

Kristen

As seen by Miles Aldridge and Chantal Joffe

Paint
Background
not just
Black



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‘I am looking in the Camera’

An interview between Miles Aldridge, Chantal Joffe and Magdalene Keaney, London 2010

Magdalene Keaney: The initial idea for this project came from you Miles. Could you tell me about the genesis of the project and approaching Chantal?

Miles Aldridge: I wanted to do something that was a mix of painting, drawing and photography and thought that the theme of the artist’s model in the studio was an interesting way to do that. Previously my instinct would always have been to re-make something rather like a film director - so build a set and cast somebody to be the painter and the painter’s model and light and photograph the whole thing. Lately I’ve been freed up of needing that much control. Rather than completely inventing the situation I sought out a London painter and contacted Chantal. I sent her my book.

Chantal Joffe: It was summer 2009. Miles left his number. I phoned him and he was in America. I met him and what I liked was that we had a very polite fight about how we were going to do it. I wanted to personalise the project because it seemed too formal to me. I liked the idea of implicating Miles much more. That his wife was a model seemed great because

it was a way of getting under the skin of it and it would become more intimate.

MK: So the idea to work with Kristen came from you Chantal?

CJ: I’d always admired her as a model.

MA: I hadn’t really worked with Kristen since being married to her. I often use her as inspiration. I’m quite happy to take domestic themes from my real life, do a drawing and then make that into a fashion photo with someone else in the roles. But the idea of doing something ‘real’ was something I was cautious about. I thought it was outside of my field of expertise. I’ve always been interested more in an artificial sensibility.

MK: So although it’s a collaboration you both came at it from different perspectives, media and different gender. Can you tell me how this specific project tied into or extended and challenged your process and work?

CJ: I’d been going backstage at fashion shows so it was an extension of that for me, I also use images from Vogue and fashion magazines in my work so having a model who was a super model was like adding another



layer. It was interesting to me to have Kristen here and come to life, talking and chatting as though she'd stepped out of the magazine page.

MA: I like to have ideas but also to have complete control over them. I didn't want reality in the way that Chantal seeks it in the paint.

CJ: I like the real. I hate fantasy. It was a kind of exchange.

MK: How did the project begin? What, for each of you, were your initial interests and expectations?

MA: I'm interested in eroticism in my work. The way we worked was there were three painting sessions in advance of my photography session. Each was about three hours long. The deal we had was that I would sit in on her sessions and try not to be intrusive and she would do the same with her sketch pad at mine. I would be there with my cameras but no lights. I would document the painting sessions. I was very aware of intruding on Chantal's sessions. I didn't want to disturb the intensity of what she and Kristen were doing. The idea was that the giant painting that Chantal was working on would be in process when it was my turn. I had two whole days with a crew and another room filled with clothes and makeup mirrors. My thing was working in Chantal's studio within the confines of a woman modeling for a painter, but now she was modeling for this painter that I was imagining, not Chantal, and I was putting her into more eroticised positions.

CJ: Kristen is particular because she is so used to being photographed. Every movement she makes is quite

