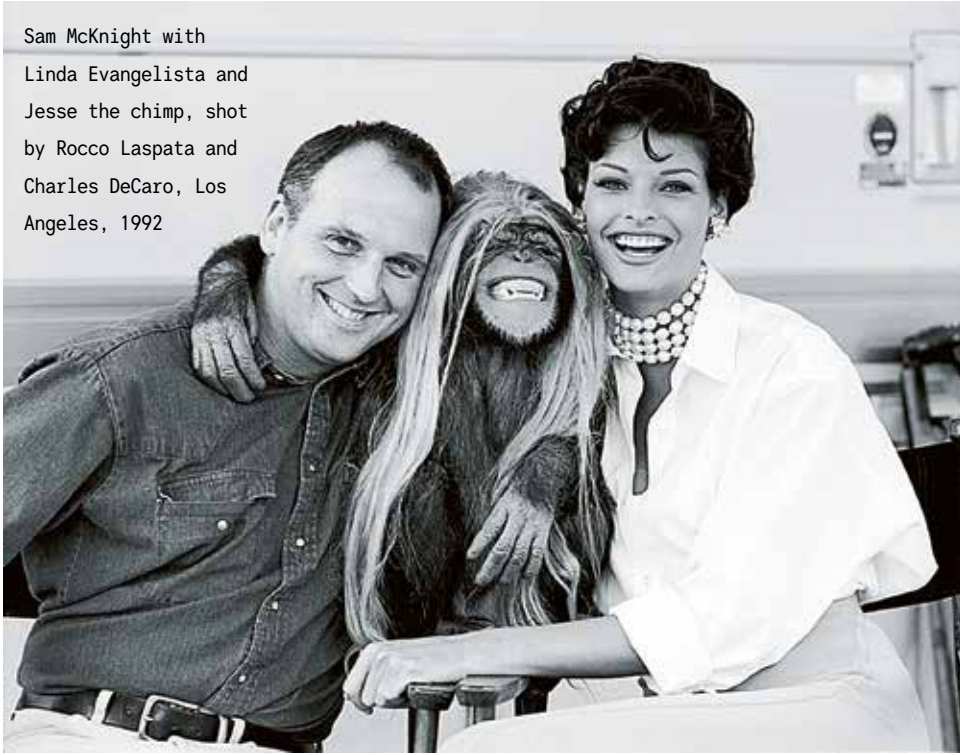


Sam McKnight with  
Linda Evangelista and  
Jesse the chimp, shot  
by Rocco Laspata and  
Charles DeCaro, Los  
Angeles, 1992



# SUPER SAM

He's the hairstylist who created looks for Princess Diana, Kate Moss and Gisele. As Sam McKnight celebrates 40 years in the industry with a book and an exhibition, *Christa D'Souza* has a gossip with the man who knows everyone's secrets

**H**e may currently be the world's most talented hair stylist – more than 100 British Vogue covers would attest to that – but if you want to know Sam McKnight's real passion, it is gardening. Oh but this man loves flowers, especially dahlias, as any one of his 90,000-plus followers on Instagram would surely tell you.

“Honestly, there is nothing I love more than pottering around my garden,” he says. “And now I've got my raised vegetable beds, you should see – I've double-planted leeks through the courgettes. I can get lost in it for days.”

It is a Friday morning and McKnight has just flown in from Paris, having spent most of the night shooting with Karl Lagerfeld and Gigi Hadid (“It's insane how many Instagram followers she has!”) for Harper's Bazaar. On Monday, he's off to LA on another job, which leaves him just enough time for a quick nip home to Ayrshire, in Scotland, to visit his 84-year-old mum.





Kate Moss, shot by Nick Knight,  
Vogue UK, September, 2000.  
Courtesy of Nick Knight



Looking like a handsome builder in his uniform of Nike sneakers and a poloshirt with the collar slightly up, he is giving a model's roots and ends a subtle but crucial shimmy to create his trademark "done undone look": always so effortless-looking on the page, always so impossible to duplicate at home.

McKnight is considered one of the most influential figures in the fashion industry, credited with helping to develop the images of Kate Moss, Linda Evangelista, Christy Turlington and Naomi Campbell — "the supers", as he calls them — and is Karl Lagerfeld's number-one choice for all Chanel campaigns and catwalk shows. But until now, McKnight has maintained a strictly behind-the-scenes profile. That may change this autumn with the publication of the book *Hair* by Sam McKnight, a pictorial celebration of his 40-year-career, and a grand-scale exhibition at Somerset House, curated by the set-design genius Michael Howells.

