

f Go with the flow

With her impressionistic photography, Canadian photographer **Barbara Cole** has created an extraordinary body of work. She talks to **Amy Davies**

Looking at Barbara Cole's fantastic underwater work, you'd be forgiven for assuming you'd stumbled across a painter's back catalogue. Look a little bit closer though and you'll begin to see that these sublimely ethereal pictures are indeed photographs. AP fortuitously bumped into Cole at this year's Photo London, where her work was one of the most compelling and standout displays of the exhibition.

Cole spent several years working as a fashion editor before turning her hand to photography. Perhaps surprisingly for someone with a journalistic background, she was never interested in photography's ability to convey realism, and was

The images on this spread come from Cole's 2016 series 'Falling Through Time'. The backgrounds are shots taken with a Polaroid SX-70 and show various English gardens during the 1990s. The models were shot recently in Cole's underwater studio in Toronto, using a digital camera.

Right: Egyptian Avenue
Below: Palace Gardens

almost immediately drawn to the idea of creating abstracts.

Cole was once a passionate advocate of Polaroid, for which she had a particular fondness due to the way it was able to create abstracts. Speaking to us from her home in Toronto, Cole says, 'I needed to make pictures look painterly, and Polaroid film, in a nutshell, gave me that opportunity.'

'With Time-Zero film, the surface was plastic and the back was paper. You could peel back the surface and in between was a gel. If you carefully pushed that around, you could get that white gel to come through the plastic layer and it was like oil paint. I lived for that film, and it created my interest in photography big time.'

