

#34 November 2018 *Cameraderie*
Irving Penn (1917-2009)
Part V: Beauty



This is the last of five articles on Irving Penn. This article covers his photography under the category of beauty.

Just as reminder, this is the Irving Penn Foundation website:

<https://www.irvingpenn.org/artwork/>

I encourage you to look at all the images there, in the eight categories: Portraits, Small Trades, Still Life, Fashion, Beauty, Nudes, Travel, and Documentary. All are worth studying, and I am discussing the first five, in five articles. The website also has an excellent biography and chronology of Penn's life and work.

Here is the link to the Wikipedia article on Penn:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irving_Penn

Two issues ago, in the article on Penn's still lifes, we observed his penchant for *memento mori*—reminders that life is limited and that eventually we all decay and die. Penn brings this out in full force in his images of "Beauty." The Irving Penn Foundation might as well have titled this section of their website "Beauty is Temporary."

Gold and Silver Make-up (B), New York, 1985



This image is full of inversions and unexpected elements. Instead of two large colored dots on the cheeks (like clown makeup), the cheek dots are windows through the makeup to the normal flesh. Pointed at these are natural-color fingers. The center dividing line is a thin strip of natural flesh as well. The model's lips, brows, and eyes show a disturbed mood (brilliant posing), and her eyes do not look in the same direction. Her eyes are red in the corners, adding to the disturbed mood. This is hardly beauty, although she is clearly a beautiful professional model. This is a death mask, full of divisions and glimpses into pain and disturbances. Penn does not light this face as a portrait, with a light and a dark side, but with a single center-aimed light, concentrated on the forehead, like a painful blow to the face.

Bug in Ear (A), New York, 1959



This image speaks for itself (my word play is intended; the bug is speaking into the ear of the model). This obviously beautiful woman will eventually feed the insects, and the insect is even announcing it, and may soon in fact enter through the ear canal. This is really quite grisly.

White Face with Color Smears, New York, 1986



"All is vanity," this says to me, "and then we die." The white face is a sign of a dead person or a ghost. Makeup, normally used to create beauty, is here reduced to simple smears, a complete failure of purpose. I can't tell if the model has color smears directly on her, or if a monochrome image has been painted on, and then re-photographed. Note the deep shadows on the sides of the head and under the chin. A single strong light has been used, above and a little off-center.

Foot Care, New York, 1990



Again, Penn reminds us that we age and decay. He has even included five acupuncture needles in this catalog of foot care products. Note the alternation of the toes with the materials, making a rhythmic composition, which then descends the foot right/left/right/left, and finally center. So original!