

SHOTS 97



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Martin Cooper

The disciplines of photography and fashion design intersect for London-based American artist

Interview by Russell Joslin

RUSSELL JOSLIN: Thinking about your past and your boyhood, what do you recall that may have pointed you in the direction of becoming a designer and artist?

MARTIN COOPER: Wow... where do I begin? The home that I grew up in was not an artistic home, though I was very much an artistic child. My father is a dentist. My two older brothers are dentists. Both grandfathers were dentists, as well as my father's eldest brother. But I was one of those fortunate few who never had to struggle to figure out what they wanted to be and I knew early on that it certainly wasn't going to be the family business! "It" picked me. By that, I mean fashion. I always knew that I would live in New York City and be a fashion designer. By the time I was 9 or 10 years old, I was designing complete collections. My life seemed quite predestined, and, to this day, I'm doing pretty much what I set out to do from those early years.

I am also a great believer in mentors. My grandmother lived next door to us. She was a woman truly born before her time. She graduated from Pratt Institute in 1922, in what was called "fashion construction" at the time, the precursor to fashion design. She was the one who taught me to draft patterns. She bought me my first sewing machine, and, most of all, she was the one to teach me that the human body is a three-dimensional form. She truly changed my life.

When I was 14, I was given special permission to attend the college-level sum-

mer program to study fashion at the prestigious Parsons School of Design in New York City. During that summer, I met other young people who were thinking just like me. There is something universal about youth and talent. We were all on the same wavelength, all doing and exploring the same ideas and concepts.

I met a woman that summer who would also change my life. Her name was Marie Essex—she taught fashion illustration at the school, and taught everyone from Donna Karan to Marc Jacobs. She was the only one who really knew how old I was and she took me under her wing like I was her own. I went back home to South Carolina a focused and changed person with my eyes set on returning to Parsons to study fashion when I graduated from high school.

So your interest in fashion came before photography? How did each emerge as a significant means of expression?

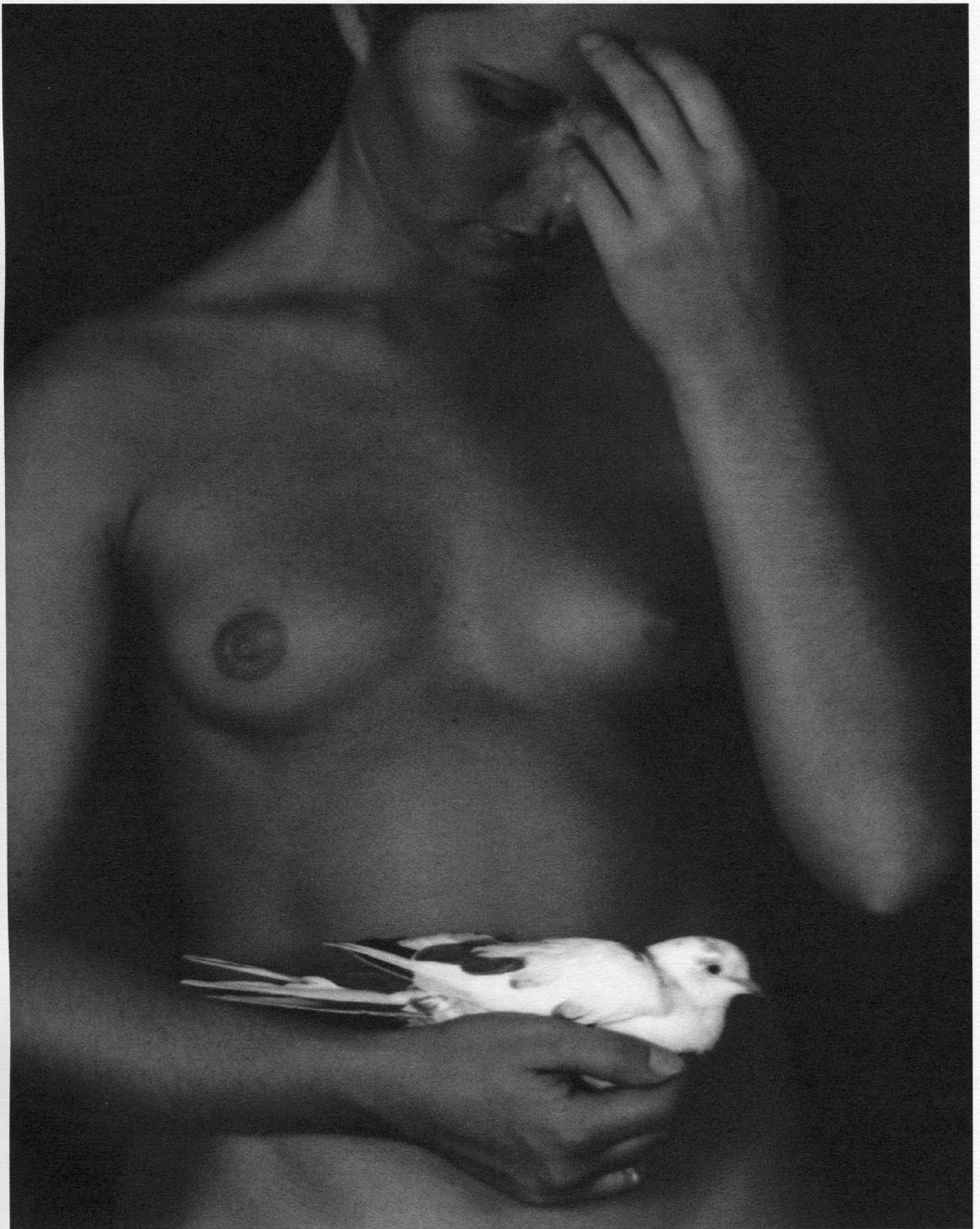
Fashion definitely came first. But looking back, photography was always around me. My father had a beautiful leather trimmed Contax camera that he bought when he was stationed in Japan in fifties that I used quite a lot. I could shoot as much film as I liked; he was very generous in that way. Also, a funny story: my older brothers and I had the responsibility of cleaning my father's office every night. I loved the weeks that I got to clean the reception room because it brought me into contact with wonderful magazines like *LIFE* and *National*

