

Big Shot

French-Algerian photographer Michel Haddi made his name shooting fashion and celebrities and then went on to start his own publishing house. Based between London and New York, he's now a celebrity in his own right.

There is a woman looking at you. A playful look in her eye, she feigns ennui by playing with whatever fine jewellery she has on, drawing you in with her delicate features, her somewhat sardonic smile. She is draped in the latest fashions, she is young and she is beautiful. She may be famous, she may not, but she'll always leave you wondering. She is outdoors playing in the sand. She is indoors getting out of bed. She is romantic, she's dramatic, she's powerful. She is seductive.

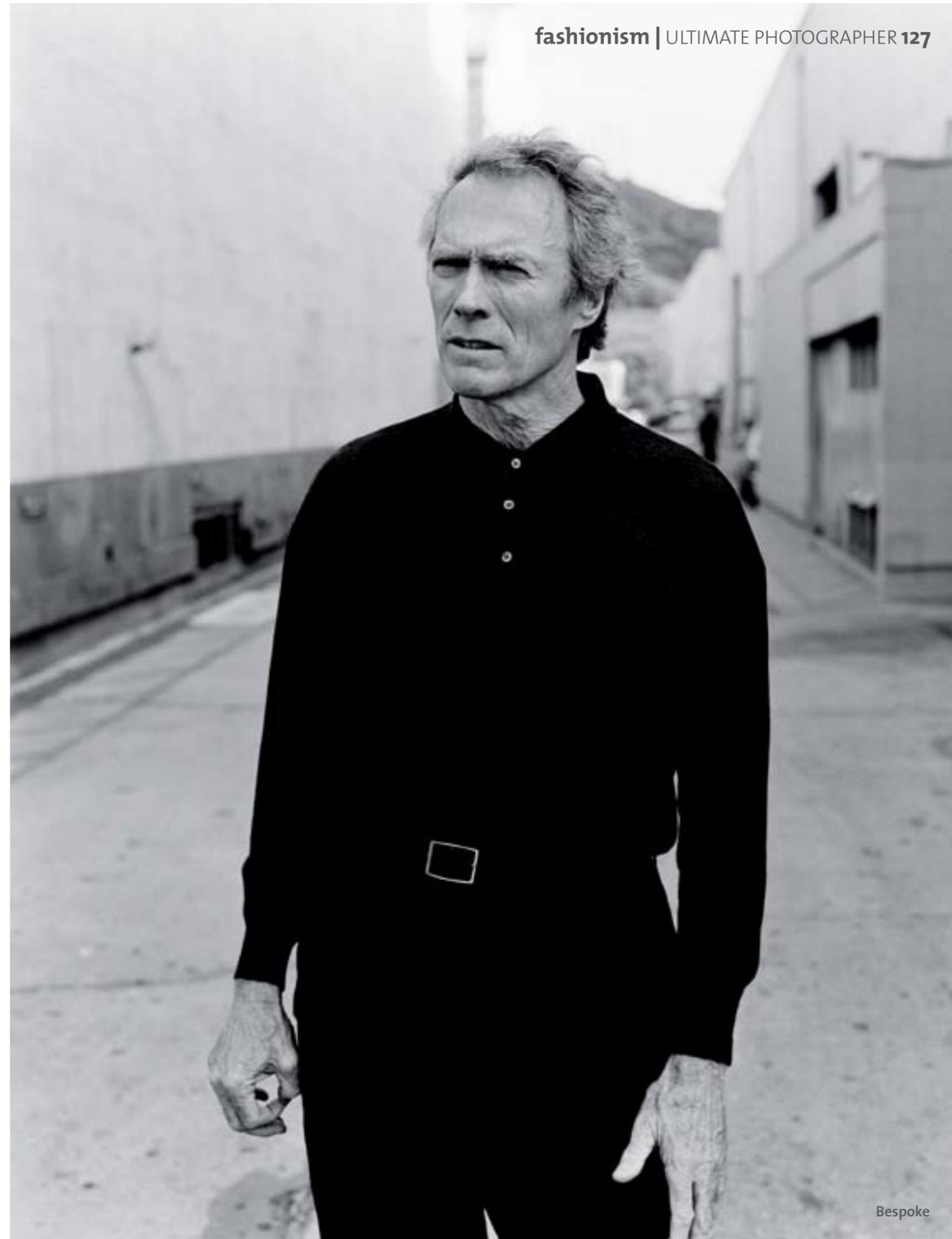
This woman, this idealised amalgam of feminine mystique typifies the subjects of Michel Haddi's photography. The self-professed 'King of the Celebrity Snappers' shoots the good-looking. In every respect. "I want people to be beautiful," says the photographer during a recent Skype interview. "Beauty, for me is normal. I can take anyone and make them beautiful." It's a good thing then that he became fashion photographer. The profession has allowed him ample room to play with beautiful things and concepts.

