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\$2.95 • OCTOBER 12, 1992

# NEW YORK



## madonna's magician

WILL PHOTOGRAPHER STEVEN MEISEL

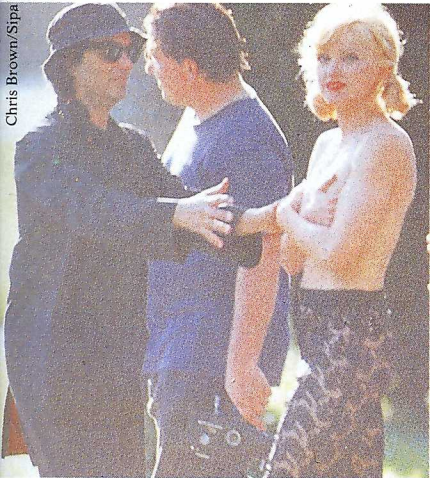
CLICK WITH THAT "SEX" BOOK?

BY MICHAEL GROSS



# madonna's

HOW LENS  
MAN  
STEVEN  
MEISEL,  
THE CAT IN  
THE HAT,  
MAKES THINGS  
CLICK



"Sex" in Miami.

Meisel (left) and Madonna shooting

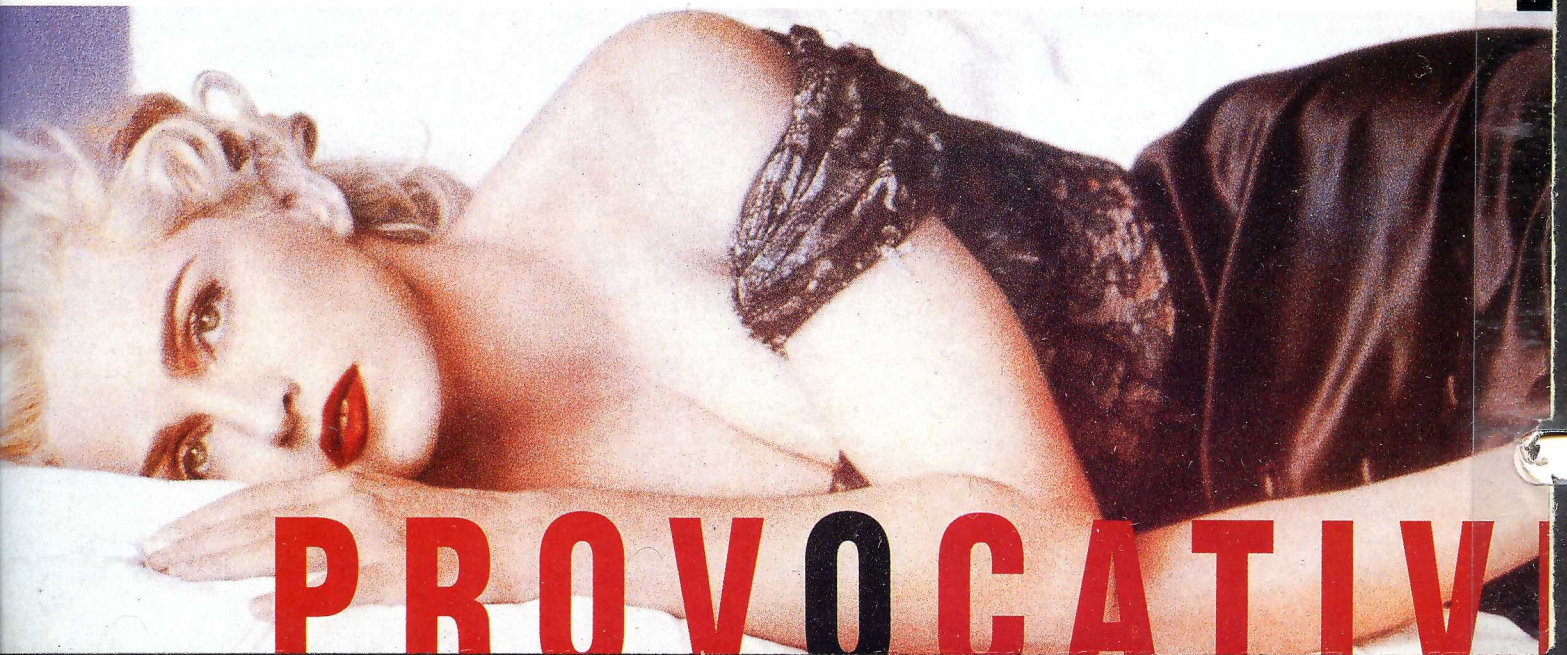


BY

# magician

MICHAEL  
GROSS

Warner spells things out in a flier for the forthcoming **erotic**—and no doubt **seismic**—book.



**a** T HALF-HOUR INTERVALS OVER TWO DAYS IN MID-September, some of the most influential figures in fashion arrived at Industria Superstudio. The vast studio, a scene to begin with, became—for 48 hours, anyway—the focal point of the fashion universe.

Some visitors were from the pop past, like Warhol superstar Jane Holzer. Others came from stock of a more recent vintage, like designer Stephen Sprouse. There were powers of the present, too: rocker Lenny Kravitz, actor Kyle MacLachlan, models Naomi Campbell and Linda Evangelista, designers Michael Kors and Isaac Mizrahi. They'd all been assembled—39 strong—for a sort of group ego trip. The hottest photographer in their world had asked each of them to sit for a portrait. They'd been chosen.

