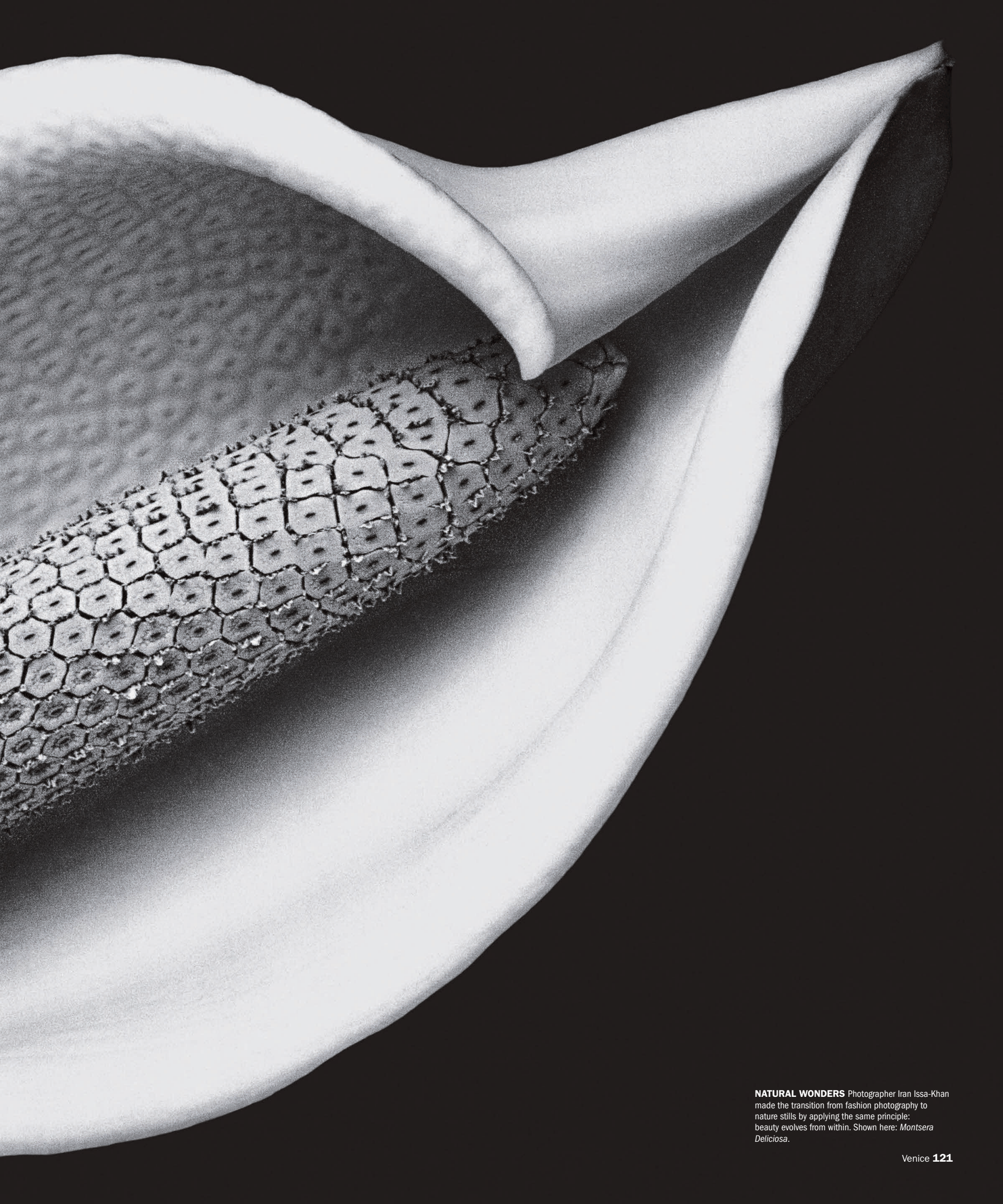


REDISCOVERING BEAUTY

*Photographer Iran Issa-Khan simplified everything
and found something extraordinary...herself.*

**BY REED V. HORTH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY IRAN ISSA-KHAN**



NATURAL WONDERS Photographer Iran Issa-Khan made the transition from fashion photography to nature stills by applying the same principle: beauty evolves from within. Shown here: *Montsera Deliciosa*.

“When I take a shell or a flower or a plant, fashion has to come into it, with the shapes and the way I light them. I shoot nature like I shoot a cover.”
— Iran Issa-Khan

Photographer Iran Issa-Khan is not afraid to spiritually and figuratively trim the fat in her life, career and art. Her genteel, lyrical speech and the cordiality with which she illuminates events in her life is as much a product of her Middle Eastern roots as the recent introspection that colors her most recent series of still-life photographs. By rejecting tumult and focusing on nature, Issa-Khan discovered beauty through a lens of simplicity.

The bustling metropolis of Tehran, which her family fled in the late 1970s, was a hub of progressivism, culture and scholarship for millennia. To the surprise of the world, the 1979 Iranian Revolution took a relatively successful and prosperous monarchical government and overthrew it within a matter of months. Political allies to the soon-to-be-deposed Shah immigrated westward to Europe and the United States and brought with them a culture rich in architecture, mathematics and generosity of spirit.

