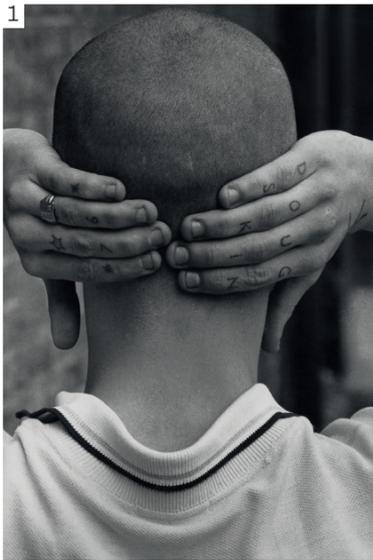


# THE WAY I SEE IT

# Nick Knight

His career as a doctor was derailed after glimpsing the uber-cool arts students on the King's Road, but medicine's loss is the fashion industry's gain. One of the most influential and provocative image-makers of the past 25 years, Nick Knight started out shooting skinheads, music acts and people on the street, before moving into haute fashion, creating ad campaigns for the likes of Yohji Yamamoto, Alexander McQueen and Vivienne Westwood. In 2000, he launched SHOWstudio, which championed the emerging fashion film genre and carried the world's first live-streamed catwalk show, and he's continued to push the boundaries of digital visuals with 3D printed sculptures of supermodels and iPhone-only Instagram ads. He tells *Selena Schleh* about dreaming in abstract geometry, the internal narrative of clothes and why pornography shouldn't be the preserve of the visually illiterate





“Although I was a skinhead, I wasn’t a racist thug – I just had a lot of attitude...”

**I was born in 1958, in Queen Charlotte’s Hospital in Chiswick, London.**

**It’s hard to pinpoint my earliest memory. I can remember being attacked by a dog and drawing on my next-door neighbour’s wall (he wore winkle-pickers). And my parents’ Ford Zephyr.**

**My mother was a physiotherapist and my father was a psychologist in the Forces, first of all for the RAF and then NATO. In 1956 we moved to Paris for a year, living in a beautiful old apartment in the Bois de Boulogne. I went to a huge international school for military kids. I remember my mother going to shop in the Rive Gauche, and also the first rumblings of what became the May [1968] riots.**

**When General de Gaulle decided that he didn’t want France to be part of NATO any more, we moved to Brussels. When I started at the local junior school, I had no idea what was being said. I sat there completely baffled and bemused, and then all of a sudden I woke up one morning and I could speak French! Your ear gets used to the different patterns and rhythms, it’s almost like a jigsaw puzzle.**

**There’s a lot to be said for learning another language. You learn another way of thinking and another culture, it’s not just the words. French is a much more beautiful, more poetic language [than English]. I can still speak it, but I don’t dream in it any more.**

**When I reached my teenage years, my mother said, ‘Oh you’re so bright, you should be a doctor.’ Falling for this ruse, I decided to become a doctor, though I didn’t focus academically at all. I enjoyed school because of the community and social interactions, but really didn’t see the point in sport. Going to a reasonably tough comprehensive, I learned a lot socially. But did I learn a lot about history and geography and algebra and that sort of thing? Probably not.**

**I scraped through my O-levels and went to technical college in London, where I got mildly involved in politics and became the chairman of the student union, though I wasn’t very radical. I’d read Chairman Mao’s ‘little red book’, but to be frank I liked the idea of politics more than the reality. I liked how people looked when they were rioting. One of my favourite photographs is of the [1968] Paris riots and those tousle-haired Molotov-cocktail-throwing students. For me, that was the beginning of fashion photography; I saw fashion as something that came very strongly from the streets, from this idea of expressing your identity, in a very bold and provocative way.**

**The idea was still to do medicine, but things didn’t quite go to plan. I didn’t get the A-level results to get straight into medical school, so did a year of human biology and then started medicine. When I got to Chelsea College in London I absolutely hated it. You had the science college on one side of the road and on the other, very dangerously, you had the arts college. It looked so much more fun, and the arts students who were coming into the bar every night looked great. This was 1978, on the Kings Road – a fantastic time.**