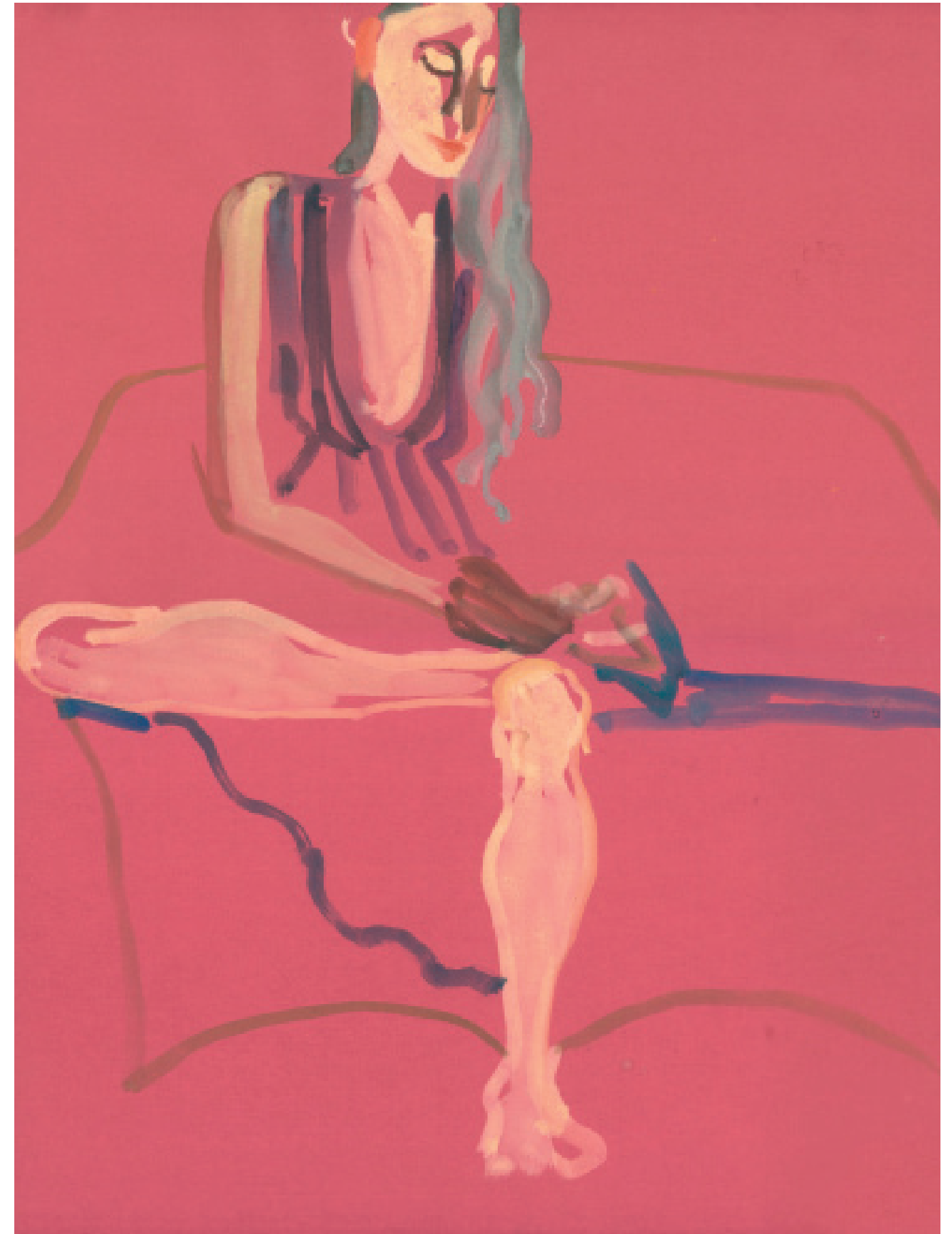
graceful and considered. Her body is so imprinted with the camera. I wanted to personalise it, to get her to do things that were awkward, to make it more real. It's hard to explain why that's important to me -that awkwardness - but it is. I wanted to find something that didn't end up looking like fashion. Paintings are never what you think they are going to be. Kristen was an exaggeration of that. It's about the gap between what you think you are going to make and what you make and the journey between the two.

MK: So Kristen is the other important collaborator. These pictures are about her as well as about you both. We've talked about the idea of the model and muse but then there is the notion of the portrait which is different to that. Do you think that these pictures move into portraiture?

MA: I think my photographs are portraits of me and her. This idea of portraiture- like 'is it really her'? I don't worry about that too much. I was thinking more about making a picture and colour.

CJ: I think there is a sense of her, even in the act of concealing herself, but it's fugitive.

To me she is quite an elusive person. It was really interesting trying to complete the painting after Miles' photo shoot. I began it with one idea. She was un-made up, still obviously beautiful but an unassuming and down to earth person. In the photo shoot with Miles she was more 'diva-ish' which befitted the occasion. It seemed as though it came to her like a role of an actress going on stage. That was fascinating. So there was a tension between getting to know her as a person and then as a constructed character as a fashion model. I think I felt ultimately that the 'true her' lay



somewhere else completely so I'm not sure how far I got on that level of the painting being a portrait.

MA: Kristen has her own opinions. I remember there was one confronting moment when I was looking at the pictures from the first day and she was looking in the camera in them all. I wanted there to be some changes from that in the sequence which I told her. I wanted her to seem less aware of the camera. So in the first shot on the second day she was looking straight in the camera. I said 'would you mind not looking in the camera.' She focused her eyes intently on me through the lens and said 'I am looking in the camera'!

