of what's behind the image. You can't make up stories anymore.”

Tragedy struck when Issa-Khan's friend and makeup artist, Guillermo Hernandez, died of AIDS in the early '90s. She was so heartbroken that she abandoned photography completely for a number of years. Then, in the mid-'90s, the artist Michele Oka Doner, whose

Vermillion, 2010.

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works are inspired by the multifaceted beauties of nature, recommended that she begin shooting plants. “I saw what she meant,” Issa-Khan says. “I forgot everything about fashion and came to a place where I dovetailed with the gifts of the earth and the ocean in their purest forms.”

In 2001, the architect Michael Wolfson—who loved her initial images of flowers, plants, and shells—organized a show of her work in London. It turned out to be a stellar success, with her images landing on the cover of *The Independent* and attracting renowned collectors, such as Zaha Hadid. “All of a sudden I had a new career,” Issa-Khan says. “Nature is so perfect,

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY IRAN ISSA-KHAN

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Foursome,
2010.

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and we never really take the time to look at it. That's why I work in large format, five feet by four feet. You don't respect the shells, the plants, unless you see them huge, and immerse yourself in all their veins and gradations of color.

"I use the same light for objects as I do for people," she continues, "the pure lighting that made my reputation as a fashion photographer. It comes from the top, bottom, and sides, illuminating people from within and showing their souls. If you are beautiful inside, you are beautiful outside. But if you are ugly inside, no matter how lovely on the outside, it won't work. It's the same with a plant—it represents perfection. I don't like weeds. And some people are weeds and others are fabulous plants."

The multicultural energy and intense growth of Miami only fuels Iran Issa-Khan's desire to produce more art, and she hints that a book collecting her fashion photographs is in the works. Her overarching philosophy is always one of moving forward. "[Richard] Avedon said he never took his best picture, and that's how I feel—I haven't taken my best photo yet, or learned my best lesson, or eaten the best food. The more you experience life every single day makes you better as a person," she explains. "It's very important to surround yourself with young, beautiful people, but it's even more essential to learn from those around you—be it a child, a grown-up, or an animal. You take all that and make it your own. Experience makes you wise." ■



A TASTEFUL TRIO

Iran Issa-Khan spotlights three favorite accessories from the Resort collections.

Moving in the same posh circles as sheiks and princesses, designers and socialites, Iran Issa-Khan has lived a charmed—and stylish—life. Over the years she's honed her fashion aesthetic to reflect "classics that feel timeless, always elegant, always sophisticated. You can never go wrong." With that in mind, we asked Issa-Khan to spotlight some favorites from the Resort collections now arriving in stores.

Parnassea Collection Bleu Canard Capucines bag by **Louis Vuitton**. 305-931-3887. 2003 sunglasses by **Emporio Armani**. *Sunglass Hut*, 305-466-9353. Brown leather lock bag by **Valentino**. *Nordstrom*, 305-356-6900.