Behind the camera was Steven Meisel, 38. The object of fierce bidding in the recent magazine war between *Vogue* and Hearst's *Harper's Bazaar*, Meisel ended up the highest-paid photographer in fashion—Condé Nast Publishing's \$2-million man. Meisel also pulls in a seven-figure income as an advertising photographer for just about everyone who's anyone in fashion—The Gap, Revlon, Valentino, Anne Klein, Calvin Klein, Gian Franco Ferré, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Lancôme, and Barneys, to name only a few.

More important for now, Meisel is the man behind *Sex*, the sure-to-be-controversial photo book of raw hetero-, homo-, and omni-sexual fantasies (to be published October 21), starring and more or less written by Madonna, the world's most advanced human publicity-seeking missile. It was inevitable that the ultimate exhibitionist would find common cause with this master imagician. What's more surprising is that the ambitious blonde and her Boswell meet as equals. Despite her power and wealth, Madonna still needs people like Meisel. She puts on the show, but he immortalizes it. And in his small world, Meisel is as well known and as powerful as she is.

A fashion Pygmalion, he "cultivates" and "trains" models—"the girls." The naturalist snapshot style that has dominated fashion photography lately isn't his thing. "Women today are striving to be perfect, to be the ultimate Barbie doll," Meisel told England's *Independent*. "I can't think back in history where women have been so plastic. I mean, how many women are going out to have face-lifts and are having their teeth done and are dyeing their hair? Sociologically, it's definitely a modern thing."

But many competitors consider Meisel a scavenger of the past, a sort of re-photographer. "He does a very good job of systematically making a story out of other photographers' styles," says Bert Stern, who threatened legal action over photographs of Madonna that Meisel copied from Stern's famous 1962 "last sitting" with Marilyn Monroe. Meisel has also cribbed from Brassai in shooting Madonna. "Everyone is influenced," Stern goes on. "That's natural. But he takes." Stern sighs. "We live in an age of nostalgia. It's what's going on, I guess." Meisel's canny, postmodern samplings are all of a piece with the *fin de siècle* ragpicking that has given us everything from the AT&T Building to haute couture influenced by rap music.

Frequently, insecure fashion clients hire him because he has the eye and the buzz. Editors love him. *Mirabella*, *Elle*, and *Bazaar* have all thought of hiring him. *Bazaar*'s top editors, several of whom have worked steadily with him for years, are apparently still smarting from his recent rejection. They replied to requests for in-

terviews through a spokeswoman, who said, "Your quotes should come from *Vogue*."

"He's widely acknowledged as one of the superstars of fashion photography," says his *Vogue* boss, Anna Wintour, who earns far less than Meisel does.

"He is one of the few," agrees top *Elle* photographer Gilles Bensimon. "He knows fashion better than anybody, perhaps."

Advertising clients hail him, too. "He makes Valentino very modern, and that is very important," says the couturier's partner, Giancarlo Giammetti. He also brings out the best in the troops. "People try to go to the limit for him," says Ronnie Cooke, the creative director of Barneys New York Advertising. "What other photographer has both a sense of style and a sense of humor?"

Models die to work with him. The daily fantasies that inform the work in most fashion-photography studios are taken to the nth degree in Meisel's. "He makes you believe in whatever it is you're supposed to be from the minute you walk in the door," says Cindy Crawford. "You walk out thinking you took the most brilliant pictures ever. He makes you look . . . genius, basically. There's so much drivel out there. Working with Steven is fashion at its most fun. You feel you're doing art."

Or at least artifice. Meisel's work is controlled, graphic, idealized, strangely beautiful, provocative, and always artificial. So inspection yields little about the man behind the camera. Artifice is also Meisel's mask. In fact, everything about him seems calculated to conceal. He rides around in a chauffeured, tinted-window Mercedes he calls his Darth Vader—mobile, usually surrounded by impossibly beautiful models or a pack of acolytes dressed just like him. He looks like a Jewish Cherokee, with thick, straight black hair cascading to his shoulders past dark eyes and extra-thick brows and lashes. He has worn only black since leaving high school. His *Industria* outfit was typical. Black boots, jeans, turtle-neck, trench coat, and a do-rag bandanna under a black rabbit hat with flying fur earflaps—never mind the weather.

Ah, that hat. It's been mocked by the *New York Times*, ridiculed in the bitchy fashion world as a cover-up for baldness (which Meisel denies). But like the black rain hat he dons for less formal occasions, it is also admired as a compelling signature by people who spend their lives in pursuit of such things.

And that, it turns out, is precisely the point of the exercise at *Industria*. The elect have been asked to write down what they do on a small paper sign, and pose—one by one—wearing Meisel's furry hat.

Linda Evangelista, Meisel's muse, wrote, "I serve." Quentin Crisp wore Meisel's hat over his own and announced, "I do nothing." Jane Holzer was a "retail slut" and wore two of Meisel's hats. Nan Kempner called herself a "housewife" and wore the hat flaps up.

The results will appear soon, filling fourteen pages in Italian *Vogue*. And for a month at least, that famous stupid hat will be transformed into . . . genius.

**S**TEVEN MEISEL HAS BEEN DESCRIBED that way ever since he started making a mark on the city's downtown social life as the center of an intriguingly sinister, sexually ambiguous black-clad pack of night-crawlers. To understand Meisel, one must first grasp the importance of his ever-evolving clique. Its members are planets circling his sun, taking energy from him, and reflecting back light for the greater glory of them all.

"Steven always had the ability to recog-

**WHAT'S SURPRISING IS THAT THE AMBITIOUS BLONDE AND HER BOSWELL MEET AS EQUALS. MADONNA PUTS ON THE SHOW, BUT**

Photographs: clockwise from top left, Antoine Verglas/Gamma-Liaison; Alison Dyer/Visages; Bettina Cronie; Albert Ferreira/DML.



With Linda Evangelista, one of his

favorite models.