**From that point I knew I was never going to make it as a doctor. So I dropped out, and luckily Bournemouth [College of Art] agreed to hold a place for me. I went back that summer and started working in an off-licence, and there was a skinhead working there, and we started hanging out and working out what was going on in the scene, and I started taking photos of them.**

**My book, *Skinhead*, was published when I graduated in 1982. At the time, the biggest employer [of photographers] was the music industry, so I started working as a music photographer for the *New Musical Express*. Music videos hadn’t really started getting underway yet; the 12-inch album cover was still important.**

**I was shooting a lot of stars when they came over from America, and going to [London goth nightclub] the Bat Cave to photograph bands. A lot of my younger friends now say: ‘I can’t believe you photographed so-and-so!’ That was how I got involved in photography, though I never really thought you could make a living from it – only stop yourself starving to death.**

**The likes of *Vogue* and *ELLE* and *Marie Claire* weren’t going to have anything to do with me at that point, so I found my place at *i-D*. Their premise was that people walking down the King’s Road were much more interesting, dress-wise, than anybody else. The streets were the catwalks of the world. And my job was to photograph people I liked the look of. It was almost a non-aspirational way of presenting fashion. All credit to [founder] Terry Jones for starting it.**

**My first mentor was [graphic designer] Barney Bubbles, who gave me my first job. Sadly he committed suicide three years later, so I guess it was an early love and an early loss. Someone else who became incredibly influential was [graphic designer] Peter Saville, who did the New Order and Joy Division album covers. I first approached him to design the cover of *Skinhead* and he ended up designing my business cards and posters with my name on that I’d drop round with my portfolio. The friendship started from there.**

**In the early days of my career, I was incredibly arrogant. Although I was a skinhead, I wasn’t a racist thug – I just had a lot of attitude and was quite rigorous on the people around me. When I asked my [college] tutors: ‘Who’s the best photographer in the world?’, they said, ‘You should look at Alfred Stieglitz, you should look at Edward Steichen.’ And I thought, ‘What, really? They’re the best? I can do better than anything out there.’**

**I was very frustrated with the world and how it looked visually: the way women were portrayed in the media, the totally racially un-diverse media that we had, and I took the attitude: well, if you’re this bad, I’ll be worse. I very much wanted to provoke. I still am [frustrated]. But I’ve learned to express it in a more intelligent way.**

**I don’t think I calmed down until I met my wife, Charlotte in 1986. She really changed my life; she opened my eyes to a lot of things and calmed me. A few years later, we had our children – and that really changes you as a person. You put your children first. Before then, it had always been about me, always been about my work, always about pushing, pushing, pushing.**

**Fashion is very much a predictive art medium. It’s not about what’s here now, it’s about what you’ll want tomorrow. The images that I create are questions that I put out to the world around me, not statements. So I’ve never seen my work in the sense of ‘this was the best fashion campaign’, or ‘this was the strongest image’. You interact with other photographers, and it’s an ongoing conversation: I do a series of pictures and they go out into the world, then somebody sees them and they do a reaction to that work. It’s an ongoing process.**



**Prior to the internet, photography – or what I’d now call image-making – was a weird mono-directional pastime. You’d make these images and out they’d go, with no feedback whatsoever. The only way you’d be able to tell if you’d done any good was whether [the editors] would pay your first class air plane ticket the next season! Rewarding someone’s work by just giving them money isn’t very good for the soul, and it was very frustrating for somebody who believes in the idea of communication. When the internet came along, it was a much better deal. It became a two-way medium, which was very refreshing.**

**The biggest single revolution that has happened since I started my career? The internet. In essence we can communicate across the globe in real time. That’s an incredibly different proposition in terms of communication.**

