

A close-up portrait of a woman with short, light-colored hair, looking slightly to the right. She is wearing a dark, textured garment. The background is dark with some light spots.

CHARLOTTE COTTON

# FASHION IMAGE REVOLUTION

THE ART AND TECHNIQUE OF BRIAN DOWLING  
WITH NICK KNIGHT, ANTON CORBIJN, CRAIG McDEAN,  
GLEN LUCHFORD, SØLVE SUNDSBØ AND MORE





It is somewhat difficult to imagine that the inimitable and incalculably influential image-maker Nick Knight was anything but fully formed at the beginnings of his photographic practice in the early 1980s, and purposefully in search of the best potential collaborators for his groundbreaking work. Knight was a recent graduate who had moved back to London and was taking on commercial jobs that would financially allow him to do his own independent projects. He had become highly inquisitive about the possibilities of colour photography for amplifying his already accomplished use of large-format cameras and the language of black-and-white photography. To see his vision realized through colour photography in the early 1980s was something of a challenge, not least because the default process for the rendering of colour editorial or advertising images in magazines and catalogues was to use colour transparency (slide) film. These jewel-like images on film were individually drum-scanned for their translation onto printed magazine pages, and this entirely circumvented the need for a photographic print. Colour transparencies were notoriously difficult to manipulate post-capture, with only modest scope for airbrush retouching, and with the substance of their colouration and balance due mainly to the lighting conditions (such as using flash lighting and placing colour gels over studio lights) created on the shoot, and the use of precise exposures within the markedly tighter range of exposure values demanded by transparency film compared to its negative film counterpart. By his very nature, Knight likely saw the challenge of countering the received conventions of colour photography — and finding an experimental groove where he could breathe new life into the rich heritage of this rarefied facet of the medium — as the most exciting terrain to pursue. Knight found in Dowling not only a profound knowledge of how to technically prepare and reproduce original colour prints but also a passion parallel to his own for taking the inherent capacities of the medium and pushing them to their beautiful limits time after time. It is significant that this was also the moment when Knight first approached graphic designer Peter Saville, who had immediately become a legendary figure in British design because of his game-changing work, since 1978, for Factory Records in Manchester, and the subsequent visual identities he created for their roster of artists, principally Joy Division and, from 1981, New Order. Knight approached Saville and his senior design collaborator in the mid-1980s, Brett Wickens, to design a poster and his business card, which ended up foregrounding a collaborative meeting of minds between Knight and Saville that staccatos through the unfolding decades.

For a young, ambitious photographer in the early 1980s, there was perhaps no better place to be than in London. Principally because of the rise of independent style-magazine publishing with *The Face* and *i-D* (alongside *Blitz* magazine, which closed in 1991) starting the decade with clear permissions for new talent in the fields of photography, styling and fashion to create what they saw as the relevant visuals of the time. It is worth bearing in mind that this was a pre-digital media moment in which

“There was an opportunity to do something better so why wouldn’t we? And there were one or two people, whether it was Factory Records or Yohji Yamamoto, who felt the same thing — that same kind of utopian foolishness of saying, ‘Well, we can do it better, so we will.’”

— PETER SAVILLE











Photographers who had been lucky enough to watch Dowling's masking, dodging and burning in the analogue darkroom and see his hands move with the grace of a bird in flight, find a direct equivalent as he sits and works with his digital retouching pad, returning time and time again to his exacting and unfettered mental space of realizing an image that reaches to the limits of what is possible. It is telling that Dowling's choice of a second-hand Polielettronica digital C-type printer, installed at BDI in the late 2000s, which was a high-quality but already-becoming-obsolete machine that perhaps only one or two technicians in the UK can now effectively service — a beautifully idiosyncratic acknowledgement of digital automation.

In the digital era, with all its algorithmic control, it is undeniably harder to reach the happy accidents of photography's analogue alchemy. Dowling remains a quiet figurehead of the still-radical creative freedom of photography when you push beyond the expected.

It wasn't until the late 2000s that many of the apocalyptic fantasies of digital image-making usurping analogue photography in its totality began to wane. Camera film became a "boutique" product with some beloved stocks going back into production, and chemical "wet" darkrooms remained an endangered species but didn't entirely disappear, especially in the most accurately predictive art schools which anticipated a new generation of image-makers who actively wanted to experiment with the analogue heritage of their medium. Analogue photography stopped being the default technology, but it didn't stop being an elegant and effective means of energetically rendering visual form, and, for instance, the 2000s saw an unexpected reanimation of black-and-white analogue photography in the hands of young "digital natives". Outside of fashion image-making and in the realm of contemporary art, there was an extremely active discourse around the materiality of photographic prints, and the claiming of prescient ways in which analogue thinking could be manifest in digital form.

“You can go into the darkroom with Brian for four days and come out with something that no one has seen before. He has this weird wizardry-ness and the printing machines bend to his will. His hands are flying around like birds. It is very interesting how he has taken that ‘muscle memory’ and applied that to his digital finishing and retouching work. The movements that I see him making with his hands when he is working from the tablet are almost the same as when he is in his analogue darkroom.”

— JASON EVANS

