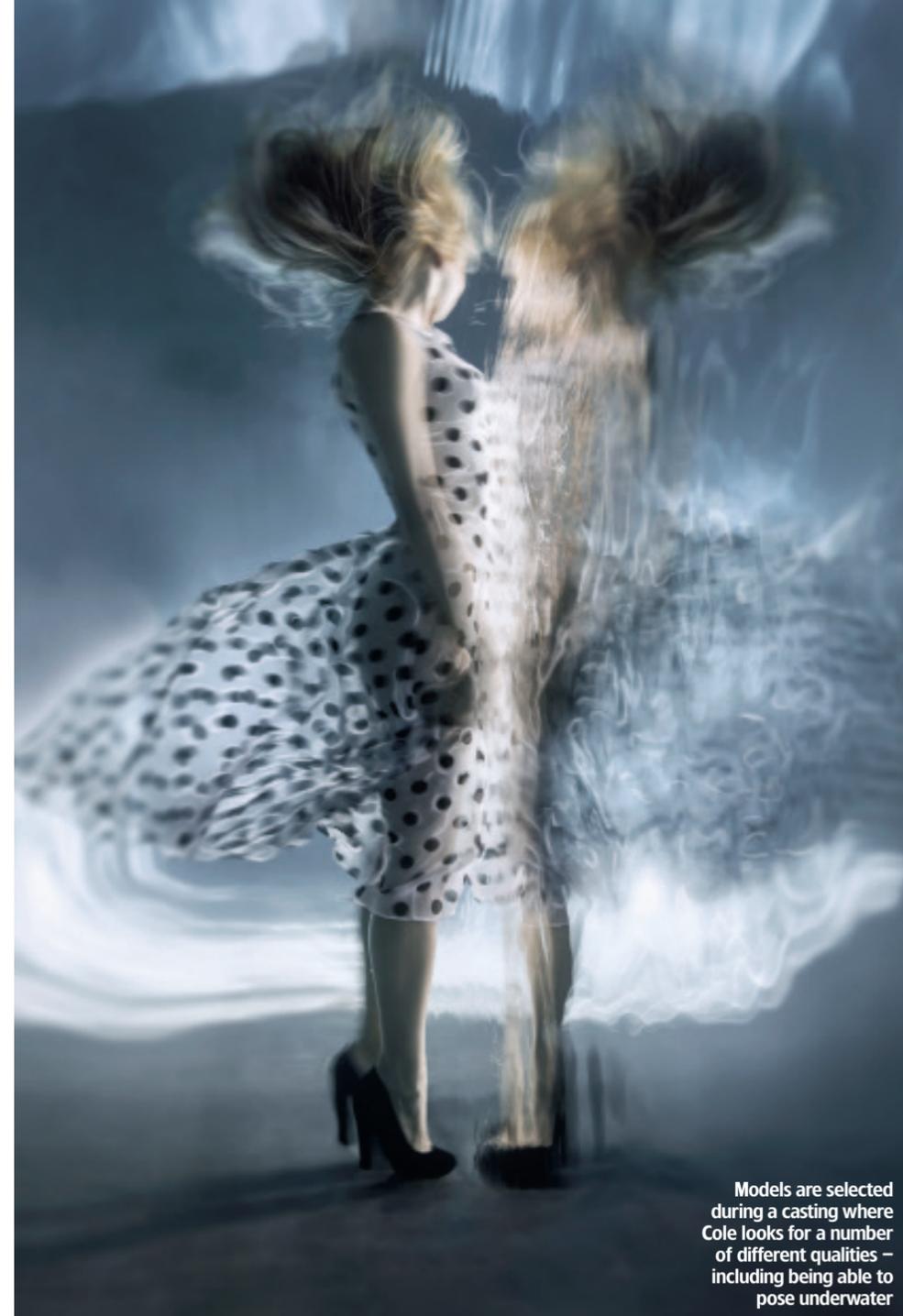
Finding an underwater world

Sadly, Cole's love affair with Polaroid was not destined to last as the company famously went bankrupt and all film production stopped. This twist of fate eventually led Cole to what has turned out to be an even more enduring relationship – shooting underwater. 'I knew it was coming, but I just thought my life had ended. By that point I'd been working exclusively with Polaroid for 10 or 15 years, and suddenly I was supposed to stop? I started looking for another way to create abstract pictures and that ended up being in the water.'

'I had an idea for what I would do. I had rented a camera and a flash, and had very basic information on how to use it. After a couple of years experimenting with digital solutions [to recreate the look



A shot from 2013's 'Duplicity' series. Underwater costumes are specially created for all of Cole's shoots with the help of fashion designer Lucian Matis



A typical two-day shooting session leaves Cole with just four or five 'keepers'

of Polaroid film], I just moved on; and it worked. And I've been doing this now for 20 years.'

Swimming with ideas

For that first underwater shoot, Cole used a Nikonos camera, but it wasn't long before she made the switch to using a digital camera, especially as she was also undertaking commercial work at the time. Describing her camera as a 'Canon whatever,' she is extremely keen to emphasise how 'non-techy' she is, and that it doesn't matter what the camera is. 'I had my first show at the Jane Corkin Gallery in Toronto in 1986. My mother came to the show and said to the owner of the gallery "My daughter's camera takes such good pictures..."; a frustrating tale which will surely be familiar to many of us.

Cole's underwater work begins life in the pool, right from the idea's conception. 'A typical shoot begins in my head. I am extremely fortunate to have a pool in my back yard. I swim about six times a week. I always joke and say that's my office, because that's where my ideas come from. I heard that Steven

Spielberg got all his ideas while he was driving on the LA freeway, and if that's true, it's kind of like that. I'm just swimming, thinking about what I have to do, and suddenly I'm somewhere else and the ideas come like a brainstorm out of nowhere.'

Those ideas are often tempered with a healthy dose of realism by her assistant, with whom Cole has been working for 15 years. 'He's really nice, and he's so helpful, but he always says "No!" But then I'll wait, because he'll come back and go, "So I was thinking..." Once I hear that hopefulness in his voice, I know we're good.'