CJ: One has ideas of a person, and preconceptions. It was quite intimate to have her in the Studio in her underclothes trying on shoes. In the initial watercolors and drawings I did I wanted to get something of her onto the paper and I was excited by that. The painting is a different thing. It's more prolonged.

MK: Miles, you took two different sets of photographs – black and white documentary style images and a more carefully constructed colour series. How do those two different approaches sit with you in terms of making a portrait of Kristen?

MA: Chantal pointed out that they were both constructions, that in the black and white images I was being another kind of photographer, making what I thought those sorts of documentary pictures ought to be. I think the idea of Kristen eluding us is quite true in that all of the images: the black and white photographs, the watercolours and drawings, the oils, my colour pictures are all attempts to capture her.

MK: Do you think seeing them together in the exhibition and as a book creates a satisfying roundness to that?

MA: I do. As a group I think they are successful because of the idea of the jump between different views of her – so say on one hand sexualised or the other tender – this reflects how these things weave in and out of one's life.

CJ: I think the studio also creates a space where you can be an idealised version of your self.

MK: I wonder if the construct of what you invited her to take part in created a sense of this as a performance for her?

CJ: I think she didn't allow herself to be exploited, she resisted that. That probably evolves from being a model and a need to keep some part of yourself for yourself.

MA: She's sensitive to that but she's aware of what she had to give to Chantal keeping within the theme of the artist's model. In the beginning I wanted to take the idea of eroticism and play with it which wasn't specifically about Kristen. Kristen became the central character which gave the project another strand that I was interested in, but for me it was always about the artist's model.

MK: Miles, I've read that you often have a preconceived idea about what you are want to create in your pictures which you explore through drawing before making photographs. How did the collaboration with Chantal alter that?

MA: I still did my own little drawings. And Chantal took her own photographs. For me it's a way of working out where you might put the camera and what the subject is doing and how it works as a series of pictures. The painting sessions were a brilliant way of researching the studio space, thinking about how I might use light, as well as capturing these softer less graphic pictures that give a different texture to the project.

MK: You both must have worked with her in the space very differently?

MA: I was probably more aggressive in my direction.

CJ: I feel quite timid working with a model. For me to interfere with someone is difficult.

MA: It was inspiring to be around Chantal and Kristen working. I got incredible information and references for the story telling aspect of a model coming and working in the studio. There was also the idea of stillness to their sittings, a gentleness and meditative quality which is different to how I work. I wanted to try to capture some of that.

MK: What do you think the relationship is between the two groups of photographs that you took? Do you think they feed into each other?

MA: It's the same woman in the same space, so they relate in that way. They give the project a layer of slightly phony documentary which I like. So when I see the black and white shots of Kristen I can believe that girl is then on her hands and knees on a yellow foam mattress; but then I can

imagine her as the black and white girl again; or the girl in the drawings.

CJ: That was an interesting conceit. The layers of artifice began to make me feel quite strange.

MA: Talking about it like this, it's all quite mental. I wonder if that discomfort was an important part of generating the work?

CJ: Yes I'm happy with the work and I was being sincere in the making of it. After the shoot I realised Miles had made an artifice of my world. I'd always flirted with the fashion world but then it felt like it swamped me a bit. The postscript was me buying a camera.

MA: I don't have many qualms about that idea of parody. Part of why the black and white photographs are so great is that they aren't parodies, they are real and as you turn the page and get into my artificial versions it all takes on a believability.

CJ: Maybe that reflects something of the struggle between painting and photography and my own ambivalence toward both mediums - using photography as the basis for paintings, or using paintings as part of a photographic narrative. It's interesting to think about the photographs of Kristen and what I wanted from a drawing and where that failed and where the photographs succeed. It's also interesting to think how we see things in a photographed world.

Magdalene Keaney is Associate Curator of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery in London.