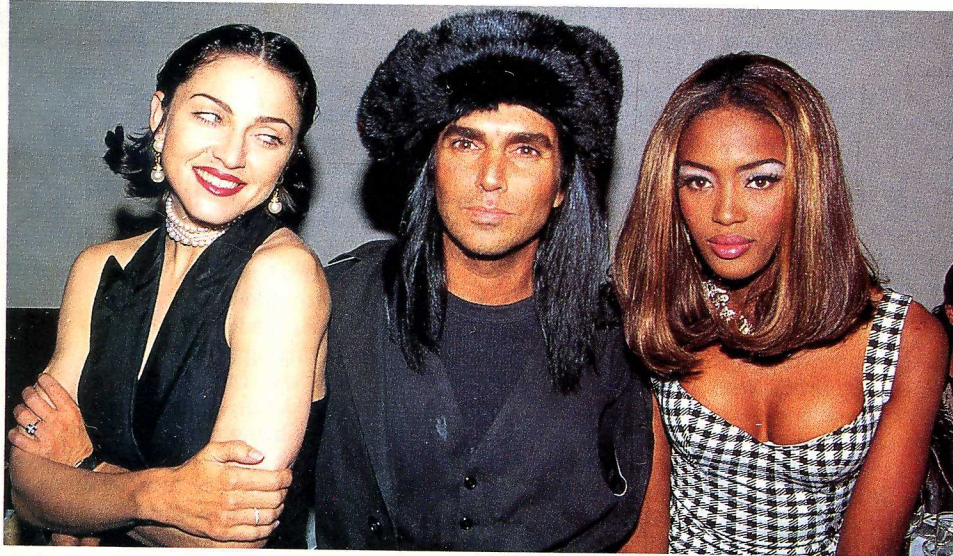
The "re-photographer."



with Herb Ritts and David Hockney.

member Christy Turlington.

Madonna and Naomi Campbell stand by their man.



With former Trinity



nize talent in other people and bring them into a group situation," says Deborah Marquit, a lingerie designer who met Meisel in art school. "You're acceptable only if you're 'off,' though. You have to be both different *and* conforming enough to want to be in the group. Steven is insecure. He needs people to see what he sees and think what he thinks. They even use the same lingo he uses. It's what he's had around him since the cafeteria at school."

For those who fit the bill, Meisel's set was and is a launching pad. Meisel ignited the cometlike career of designer Stephen Sprouse and molded the ephemeral modeling legend of Teri Toye, the post-operative transsexual who gained minor renown as 1984's Girl of the Year. Some time later, he replaced them with three models who became known as the Trinity—Christy Turlington, Naomi Campbell, and Linda Evangelista. Meisel packaged them into a collective fashion force, a fantasy of image as powerful as any designer label or glossy magazine.

It would be easy to mistake Steven, Naomi, Christy, and Linda for mere updates of sixties fashion sensations David Bailey, Twiggy, the Shrimp, and Penelope Tree. Meisel has also been compared to an earlier avatar, Richard Avedon, whom he's worshiped since grade school. At first, Meisel's work was both slavishly imitative of and less intellectual than Avedon's. But Meisel's ambitions have always been different. Indeed, his vision may be more in tune with this crass mass-media era than with Avedon's aristocratic age.

"I don't really consider myself a photographer," Meisel told me in an interview eight years ago, when his star was first ascen-

dant. "I'm more of a visual and a vision type of thing. . . . I think I'd like to direct films. I haven't planned it out yet. I don't want to do what I'm doing forever."

If Avedon and Andy Warhol had had a baby, he would be Steven Meisel. "When he was very young, he questioned how to develop a mystique to become an artist," says a woman who knew him then and allowed him to make her over repeatedly, long before he did it professionally. "He was more an observer than a participant. He'd always take somebody, shape them, and then push them out and watch. Photography was just a vehicle. He has no ulterior motives at all [except to] make a scene and be in the shadows and watch. It's so much fun that he could cause such a scene. I'm sure that's how he sees it. It was never that deep to begin with."

Certainly, Meisel and Madonna's *Sex* is going to cause a scene. Lots of people are bound to like it. Warner Books and six foreign publishers are printing an optimistic 750,000-plus copies (and asking \$49.95 for each one). But outside that small circle of the young and liberated, many others here in Puritan America are likely—especially in this highly charged election season—to see the book as godless, utterly obscene, a call to arms. "Working with Steven is comfortable for me," Madonna

MEISEL IMMORTALIZES IT.

says. "We have a similar sense of humor and beauty, similar tastes in life and people. He's very theatrical, and working with him is like working with a great director."

**f**ROM A JUST-OFF-THE-PRESSES GLIMPSE AT 32 OF THE book's 128 pages (which hold a tiny fraction of the 80,000-plus photographs Meisel ended up taking), one thing besides Madonna's id is clear. *Sex* sizzles. No overt acts of intercourse are pictured, though many are suggested. Some pictures are sweet, especially the one of Madonna holding her breasts like a 12-year-old who has just discovered them. But other shots border on the medical. Is it sexy? Disgusting? Stupid? That will depend on the eye of the beholder. Madonna's *Sex*, as rendered by Steven Meisel, is sure to be a sociosexual Rorschach test, if not quite a blot on our culture.

Madonna has known Meisel ever since they collaborated on the cover photograph for her second album, *Like a Virgin*, in a suite at the St. Regis Hotel. Today, that slutty Madonna in a white wedding dress seems downright demure. "She thrives on shocking people," says Mark Bego, who wrote *Madonna: Blonde Ambition*. He's heard that *Sex* also includes an eight-page section on incest. "Giving her bad publicity," Bego says, "is like trying to put out a fire with gasoline."