What it takes to make a picture

With her work being very cyclical by nature, Cole typically spends winter retouching her previous show and planning for a new one. Casting and bookings begin in April, while shoots take place in summer. 'By the end of August, I feel I've worked hard and I've done really amazing stuff, that I'm a genius. Then in September, I feel like a fraud, I become petrified that there's nothing there. I spend all of October worrying, then I have to slap myself

'Suddenly I'm somewhere else and the ideas come like a brainstorm'



Based in Toronto, Canada, Barbara Cole describes herself as a 'painter but employing traditional photographic tools'. She was with the *Toronto Sun* for a decade, then, during a sabbatical from the paper in 1985, she began to put together her first photographic exhibition for Toronto's Jane Corkin Gallery. Her artwork is extensively collected by both public and private institutions, and has been exhibited worldwide.

around, and by November I'm finally putting the pictures together.'

All of the costumes the models wear for a shoot are especially created in partnership with the fashion designer Lucian Matis. Now one of Canada's most prominent designers, his relationship with Cole began when he was just a student.

Directing underwater is about as challenging as you might imagine it to be, especially given that a standard shoot lasts all day, for two full days. But, says Cole, it becomes easier as the shoot progresses. 'In the beginning, the model, she won't say it, but she's so concerned about whether she can sink or not. It's a very hard thing to do. We start by holding hands, and we sink together – giving her some tools, like a weight belt, or goggles, so she can see me and what I'm doing.

'I find it very helpful to show them what I shot, so they get a sense of what they're doing, how it's working and the way I like it. It's not like being in a studio. You're dealing

with fragile young girls who want to please you – so you can say, "When you come down, please come to the right, and then let your arms go, or let your legs go out", but when she's got to contend with her hair, her dress, breathing – in the end whatever she does is perfect, and I just have to work around her.'

Since Cole is self-funded, she tends to pick models who don't have a lot of experience, but is careful to ensure that they're well cared for. 'The models will not tell me that their eyes are stinging, or that they're hungry, or that they're cold. They're afraid that I'll say something to their agent and they'll never work. I anticipate that; I ask my intern, any time they're not being used, get them a towel, make

them a hot chocolate, let them take a shower. That way, they get a sense that even though I'm 150, they can do what they need to do and not be afraid of me.'

Being underwater herself is very important for Cole. She says, 'People always say, "I bet she shoots outside a water tank". I don't, because I need to have the same experience – more or less – as the model, or you won't get the same results. If I'm wearing my jeans and a T-shirt and my eyes aren't stinging, how many times do you think she's going to swim when she's not feeling good?'

Despite capturing 'tons' from most shoots, Cole will usually be left with just four or five keepers. 'With digital, we're spoiled. With film, I was very careful with what I shot,

Models are selected during a casting where Cole looks for a number of different qualities – including being able to pose underwater



You can see more of Barbara Cole's work in her latest book, which is self-titled and available to buy now. For more information, head to barbaracole.com.

because the processing, the contact sheets, making the prints and the retouching, it was all hugely expensive. It's a different animal now. I think it's fantastic in terms of people starting out because they see their mistakes immediately. But you shoot so quickly that maybe you don't retain as much knowledge.'

Trying new things

More recently, keen to foster what she calls a 'one, two punch' approach, Cole has taken a step back to analogue photography for an entirely separate project. She explains, 'For the past seven years, I've learned the process of making film on glass and using an 8x10 camera, to create ambrotypes and tintypes. I've made every mistake possible, but I have finally found my voice with that and I now work on both series simultaneously.' Lately, she has also combined some of her old Polaroid shots, using them as backgrounds for models in the foreground, shot underwater.

You might think Cole would be further tempted to go back to her first love with the reinvention of Polaroid, first via the Impossible Project and more lately with Polaroid Originals. But it's not for her. 'I don't go back. It was such a beautiful experience that I don't want to ruin it. Anyway, the colours aren't quite right, and they also don't have the emulsion that moves around – I don't think so anyway. I was tempted for a moment, and then no, I just thought it would be re-doing something – I think that you have to move forward.'