

# The irony in fashion

Vogue photographer **Michael Baumgarten**  
on fearlessness, finding your own creative voice,  
and the art of producing an iconic image

Interview by Janine Leah Bartels



"I AM NOT THE KIND OF PHOTOGRAPHER WHO WAS born with a camera in my hand," says Michael Baumgarten, *Vogue's* renowned still-life photographer.

In his early twenties, Baumgarten studied performing arts in Germany. The day he took his final bow, he found himself in a photo studio. "I discovered the camera was the perfect tool for what I wanted to do," he says. After shooting a handful of photos of people naked in his bathroom, he landed his first story in French *Vogue*.

Since then, he has shot his own weight in diamonds for *Vogue Gioiello*, created glowing beauty animations for *Vogue China's* iPad version, and photographed several fragrance campaigns for Hermès.

These days, Baumgarten shoots with a digital high-resolution Hasselblad, producing iconic images from fearless juxtapositions: think ice cream melting on £80,000-worth of jewellery, taxidermy adorned in diamonds, and *Casa Vogue's* grand interior settings with surreal set designs. "I am quite an ironic person," he admits. "I sometimes laugh to myself when I imagine the combinations."

*Tell us about your childhood in Germany...*  
I was always creating my own world, actually doing what I now make a living from. My parents completely encouraged it. The other kids always had to tidy up, but I didn't. There wasn't a lot of TV – it was more crafting,

playing in nature and climbing mountains. It was a nice childhood. When you are in touch with nature, you learn fast. Your intuition builds. Your imagination builds. You didn't want to get bored, so you had to train your head to be a source of inspiration, to see things that wouldn't mean anything to other people and translate them into something else. These days, you have a two-dimensional screen where you find your three-dimensional world, and there's a lot of fear and protection from parents.

*How did you get from studying performing arts to being a Vogue photographer?*

Anger. In a short time, anger can drive you very fast. I was in theatre school, performing, and I found it really boring. I cannot do the same thing twice. You have a director who you obviously have to follow – you are like a puppet. I like playing and improvising. That's what I do when I shoot. One night, after we did the last show, I said, 'Bye, guys, that's a wrap.' I went down the street and there was this photo studio. I needed something to do, so I thought, 'Let's try this out.' This happened when I was 22. It was then I discovered it was the perfect tool for what I wanted to do.

*So, instead of being in front of the camera, you needed to be behind it?*

I don't want to be in front of the camera ever again. I really like to observe.



*View On Colour*  
magazine, from  
Baumgarten's  
2004-2006 archive



Left: *Bloom* magazine, 2005. Below: *Vogue Italia*, 2014. "Beauty is not only the paint you put on the face," says Baumgarten



Above: *View On Colour* magazine, from Baumgarten's 2004-2006 archive. Right: *Vogue China*, 2015. "Hair is about sculpture and the make-up is about paint, and when the team works together well, it's magic"



Bathroom series, late '90s: "When I got my first story in French *Vogue*, I had only shot 20 images: people nude in my bathroom"

*Everyone is taking photos on their phone and self-promoting via social media. How can emerging photographers catch a break?*

I think that it's really easy now. It's about having a point of view. The Instagrams that people are posting are a lot of other people's work. I really don't get it. It's an edited moodboard - but it's not their work. At the moment, people are desperate to hear voices. If someone develops their point of view and really does their thing - is authentic, in the moment, and not in the past - their voice gets heard. Fashion and beauty are about capturing the zeitgeist, not only about referencing the past. When I got my first story in French *Vogue*, I had only shot 20 images: pictures of people nude in my bathroom. I understand now, after 25 years - and I have seen a lot of images - that I had a voice and a point of view. If I had been an art director, I would have taken me. So, develop a voice, see the right people and put your work out there. When it's good, people react.

*Let's talk about your artistic vision. Where do you source your inspiration?*

I go to shows. I like the art world more than the editorial world for inspiration. The editorial world is too much inspired by its own self-glory. When I travel, it's super-inspiring because I am confronted with new things. Real life provides you with a lot of those things when you just look closely. I combine things I've seen that would look really strange together. I'm quite an ironic person, and I sometimes laugh to myself when I imagine the combinations. Then I shoot them.

*Have you ever made any big mistakes that aspiring photographers could learn from?*

On one shoot, I was badly prepared. You must prepare yourself for every situation. It's like a politician having all the answers to the questions that might be thrown at them - you must be ready. I didn't have the answers ready in this situation. Always question yourself before you step on set, and ask yourself if you really see it.

*Do you have any special tips for shooting melting ice cream with jewels?*

First, you need fearlessness. Throwing £80,000 worth of jewellery into an ice cream... you know you're

## "Fashion and beauty are about capturing the zeitgeist, not only about referencing the past"

heading for trouble! The jewellers will have to clean them all, but they'll also get an image of their product that is iconic. So don't be afraid.

*How about when shooting fragrance?*

You need to really smell the fragrance in the picture. Smell it. Close your eyes. Try to imagine what you see. There is an image of a Gucci fragrance that I shot when I started for French *Vogue* 20 years ago. This image really represented the scent. Back then, you could smell a fragrance; now there is too much marketing.

*What about shooting beauty?*

Be selective about the artists you're working with. The hair is about sculpture and the make-up is about paint, and when the team works together well, it's magic. For beauty, it is very important that you don't have horrible people on set. Your model feels this [energy], and she cannot be beautiful any more. Beauty is not only the paint you put on the face.

*What is your definition of beauty?*

It is an emotional approach. It puts me at ease with what I am seeing. It is really based on intuition. It's like when you see a good picture: you just know there is something happening in that image and that you have it. I have a hard time defining that in words. My friend Nelson Sepulveda and I are working on a book on the meaning of beauty. He was a famous make-up artist in the '80s, working for [Guy] Bourdin and [Helmut] Newton. Beauty changes. What you find beautiful - which persona, which object and which aesthetic - shifts with the times. Things that were relevant two or three years ago are no longer. Our project is about the now and the future, less of the past. I am really looking forward to finding my definition of beauty.