Geographic. I would say much of my visual language was established in that reception room! It also brought me an awareness of how other people lived in different parts of the world, with different customs, and I was very curious about that. Those magazines were definitely learning tools and a travel machine for me. Even today, I read about 30-40 magazines a month. It is an addiction I am very proud of.

How did the two disciplines eventually "overlap"?

Between my mother and my grandmother I had access to all the fashion magazines going back to the forties. Fashion magazines were an extension to yet another world. I have always been visually literate and I looked at photographers like Cecil Beaton, Horst P. Horst, George Hurrell, and George Hoyningen-Huene. They were the style-makers that defined modern fashion photography. But at the time I was actually looking at the *clothes* they photographed, not the photographs for themselves. It took me some time to put the two together. That happened much later. But from the beginning, I was really fascinated with beautiful things. It's the Virgo in me. That drive eventually led me to become a clothing designer.

With photography, I was a late bloomer, though when I look back, it was always a part of my life. I'm completely self-taught. In the beginning, around 1990, I wanted to create a photographic project about women, by women. I [planned to]



Dove from the series *The Altis*

just serve as “producer” of the project, and guide an all-female team to execute a particular concept I had. I looped my wife Karen into the project and over the course of six to eight months, we interviewed models, photographers, and writers to be part of the team, and, frankly, I was having a difficult time connecting with the photographers we were meeting. I was showing them tear sheets I pulled to give them the flavor of what I was looking for—you know, the “feeling.” I felt the need to communicate the idea to them in a more succinct way, so I decided to ask our best friend if she was willing to be my guinea pig and shoot a series of nude Polaroids to use as visual references for the photographers we were interviewing. [I wanted] to be able to say, “This is what I’m looking for. This is what I need.” Our friend Jane was extremely agreeable, and we worked for a solid two months developing the visual concepts for that project. When Karen started looking at the instant images, she said in all of her wisdom, “Why don’t you just shoot the project yourself?” That project was never realized, but it gave me just the right push of confidence to explore figurative photography in a much more serious way. Up until that moment, I had never considered doing fine art photography as an artistic expression, but making images seemed to be a natural progression. I knew how to frame a shot, so it was just the technical aspects of photography that I needed to learn.

Have you found that using photography as a means of expression affords you more freedom than your fashion design work?