So, what's the impetus behind it? This is a man, after all, who is never in the social pages (unless you count his 60th birthday party held at Tramp last year, a big, fat, glittering disco bash, with sex on the beach cocktails and a giant three-tiered cake covered in fresh peonies, with mates such as Kate Moss, Phoebe Philo, Yasmin Le Bon and Stella McCartney partying well into the wee hours).

"Well, I suppose it was time," he says in his comforting, strangely West Country-sounding drawl. "But it was also about opening a door, because unless you work in this business, it's such an inside job. After 40 years of not working in a salon, I still get asked by people outside the business, 'Where's your salon'?"

"The internet has created an interest in what we actually do," he goes on, "so it made sense to do an exhibition based on the whole process, from backstage to catwalk or red carpet or magazine page."

The book, which has a foreword written by Lagerfeld, is a magazine junkie's dream, picturing all McKnight's seminal creations: the "fauxhicans" he did for the Fendi catwalk, Tilda Swinton channelling Bowie, Lady Gaga being Barbarella, Cara Delevingne doing Mary Queen of Scots. And then there's that historic sepia-toned Vogue cover he did with Patrick Demarchelier of Princess Diana in 1994.

"I remember Mary Greenwell [the make-up artist] and I weren't even told who we were

doing. We thought maybe it might be Margaret Thatcher or Fergie or someone, and then suddenly Diana came bounding up the stairs." The pair ended up bonding big time, with McKnight often going over to the palace on Saturday afternoons to watch Brookside and sometimes cutting the princes' hair, too. He would berate her for getting a "sneaky perm" when he wasn't around; she'd send handwritten notes telling him "the boss needs a haircut when you return".

McKnight also remembers the first time he set eyes on Kate Moss, a giggling Croydon schoolgirl, aged 16, on her first go-see with the photographer Stephen Klein. "She was so short," he giggles. "We all thought, 'You'll never make it', and then Steven took these Polaroids of her and we were like, 'Wow. OK, she really is different from everyone else.' Kate grabbed that moment and made it her own, and she turned that round so quickly. But the timing was right, too. It was the glamazon era and there was a gap to be filled. That's what it's always about, capturing the zeitgeist. Liz Tilberis [the editor of Vogue at the time] was good at that."

The son of a Co-op cashier and a miner, McKnight got his first taste for hairdressing by helping out on the weekends at a friend's beauty parlour in Prestwick. After ditching teacher-training college in 1975, he hitchhiked to London with just £15 in his pocket, and once there managed to get a junior's job at the Molton Brown salon (where editors such as Grace Coddington were getting their hair done). By 1978, he had shot his first cover with the late Terence Donovan; by 1982 he had moved to New York, the era of breakdancing, graffiti artists and, a bit later, a club called Palladium, which McKnight, a teetotaler now but then a big party boy, used to frequent. The 1980s also saw the birth of the supermodels, a phenomenon that McKnight — along with make-up artists such as Greenwell and Val Garland and the photographers Demarchelier, Steven Meisel and Herb Ritts — helped to create. "I remember walking into a shop in Christopher Street with Cindy Crawford to collect a pair of white leather trousers I'd had

made for me towards the end of the 1980s," he says. "She was still in full make-up from a shoot, and when the girl behind the till saw her, she got such a shock, she burst into tears and ran into the back of the shop. She couldn't cope with coming face to face with her idol. I saw the same sort of reaction walking through Miami airport with Claudia [Schiffer]. It was like being with a rock star. It made me think, 'I get this now. The girls are bigger than Hollywood actresses.'"

Having been at the coalface of emerging style trends for nearly five decades, seeing them being made and discarded, McKnight knows of what he speaks. It begs the

## He would go to the PALACE on Saturday afternoons to watch *Brookside* with DIANA

question: what is the zeitgeist now? Where, style-wise, are we heading and what does he make of today's so-called beauty "influencers", Instagramming their zillions of followers from their bedrooms?

"I don't know," he shrugs. "I mean, I hope I don't sound as jaded as I actually am, but sometimes I feel I've lived through a golden age in fashion and beauty, and that golden age has come to an end. It's almost become too democratic, the way anyone can be an expert now, so much so you almost want a bit of exclusivity. Like I've seen with friends' kids or very young models — they have a different take. They're not looking for the same as 25-year-olds, they don't want to be the same as everyone else. They're looking for real quality or individuality. In the end, I do believe genuine talent will always out."

