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English translation by Nina Gettler

Visages De Nuit

... because the night belongs to lovers, because the night belongs to life
... (Patti Smith)

All photographs: © Wendy Paton, Text: Anne Kotzan

An elegant woman is in the spotlight so that she inevitably attracts the viewer's gaze. But she herself is looking to the side past the viewer and outside the photograph. It is night, a festive event. The men are wearing white shirts with black suits, but she is wearing a black top with a light-colored blazer. Under her styled, short hair, her forehead is furrowed, the large, dark eyes rimmed with black, her mouth slightly open. Startled, stunned, speechless, she is looking into space—or do her eyes, questioning, meet those of the man, who is hinted at by the hand in the lower right-hand corner of the photograph? The scene raises questions. Did she just get some bad news? Did she surprise her husband with his lover? Or is this a still from a film, a crime thriller? The arc between the viewer and the woman is completed by the man in the background who is observing what is going on. Apart from her, it is only the heads and shirts of the men that stand out from the blackness of the photograph. Wendy Paton has called her series of photographs "Faces of Night." A woman, her head covered by a scarf, hurrying across a nighttime street, a man gently closing his eyes for a kiss, an old woman with a muffler around her neck dozing peacefully, and many other scenes, portraits, and details that she has encountered during her nighttime forays through New York and Paris accompanied by her camera. "I get my inspiration from what I see, and I see people, emotions, the difference between darkness and light," she says at the opening of her show at the in focus gallery in Cologne in late January of this year. "I like to work in a crowd, at weddings and galas. People generally don't even notice that I'm photographing them. I myself seem to disappear into the night. I use only the actual light that is available, a mechanical camera, and no telephoto lens."

For this photographer who comes from a more rural environment, it was a completely new experience to explore the night life of the big city. Paton's childhood home was in East Meadow, Long Island, about an hour outside of New York City. "At the time, I didn't think that I would someday be able to love New York, but the city gave me the opportunity to see life differently. Artistically, it was like a muse." Wendy Paton's rural life, however, was neither peaceful nor easygoing, but very concentrated and characterized by very high demands.

Before Wendy Paton became a photographer, she had already fulfilled another dream. Like many little girls, she loved horses and from the age of five, she had riding lessons. So by the time she was put into a horse sulky for the first time at the age of 14, the way had already been charted. "From this day on, it was my dream to participate in and win trotting races." In September 1972, "I had just turned 21 and was working for a trainer when another man wanted to hire me to train his two horses. It was an opportunity that I seized immediately." And this was the beginning of her career as the owner of a racing stable. Two years later, she had already won her first race at the Goshen Racetrack and in 1978, she won again at the Roosevelt Raceway. Her male colleagues learned quickly to take her seriously. Paton was able to expand her stable to 48 horses and in 1982, her racing stable had earned an income of one million dollars. And in 1983, she was the only woman to ever win the year-end training title at the Roosevelt Raceway.

Wendy Paton had not only realized her dream, but she had arrived at the zenith of a horse racing career when she decided to go back to college in 1985. "In the racing business, everything is just about the race. And I felt that I had achieved everything that I could achieve in horse racing. Besides, I was deeply curious about other things in life, and this has remained a driving force to this day." Two years later, she left the trotting racetrack behind and in 1990, she completed her degree in communications and art management. Paton has been interested in music and theater since her childhood. "I always felt that there were two things that I had to do in my life. One was horse racing and the other was something artistic." Driven by her deep need, in 1981 she began to look for a means of creative expression discovering photography in the process. "I began to experiment with a manual camera, a Canon AE1." She found motifs everywhere—in her family, among friends, in the countryside, and at the racetrack. At the time, her photographs were mainly in color. But as someone who was self-taught, she developed photographs in black and white as well. She did not learn darkroom work until the early 1990s while she was studying at the International Center of Photography in New York.

Black and white became her medium. "In those learning years, I realized that I had to photograph what moved me personally and it became a MUST to engage with it and put it on film." Her work "Visages de Nuit" with its ephemeral nighttime portraits also emerged from her interest in "understanding and capturing people's complexity, how they really are."

From the very beginning, her path has been characterized by empathy, full commitment, and a seriousness of purpose as well as an insatiable curiosity about life itself. Well-meaning advice, such as "This has never been done before" or "That's impossible," has never been able to deter her from her plans. For Wendy Paton, fear is not a



good advisor. This was something she had learned at the racetrack. Besides, she always had a specific goal there, whereas in photography, her experience is completely different. "In photography, I have the freedom to not think about success, and I'm learning to have patience—with myself and with others." Here, she is following the advice of master printer Chuck Kelton who has been her mentor: "Just do the work." And she is doing her work well and with passion, without caring about its acceptance by others. Kelton has remained her most important teacher for her work in the black-and-white lab, and he is now her advisor, her mentor, and her friend. He is the name behind Kelton Labs, which has such notable photographers as Lillian Bassman, Robert Capa, Helen Lewitt, and Magnum Photos as its customers. Her encounter with Michael Kenna has played another significant role in her development as a photographer. She was fascinated when she saw his work at an exhibition in Los Angeles, and in 2003, she registered for his workshop in France. "I learned all the necessary technical aspects of taking pictures at night with low light from him." In the same year, she took advantage of the opportunity to study nude photography with Lucien Clergue.

Wendy Paton's debut in Europe was the exhibition of her series "Visages de Nuit" in Cologne. She presented her own, personal style with sharp contrasts of black and white as well as a skillful interplay of sharp and blurred focus. Sometimes she crops her protagonist, sometimes she shows the entire person, sometimes her subject is isolated from the crowd, then again integrated into it, sometimes as a portrait or reduced down to a graphic detail. All the photographs have a technical perfection in common as well as a fierce intensity that captures the viewer's gaze and tells stories. Between 2006 and 2008, armed with her practical and inconspicuous Leica M7, Paton headed off again and again into an unfamiliar world of urban night life. As Weegee and Winogrand have done, she also looked for her protagonists on the street, in crowds, at parties. But as opposed to Weegee, who preferred to use flash, Paton works exclusively with the light that is there. She has also avoided spectacular venues and (crime) scenes. To some degree, snapshot aesthetics inform her work as is the case with Winogrand, but her view tends to subjectively interpret what she sees more than that of the street photographer. As she uses only a 50mm lens, she has to always be very close to the people she photographs. "If a person notices me, I smile, say thank you, and keep going." But she is usually able to remain unnoticed, like Henri Cartier-Bresson back in his day. Her photographs tell the story of her encounters with people and their emotions but they also reveal a great deal about the photographer herself. It is her view of the world that she presents to us as an image. "For me, photography means concentrating on something and peeling back the individual layers until you have reached its true essence. This can be the moment when I press the shutter button, how I develop the film, or how I ultimately print the photograph—or a combination of all three."

Wendy Paton was a successful horse trainer and equestrian before she began her second career as a photographer. She recently celebrated her first exhibition in Germany.

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