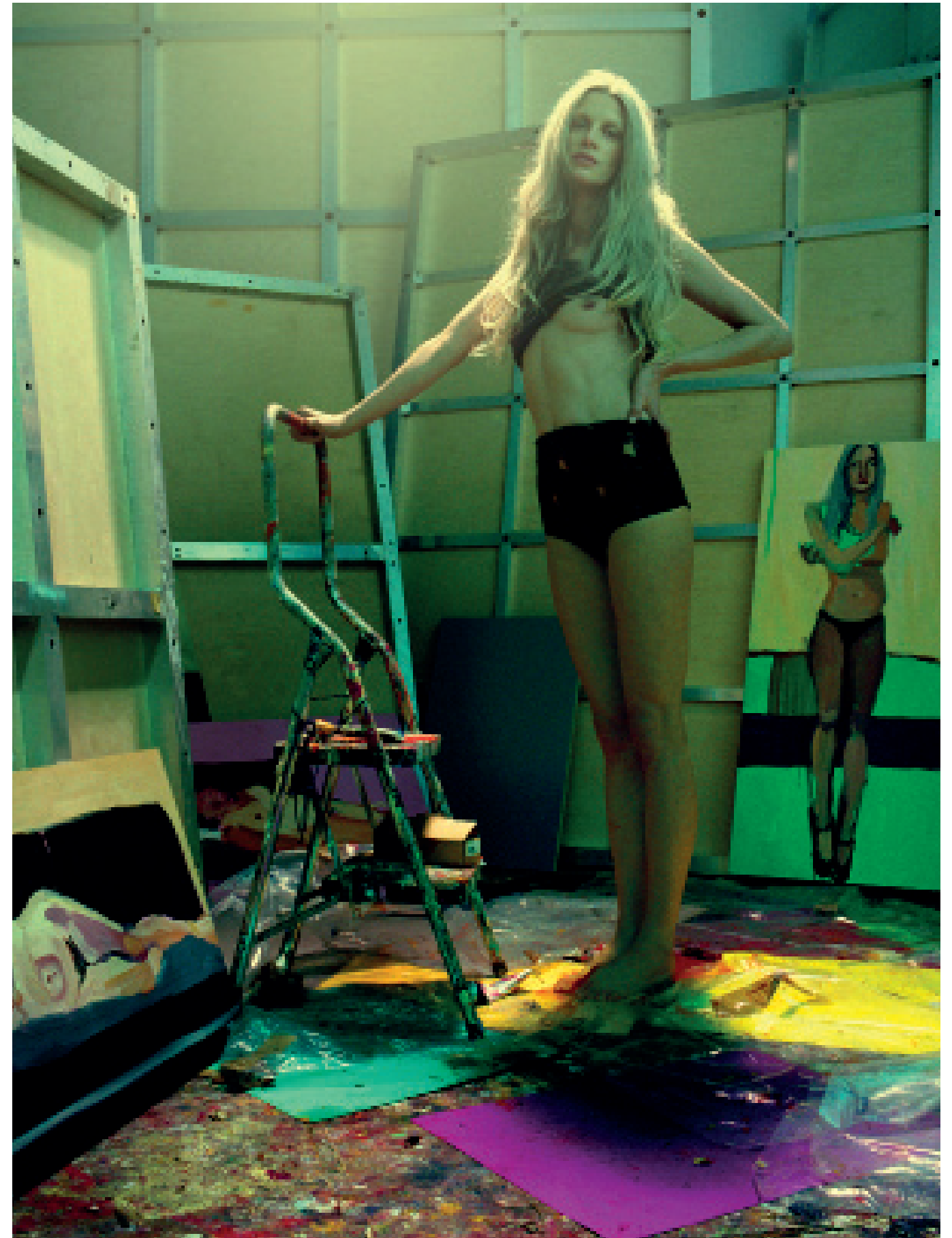