For all his success, Haddi never wanted a serious job. "I've seen so many horrors in my past that I've always loved turning everything into a sort of derision," he reveals when I ask him about his start in photography. These horrors might have their roots in his childhood. Born in Paris to an Algerian mother in the years after the Franco-Algerian war, Haddi had it tough growing up. He lived in the notoriously rough suburbs of Paris while his mother worked as a maid in the best hotels and raised him alone. When she found herself unable to care for her son, he was sent to live in an orphanage until she could afford to take him back.

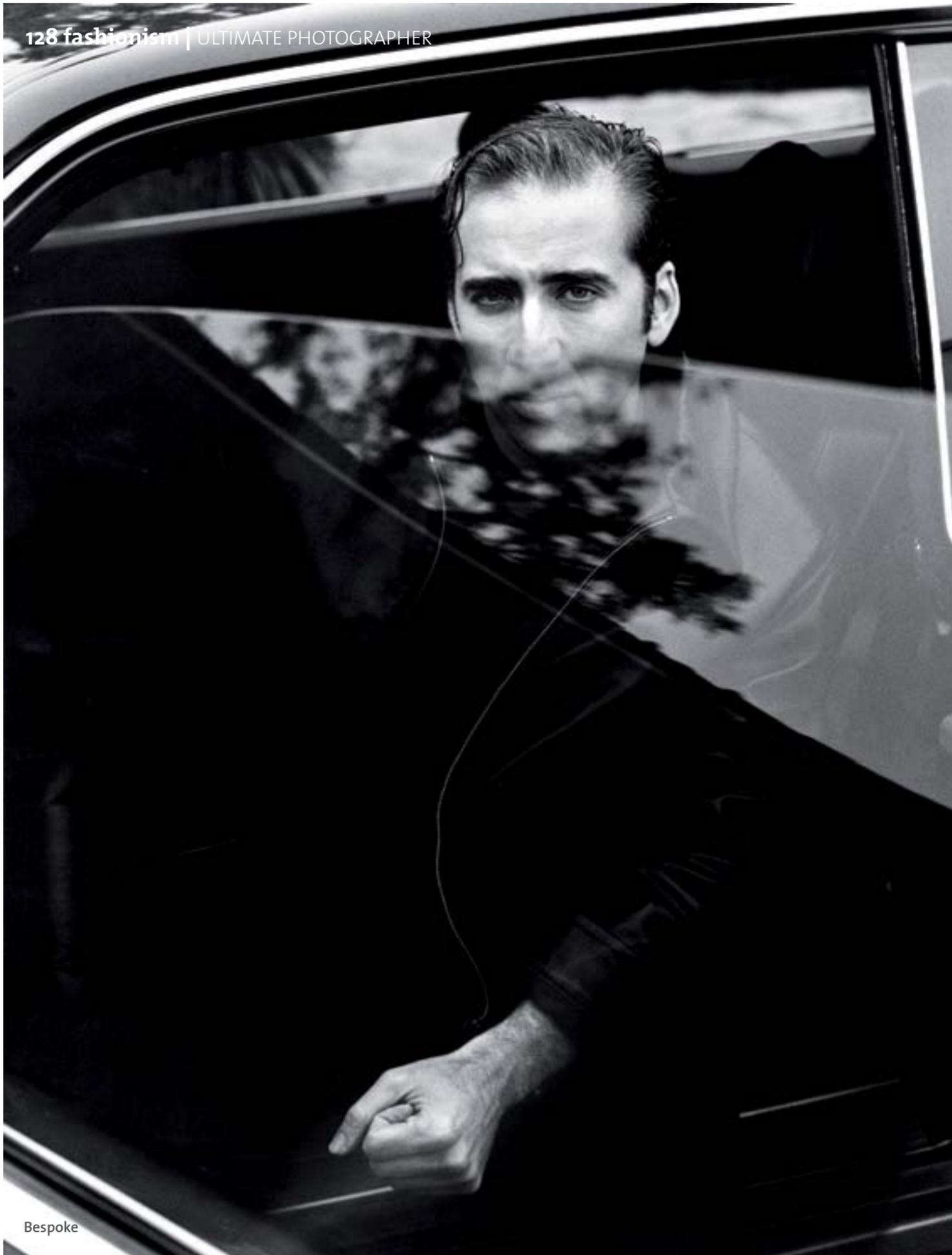
Haddi doesn't lament his childhood and instead credits his mother with sewing the seeds of his future career. He explains that she would bring back magazines like Elle and Vogue from the hotels where she worked and reading them informed his artistic sensibilities. In fact, it was one issue of Vogue in particular that started it all. "I initially wanted to be a director or a journalist. But all of a sudden, at 18 or 19, I had a realisation. I saw the cover of Vogue in a kiosk, this Helmut Newton cover, and I said to myself, 'that's incredible. I want to do that.'"