Iran Issa-Khan captured this unique perspective and used it to propel her into the hyper-competitive world of high-fashion photography. With moves to New York, Paris and London, Issa-Khan studied fashion photography under photographer and eventual mentor William Minor Jr. and developed a distinctive voice and vision within the male-dominated fashion industry.

“[For me] fashion was more about having a good time with the models than anything else,” the elegant grande dame says while serving cookies and chocolates in her apartment atop Miami’s waterways. Her Farsi lilt and elegant demeanor give way to a cordiality and joie de vivre that belies her status as one of the major fashion photographers of the last 40 years.

“Fashion photography was so great because everyone was having so much fun,” she says, evidenced by the veritable who’s who of the fashion industry’s movers and shakers who have found an oracle in the lens of her camera. International supermodels Paulina Porizkova, Christy Turlington, Iman, Andie MacDowell, Debbie Dickinson and Talisa Soto, as well as fashion paragons Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass, Salvatore Ferragamo, Diane von Furstenberg and Carolina Herrera have been photographed by Issa-Khan.

“Fashion for me was fabulous,” she continues. “I was brought up in the Middle East, but also Paris, New York, so all my life was fashion. For me, it is second nature.” Due to her generous nature, effusive personality and flair for the dramatic, her photography became legendary throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the most influential fashion magazines: *Vogue*, *W*, *Elle* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, among others. Later she shot more formal portraiture with Nancy Reagan at the White House, the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough at Blenheim Palace, the Rothschilds, Paloma Picasso and Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo. With adoring fans worldwide and an industry she had finally mastered, she was at the top of her game.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, she left it all. In the late 1990s, Issa-Khan’s makeup artist died of AIDS, shaking her to her core. “I saw what happened to him, how it had ravaged him and everything that he was all about,” she says. “He was such a beautiful person physically, mentally and spiritually. I could not shoot beauty anymore. I had to get away.”

In an effort to leave this portion of her life behind, Issa-Khan made sunny South Florida her home after falling in love with the weather years prior. During a chance meeting at the Wolfsonian Museum in Miami Beach in 2001, artist and naturalist Michele Oka Doner approached Issa-Khan to ask why she was no longer working in fashion photography. Dissatisfied with the answer, she beckoned Issa-Khan to come to her studio to shoot some of the natural

elements she was working on in her own artworks.

Issa-Khan began shooting Oka Doner’s plants and flowers and realized they had all of the breadth and beauty she experienced in fashion, but none of the artifice. Issa-Khan admits with a smile, “We can’t fix nature. Make it up. Retouch it. Put powder on it.” By stripping away artificial elements, Issa-Khan’s eyes became enamored with the majesty of all things natural. “All at once, I realized my life was so simple, and I had made it so complicated.”

Inspired by her new friend Oka Doner’s challenge, Issa-Khan began experimenting with photographing natural objects and blowing them up on a grand scale, drawing parallels to painter Georgia O’Keeffe. Extreme close-ups of the architecture of seashells and intricate details of plants and flowers become her metaphor for taking the time to really see the world and respect all things. Additionally, the large-format printing reduces the viewer to ant-size figures and reveals surprising sensuality and geometry of form in the subjects. “They are very male/female, male/male, female/female. Once you see nature, you don’t make judgments.” The effect is humbling and thought-provoking.

Innovations in computer photo processing and the accessibility of Instagram and Photoshop sometimes diminish the efforts professional photographers take in honing their craft organically. “People take photography lightly. They do not understand how difficult it is,” she says.

By rejecting modernism and shooting on traditional film, Issa-Khan obtains a photographic quality not available to dilettante or digital photographers, such as expansion of photographs to nearly impossible lengths without sacrificing quality of image. However, such adherence to tradition has its limitations. “People don’t understand that it takes 8 to 10 hours lighting a subject, shooting it,” she explains. “It is a very difficult situation. When I shoot a photograph, I don’t retouch it. In fashion we did, but in real life, I don’t.”

However, the large scale and meticulous detail her photographs convey provides viewers access to minute textures reminiscent of undulating fabrics harking back to Issa-Khan’s fashion days. “When I take a shell or a flower or a plant, fashion has to come into it, with the shapes and the way I light them,” she says. “I shoot nature like I shoot a cover.”

In successfully combining tradition with modernism, Issa-Khan creates a bridge between fashion and nature, architecture and sensuality, East and West. Further, her hope is that future generations can benefit from this reconnection with one another and the stripping of barriers and technologies which, instead of connecting us, actually restrain us.