Madonna's penchant for provocation has caused consternation in the house that Henry Luce and Steve Ross built. "Time Warner cautioned her to tone down the book," says Christopher Anderson, a former Time Inc. editor whose biography *Madonna Unauthorized* is a best-seller. "When she got nervous, Meisel bolstered her. He was the strongest advocate of whips, knives, and chains."

Sitting in her office at Warner Books, publisher Nancy Neiman proudly displays the silver Mylar bag with a ghostly blue image of the singer that *Sex* will wear to market. Madonna "is both the medium and the message," Neiman says. "It is Madonna's book. Madonna wanted to push the envelope, and she found people who were capable of taking the journey with her"—meaning Meisel. "He takes a celebrity image and plays with it in situations that are playful, dangerous, provocative—however those pictures play to you."

Neiman sounds as if she can't wait for the brouhaha that is bound to ensue. "We know it's gonna be controversial and it's gonna sell books," she says quite seriously. Then I ask her if she thinks *Sex* could affect this year's presidential election, and her eyes really light up. "Wouldn't it be fun if Murphy Brown hired Madonna as a baby-sitter?"

**S**TEVEN MEISEL IS NO STRANGER to controversies, though he's played his out on smaller stages until now. Both his private life and his career have been filled with contretemps. The first to hit the press was his falling-out with Teri Toye and Stephen Sprouse. More recently, Meisel fell out—and back in—with Condé Nast's American magazines. He's also had public spats with Bert Stern and with model Christy Turlington. After she was profiled in *New York* and spoke about her break with the Trinity ("Model Model," March 9, 1992), she and Meisel stopped speaking.

Today, Turlington politely declines to discuss Meisel. He, too, refused to be interviewed. He also contacted many people and "asked all of us not to talk," says the advertising director for a major American designer. "Steven is like a publicity hound, so I don't know why he doesn't want this."

Nonetheless, matters of both loyalty

and Meisel's influence on their bottom lines kept many from talking. Some of fashion's biggest names—advertisers, designers, photo stylists, models, and magazine editors—declined to discuss Meisel. "I'd hate for our girls not to work with him," a top model-agency executive explains. "He makes them. If they work for him, they work for anyone. He's that powerful because he's that good."

But some *were* willing to talk—more than 75 in all, including many who work with Meisel. "He has lots of faults," Valentino's Giammetti admits. "He's a very difficult guy. He asked me to get out of the studio once because I made him nervous. He's artistic enough to be respected despite his hysteria and hang-ups."

Leslie Kramer, an agent for hair- and makeup stylists, was one of many who whispered about Meisel's fight with Oribe, one of fashion's hair gods. "He gets disappointed with people," Kramer says of Meisel. "He wants his team. So when an Oribe wants [to take] a job [with another photographer], Steven will get upset." (Oribe's agent, Omar Ismail, denies that his client and Meisel have had a problem and calls questions about why they don't work together "inappropriate and unfounded." Ironically, Meisel's companion works for Oribe.)

Lexington Labs co-owner Kim Zorn Caputo and her husband, Alberto, have worked with Meisel for more than a decade. "I remember when Steven began bringing his work to the lab," she says. "The long raincoat, long hair, and floppy hat. I liked him. He was humble and worried a lot about being misunderstood. Not always able to say what he wanted, he knew how he felt. Years went by. The size of his orders grew. He seemed to become more and more isolated from technique, and unreasonable."

Then, in January, a bag of film arrived at the lab, "in the usual Meisel fashion, without any notice of its contents," Caputo continues. Lexington processed it, filed the negatives, and sent proofs to Meisel. Prints then went to the book designer. Suddenly, "Madonna's lawyers sent us a letter accusing us of selling prints out the back door," says Caputo. "Her lawyers asked us for \$50,000 to make it all go away. It was like extortion! It's all hype." She denies that her lab leaked any prints and says she asked Meisel to speak up for her. He didn't, so the Caputos told him to pick up his negatives and send his work elsewhere in the future.

"Alberto and I felt really betrayed after all these years," Caputo says. "We pulled him out of some really tight spots, meeting absurd deadlines and making him look good. I hate to say this, but Steven and [Madonna] seem to have something in common. They both climb over all the people that helped them get where they're going and shout, 'I made it myself.'"

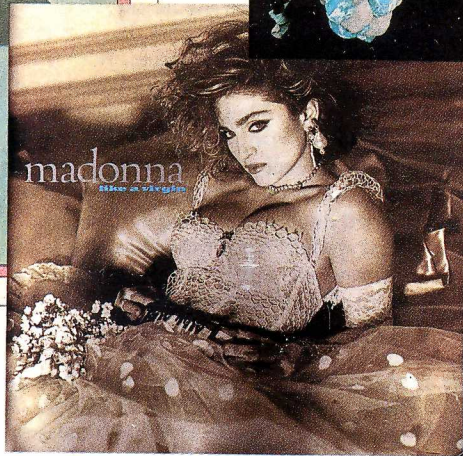
Caputo also thinks Meisel is upset with Madonna. "Really upset and strung out," she adds. "He didn't want to talk about

HE STARTED  
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"I WAS  
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A Soho Weekly News cover led to jobs for Italian Vogue, Italian Glamour, and Madonna. Meisel also has a lucrative sideline shooting ads for companies like Barneys and designers like Valentino.



it." Through an intermediary, Madonna denies it. Is it true? Does it matter? *Genius!*

**U**NTIL HE WAS ABOUT 25, MEISEL LIVED AT HOME with his parents in Fresh Meadows, Queens—three blocks south of the Long Island Expressway—in several apartments, each no more than a block away from the last. He was an indulged child who went with his mother to watch the legendary Kenneth do her hair. He started reading her fashion magazines about the time he was in the fourth grade. They were his "escape mechanism," he's said. He'd even cut school—with his mother's permission—to read them the day they were published. "I was obsessed with the magazines, absolutely," Meisel once told me. "I was totally insane with it." Cheerfully, he admitted that his interest was "a little peculiar."