A pragmatist, Haddi's first job was working on compounds for French companies in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, to make enough money to support his budding photography career. Within a few years, he returned to Paris, before heading to London to become a photographer's assistant in 1978. He hasn't stopped shooting since.

Becoming a photographer, let alone a fashion photographer, is hardly the rags-to-riches tale one expects of a French-Algerian boy growing up in a marginalised Paris suburb. But then Haddi has▶



Previous spread: Haddi's shots of Lucy Gordon, taken in 2009 for Vanity Fair, were some of the last ever taken of the 28-year-old British actress before she took her own life. **Right:** A classic shot of Clint Eastwood by Michel Haddi.



Left: Nicholas Cage, photographed by Haddi in 1990 in Topanga Canyon, Los Angeles for Detour magazine.

never considered himself to be typical.

His career spans thirty years and encompasses countless unforgettable images. From backstage shots at fashion shows in Milan and Paris to pictures of Liza Minelli, Kate Moss, Johnny Depp and Uma Thurman, Haddi has done it all. He even shot the Red Hot Chili Peppers on top of the Berlin Wall, the day it came crashing down.

"Photography allows me to create a pseudo-reality. Fashion photography is not an accurate reality. Sure, there are elements of reporting, what's on trend, what the current popular interests are but it's a phantasmagoric system. I have free reign."

Having built up a stellar reputation in his field, Haddi is indeed often given free reign to shoot however and whatever he pleases. He has long done sprawling and avant-garde editorials for a variety of international magazines including Interview and French, British and Italian Vogue but he regularly comes back to the same motifs, over and over again. "I have one single theme in life, that I love and that is the decadence of the bourgeoisie. I just love it." That decadence is often reflected in his work. From bejewelled damsels in retro-chic lounges to young hipster singers, Haddi always manages to weave in subtle details reminiscent of the haute bourgeoisie. "They're batty," he says, explaining his fascination for the class. "They're obsessed with tawdry things but are always impeccably dressed. The perfect hair, etc. But scratch under the surface and there's always more there."

This particular captivation may have come about as a result of Haddi having lived for so long on life's peripheries. "My mother was a Muslim, an Algerian hotel maid but my father was a French doctor, a Catholic, very Rightist. I've never fully understood the link between the two but I have these two sides and I like to show this difference in my photos." Perhaps this explains why, no matter the context, he renders his subjects subtly aristocratic in demeanour and often, in expression.

Despite his insistence that he is "not a fashion photographer or a celebrity photographer, just, a photographer", his contributions to the oeuvre of celebrity portraits places him high on the ladder with the likes of Mario Testino, David LaChapelle or Patrick Demarchelier.

Unlike his peers, Haddi branched out beyond his lens and turned his hand to publishing. When he noticed that magazines were beginning to struggle and that photographers were being limited in print, he decided to do it himself. The result was MHS Publishing, through which he has been putting out books of his photography, organised along quirky themes of his own



Left: Denzel Washington, photographed in 1991 in New York for Interview magazine. **Above:** A 1993 photo shoot of Swedish actress Lena Olin.

imaginings. From 'I love America, Don't You?' an ode to the American dream to 'Boom Boom On The Beach' set in Rio, he has fully embraced the concept of free reign. He can now do the photo essays and projects he wants and distribute them independently of magazines as individual books. He has also been publishing SPASHION, a men's sports and fashion magazine and is lucky to have the support of Comag, the Hearst and Condé Nast joint publishing venture, without which his projects may not have seen the light.

Well-known for over 30 years in Europe and America, Haddi has only recently become well-known in the this part of the world, thanks to a 2012 retrospective of his celebrity shots in Dubai, curated by Sheikha Lulu Al Sabah. "You think of fashion photographers past and present like Cecil Beaton, Mario Testino, as being from the western world. Which is fantastic. But we wanted to showcase the work of someone from our region," said the Sheikha, who is founder of JAMM Art & Beyond, an art advisory group that seeks to promote collaboration and trans-cultural appreciation of artists world-wide.

"I'm proud of my roots. I've never had to hide behind anything," Haddi says of his Arab origins but adds that having grown up in France, he has never been happy with the way Arabs are treated there, which is part of the reason he is looking to the Middle East for his future. **B**

WHO Michel Haddi

WHAT Fashion photographer

BORN in Paris in 1956

WHY French by birth and Algerian by heritage, Haddi did not just succeed in the notoriously fickle world fashion photography, he managed to emerge as one of its leading vanguards.