**The other major thing is that we have digital image making, which has taken over from photography. It’s really important for people to understand that photography stopped at some point in the mid-1990s: what we do now isn’t photography. Now I can pick up my phone and take a picture, and I can move it around with my finger on the screen and then I can press another button and make it 3D, and then I can press another button and publish it. [Hungarian-French photographer] Brassai couldn’t do that, because he was working in a completely different medium.**

**For the Met Museum’s exhibition [*Punk: Chaos to Couture*], I went through old footage of the Sex Pistols and The Clash and there’s not a single camera in the audience. Now, you go to a Kanye West concert, look out into the audience and there’s a sea of phones. Now everybody can take pictures, can express themselves. However, in the same way as with the invention of the ballpoint pen, not everybody wrote *War and Peace*, you still only have a few people who can express themselves incredibly. But everybody at least can try, and I can’t see that as anything other than beneficial for image-making. ▣**

*1 The cover of Skinhead*

*2 Aimee Mullins, Access-able, Dazed & Confused, 1998*

“It’s not about what’s here now, it’s about what you’ll want tomorrow. The images that I create are questions that I put out to the world around me, not statements.”



“Sebastião Salgado is a brilliant photographer, but you wouldn’t give him the Prada campaign, because it’s not his language.”

**The imagery that’s starting to come out because** of the internet, the art that it’s spawning, is incredibly exciting. Look at any social movement – whether it’s surrealism in the 30s, or pop art based on consumerism and capitalism in the 60s, they yielded art movements, and the internet will absolutely yield art and artists. So it’s very important to realise the possibilities of this new medium and to encourage it to grow, and not shackle it within the confines of ‘photography’.

**I’m not a champion of photography or** photographers, I’m somebody who’s interested in communication. I don’t care if it’s sculpture, or writing, or singing, or dance or photography – my thing has always been about communicating with people. Human interaction has always excited me.

**I didn’t launch SHOWstudio to demystify** fashion – I did it because what I saw in my studio was ultimately so much more exciting than what I was seeing in the fashion press. At the time, I was working with Lee [Alexander] McQueen and John Galliano, two huge talents – it was a bit like working with Da Vinci and Michelangelo. It was fascinating, getting inside their heads, and if you’re only seeing photographs, it’s not really doing [fashion] justice.

**SHOWstudio was a way of opening the doors** [to fashion]. Like understanding how a top model works. There are a million girls out there who want

to become Naomi Campbell or Kate Moss, but there are only two of them. It’s because they’re brilliant at what they do. A model isn’t just a girl who turns up, puts some clothes on and does some poses – it’s somebody who will work from 9am in the morning until 3am the following morning to get a picture. They’ll twist and turn and push and invent. They’ll do all things great models do, and you aren’t seeing that [in a magazine photograph].

**I have a lot of problems with the way that** fashion is portrayed by the media. It’s either trivialised or standardised. I picked up *The Observer* during London Men’s Fashion Week last year, and there wasn’t one line in the whole newspaper, yet they had six pages on the Tour de France. This is the third biggest industry in Britain and yet the only time they [the press] react to it is to say: ‘Oh look, they all take drugs; oh, they’re too skinny.’ For fuck’s sake! You’re completely missing the point.

**Fashion is the most basic art form that we have.** It’s how we express ourselves. Whether it’s your position in society, or sexual availability, or whatever, people express it through what they put on their bodies. My father, who wasn’t into fashion, always dressed a certain way: he’d never wear jeans, which is a big fashion statement, if you think about it, although he was turning it the other way round.

**So [the media] really does fashion a huge** disservice. If you look at the work of McQueen, or Hussein Chalayan, or Gareth Pugh, all of those incredible artists, that’s a huge outpouring of interesting cultural comment that comes out once every six months. There are 300 designers showing you what they think of the world, and we’re dismissing it as trivia and scandal. I find that kind of coverage increasingly boring to read.

**The other main driver for setting up** SHOWstudio was fashion film. Until the internet came along there had never been a platform for it, unlike fashion photography, which had had beautiful magazines to present itself in for a hundred years. I’d actually started making fashion films back in the 80s, filming my shoots, but there was nowhere to put them. Of course, when the internet came along I realised very quickly this had been the medium I’d been waiting for.

