

powerHouse Books

Gilles  
Larrain

# IDOLS



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Photographs by Gilles Larrain

Foreword by Ryan McGinley

Published by



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**powerHouse Books** Brooklyn, NY

*We dress for our own pleasure and get off on each other. It's our own small world; within it we understand and are understood—and we do what we want. When we put on our clothes, we feel free.*

*If other people want to share in our joy and freedom, they're welcome to. There's strength and self-confidence in the way I dress. Suddenly I don't feel ugly anymore.*

# FOREWORD

by Ryan McGinley

In 1998, I was hanging out at my friend Jack Walls' loft on 29<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City. I had just moved to New York, I was 21, and I was just starting to take photographs. Jack's loft was like a fancy junk shop, full of the relics of 20 years of bohemia, with an enormous collection of rare art books. I would pour through his library like a fiend. I was hungry for information about photography, and one day I picked up *Idols*.

I remember being instantly taken by it. I was like, "Who is this Gilles Larrain guy and who are all these beautiful freaks?" Jack explained to me that he had been photographed by Gilles back when Jack was boyfriends with Robert Mapplethorpe. Gilles was friends with Robert and had taken a lot of photos of him. Jack told me that *Idols* represented the drag scene in New York in the late 60s and early 70s. They were the outsiders, not the same Warhol superstars you always see. Some were affiliated with the Cockettes performance troupe from San Francisco but most were just cool-looking people who Gilles met hanging out at Max's Kansas City.

To me, the book represented a history of New York and a subculture I was very curious about. My older brother often did drag and he had died of AIDS four years before I saw *Idols*, so the photos reminded me of him and his friends. He had been fond of dressing up as the Wicked Witch of the West and his boyfriend was a Barbra Streisand impersonator. When I was little, in the 80s, I would visit them in Greenwich Village. They would entertain me by doing little shows for me. They had a box of costumes and we would all dress up. So I really felt an emotional connection with these portraits.

Years later, when I met Gilles, he told me that he had boxes of props and clothes in his studio and everyone would come over and hang out and play dress-up. I love the thought of that. I moved to New York City because of people like this. I wanted to be around the art crowd and the weirdos and the freaks, high on drugs and hanging out, and here was a full-on book of them. I was like, where do I sign up? I wanted in.

Drag queens were a representation of New York City to me. Jack would tell me stories about the people in the photos, so it was even more like they were real people. It was a rare look at this subculture. There's not a lot of documentation of drag queens in this era. You can tell by the photos that they very much wanted to be seen, they wanted to be documented, because they were otherwise invisible. They were outside of society. Gilles contributed to the anthropological timeline

of New York history, and by photographing them, he made these people into the people they wanted to be.

