Irving Penn’s career has had its extraordinary longevity (now spanning sixty years) because he has been able to maintain a certain balance in the projects he has undertaken. He is perhaps most famous for his fashion photography of the world’s most beautiful models wearing the season’s most elegant clothes. But one reason he has been able to keep this subject matter fresh for so long is that he has never lost sight of another, more fundamental notion of womanhood.

A series of nudes that he made in 1949 and 1950 counterpoised against the wraithlike women in couture dresses a group of heavy, art-school models in, mostly, fallen postures. These “Earthly Bodies,” as he himself called them in later exhibitions and publications, reminded his viewers of the ungainly, the maternal, the unglamorous, indeed the human, all-too-human side of being a woman. The photographs gave great offense when first made—they weren’t shown until thirty years later—and they still make many people uncomfortable. Their audacity lies not just in their subject matter but in Penn’s treatment of the prints.

Penn devised a darkroom technique whereby he overexposed each print until it was absolutely black; he then bleached the print in order to remove the excess chemistry and bring out the subject again. This is what makes the prints look as if an etching process was employed that eats away at the surface in order to create the image. (In Nude No. 130 this effect is particularly noticeable in the shadow areas.) In a sense, Penn did to the photographic materials what these subjects had done to their bodies, stretching the physical limits as far as they would go. This is an imagery in which technique and subject matter—art and life—each meet their match. Thus did Penn achieve in the nudes that perfect balance for which he is ever searching.

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