**I christened it ‘fashion film’ back in 2000** because there wasn’t anyone else talking about it, but in some ways it was a handicap calling it that, because it’s a totally different medium. Companies think: right, it’s a ‘fashion film’, so we need some actresses, we need a film director, and they’ll go and find someone like Wes Anderson, who’s a fantastic director but knows absolutely nothing about fashion.

**Fashion film has suffered from the idea that it’s** a narrative-based story. But the narrative is already in there: in the piece of clothing, and a great model can express it. If you ignore that narrative, and slap another narrative on top of it, it becomes a film with clothes in it, and the clothes become costumes. A great actress will not understand the narrative within a piece of clothing and a great film director will not understand it either.

**Sebastião Salgado is a brilliant photographer,** but you wouldn’t give him the Prada campaign, because it’s not his language. Only a few photographers have an understanding of that point at which the girl turns her foot a quarter of a centimetre to the left which makes the whole line of the dress look better. And it’s the same for fashion filmmakers.

**A designer creates a garment to be seen in** movement, and therefore showing the garment must be about getting the viewer closer to the designer’s original vision for it. That’s why I believe fashion film is becoming so important for fashion. Because it’s closer [than photography] to what the designer intended you to see. I don’t call it fashion film – I call it clothes in movement. That’s all fashion film is.

**It took fashion photography from 1910 to 1960** to crystallise and become a recognisable art form. Fashion film is arguably only 16 years old, so

it’s only going to have a couple of practitioners doing it well and a lot of people doing it badly. However, you’re going to start seeing the people who are going to define it now.

**But the industry needs to realise that fashion** film is a very strong asset in communicating what your brand is about, and to give the people who make them the sort of respect they deserve. And by that I mean a) the proper financial assistance to do it and b) recognise they can’t just say, oh, you’ve done one thing, now do two for the same money.

**I’d never push SHOWstudio to become a really** commercial thing. It was founded for the love of the art, not to make money. So we’ve never carried advertising on the site, because we don’t want advertisers controlling your content. That’s a very dangerous situation, particularly in fashion, to be in.



**We’ve recently moved to a new studio space** in west London, and I think it’s important to encourage the spread of artists across the city. When I grew up in London in the 80s, it was very different. Now the focus has moved east. But you’re not doing the artists a service by putting it all in one place. London is as much Golders Green as it is Clapham.

**I’ve always been someone who looked more to** the future than to the past, so if I could time travel, I’d go a hundred years forward so I’d be able to join the dots more easily. If I went back, I’d go a long way back, to pre-historic times.

**I wouldn’t change anything about myself.** Not because I think I’m perfect, but I don’t think that way at all. I think you’re who you are, whether you have a speech impediment or a squint, or you’re incredibly shy or incredibly loud. Personally, I’ve accepted who I am.

**The closest I’ve been to death was as a child.** We were driving through Montmartre in my father’s Citroën and were completely engulfed in a mass of rioters, protesters and students. [They were] rocking the car and my father was terrified that we were going to be singled out because of the orange and green diplomatic plates – he was part of the diplomatic corps by then.

**I dream in abstract geometry, which is boring** and frustrating. Normally it’s two abstract shapes, and I’m desperately trying to resolve which is the better one. I wake up feeling very annoyed.

**Some shy away from Googling themselves,** and that’s very strange. I care about what people think, because what I do is communicate, so not listening to what people say would be rather naïve of me. But, your art has to be for yourself and you can’t let your audience define your output. And it can be difficult: when you put out a piece of work on YouTube and there’s a thousand comments saying ‘This is absolute rubbish, you’re vile, and you should never be let near a camera again’ it’s very hard to say ‘Oh, that went down well!’

**There’s this perception that art is good. Art** isn’t always good. It can be very bad. It can be anti-Semitic, it can be racist, it can be a whole bunch of vile things and it often is, but it’s expression – and some people express things in a very negative way.