I feel my voice as a photographer is stronger because I have no commercial constraints placed on me like [in] the fashion world. In photography, I make the kinds of images that I want. If someone enjoys my work and wants to further their relationship with a piece by purchasing it, that’s wonderful, but selling is not the driving force behind my work. It really is [more] about personal expression and the journey than anything else. On the flip side, my clothes must sell. Otherwise, what’s the point? So it’s easy for me to say that photography is the thing that makes my life right. It’s the thing that gets me out of bed everyday. It’s my drug of choice. I am, however, extremely thankful that fashion is in my life because it affords me the privilege to be able to make the types of images I want to make with no strings of commerce attached. As a matter of fact, I run my studio OrchisArts at “net-zero”, meaning that once everything has been paid for (model fees, printing, etc.), I donate all the net proceeds to breast cancer organizations like Casting for Recovery, which is a not-for-profit group that teaches breast cancer survivors the art of fly fishing as part of their physical and mental



Brocade from the series The Altis

recovery. It's one of the parts of my life that I'm most proud of.

What has being a fashion designer taught you that you've applied in your photography?

The short answer would be having the discipline to be creative on command. It's the number one tool that I bring over from fashion because, regrettably, I'm not able to shoot everyday. Sometimes not [even] every month. So when I book a model, I have to have incredible discipline to harness the most from that session, because the next session may not be in the immediate future. In fashion, there isn't the concept or allowance for "writer's block." Other artistic disciplines allow the artist not to produce a body of work for years. As a designer, I don't have that luxury. I must conceptualize and create four major collections a year. So to answer your question in one word, it would be *discipline*. Fashion gives me an incredible sense of discipline that I can apply to all facets of my life, including my photography.

An interesting story [that's] kind of related: when I was a freshman at Parsons in the early eighties, my friends were illustration majors, not fashion majors. These guys were a talented group who conceptualized and drew beautifully. They were also incredible musicians. When their drawing presented a problem, they worked

through the drawing on their bass or drums. And conversely, when they encountered a snag in creating music, they worked through the music through their drawing. These guys were multi-talented. What I learned from them is that all creative energy is the same. Whether you're making an incredible drawing, an amazing musical arrangement, composing a photograph, or designing a coat, the thought process is exactly the same. It comes from the same core. It is interrelated.

Your largest body of work appears to be *The Altis*. How did that project come about and what was your approach to it?

That's right, Russell. To date, *The Altis* is my largest body of work. That project had an interesting beginning. *The Altis* didn't exactly start off as "The Altis." It originally started off as an ode to a dear friend of mine that I grew up with in South Carolina. She is one of my oldest friends—we've known one another since kindergarten! It was to be an in-depth exploration of nudes and portraits. She lived in Boston while Karen and I were in New York, so we were only able to work on the series a few times a year. Karen, in all of her brilliance, looked at the images about a year into it and mentioned to me that the project had a very Olympian spirit to it that could expand into something

larger. Ding, the light bulb turned on, and I started doing research into the ancient Olympic games and, in particular, women's role in ancient sport. During the course of a year or so, I interviewed historians and anthropologists to understand what the games were really about. What I learned was that women's participation was almost non-existent. Women were banned from participating in the ancient games; [participation was] "a crime punishable by death." I felt that [one's gender by itself] doesn't mean that one can't excel in athletics, or anything else in life for that matter, so I made the choice to cast the project with an all-female cast as a reflection of social and sexual equality in our living times.

I understand that *The Altis* inspired a ballet. How did this come about, and what was your role in the process? Also, did seeing your work presented in the context of performance/dance offer any personal insights to the photographic work it was based on?

In 2002, I was having an exhibition at the Media Gallery in Boston. Oddly enough, I was introduced to this gallerist through my same childhood friend that inspired *The Altis*. When we met, the gallerist said I should meet his friend, Rebecca Rice. I said, "Who's Rebecca Rice?" He said, "She's a choreographer for the Boston



Feather Merit No. 4 from the series *The Altis*

the studio during each shoot. Karen has filmed in the studio for many years and she has also interviewed all of my core models to hear their version of the collaboration for the historical record of the studio. So not only does the model help create the images, we document who she is as a woman, model, muse, and collaborator.

What have your models taught you about your work?

Models help take "ego" out of the equation. I can't do what I do without them. It is a shared experience.