In the sixth grade, he began pestering model agencies, posing as a photographer in order to get copies of the modeling promotion cards known as composites. "I had to see other pictures that weren't in the magazines," he recalled. The masquerade went further still. When Twiggy came to New York, he claims, he called her agency, put on a phony accent, said he had to change a lunch date with her, and asked if the agency could tell him where she was. "Like fools, they did," he said, smirking.

Meisel was also fascinated with show business. His grandfather Nat Simon was a composer and lyricist who co-wrote the hit song "Poinciana." His mother, Sally, had sung with Sammy Kaye before marrying Lenny Meisel, who worked at London Records.

After a brief flirtation with ballet, their son became an art student. At the High School of Art & Design, Stevan (as he spelled his name then) studied fashion illustration. He went on to the Parsons School of Design but never graduated. "It was boring," he said. "I'd been going out and getting information on my own at night. There was a new movement happening. Great bands." For Meisel, punk sure beat Parsons.

Meisel was hired as an illustrator by *Women's Wear Daily*. "I adored him," says his boss, James Spina, then an art director at

Fairchild Publications. Meisel arrived with an "awesome, amazing portfolio." He immediately won a place in a department he would later describe as "a snake pit."

He still lived at home, "just like the Beaver in a garden apartment," Spina, a neighbor, recalls. Meisel would drive Spina home in a Plymouth Scamp his father bought him to keep him off the subway. Together, they would pore through Meisel's extensive collection of old fashion magazines as they sat beneath posters featuring the likes of Veruschka and Mott the Hoople.

At work, Meisel was modest and likable. He would sit around the office creating characters and monologues. "We'd discuss trends, personalities, the sixties—when women actually wore five pairs of earrings," says Robert Passantino, a *WWD* colleague. Sometimes the male illustrators played dress-up. "They'd bring beaded Norells in and try them on," says an editor. Meisel joined in, only he'd put dresses on over his jeans when he posed for the department's dean, Kenneth Paul Block. "He seemed like a naïve boy from Queens," Block says. "He was quiet, good-looking, very focused, and really eager to be successful. That, one felt."

By 1977, Meisel was illustrating page-one stories as well as spreads. Spina remembers that when the paper covered the new punk performers like Patti Smith and the Clash, Meisel did a series of "New Age, high-voltage" drawings to accompany the story. He was close to that scene. He'd go to Max's Kansas City to see Smith play. His best friend from grade school, Richard Sohl, played keyboards in her group. Sohl would visit him at *WWD*, as would two designers: Anna Sui, an old friend from Parsons, and Stephen Sprouse, whom he'd met at a Bowie-era drag bar, the 82 Club, in 1974.

The clubland years had begun. "The scene was very flamboyant," says Deborah Marquit, the Parsons classmate who, with Meisel's help, got a job at *WWD*. "Everyone came to work crazy

WITH IT," HE SAYS.

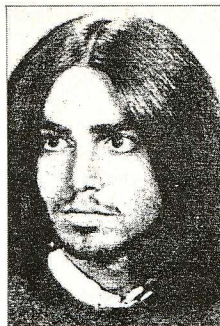
from the night before." Gabriel Rotello, the ex-editor of *Outweek*, was just starting a career as a musician and nightlife impresario when he met Meisel and Co. at the Ninth Circle, a Village bar. Rotello, who went on to share a summer house with Richard Sohl, followed the group's exploits for a decade. At first, Sohl was the star. Patti Smith would introduce him onstage as "Richard D.N.V. Sohl." The initials stood for *Death in Venice*.

"Richard entertained us with stories of them coming into the city in junior high and going to gay bars," Rotello says. "They had real wild streaks, wanting to be where the action was. Steven was very reticent, very nice, obviously very talented, very enigmatic. I thought he manufactured his eccentricities as he might an illustration or a photo. For effect."

Meisel and Sohl shared a conspiratorial streak. They would whisper in a private language and call each other names—Sissy Meisel and Tanta Ricky. "If you didn't know the codes, you wouldn't know what they were talking about," Rotello says. "Together, I found them a little scary." So did Marquit. "For them to accept you, you had to be arty, eccentric, or leaning towards homosexual," she says. "I was straight and into guys. He found humor in my sexuality, but almost at the expense of my sexuality. He can appreciate Madonna's talent. I don't know if he can appreciate her as a sexual being."

Teri Toye was more to Meisel's taste. They met at a party at Rotello's loft, jumping on his old sofa and breaking it. Arriving from Des Moines in the late seventies, Toye started Parsons as a boy, only to quit as a girl. Along the way, she modeled for an illustration class Meisel taught at Parsons. Together, the pair made quite a fashion statement.

Before he got his own Manhattan apartment on East 21st Street



The high-schooler in 1971.

in about 1979, Meisel spent a lot of time visiting kindred spirits. "Steven's idea of a fun evening was to come over, do my makeup and hair, put something crazy on, take a photo, and go out," says a friend. "He was a Svengali. He'd always concentrate on the other person." His exhibitionistic set was glad to oblige him. The times were wilder than Meisel. Though many people around him were drinking and drugging and having oblivious sex, says Rotello, "Meisel always seemed a little too dignified to be caught with his pants down." He had the same companion for years.

