Nick Knight
Shalom Harlow, Louis Vuitton, 1996
If Brian Dowling has a signature that cuts across all of the fashion imagery that he has materialized, it rests with the sensitivity with which the models’ visceral presence is rendered, according to each photographer’s vision. This process, which was initiated with the work that he made for Knight, started with Dowling pre-flashing the light-sensitive photographic paper multiple times to build up a base “temperature” of colour, not unlike a softly toned base primer applied by a painter to a bare canvas. In combination with his masking technique, the actual colours and fabric weight of the styled outfits from the respective fashion collection could be shown precisely, while the model’s exposed skin and face could be independently given more substance, or even dramatically transformed by colour. Knight’s October 1995 editorial story for British Vogue, “Couture in Colour”, and his Louis Vuitton campaign in the following year, took Knight and Dowling’s collaboration to its zenith with every limb of model Shalom Harlow cast in spectrums of colour, manually shaded into their full-blown glory by Dowling in his darkroom. Simultaneously, Dowling was collaborating with photographers on their commissioned and independent projects that sat at the naturalistic aesthetic end of the photographic spectrum, such as those of Perry Ogden. Although Dowling’s signature within Ogden’s prints is less emphatic, it relied similarly on a journey of discovery between photographer and printer, and an acute attention to detail that pervades all of Dowling’s work and makes the difference between a good and truly great photograph. For Ogden, using 120 Kodak VPS 160 ASA, Dowling would push the C-41 developer to make the highlights brighter, and smooth the tonalities of subjects’ skin, then add a warm pre-flash to the photographic paper to amplify the contrast in the eventual print. In the late 1990s photographer John Spinks worked with Dowling’s vast knowledge of how to match a particular film stock with a photographic paper to go beyond what the photographic chemistry could officially do. Spinks was in search of a colouration that suggested the quality of mid-century printing ink on paper rather than the photochemical range of C-type prints. Together they worked out how to use a Kodak negative film in combination with Agfa Portrait paper (more commonly used by high-street photographers) that could hold that degree of darkroom interpretation — a process that Spinks has used for the ensuing twenty years.

“Brian Dowling has his own kind of dodge tool that he uses in the darkroom. He made it himself using a thin piece of wire and card the size of a five-pence piece at either end. He holds it in his hand when developing photographic prints and often refers to it as his ‘wand’. To burn (or let light in) he uses the top of a box of photographic paper — as it is black one side — and punches a hole through it. He also uses his hands to burn or shade, which sounds somewhat inaccurate, but he can be very precise. All this is performed in complete darkness, and to glimpse his hands when they appear under the light of the enlarger lamp is magical.”

— KEVIN DAVIES
Jason Evans
Sam, “Strictly”, i-D, 1991
The fashion image-maker who most likely spent the greatest amount of time working with Brian Dowling inside of his darkroom through the 1990s is Craig McDean. In the early 1990s, McDean was Nick Knight’s first assistant on shoot days, collecting and delivering film and test prints, seeing through the long quiet hours of the process at BDI, an extra pair of hands in the darkroom, and getting a unique education throughout. As a result, perhaps, McDean’s own career began to come into focus in the mid-1990s, a fraction later than his London-based contemporaries that included Juergen Teller (who had developed his mid-1980s Polaroid processes with Dowling), and David Sims, Mario Sorrenti and Corinne Day, who all had stints of developing film and occasional printing at BDI. Since 1989, these were the images-makers that had defined London supported at the crucial moment by *The Face* art director Phil Bicker (who designed the BDI logo that, when seen in colour, formed a “beady eye”), and Nick Knight during his hiatus from his own photography in 1990 to focus on picture editing nine of *i-D* magazine’s monthly issues. It is testament to this moment in London at the turn of the decade that such a range of visual strategies — from Knight’s aesthetic and narrative boundary-pushing to, for instance, Corinne Day’s radical counter-arguments to prevailing commercial ideas of beauty and style — could thrive and create the locus for fashion photography unseen since the turn into the 1960s. Whereas some of McDean’s peers initially needed to acclimatize to the shift and scale of the commercial feeding frenzy for London’s home-grown talent, he was already attuned through his assistantship to Knight, and concomitantly working with Dowling, and sprinted into his future. McDean’s 1995 and 1996 Jil Sander campaigns (again, as with Knight in the early 1990s, creatively directed by Marc Ascoli) had the signature gorgeousness of images that came through BDI but with a tenor that clearly lifted and abstracted the refreshed realism defined by the so-called grunge fashion photographers in London. In retrospect, McDean’s portrayal of model Guinevere van Seenus for the 1996 Spring/Summer Jil Sander campaign carries the hallmarks of best practice at the time, with a then unconventional American model holding her own naturalized poses; the lightest, dewy-skinned make-up design by the visionary Pat McGrath; and Eugene Souleiman’s intentionally subtle hair design that implies that it is casually self-styled by the character that Guinevere plays. Set against plain backdrops, and photographed with flat cross lighting, everything within the performance of the shoot and each gesture within the image construction amplifies this subtle poem in individualism and photographic intimacy. Dowling printed these images on the super-glossy Fujiflex C-type paper, pre-flashed to compensate for the paper’s blue/green bias, and accentuating further Guinevere’s wax-like skin and the sheen, textures and cuts of fabrics, and drawing out the here and now of this fashion moment. In 1997, with creative director Ronnie Cooke Newhouse, McDean created all nine

“Brian is an incredible person — gifted, kind and funny. No one would spend that amount of time with Brian if he wasn’t that person. If I added all the time up, I must have spent two years of my life in the darkroom with Brian. And sometimes it was like a David Lean movie going on forever, and sometimes it was like *Fawlty Towers*. There’s the adage that you are still good if you still love it. He always wants to get the print right.”

— CRAIG McDEAN
Craig McDean
Guinevere van Seenus, Jil Sander S/S 1996
Zaubern mit Licht und Farbe


Der Titel im Katalog