Do you find that the more you work with a model, the better the images become? Or are your results consistent as you work with someone over a period of time?

Historically, I prefer to work with the same models over and over again. Most photographers prefer to work with a new face or model every time they pick up the camera. I'm the opposite. I feel that the longer I work with a model, the stronger the im-

ages become. I would say that there is a core of about 10-12 models that I've been collaborating with for over 10 years. They have essentially grown up in front of my camera and they all have tremendous ownership about their collaboration with my projects. I worked on *The Altis* over the span of 10 years, but if you were to see it in its entirety, you would never know that the same model might be 10 years older or younger from one image to the next. It's seamless.

Do you feel that working with the nude presents specific challenges to your work?

Not really, but I would say that if there are any specific challenges, it would be on the selling side. Corporations almost as a hard rule do not purchase figurative (nude) photography. I've been privileged to show my work to a wide audience, be it museums or galleries, and I was thrilled when Bergdorf Goodman, the preeminent New York retailer of all things luxury, acquired about 12 nudes that are on permanent display in their store. As a public

space, it was the right artistic environment to show my work. It set a gold standard because it broke (or bent) the rule in the States that it's taboo for companies to purchase nudes for their corporate collections.

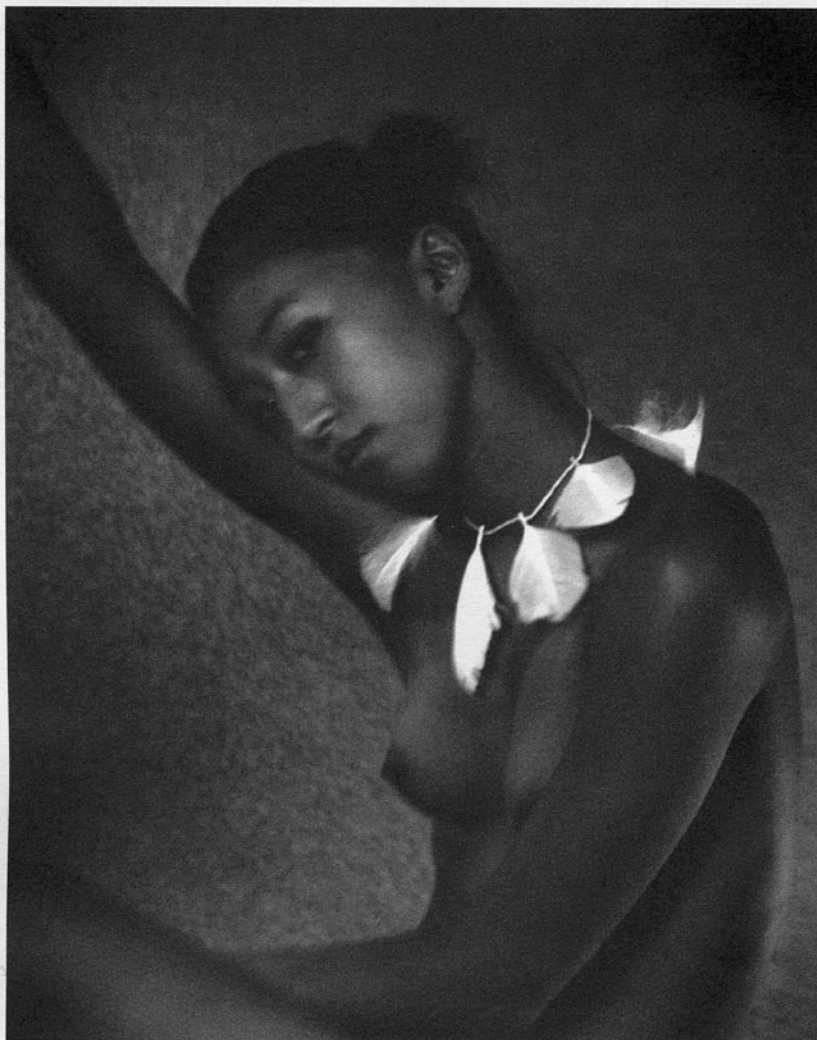
You often "storyboard" your images, sketching and planning them before you shoot. Do you ever work intuitively without preplanning? Also, do your images usually turn out as you planned them, or do the sketches act as a starting point that lead to ideas you hadn't thought of?