More recently, with the safe-sex posters he shot for Red, Hot, and Dance, an interview in the *Advocate*, and the Madonna book, Meisel has opened up a bit. He said he's always photographed "more effeminate-looking men, more masculine-looking women, and drag queens" in hopes of "teaching that there's a wide variety of people. . . . There's absolutely a queer sensibility to my work . . . but there's also a sense of humor . . . a sarcasm and a 'f--- you' attitude as well as a serious beauty."

To Danny Fields, a journalist and rock manager, Meisel's clique appeared asexual. "They dressed like Arab women in mourning," he jokes. "How could you unwrap that? They were like an order of nuns. They just went places and were special. They meant no harm. They tried to look more scary than they were."

**m**EISEL'S PHOTOGRAPHIC CAREER BEGAN IN-  
auspiciously. Illustration was passé. "There wasn't a lot of work to be done," Marquit says. "We were all getting very depressed. Steven took up photography." One night, Spina took Meisel to a party for Bette Midler. Meisel borrowed an old Exakta and took a picture that ran in *WWD's* "Eye" column. As a continuing-education teacher at Parsons, he was entitled to take courses, and chose one in photography. His parents bought him a camera.

In 1979, Meisel met Valerie "Joe" Cates, an aspiring model from Park Avenue, in a vintage-

## EDITORS L

clothing store. He asked to photograph her and her sister, Phoebe, a top model at *Seventeen*. Through the Cates sisters, Meisel got work shooting test photographs of young models—and an assignment from *Seventeen*. "The next time we wanted him, we couldn't get him," says Tamara Schneider, who was then the art director.

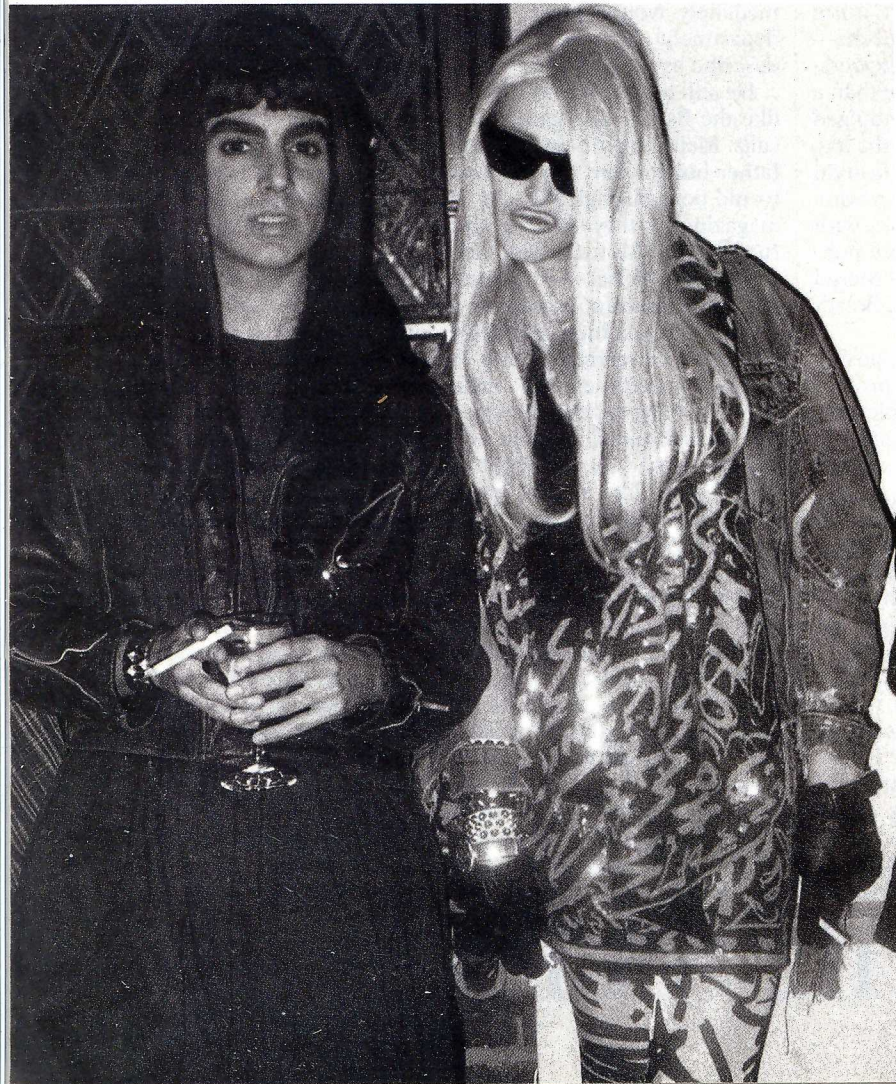
In the interim, Meisel had sought out Annie Flanders, who'd owned the influential sixties boutique Abracadabra (a haunt of the young Meisel) and become the style editor of the *Soho Weekly News*. She published his first cover photo.

Flanders knew that her friend Frances Grill, a photographer's agent, was looking for new blood. Grill was impressed with Meisel and immediately sent a carousel of his slides to Kezia Keeble, a stylist who'd once worked for Diana Vreeland. "She refused to come out of her bedroom to look at them," Grill says. Keeble's husband at the time, Paul Cavaco, looked at the slides against their door. "Come out of the bedroom," he told her.

It was clear, as Keeble would later put it, that "Steven Meisel was it." She got him jobs with Charivari and WilliWear. Then she was hired to create covers for Condé Nast's *Self* magazine. Meisel had never worked in a studio, and he didn't want to leave his *WWD* job. "He technically knew

With Teri Toye, a post-operative transsexual and 1984's

Girl of the Year.



nothing," Grill says. "He was really insecure."

Still, in the early eighties, Meisel shot half a dozen *Self* covers with Keeble, helping turn the new magazine into a million-selling success. He was also working regularly for *Mademoiselle*; its Italian equivalent, *Lei*; and, every once in a while, *Vogue*.

