



FRANÇOIS HALARD TALKS TO FILEP MOTWARY

François Halard graciously agrees to an early-morning interview over the phone from New York. The French-born, continent-straddling photographer has been one of the world's most highly regarded interior and architectural photographers practically since his teens, and his collaborative résumé is a roll call of legendary American and European artists, editors, fashion designers and art directors. The critic Vincent Huguet's description of Halard's work needs no translation: he photographs "en liberté, avec gourmandise, mais aussi avec une forme d'urgence, de nécessité".

MOTWARY:

How long have you been going back and forth between Paris and New York?

HALARD:

Oh god. I think the first time I received a call from Alexander Liberman [American *Vogue* art director, 1943-61; Condé Nast editorial director, 1962-94] I was in my mid-20s, so it's been 25 years already. But my first visit was at the age of 14, with my parents, and I found it shocking and at the same time it felt like it was my home town.

MOTWARY:

How did everything start for you? Not a lot is widely known about the beginning of your career.

HALARD:

Yes, there is very little information around. I like privacy. I started photographing around age 12, after witnessing Helmut Newton taking photographs at my parents' home. At the time it was a very popular location among photographers—there was something very special about it indeed. I think it's because my parents were famous interior designers. I was very reclusive as a kid—I didn't talk that much, being very shy. I had speaking difficulties in my early years. Having a life where you had to look through a lens in order to make a living was really intriguing, and in a way protective, or at least this is how I saw it from a young age. Of course I don't feel like those days any more! [Laughs] I thought of owning a camera as a sort of protection from the outside world.

MOTWARY:

So you were a distant observer?

HALARD:

Exactly. There were a lot of photography books in the house, and I remember my dad used to make

collages using fashion tear sheets in the dressing room. By the age of 14 I could see the difference between a page from *Elle* and a picture from *Vogue*.

MOTWARY:

That's quite a habit for someone of that age.

HALARD:

My parents didn't want me to become a photographer.

MOTWARY:

Did you feel the need to prove yourself to them?

HALARD:

Yes, of course. I wanted to prove that I would make it, so I quit going on school vacation. Every summer, instead, I would call photographers, asking them to hire me as an assistant. So I worked for free in order to learn. At the time, working in a studio seemed much more important than hanging out with kids of my age. Being not too social, it was a good way for me to learn and experience new things, that would also secure the distance I wanted, to keep from things I didn't find appealing. Also, I preferred being around older people than anyone my age.

MOTWARY:

How old were you when you started with *Vogue*? Were you aware of what you were getting yourself into?

HALARD:

I was 25 and I absolutely had no idea! My first job was to do a couture story, which of course is the highest one can get. At the time I was living in a very small apartment in Paris, a 6th-floor walk-up with the loo in the corridor, and in one day I had a driver... Alexander wanted to see me, so he sent a Concorde ticket for me. I had no idea how perverse the situation would be after. I was so naïve.

MOTWARY:

What else were you doing at the time?

HALARD:

I started with Marie-Paule Pelle, the editor of a new magazine at the time called *Decoration International*. Very early on, she offered me my first commissioned job, after she saw some pictures I did for my parents' company when I was 18. She asked me to show her my portfolio. Two months later, out of the blue, she called at home—she was also friends with my mother—and informed me that the next morning I was doing the cover of *Marie Claire Maison*. In a studio, with lights, models, décor... I said, "I have never done this before!" She responded, "You'll be fine."

When *Decoration International* was first released, I was still a student at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs. She was looking for someone to help the magazine's art director with the layouts, like a photo editor. So although I quit school, a job was already waiting for me. I was looking to be out in the world. I wanted to be free and to explore and discover. It was a very

exciting period—I had the great opportunity of living my dream, working where I wanted to work, among the best people around. I wanted to progress! Then Marie-Paule moved to *Vogue Decoration*, for which I contributed. At the time it was a really revolutionary magazine, mixing décor, artists, portraits... really avant-garde.

Condé Nast in America was aware of my photography by then, and Alexander Liberman asked me to work for *House & Garden*. Then they launched *Vanity Fair* and asked if I wanted to work also for that! This was the time when the opportunity came to shoot couture, and with a very naïve sense of the politics involved, I said yes. Before that, I used to work in the lowest profile possible. I had no assistant, almost no camera, no studio, and everything was in a little bag. So *Vogue* offered everything that was missing.

MOTWARY:

You could have chosen any type of photography, yet your work focuses on architecture and interiors. It was a result of being inspired by your parents?

HALARD:

These days, yes. I did fashion for many years and I truly loved it back then. I shot Christy Turlington, Cindy Crawford, the Victoria's Secret catalogues, big campaigns, things like that. It was great to have fashion success very early on. What else can you do if you taste it all so early? Well, when you get all that accomplished, the next natural phase is that you want to do something more full and nourishing.

I used to travel with great writers. With my architecture and landscape photography, the magazines used to send me all over the world, and I would come back with pictures. Especially American *Vogue*. In India I'd shoot the architecture, and the next day I would fly to Topkapi to shoot anything I wanted. I remember once, for *Vanity Fair*, I was by myself with all Picasso's sketchbooks. Do you realise the freedom and opportunity this work has given me? I was blown away by the opportunity to learn and the freedom to access the most obscure things. Meeting all these great artists, for me, this was the best education I could ask for.

Maybe this is why my style is a little different from the rest of the interior photographers, since many of them do not like photographing people. I like to mix interiors with people. Today I'm doing a mix of both. Even when I am photographing an empty room, you can still feel the presence of the owner. I like this sense of life. I detest pure architecture photography, because I think often it comes out very cold.