*Hair* by Sam McKnight opens at Somerset House, WC2, on November 2. The book is published by Rizzoli (£35) on October 25

See Claudia Croft in conversation with Sam McKnight as part of our Smart Works Big Fashion Sale at Somerset House on November 19

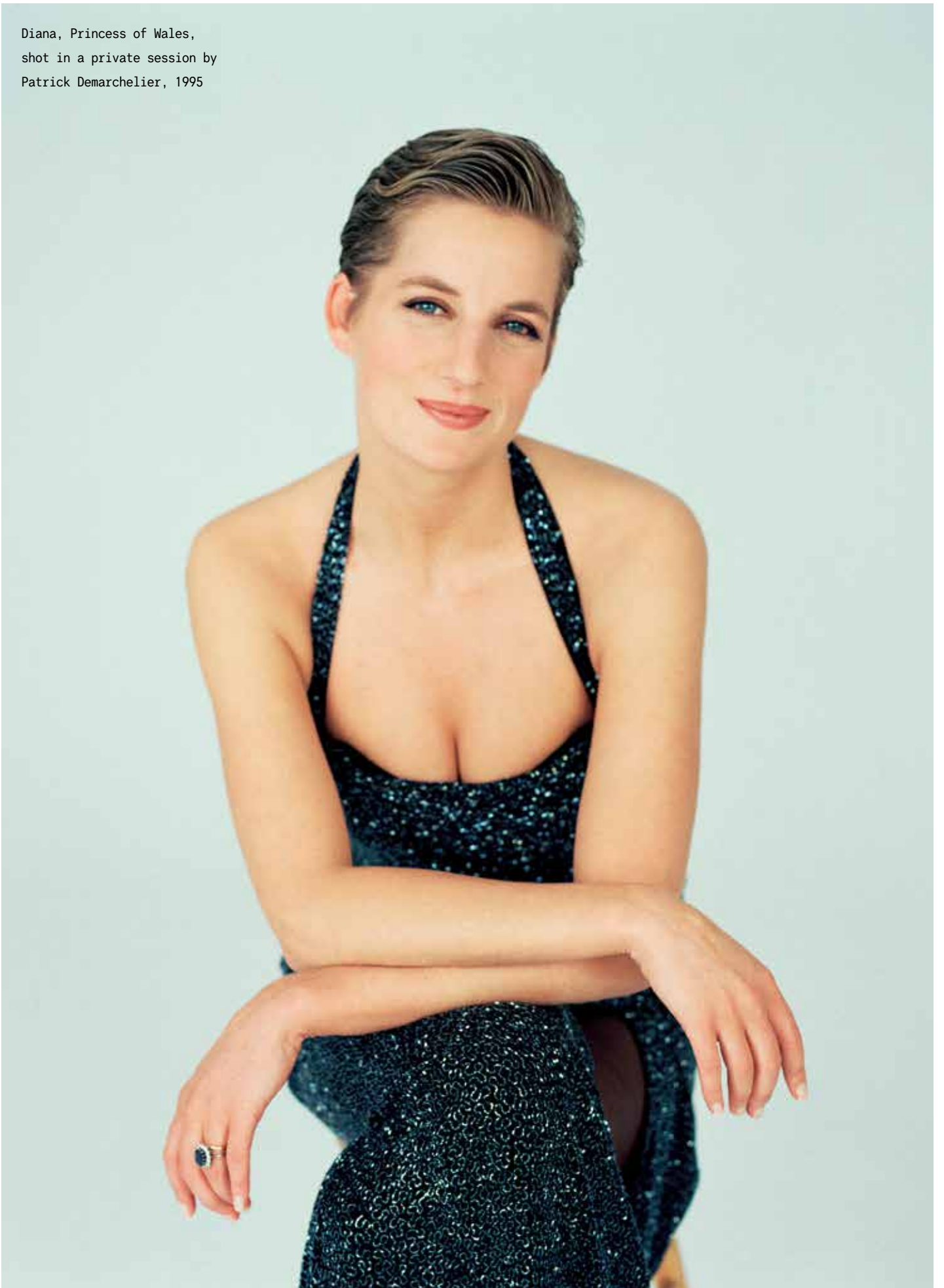




Gisele, shot by  
Alexei Hay, UK  
Harper's Bazaar,  
October, 2007



Diana, Princess of Wales,  
shot in a private session by  
Patrick Demarchelier, 1995







Tilda Swinton, shot by  
Craig McDean, *Vogue*  
Italia, February, 2003.  
Courtesy of Art + Commerce