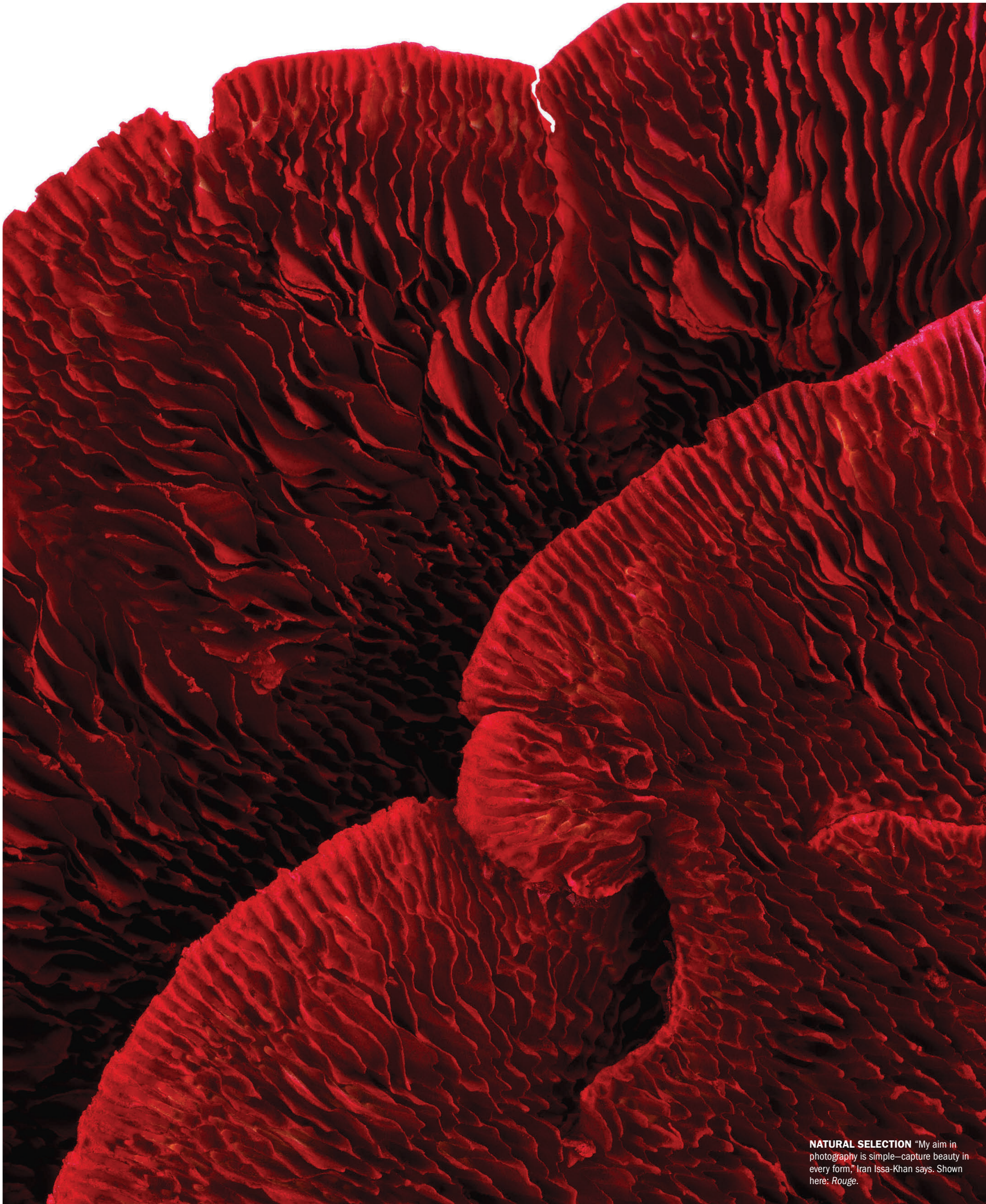
“We are so distracted,” she says, pointing at her phone silently blinking on the table before her. “You go to dinner or lunch with someone, and all they do is look at their cellphone. I say, ‘What did you do before you got this? How do you connect with each other?’ We’ve forgotten how to write letters, we have to learn how to spell. We’ve forgotten how to be kind to one another. Everything is through a machine. We are robots. You need to go back to nature because it is the only thing that is real.”

Reality is what surrounds Issa-Khan now. Throughout her crisp white apartment, illuminated by natural sunrise and sunset views, she artfully surrounds herself with real friends, real inspiration, real art and real sunlight. And, based on the laughter—of which there is plenty—life has never been better.

To purchase Issa-Khan’s book, which presents a stunning collection of fruit and flora and a foreword by internationally acclaimed architect Zaha Hadid, please visit IranIssaKhan.com. “Iran Issa-Khan” is also available in a limited edition, which includes a signed print by the artist.



FRUITFUL PURPOSE Issa-Khan aims to keep photography simple while still capturing the beauty of any subject. Shown here: *Amrut*.



NATURAL SELECTION "My aim in photography is simple—capture beauty in every form," Iran Issa-Khan says. Shown here: *Rouge*.



A CLOSER LOOK Deep observation into Issa-Khan's photographs reveals formal complexity, color and texture, which are noted in her images that range from flowers to shells to coral. Shown here: *Forbidden Love*.



FOCUS FIRST "Just as people do, I believe that each plant, each tree, each shell—and nature itself—has an inner force and an inner beauty that glows," Issa-Khan says. Shown here: *Soixante-Neuf*.

PETAL PUSHER Through her provocative and sensual images, Issa-Khan magnifies viewers' appreciation of each living subject. Shown here: *Twosome*.