**The single greatest and worst human invention?** Religion. I’m getting into deep waters here, but it brings out the worst and the best in humanity. I’m absolutely in shock at what’s happening in the name of religion. I think most people are. It’s a very, very difficult time. ☑

1 Karen Elson as ‘wrath’ in *The Seven Deadly Sins* of Edward Enninful, a collaboration with Beats, 2016

2 Susie Smoking, *Yohji Yamamoto*, autumn/winter 1988/89

“I care about what people think, because what I do is communicate, so not listening to what people say would be rather naïve of me. However, your art has to be for yourself and you can’t let your audience define your output.”



“I sound like some kind of hippie, but it would be nice if my work helped produce some better vision of the world.”

**What worries me is a creeping puritanism, not** just on Instagram and Facebook, but generally; a real shift towards this censored image of women. I don't know where it's come from. I grew up in the 70s, a time of sexual liberation, and if you look at the ads they were a lot more free in their portrayal of women's and men's bodies. Sex was seen as positive and enjoyable. But a lot of the messages the media is sending out to young women today – that showing your breasts is a sinful thing, even if you're breastfeeding – are really twisted. There's a really nasty and quite puritanical shift going on, and I'll do everything I can to stave that off.

**If a reaction has taken things that far one way,** I think you have to push in the opposite direction and produce something much more sexualised. Before, I wasn't interested in articulating sex in my work, but now I think: enough of really dumb sexualised images of women. Sex is one of the most important things in most of our lives, it's one of the driving forces in nearly everything we do – so why is pornography always done by people who are visually illiterate? Surely you should give the photographers and fashion filmmakers, the image-makers, that responsibility?

**My personal style comes from different** influences – it's the clothes I used to wear as a skinhead, albeit slightly more luxury versions. I'm still wearing brogues, dark indigo Levi's, white button-down shirts made by Frank Foster, a

brilliant shirtmaker who's now in his nineties. I like things very plain and simple. As soon as my jeans get to the point where they need washing, I don't wear them any more. That's how I've got through 80 pairs of Levi's 505-217s.

**My work is pretty all-consuming, so I don't** really have any hobbies. I try and keep fit: that's more about survival, though. I did once start doing [Israeli self-defence system] krav maga for a series of films on SHOWstudio: demonstrating how to break a choke hold when you're wearing a pencil skirt from Yves Saint Laurent. The model [Lara Stone] learned krav maga and I did too, to try and find out what it was about. I'd love to go back to doing that if I could find the time.

**I find it so frustrating that I'm only going to be** around for a little bit longer, because there's so much more that I'd like to do. The more I push it, the more I find, the more doors open up to me, and conversely there's less time left to do it. So I don't want to stop and do something different.

**Some people spend their money buying lots** of houses or great art to put on their walls, but actually, participating in the process of creating art is much more rewarding than nailing it to the wall and standing there by yourself. Being able to spend my days at SHOWstudio, surrounded by exciting people who are excited by new things is incredibly nourishing.

**I've no idea how I'll be remembered. It's not** something I think about. Perhaps as somebody who changed things. I sound like a hippie, but it would be nice if my work helped produce some better vision of the world. The world needs a better, more inclusive vision of itself. People need to feel part of a world that accepts you for how you are and finds you beautiful however you are.

**If I were UK prime minister for the day, I'd have** the government pay for one generation of parents to stay at home and look after their children. We're in this cycle now where people are really struggling to make a living so they can't spend as much time with their kids as they would want to, and that new generation grows up and it gets worse and worse.

**When my children were young, I told all my** clients, I'm not travelling any more – if you want to shoot with me then you've got to shoot in west London, because my children will only grow up once and I don't want to miss it. And if that meant I'd only get one job a year, well, we'd live in poverty but I'd be with the kids.

**At the end of the day, everything matters.** From the finer details, to the bigger brush strokes. The most important thing is that you're doing something good. **✎**

*Alexander McQueen, spring/summer 2010*