

PRETTY (AND COMPLICATED) AS A PICTURE
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It takes different skill sets and talents to make a successful portrait photograph, depending on which side of the camera you find yourself on. Whether it is routinized, collaborative, or a contest of wills, portraiture is, inevitably, a complex process. If the images that result are truly compelling, it is because they raise more questions than can be answered: What does it mean to be seen and to scrutinize? What will and won't we do in, or for, photographs? What do portraits actually depict and what narratives do viewers project onto them later?

These are among the issues Sage Sohier's compelling photographs of her mother, Wendy Morgan, raise, grapple with, and respond to. They portray a model and a photographer, a woman watched and a woman watching, a mother pictured by her daughter and, earlier in her life, by others, as well. Why? Because Wendy Morgan was and, as these pictures attest, still is a woman whose extraordinary presence and beauty is commanding. When she strikes a pose, people look.

It may be, though, that it is the children of beautiful women, and their daughters in particular, who get to observe them the most carefully and critically, even as they are awed, proud of, confused, and intimidated by what they see. Sohier's photographs reflect those responses and—given her mother's backstory—even more. In the mid-twentieth century, Wendy Morgan, then Wendy Burden and a raven-haired debutante from Westchester, worked briefly as a fashion model in Manhattan. Within two years she appeared on the covers of LIFE and Look magazines and was featured in both the editorial pages of Vogue and in advertisements, photographed by the celebrated photographers of that era: Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, George Hoyningen-Huene, Philippe Halsman, and Horst, among others.

In that heyday of America's post-World War II confidence, Morgan intuitively knew how to work the clothes she wore, the light that bathed her. She knew how to respond to photographers' prompts and the camera time that she received. Describing photo-sessions with Avedon to her daughter, decades later, she reminisced: "He would tell you what he had in mind and then it was up to you to do it. It was like being an actress, in a way. One began to feel that it was like a partnership, you know, that you were doing what he wanted, that he liked it. All you had to do was more of the same or be imaginative and then it was going to go well." The glamour, composure, and self-assurance Morgan radiated nearly seventy years ago is readable today and

contributes greatly to the construction, polished charm, and complications embedded in Sohier's riveting, and every once in a while, startling photographs of her.

As an artist, Sohier is known for insightful images that explore people's identities, relationships with each other, and the cultural values they subscribe to or rub up against. As a teacher, Sohier encouraged students to train their eyes and ground their work by making self-portraits and photographing their families. That became a challenge she set for herself some fifteen years ago when, having spent time photographing people with their aging parents, Sohier decided to make photographs with and about her mother, and in which she and her sister, Laine, would play featured roles.

From James McNeill Whistler's somber *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* (1871) to Andy Warhol's colorful silkscreen portrait of his mother made a century later, from Marilyn Minter's unsettling *Coral Ridge Towers* photographs in 1969 to Les Krims' outrageous *Making Chicken Soup* (1972), from the hesitancies Larry Sultan captured in his *Pictures From Home* (1982–91) to the connections that link three generations of women in LaToya Ruby Frazier's book, *The Notion of Family* (2014), artists have paid homage to and plumbed their relationships with the women who gave them life.

That is Sohier's strategy here, too. She gathered up and presents vintage photographs in juxtaposition with the very differently conceived photographs that she has recently made to survey the narrative sweep of a lifetime. We see Morgan first as a child and then as a woman, as a wife and a widow, on the Eiffel Tower and on Central Park South, in gardens and bubble baths. She is pictured draped in gowns, fantasy costumes, cashmere and pearls, and in the nude. Details in early snapshots, passport ID photos, tear sheets, wedding and vacation pictures, and Sohier's more contemporary images point to a life of privilege. Photographs taken on treatment tables, at the edge of sick beds, and in Arlington cemetery—revealing literal scars and moments of sadness and reflection—remind us that no one makes it through life untested, unscathed or, for that matter, alone.

Nevertheless, Morgan is always the focus of attention here. More often than not she appears self-possessed, camera-ready, and dead-center in the photographs. More than once, Sohier depicts her mother holding mirrors or reflected in them. Some images intentionally idealize Morgan, casting her as a muse, a nymph, a modern-day goddess. Equally striking are the photographs in which

Sohier brings her larger-than-life subject back down to earth, showing her jumping for joy after sinking a shot at a mini-golf course and dwarfed by towering shelves in the customer pick-up area of an Ikea in Maryland.

It is, however, the photographs that hint at tension in the air when Morgan's daughters appear and interact with her—trying on clothes, engaging in cosmetic rituals, fielding judgmental looks, and even when joking around—that give this book its surprising and animating edginess. What at first glance appears to be a picture project about perfection is regularly jolted by images that inject notes of theatricality and conflict into the mix. The book's title—*Witness to Beauty*—and opening section suggest it will take a documentary stance, but once Sohier's photographs are introduced, the project heads off in another direction. The photographs she made of and with her mother, unlike the more conventional ones that precede them, acknowledge the toll of time, shifting generational values, glitches in family dynamics, and the insecurities and confrontations that beauty can trigger. Fabulousness, as this nuanced project underscores, often leaves quite a wake behind it.

Wendy Morgan, as Sohier's photographs emphasize and confirm, is a stunning and resilient woman. That she has, for over a dozen years, gamely appeared in and actively helped shape these photographs confirms her, once again, to be a good actress and a good sport as well, more of an Auntie Mame than a Mommie Dearest. Sohier describes their collaborative process and work together as a bonding experience, alternatingly fun and exhausting. As the project progressed, Sohier quickly learned it was pointless to try to catch her mother off-guard, because whenever she did the pictures suffered for it. If the best models have an innate sense of what they will look like in photographs, so do former models, as their jointly made photographs confirm.

In one after the next, Morgan positions and presents herself carefully: head tilted this way and that, eyes raised, lowered or gazing out of the frame, body pivoted, arms bent, hands ever-so-gracefully placed. Given the two women's artfulness and willingness to experiment, the photographs are exquisitely controlled, yet sometimes uncomfortably revealing, and delightful, although every once in a while some get uncomfortably raw. Morgan, in a sustained performance extending over dozens of years and images, reveals herself as a force to be reckoned with. Sohier, in photographs different from those she has made before, proves herself to be as shrewd and accomplished an instigator of images as she is the recorder of them.

The camera, Avedon once said, “lies all the time... the moment you’ve made a choice, you’re lying about something larger. Photographers are the same way.” So are models. So, for that matter, are the rest of us whenever we willfully choose which pictures we will take, pose for, and believe in. And in the end, that is what makes this book—about truth and story-telling, glamour and its construction, parents and children, past and present—so unexpectedly powerful and affecting.