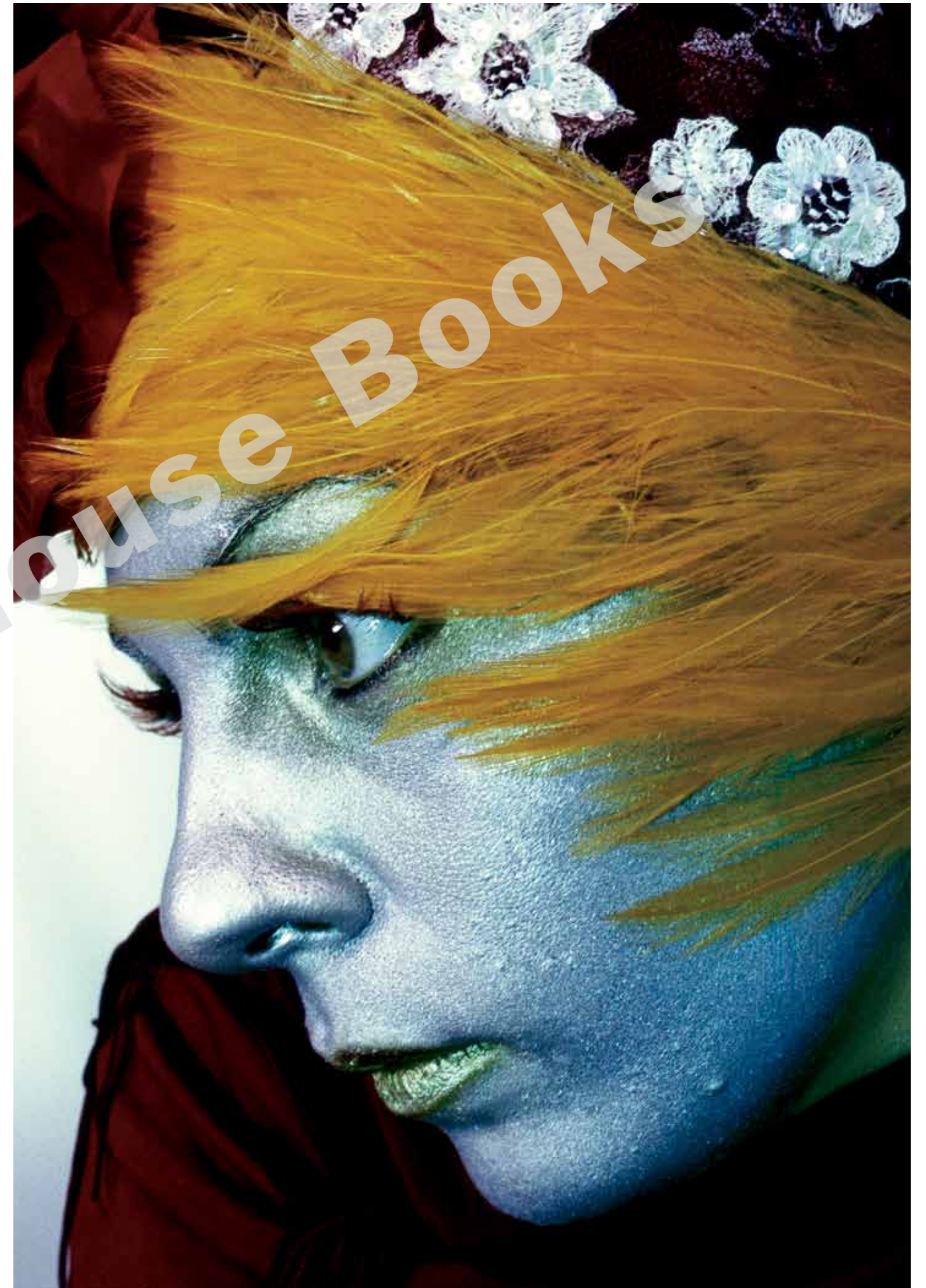
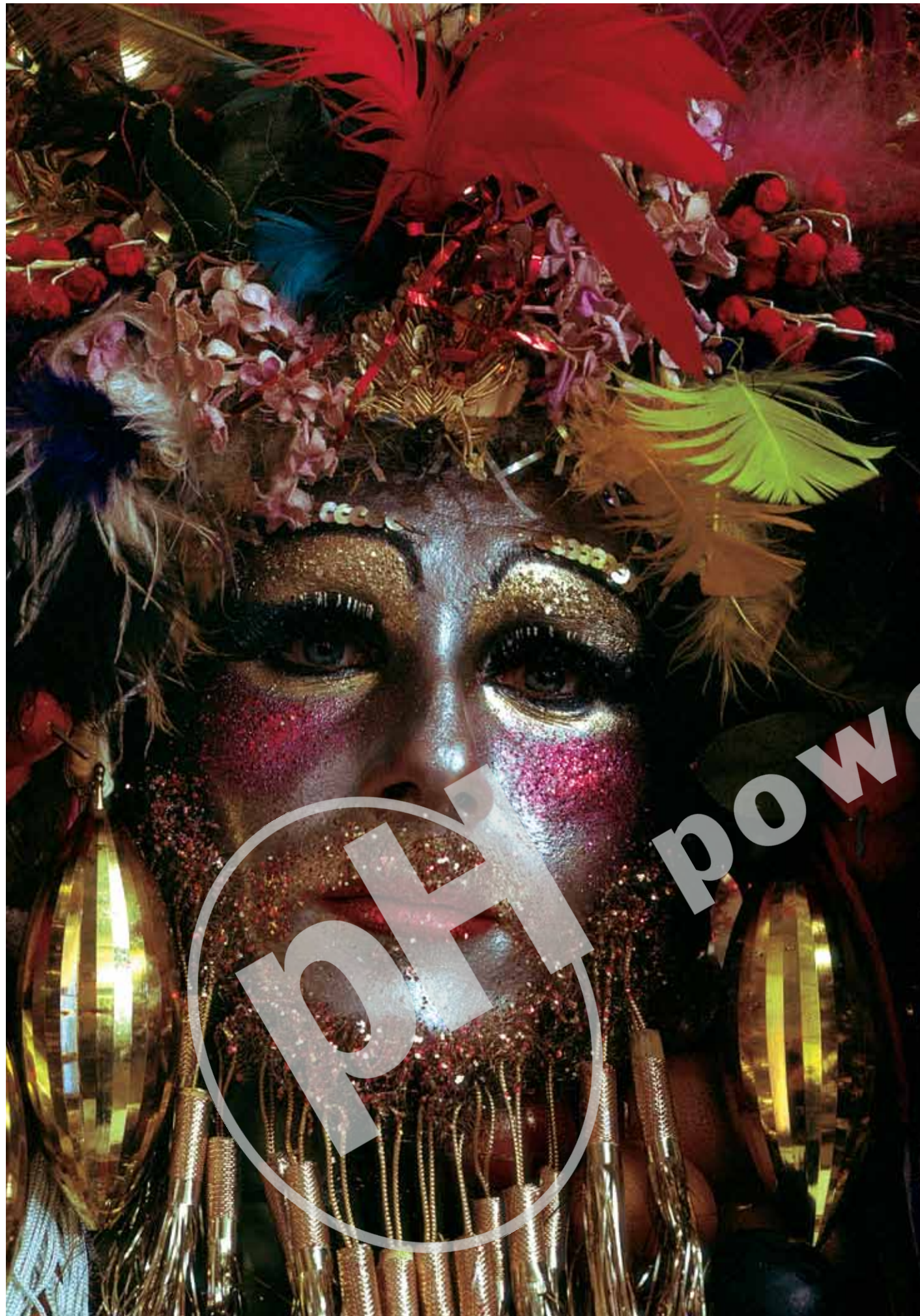
Gilles has the magic touch; it seems he is effortlessly able to glamorize his subjects and make them look like the most fascinating people in the world. His photos are sophisticated but also playful. Finding the balance between those two opposing things is really hard to do; it's something I'm always striving for. But there's a kind of dark side to it too. You see the glossy surface of who they want to be, and then you get a glimpse of the reality. The photos are so detailed that you can see every imperfection. "The harsh truth of the camera eye," as Morrissey sang. Like a five o'clock shadow underneath caked-on foundation, or the imperfections in their makeup. They didn't have makeup artists and stylists; they did it all themselves, probably while drunk and stoned and having a wild party (in my imagination at least). I like to think that it's cheap makeup shoplifted from a drugstore. That's what makes the photos great too, that it sets your imagination off and you can create a whole narrative and backstory to who these people are.