An assistant—who was "promised tons of work by Kezia Keeble to show Steven how to do it"—would set the lights and the camera, says an insider. "Steven didn't know the front of the camera from the back. Kezia wanted a photographer she could mold. He was her boy."

Christopher Baker, another assistant, agrees that Meisel didn't know much. "He didn't care. It was weird," Baker says. "He was, like, chosen."

**E**DITORS LOVED HIS PERFECTIONISM and his style. Wearing a dirndl skirt over jeans, he was "always pushing the limit," Andrea Robinson, then a *Vogue* editor, recalls. "He'd speak to the model in sign language, put his hand a certain way, throw his neck, and expect her to imitate him."

Around that time, Meisel won an assignment from *Vogue* to shoot the Paris collections. "I had to fire him so he could get going on his photo career," James Spina says. The paper soon felt the loss. "He was a genius, and we were fools not to try and keep him," says *WWD* chairman John Fairchild.

In January 1983, Stephen Sprouse asked him to photograph some clothes Sprouse had been making. The designer—aided and abetted by Meisel's image-making skills—was an immediate hit.

Suddenly, Meisel's posse was in the limelight—literally. The *Limelight* opened late in 1983, and Toye and Meisel used the occasion to announce their mock engagement. "It was a 'Let's play with their heads' thing, a joke," says party promoter Alan Rish. But the reaction was unexpected. "That was probably the beginning of the end for downtown," says Ira Silverberg, a book

The early days: Richard



Sobel (in drag), Anna Sui, model Attila, and Stephen Sprouse.

Others talk darkly of sex and drugs. "It was a time when people were toying with dangerous things," says someone who shared a loft with a friend of Sprouse's. "People realized that, left town, got new lives."

Toye married art dealer Patrick Fox and moved back to Des Moines, where they now restore Victorian houses and are active in local politics. Sprouse went into and out of business twice and is now trying another comeback. Only Meisel's aim was true.

Following the breakup of the group, he began working regularly for both Italian and American *Vogue*. But as his profile rose, his problems multiplied. Often, his pictures were discarded. "He was ahead of his time, and that scared people," says an editor he worked with then.

"Carlyne [Cerf, another of his editors] and Steven were after aggressive, contemporary images that were against everything *Vogue* stood for under Grace Mirabella," says a prominent art director. Even when his photos did run, he grew increasingly upset about the way they were used and about the habit editors had of hanging over his shoulder, demanding to see film before he was satisfied.

"He began getting difficult," says a Condé Nast editor. "*Vogue* is very, very autocratic. He had to do as he was told. He was not happy." He began holding on to his film until the last possible moment. "That was the only control he had," the editor says.

Grace Mirabella acknowledges there were creative differences. "It's like clothes I don't like," she says. "I just decide; I don't remember. Not that he's not strong and interesting. But I wanted a direction he didn't want, and I have trouble doing things halfway." Even the changing of the guard at *Vogue* in mid-1988, when Mirabella moved out and Wintour moved in, didn't improve matters. "All of a sudden," says a *Vogue* editor, "Steven was not on the schedule."

The photographer had problems with his advertising clients too. "Occasionally, I get to do what I want," he complained to

# LOVED HIS PERFECTIONISM AND STYLE. WEARING A DIRNDL SKIRT OVER JEANS, HE WAS "ALWAYS PUSHING THE LIMIT," ONE OF THEM RECALLS.

editor who was the doorman at the *Limelight* that night. "It went from small to big. Everyone became someone. They weren't just hanging out anymore."

That fall, Sprouse held his first commercial show, and Meisel met Madonna, shot her album sleeve, and photographed her for *Mademoiselle*. Then, in the spring of 1984, Keeble and John Duka, the *New York Times* fashion columnist who was about to become both her fourth husband and her and Cavaco's partner in a P.R. firm, ran a fashion show where they declared Toye the Girl of the Year. One friend refers to what followed as "their little Peyton Place."

"It was intensely intimate," says hairstylist Maury Hopson. "Then it was intensely estranged." Meisel, Sprouse, and Toye stopped speaking. Toye wrote it off as a "high-school girls' fight."

Frances Grill, who also began seeing less of Meisel at the time, thinks his frequent fallings-out stem from boredom. "He is fashion," she says. "Fashion itself. As fast as you think you've got it, it changes. That's how Steven is. He moves on."



# “I DON’T GO OUT AND DO DRUGS AND F--- ALL NIGHT LONG, YET I’M NOT QUITE READY FOR DINNER PARTIES.”

Photo District News in 1987. But just as often, he didn’t. He shot an ad campaign for designer Azzedine Alaïa. “He put the sexiest women’s clothes in the world on boys,” the Condé Nast editor says. “He’s very provocative. Very self-destructive.”

By cutting off relations with American *Vogue*, Meisel had taken a considerable gamble. “He went out on a limb, but it really paid off for him,” says a stylist he’s worked with. Luckily, Meisel had a friend in Franca Sozzani, who’d first used him in 1980 at *Lei* and then, when she was made editor of Italian *Vogue* in 1988, gave him incredible freedom and a regular showcase shooting covers and multi-page spreads for almost every issue.

Meisel also enjoyed working with Sozzani’s art

director, Fabien Baron. After Baron left *Vogue* in 1988 and opened a design studio, Meisel’s ad work increased significantly. His income, he has said, has quadrupled in the past two years. He even bragged that he’d made more than \$30,000 on advertising jobs “just for walking in the door.”