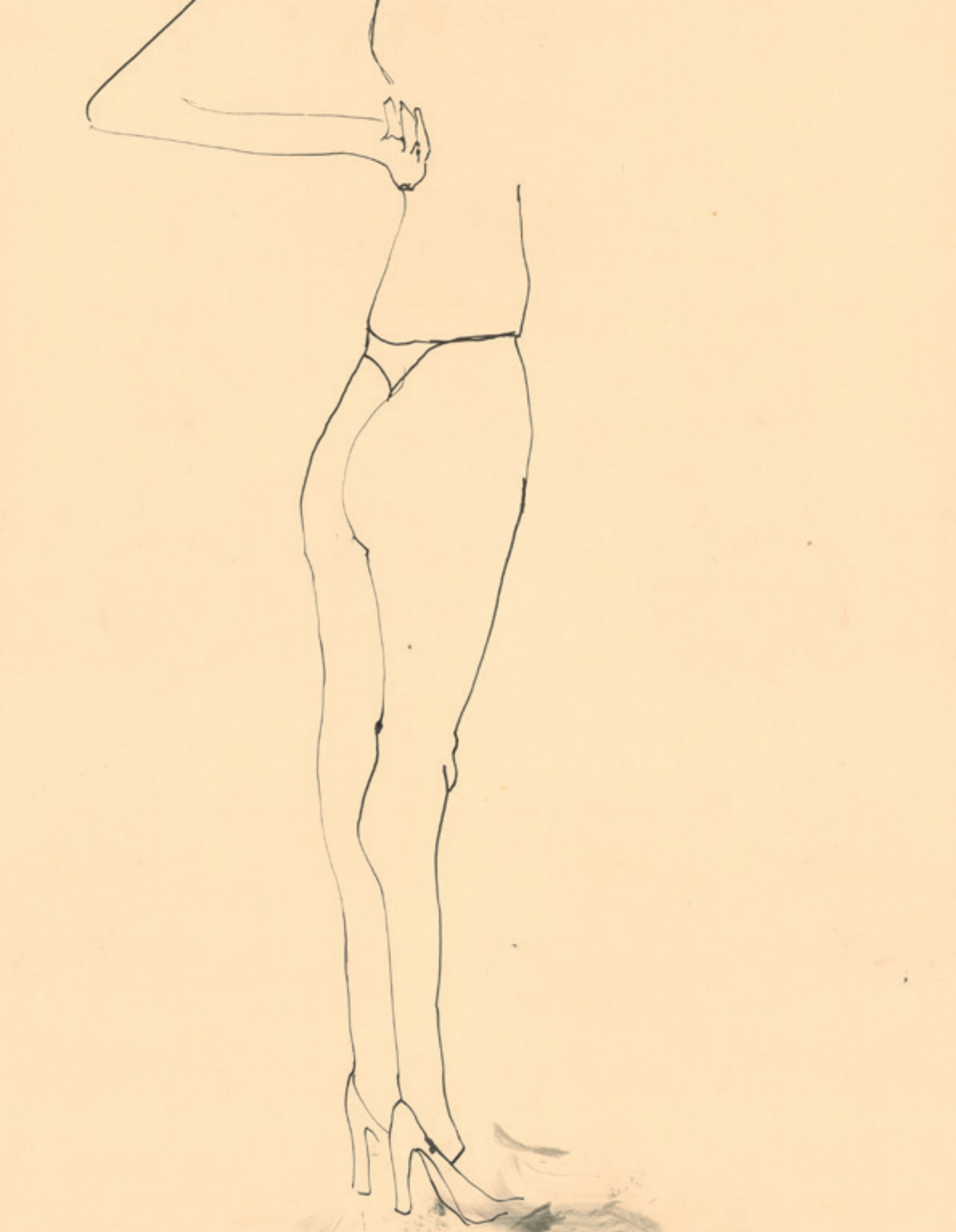