*Idols* is a book I constantly look at. I pull it off my shelf all the time. Back when I first saw the book, I really wanted a copy but it was out of print and expensive, so I bought a copy that was discounted because the binding was broken and all the pages were loose. But that was fine by me because I just tacked all the pictures up on my wall. Over the years I've bought so many copies of it and given it to people as presents. Everyone I give it to is always blown away by it.

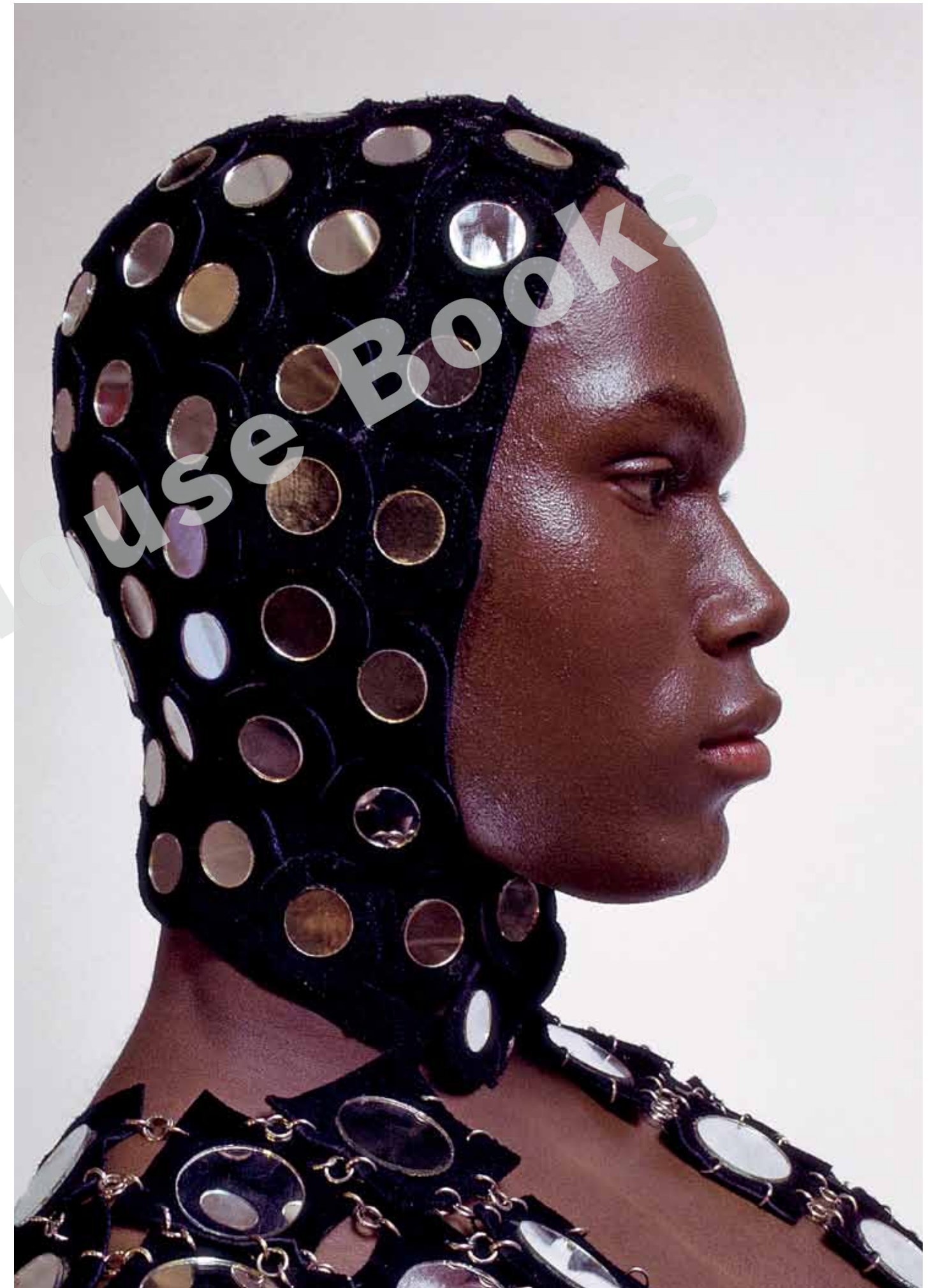
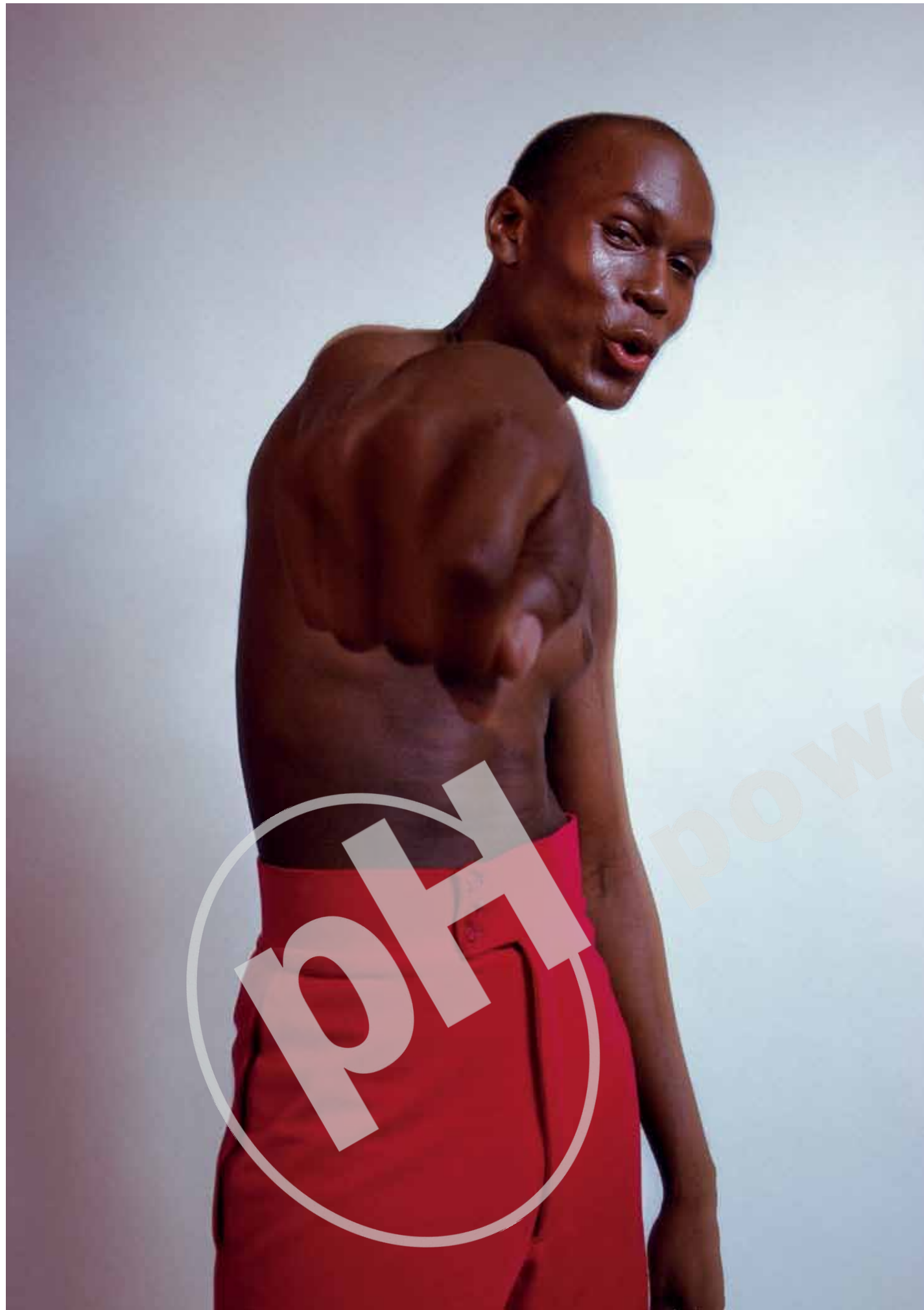
The book has had a big influence on me, in terms of experimenting with colors, casting, and props. The colors are out of control. The saturation and lighting and textures and feathers... And he doesn't even manipulate them; they're raw images. His acute sense of color, the people he chose to photograph, the way they pose it's an artistic study. And he's so good at pulling emotions from them. His eye for picking subjects is impeccable. It's so important to find the cast of characters who will offer you something you would never expect, and often these are people are artists themselves.

