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ZOYA LOEB: THE OBJECT OF HIS AFFECTIONS

BY JOYANN KING



Clockwise: Zoya Loeb, works by Damien Loeb, Say Hello to the Angels, Atmosphere (Warm Fingers), Ghosts I-IV.

Model Zoya Loeb knows a thing or two about sitting pretty for the camera. But what happens when that photographer isn't Bruce Webster, but your husband? Married to artist Damien Loeb since 2003, Zoya is now the subject of his latest exhibit, "Verschränkung and The Uncertainty Principle." Based on a series of intimate photographs of Zoya he took over the last seven years, Damien's paintings examine the relationship between subject and object and, in this case, model and artist. *BAZAAR* sat down with the subject to find out just how objective one's husband can really be.

Joyann King: How did you and Damian meet? What was your love story?

Zoya Loeb: I had only been in New York for 6 months when I was offered a blind date by a mutual acquaintance who kept insisting we were a perfect match. Coincidentally, Damian and I had both recently been interviewed for the same German TV documentary about New York but we had never actually met. At the time, I was working a lot and hadn't planned on staying in NYC for much longer, so I was skeptical about the date. It was a movie screening about the band Joy Division (one of Damian's favorite bands) and we had both planned on going despite our reservations about being set up. Afterwards, neither of us remembered much of the movie. As cliché as it sounds, it was love at first sight; we were instantly inseparable. The first week, Damian would make any excuse to keep me from going back to my own apartment (I never did). By the second week I had moved in. We were married at a friend's house upstate a year later.

JK: That certainly makes for a great story! What was it like working with your husband on these images? What is different about posing for him versus the many photographers you've worked with?

ZL: When modeling professionally, it is never 'me' the photographers want to capture on film, but rather an anonymous, stylized image of me that fits in with whatever they or the client want to portray. This disconnect is what allowed me to model in the first place — this necessity to temporarily reside in a different 'self' — especially as I was a very tall, shy, and reserved teenager.

With Damian it is the complete opposite: the lens is a natural extension of his eye. Nothing Damian shoots is ever posed or set up; he doesn't talk about what he is trying to capture. Most of the time I am completely unaware of his camera, and just doing whatever I was, being myself with him. And he is being himself the whole time too, whether it is accompanying me on exotic locations for modeling jobs, around the city or just at home; he is always observing, composing and saving all those moments on digital film. I remember on one trip to St. Bart's, the photo crew continually joked that I had a stalker as Damian would always be lurking somewhere, in the bushes, or peeking through a window behind the pool house, snapping away... I don't think he even noticed them.

JK: Speaking of being noticed, your husband was inspired by the Uncertainty Principle, that the act of observation affects the object being observed, how did his presence effect you as the subject/model?

ZL: Though his camera has become his ever present but ignored appendage, there is always the echo of another in his images. His presence, though unseen, is always there, because I am with him and aware of being under his gaze. Years of modeling have eliminated any self-consciousness I might have felt in front of a lens, yet I am still always aware of him — which is how Damian captured such intimate and candid images that represent a natural part of the narrative between us. He captures more of 'me' than any other photographer ever could while I still feel there is no violation of what is only mine and his. Diane Arbus once said: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know." With Damian's finished paintings, the viewer sees what they want, what they bring with them and our secret is safe.

JK: I know Damian worked on these photos over a period of seven years. How long did the process of making the paintings from the original photographs take?

ZL: Damian only works on one painting at a time, immersing himself in it until he is satisfied that it looks the way he remembers it. It is quite remarkable to watch. Although I see his process every day, I am still amazed at the long transformation of our shared moment to this art form. Each individual painting takes him several months but that isn't accounting for all the months he has spent finding and working on the original photos.

JK: What was your early modeling experience like? Any exciting stories from your time walking the couture shows for Gaultier and others?

ZL: I started modeling just before I went off to college — my early years were quite hectic as modeling and studying were really full-time occupations in their own right. It was both glamorous and very grounding — I would have to take the Eurostar over to Paris, check in at the Hotel Costes, quickly walk a couple of couture shows, then rush back for the five hour train ride back to Oxford to study for my examinations. I'd get some funny looks walking back through Tom Quad (the centre green in Christ Church College) still in full hair and makeup! It was fun but also quite stressful. I remember spending a weekend in Venice shooting for a French magazine. It was my first time visiting the city and I wanted to explore its beauty but every evening, after the shoot and dinner with the whole crew, I'd have to run upstairs to my room, staying up half the night, furiously trying to finish an essay on *Madame Bovary*...only to have to be up fresh and presentable at 5 a.m. to start shooting the next day! I still managed to have a wonderful time.

JK: You were the face of Ralph Lauren for some time. What was your experience like being British and representing such an iconic American designer?

ZL: It was a huge compliment to me to be picked to represent such a legendary American brand. Bruce Weber is a legend and I really enjoyed the whole experience. They are a great group of people at Ralph Lauren and I made some lifelong friends from those jobs (as well as, evidently, a few of Damian's paintings).

But although I was raised in England, my parents are actually Serbian and I was born in Belgrade. Having moved to London when I was almost four and not speaking a word of English, I have never felt entirely British or even entirely Serbian. I had one language for home, another with friends and then at

university studying a third. Ultimately, I think that's what I first loved about New York as a new arrival; everyone is from somewhere else, yet we all are "New Yorkers". I felt very at home here from the beginning. It is however, still a little peculiar for me when my 3-year-old daughter speaks with an American accent! We all have fun arguing over the correct pronunciation of 'tomato.'

JK: Do you have any artistic leanings of your own or projects that you have in the works?

ZL: Our two young children keep me very busy at the moment. Damian designed an amazing chef's kitchen in our loft before the kids were born but neither of us had any real experience in one (though he had been a dishwasher and waiter, which doesn't really help). Eventually I taught myself the basics so I wouldn't feel guilty about having a kitchen I never use. I think I am surprised the most by my new skills — I am very picky about what we eat and tend to make everything from scratch. I now even bake my own bread every day! My daughter is very into helping with cooking and baking — which got me thinking about how that tradition of passing along favorite recipes between generations is slowly disappearing, as no one I know really cooks anymore. I am working on making an iPad app to address that. (We each have our own and are a bit of a Mac geek family!) I am very interested in helping women navigate the often overwhelming world of urban family life.

Also in the works is a children's book. Whenever we visit the bookshop with the kids, I end up feeling very disappointed with most of the newer children's books. I try and get them as many of the "classics" as possible (and I am fortunate enough to have a friend in London who always sends my daughter these amazing, hard to find, English children's books since she wrote her thesis on classic children's literature!). There is nothing we enjoy more than reading a good book together.

Damian Loeb's "Verschränkung and The Uncertainty Principle" is on view at the [Acquavella Gallery](#) in New York now through June 17.