MOTWARY:

After so many years, what remains the most fasci-

nating to you about the human living space?

HALARD:

Homes tell a story. It's like the autobiography of the owner. I was recently photographing the house of [the American painter] Cy Twombly, and you could feel what he would feel when looking at it. It's not only about the decoration, it's about how everything comes to life with the energy of people and their reflection in the space.

MOTWARY:

How do you think humans are connected with their homes?

HALARD:

It's their protection, something that works like clothes—the way someone likes to dress, what they choose to read, what they collect and so on. A house tells a lot about the person. When I'm not photographing, I take care of my own space. I collect objects and furniture. It's like a drug.

MOTWARY:

What kinds of things do you collect?

HALARD:

A lot of things! I'm a collecting addict. With the first paycheck I got, I bought my first modern art piece, which was a lithograph by Cy Twombly, 25 years ago. Recently I bought an Egyptian sarcophagus of Horus. Also a Greek 4th-century stone sculpture. So my collection ranges. I still go looking for objects every week, anywhere I am.

MOTWARY:

Your photographs often focus on a painting, a sculpture or a photo on a wall. What does the art in someone's home reveal about their personality?

HALARD:

Art speaks to me—I need to be surrounded by it. I like photographing, living, feeling it. Now I'm doing more and more exhibitions—trying to move a bit away from magazines and focus on projects like curating my own body of work. Sometimes it's strange when you create your own art by photographing the art of somebody else, you know. There is a fine line, but I think there is always something very exiting to try.

MOTWARY:

I want to talk about your portrait photographs. What do you look for in a face?

HALARD:

Honesty! I was very happy when the Tate chose my portrait of Cy Twombly to use for all his Tate exhibitions. I am speaking for the portraits I do for myself, though. For *Vogue* it's a bit different because you have to look at the fashion, put them in a smiley environment.

MOTWARY:

What do you think is a photographer's role in fashion these days? How do you perceive fashion, now that you have distanced yourself from it?

HALARD:

The business has changed tremendously. When I was a kid it was the time of [Helmut] Newton, [Guy] Bourdin, Deborah Turbeville, [Irving] Penn, [Richard] Avedon, [David] Bailey... they were all following their own vision and style.

MOTWARY:

And there are no such originals now?

HALARD:

There are a few. But I feel weird when I see a new story based on something that was perfectly made in the 1980s or '90s. There's so much re-reference. For me, the industry is lacking a sense of surprise at the moment. My best friend was Katell le Bourhis, head of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum [of Art in New York]. I used to collect dresses, and my mother wore couture. You could show me a painting, a magazine, a photo, and I could tell you the date, where it came from, the references behind it, the inspiration, all of that. I worked a lot with Yves Saint Laurent and all those people. It was a fabulous time. Back then, any time these people created a collection it was a true revolution. So, yes I must be frank. I'm not surprised any more.

MOTWARY:

What is the greatest lesson you have learnt from someone else's mistake?

HALARD:

That you always have to be fresh. It's important for me to treat each shoot like it's my first one.

MOTWARY:

What exactly do you mean by "fresh"?

HALARD:

It's difficult to explain. Freshness means that something is still to be discovered. It needs a certain approach to be revealed and looks new when finished. Fresh means to be a kid in front of candy. *Il n'est pas blasé*. It's about not repeating yourself; it's about looking at each thing from a different angle each time.

MOTWARY:

Out of all your stories, my favourite is the series you did of [the Italian modernist landmark] Villa Malaparte.

HALARD:

Oh yes! The first time I went to Capri, I was walking with an editor friend of Alex Liberman, Baronessa Beatrice Monti della Corte von Rezzori, who used to spend time with [the original owner Curzio] Malaparte in his house. Her father was a friend of his; they were in Africa together during the war. I would always hear stories about that house, and of course when Jean-Luc Godard released my favourite movie [*Le Mépris*, much of which was shot in Villa Malaparte], I became fixated. It took me 10 years to get a day permit in the Villa, 10 years! I

was craving. It was like wanting to have sex with someone for 10 years.

MOTWARY:

Looking at your pictures, it feels like you were there but couldn't quite believe it.

HALARD:

Yes, I was even shaking. I was emotionally moved and disturbed. It was something between dreaming a love affair and living it. Sometimes I get physical when I enter a space that moves me, very emotional, especially when I try to capture it, dominate it. You also have to be very respectful about it. I rarely move things when I shoot.

MOTWARY:

So how did you finally get permission?

HALARD:

I got it on the 100th anniversary of Malaparte's birth. At the time I was working for *La Repubblica*, the Italian newspaper. I used that connection to get me in for a day. I loved the house on a different level. Even my mom was a fan of Malaparte's writing. I was a fan of his architecture. I liked that he said, "*Faites-moi une maison comme moi*" ["Make me a house like me"]. He always considered his house part of his autobiography; an extension of him.

MOTWARY:

What are your next plans?

HALARD:

I continue to work for magazines and I am also preparing a book with Rizzoli, which will be about my interiors. For the next couple of months I will be in Arles, and will go through my archive, which will be a very long process. Maybe I have 2,500 to 3,000 stories to look through. It's the work of 30 years. It scares me a bit to dig into my past and see.

MOTWARY:

What are you afraid of finding? Mistakes?

HALARD:

No, no! I am afraid only of the amount of work it's going to be.