A few years ago Jack Walls had his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party at Gilles' studio and that's when I first got to meet him. Gilles immediately grabbed us and put us in a corner and started photographing us. That's how he does it: like lightning, with a confident authority. In his thick French accent, he said, "Yes, yes, you come and sit for me now." I was honored. I just wish I had dressed more flamboyantly.

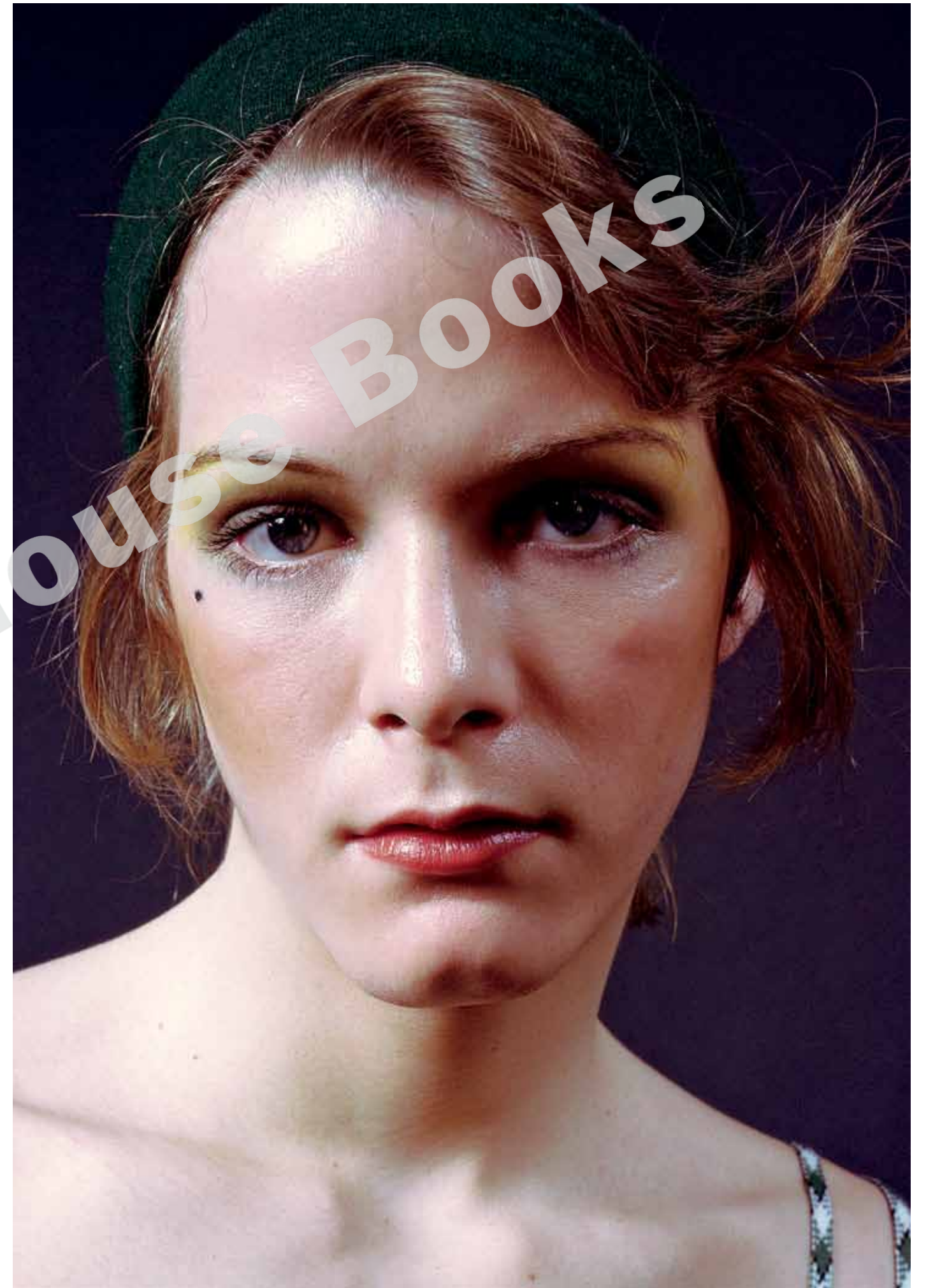
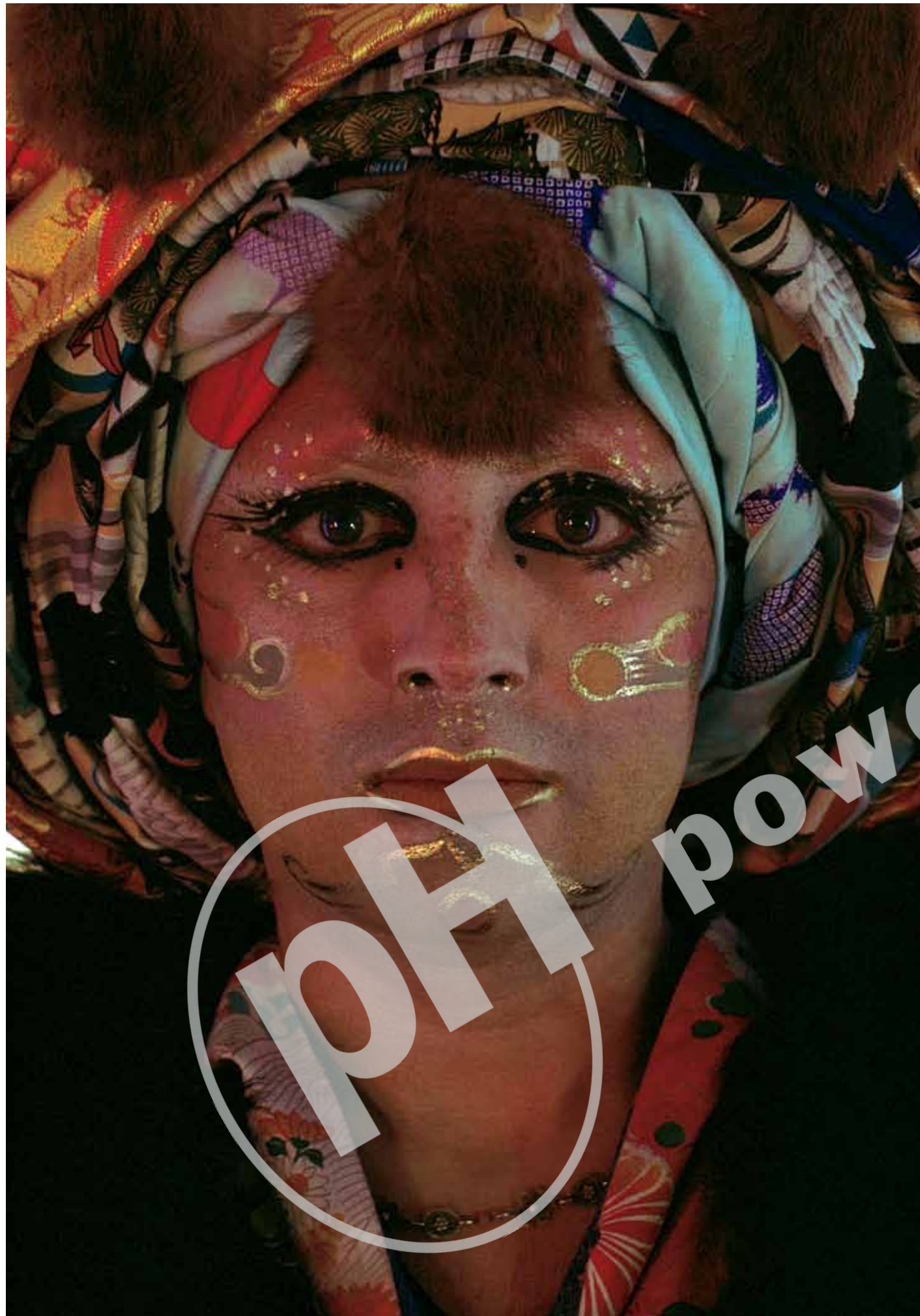






























# **IDOLS**

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Foreword © 2011 Ryan McGinley

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