One door he didn’t like walking in much was Anna Wintour’s. She didn’t really like him much, either. By 1990, they were taking potshots at each other in the press. Only one of his stories had run the previous year, and he’d canceled his contract. “There’s just not much discussion with him,” Wintour told *WWD*. Meisel responded that although “editors scream and carry on,” he was opposed to “kissing ass” and being “taken advantage of.” Friends worried aloud that Meisel was “depressed like crazy,” developing an ulcer, unable to work. He had no domestic outlet. “It just gets so tiresome,” he would complain. “What I need is freedom.”

**h**E FOUND A CERTAIN freedom—and a new clique—when he helped form the Trinity. “I like gilding the lily,” Meisel has said. Having practiced on Teri Toye, he now took on three biological women, transforming them into superbeings in the all-white Park Avenue South studio he dubbed the Clinic. Turlington, Campbell, and Evangelista were beautiful to begin with, but Meisel’s constant makeovers kept them interesting as well, and the sparks that flew from their collaboration lit up his pictures. He first worked with Turlington in 1986, and she introduced him to Evangelista and Campbell. Meisel began photographing them together, says a styl-

ist, because “he thought it would be a neat look.”

Perhaps it was destined that the fab foursome would self-destruct. “They became very powerful and not nice about it,” another top model says. “They were very snobby and cold and shut people out. We had to deal with the disgusting influx of negative attention to models that they generated. People had to tolerate them while the wave was high. Now it’s ebbing.” By 1991, the malleable Evangelista had become Meisel’s favorite. When she and Turlington had a spat, the Trinity broke up, just as the Toye-Meisel-Sprouse axis had, surrounded by rumors and recriminations. Turlington wanted to “distance” herself, she told me last year—“be myself again.”

As before, Meisel escaped unscathed. In 1989, in his most influential move yet, he’d revived the modeling career of Lauren Hutton, who was then 46, in a series of ads for Barneys New York. He also brought back other sixties and seventies faces such as Peggy Moffitt, Veruschka, and, most recently, Lisa Taylor. Meisel’s recognition of the beauty of older women won him tremendous—and well-deserved—acclaim.

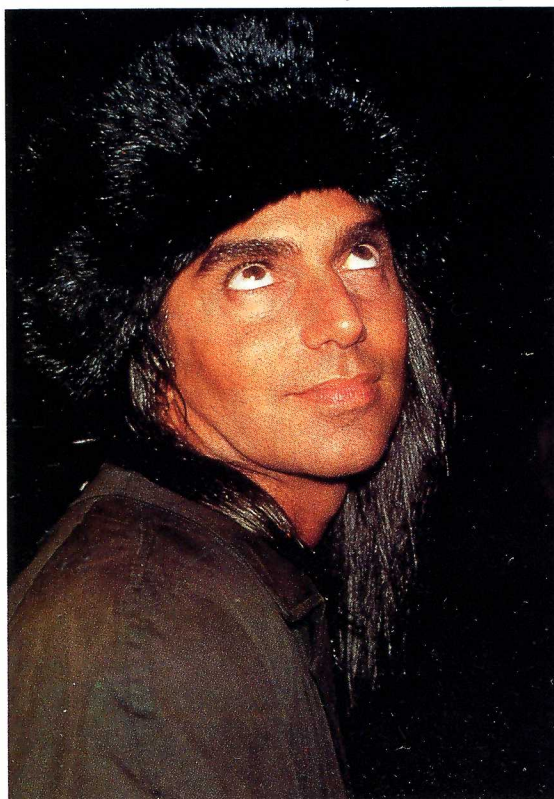
But still, he was dissatisfied when an interviewer came calling late in 1990. “I’m not having as much fun as I would like to or that I used to,” he said. “I’m sort of in a transitional period in my life, because I don’t go out and do drugs and f--- all night long anymore, yet I’m not quite ready for dinner parties.”

Then Hearst hired British *Vogue* editor Liz Tilberis (along with Cavaco and Baron) to edit *Harper’s Bazaar*. But by that time, says the *Vogue* editor quoted above, “we really wanted Steven back.” How did *Vogue* win him when so many of his collaborators had signed with *Bazaar*? Condé Nast executives whispered subtle hints before Meisel made up his mind. They pointed out that thanks to his exposure in Italian *Vogue*, he had won millions of dollars in advertising jobs. The implication was that if he signed with Hearst, that work would fade away.

Franca Sozzani says she’s heard the same story, but “that’s not my style. It would be stupid to say I believed [in him] for twelve years and now he’s bad.” Whatever the case, Meisel was back in *Vogue*, beginning with shots that ran in the September issue. He’s still up to his old tricks, though. “We didn’t see that film for two weeks after he shot it,” the *Vogue* editor complains.

Will Steven Meisel shoot happily for Condé Nast? Will he have problems and jump to *Bazaar*? Or will he head off to the desert as he once threatened? One old friend sees him as Peter Pan. “He’s very sweet,” she says. “He has a real thing about not wanting to grow up. He’d like to stay just the way he is.”

Meisel “always had a thing about



not growing up.”

But a fashion editor who is close to him thinks that Meisel has reached a turning point with *Sex*. For most photographers, causing such a scene would be the high-water mark of a career. But it seems to have caused Meisel to turn inward. “He’s had a very high profile, but I don’t think he’s a high-profile person,” says the editor. “I think he’s making a change. He’s always going to be brilliant and difficult, but I see a new direction. He’s going into a clamshell, almost, and he’ll come out as something new.”

There have been other signs that the editor is right. Earlier this year, in the midst of shooting Madonna’s book, Meisel lectured at the International Center of Photography.

“Is there anything you’d want different?” someone asked.

“More time,” he sighed. “The days just end. . . . I wish I had more time to think.”

So perhaps we’ll get a chance to see if Peter Pan can really fly. ■

Photograph by Gerardo Somoza/Outline.