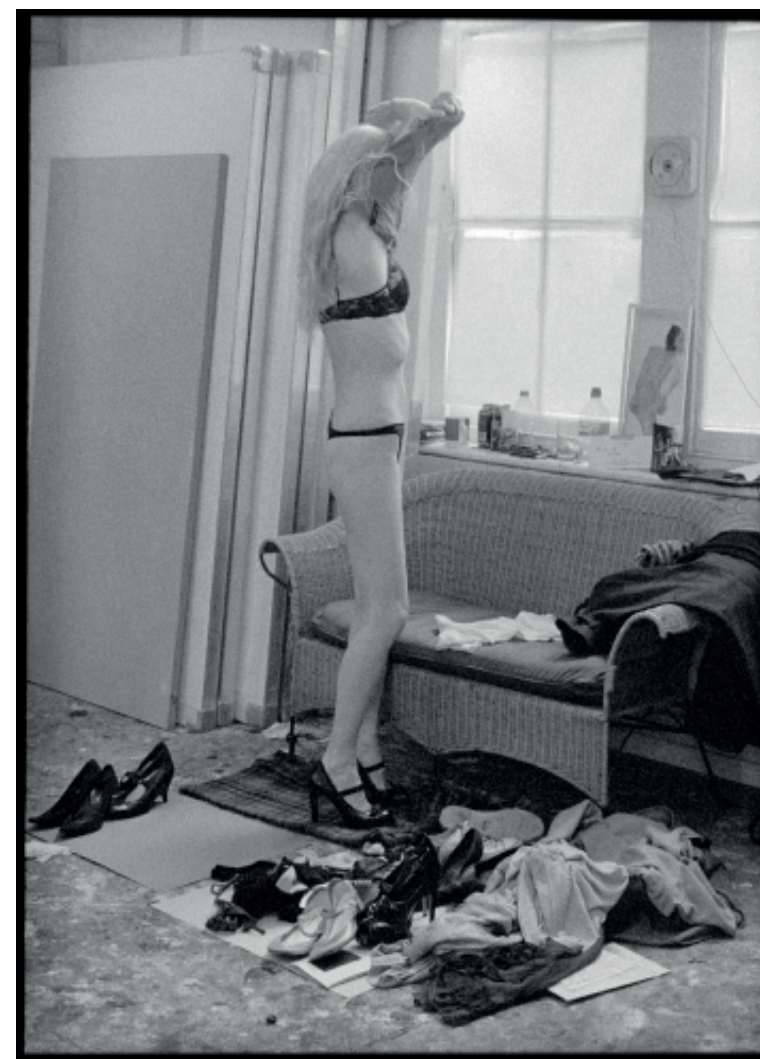














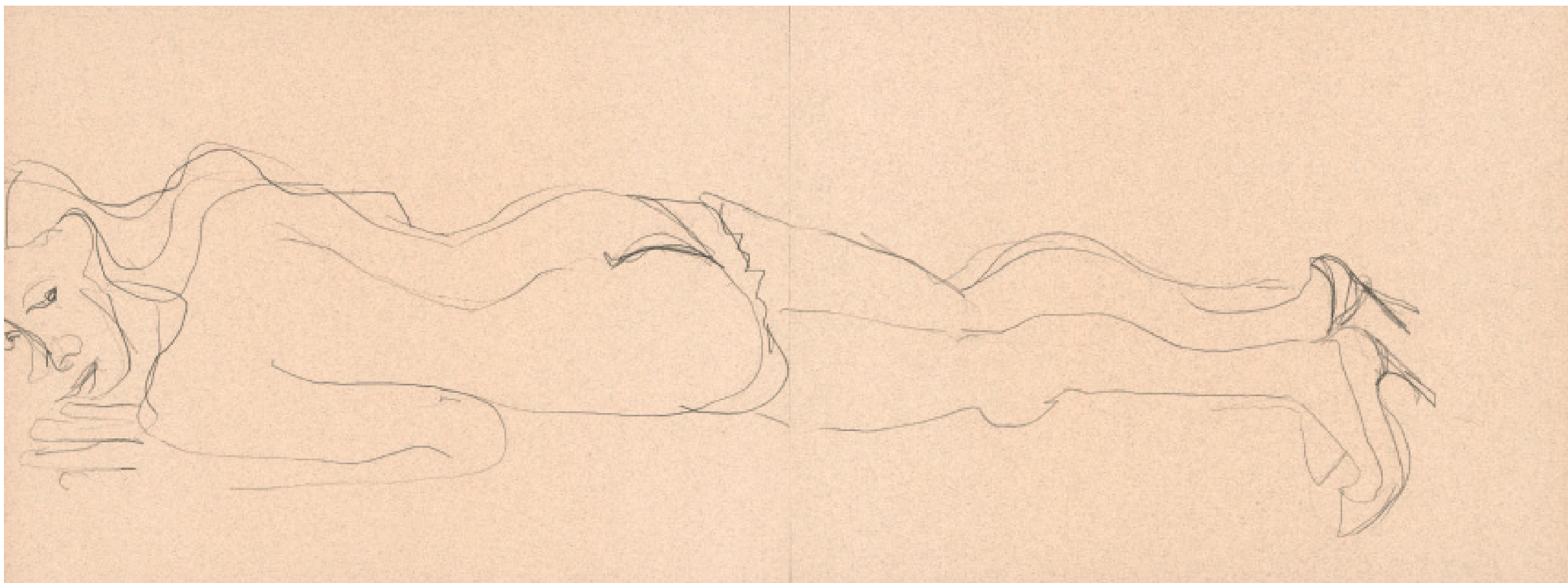












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