I find that working with large format cameras forces me to know what I'm looking to get out of a shoot before the shoot happens. The film is just too expensive. With *The Altis*, I sketched out and storyboarded the entire project and it was shot in a shooting sequence similar to that of a filmmaker, meaning that like-things were shot together, as opposed to being shot in sequential order from beginning to end. Since I love drawing, I prefer to work this way. I can conceptualize at any time of the day, make a quick sketch, add it to my Sequence Book, and shoot it when I can. It's really a diary and a starting point. Nothing is ever rigid or cast in stone. We always have the liberty to veer to the right or to the left. Sometimes a model's body can't move the way that I've drawn her. Most of the times, I will have to say, the final image looks just like the conceptual drawing. Other times, they look nothing alike. I love it though when a model is able to bring her own magic to the image, and veer away from the drawing, making it stronger.

Now, back to collaborating with the model, I show her the sketch before we start to work. She'll know exactly what she needs to do. We discuss all the details and possibilities, so it's really a tool to get us on the same page quickly, because I won't shoot a lot of film. In a three-hour session, I will shoot only about 30 sheets of film; less than the equivalent of one roll of 35mm film.

What equipment do you work with, and how does it dictate the outcome of your images?

I only work in the large format. I shoot with two Sinar cameras. A 4x5 and an 8x10. My setup is pretty simple. I never want my equipment to get in the way of the creative process, and as I mentioned earlier, I need a particular consistency throughout my work which forces me to keep it simple so that I can replicate the exact lighting schematic if needed, several weeks or several months later. I only shoot in studio with controlled light. I use two 1000 watt Dps as the main source and two 500 watt Omnis on the back-drop. I use homemade dimmers for all four lights so that I can dial them up or down



Feather Merit No. 20 from the series *The Altis*

as I see fit. I also hand hold a Maglite to illuminate selective areas on the face or wherever it's needed. I never use reflectors.

How does working with the immediacy of Polaroid film affect your work?

My love affair with Polaroid began before I realized that I would become a photographer when I shot Jane on the Spectra camera. I now shoot with T55 (and type 665 before Polaroid discontinued the film) for 4x5 and mix T804 and T809 for 8x10. Not only is T55 my favorite because it's so smooth and velvety, but it's a great confidence builder with the model. She can instantly see what she's giving back to the camera. It also allows us to edit or make decisions right there on the fly... "Rotate your torso a bit to the left." Click. Wait 23 seconds. Peel the film apart and we know if we made the right decision or not. My use of Polaroid film sits at the very center of my creative process because by nature it makes the experience inclusive for all.

You seem most attracted to history and the traditional. Do you feel that by working within a traditional framework that you bring anything new and/or "modern" to your images?

I'd like to think so. I hope that my work helps to evolve the tradition of the genre. For me, the Nude is a genre that is one of the most complicated things to get your arms around, and so easy to get wrong. There are so many additional aspects that are projected on the genre from societal, cultural and political aspects. I certainly have

no interest in trying to change the public's view of the Nude, but I hope that my work helps to educate and promote healthy and positive images of women.

I am also highly aware, as are most of your readers, that traditional photography, as we know it today, will not exist in the same form in the near future. I specialize in toning. I spent years studying nineteenth-century toning recipes. Most of the chemistry exists from yesteryear, but it's the paper that's changed. The trick was to get old chemistry to work on a modern paper. No easy feat. In the last year or two, I have lost one of my films (T665) and Agfa has discontinued making my paper. We spent years perfecting all of the elements... lighting, paper, and chemistry to create a look of platinum, but not. I wanted a look that was even more romantic than platinum. I'll now have to start that process all over again. I can't say today how this will effect how my images will be printed in the future, but I do know that it will not be the same.

As modern photography continues to evolve, I know that my work won't switch over to digital. That would be too easy. [It's] not special to me. I'm also aware that the market for the traditional is getting smaller and smaller. More niche-like. I don't shoot in color, I don't shoot in "snapshot" style and my images aren't printed mural size. I generally print 16x20". I'm finding something very attractive about the nineteenth-century and alternative processes. It's very self-sustaining. If I can't buy my paper, I'll make it. If I can't buy my film, I'll make my own film. I want to not only create compel-

ling images, but also create images using a technique and methodology that brings inherent value to it. An heirloom.

