

The New York Times

Cindy Crawford, Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan: An '80s Fashion Mystery

Thousands of slides tossed in the garbage a decade ago capture the golden age of New York fashion.

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On a late-summer afternoon 11 years ago, Gaetane Bertol was hurrying past the corner of 14th Street and Ninth Avenue in Manhattan, when she noticed a large stack of yellowing boxes on the sidewalk. At the top of the pile was an open binder containing color slides.

At the time, Ms. Bertol, an artist and set designer, was creating small collages from colorful bits clipped from magazines, so the slides caught her eye. When she held one of the sleeves up to the sun, she could see tall women parading down a runway in vivid clothes.

“The colors — that’s what really caught my eye,” she said. “I thought to myself, ‘What is this? Whose stuff is this?’” She looked around, but it seemed clear the boxes were left on the curb as garbage.

She decided to take a few boxes home and incorporate the slides into her own artwork. So she hailed a taxi. The 6-foot-4 cabdriver, who didn’t entirely understand her instructions, loaded all of the boxes — 22 in all — into the trunk.

Before she hauled them up to her Park Slope apartment, she went through each box to make sure there were no dead rats or bugs in them. “I mean, this is New York,” she said, “and it’s garbage.”

What she found were thousands of slides from 1980s and '90s fashion shows and events, labeled with names like Bob Mackie, Anne Klein and Oscar de la Renta. Thirty-six slides per container, about 30 containers per box. Twenty-two boxes. Upward of 20,000 slides.



Mary Inhea Kang for The New York Times





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Because she didn't work in fashion, she didn't recognize many of the faces in the shots. "But then I saw Ralph Lauren. I was like, I know this face."

Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss and Cindy Crawford were all there, too.

Ms. Bertol placed the boxes in her art supply closet, and there they sat until she moved to Prospect Lefferts Gardens about five years ago, when she put them in a bigger closet.

At some point, as she rummaged through the boxes, she came across a receipt from a film developer made out to Yuriko Tomita, who turned out to be a fashion journalist. She searched online for the name and eventually tracked down the Tomita family, who said Ms. Tomita's son, Kishimitsu Hada, had shot the slides. After a fire in Ms. Tomita's apartment, the smoke-damaged boxes were put out on the street. The family didn't want the slides back. Ms. Tomita died in 2017.

Ms. Bertol considered making a wall divider out of the slides, which shimmered like stained glass when held up to her windows. "But a voice in my head said, 'Are you really going to destroy this collection?'"



Mary Inhea Kang for The New York Times

Then last fall, Ms. Bertol had lunch with a friend, Tzili Charney, who owns 1441 Broadway near 41st Street, which had been one of the centers of the fashion industry with showrooms and offices for many of the major designers. Ms. Charney recently founded a gallery in the lobby of 1441 Broadway — also known as 10 Times Square — called ZAZI0TS.

She lit up when she heard about Ms. Bertol's slides. "I'll tell you exactly what you're going to do with them," Ms. Charney recalled recently. She called Ya'ara Keydar, a fashion historian and curator.

“It was like discovering a treasure trove,” said Ms. Keydar, who was born in 1980. “I grew up during the time these slides were shot. These shows and models designed my views on fashion.”

The slides, she said, are like a time capsule of an era that redefined the fashion industry — “a time when photos were taking up physical space in our lives. They were in boxes on the street. That’s almost unimaginable to young people today.”

This was the era of supermodels and designers becoming celebrities, with women running multi-million-dollar brands. It was the age of the power suit. “Looking at these photos is like looking at the golden era in New York fashion,” she said.

As they examined the slides, they realized that some of the shots were even taken inside 1441 Broadway — Perry Ellis once occupied 20,000 square feet in the building, and Liz Claiborne had three entire floors.

The building’s elevators were once filled with fashion models. “You should have seen the lobby back in the day,” Ms. Charney said. “Guys just came in to watch the girls.”



“10 Times Square: New York Fashion Rediscovered 1982-1997,” featuring images from the slides, will be on view through January. ZAZ10TS

For the next few months, Ms. Keydar narrowed down the thousands of slides to 30 images for the show, using the designers who occupied the building as her criteria. “10 Times Square: New York Fashion Rediscovered 1982-1997,” consisting of prints of designers like Ralph Lauren, Liz Claiborne, Isaac Mizrahi, Donna Karan and the top supermodels of the day — opened last Thursday at the start of fall fashion week and runs through January.

The designer Gemma Kahng, who once rented space at 1441, showed up at the exhibition to find a giant blowup of herself from the '90s.

Ms. Kahng retired from the fashion industry two and a half years ago and moved upstate, where she has become a painter, capturing what she calls “fashion in nature” — the striking colors of birds and animals.

“I kind of buried that part of my life. It was a really, really long time ago,” Ms. Kahng said. “But when I was there the other night it suddenly didn’t seem so long ago.”

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