What have you most recently been working on, and where do you see your work going in the near future?

I've been working on two new bodies of work that I'm quite passionate about. I've spoken about one of them more publicly than the other. The first is a body of work that explores why I feel the human pelvis is the most fascinating and controversial bone in the human body. This body of work will contain photographs, drawings, visual shapes or hieroglyphs, and video installations. The other project centers on a nineteenth-century historical figure. This project is definitely a point of departure for me and will take my work in a completely new direction. I felt it was time to use my voice as an image-maker in a stronger way. It will also be an image based multimedia project. I think I will always use the human figure in my work, but it may not always be the center of it.

What have your creative pursuits brought to your life, and, in the end, how would you most like to be remembered as an artist?

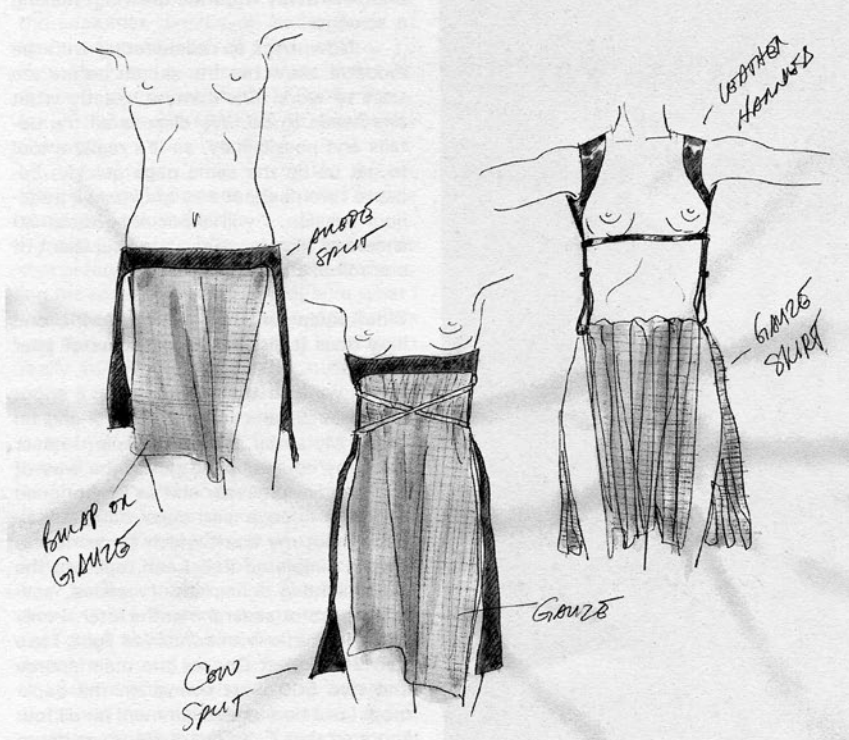
I would have never thought in a million years that I would have started an artistic exploration in photography, and more particularly the nude as a genre. After all, I'm a fashion designer. Sixteen years later, I now love the fact that by day I spend my energies creating a language of clothing to dress and adorn the body, but by night, I reduce the layers and affectations down to the nothing.

Photography is extremely self-satisfying and calming to me. It's something that's mine, separate from the commercial world. It's something that I can do the rest of my life. For that I am truly blessed. For me it's also all about the journey, and those that I've met and collaborated with along the way.

As for being remembered as an artist, I think the night is way too young to say!



Martin Cooper lives and works in London and hopes to publish a monograph of *The Altis*. His beautifully hand toned work concentrates on the photographic Nude. He is also VP of Design for Burberry, the British luxury goods company. His work has been collected by The Polaroid Collections, The Henry Buhl Collection, the Beth Rudin-Dewoody Collection and Bergdorf Goodman. Cooper's studio, OrchisArts, makes contributions yearly to breast cancer organizations. Please visit martincooperphoto.com to learn more about his work, or contact Jayne H. Baum, jhbgallery.com.



Sketch for Altis costumes



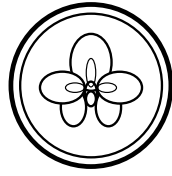
Altis costume



Golden Berries, No. 1 from the series The Altis



Shot Put from the series The Altis



MARTIN COOPER

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