

*Une discrète
à l'ombre d'un*

GÉANT



Des parents fantasques à la vie bohème, une mère top model, le photographe Irving Penn comme beau-père : Mia Fonssagrives avait tout pour connaître fortune et gloire promises par la mode. Elle a préféré retrouver l'anonymat en sculptant des robots, comme elle l'a raconté à JOSHUA LEVINE.

E

very morning

when she was growing up, Mia Fonssagrives and her family would gather around the breakfast table. On weekends, they lived in a farmhouse in Huntington Long Island, about an hour's drive from New York City, and there were chickens, goats and a big black angus steer they called Steak until, one day, that's what he became. Mia drove the tractor while a farm-hand worked the machine that gathered the hay and tied it in bundles, and then later, as Mia got older, she worked the hay-gathering machine herself.

"We all had breakfast together and then we all got down to work. Irving would make his platinum prints, my mother would be painting, my brother would be hammering away on something, and I would be sewing to make enough money to pay for my art," she says.

Even counting the goats and the chickens, it is hard to imagine a more glamorous breakfast table. Mia's mother was Lisa Fonssagrives, at one time perhaps the world's classiest fashion model. Mia's stepfather Irving was Irving Penn, the legendary photographer who made Fonssagrives his muse.

If Mia herself is less familiar, it's partly because she has chosen to be. But for a glittering dayglow moment in Paris, the spotlight shone brightly on her. Did she invent the mini-skirt? Scholars will debate the question, but let history record that in 1961, Mia Fonssagrives, then a student at the Parsons School of Design, took a small strip of fabric, punched two holes in it, and tied it around her waist. Fonssagrives is long and lean, and the woven fig-leaf barely made it to her upper thigh.

"Everybody's mouth just dropped, and they wanted to throw us out of school, but they couldn't—we exuded power," says Vicky Tiel. Tiel was Mia's best friend at fashion school and, a few years later, her partner in Paris, where they showed the Mia-Vicky Mini in Louis Ferraud's 1964 couture show. For some

« On a voulu nous exclure de l'école, Mia et moi, mais nous étions trop populaires. »

VICKY TIEL
(créatrice de mode)



UN CERTAIN REGARD

(1) Mia enfant et sa mère Lisa, par Toni Frissell.
(2) Vicky Tiel et Mia Fonssagrives vêtues de leurs créations à Paris, en 1966.



du culot nécessaires ont fait le pèlerinage à leur boutique, rue Bonaparte, à Saint-Germain-des-Près.

time after that, any woman with the legs and the nerve made a pilgrimage to the Mia-Vicky boutique on rue Bonaparte.

Mia Fonssagrives-Solow is 76 now (Solow is her second husband.) She still has the sapling figure of the girl in the home-made mini, but her hair is framed now in a bright silver page-boy. Her manner is still girlish. She is fun, easy company--what Americans used to call a "hoot"--with a throaty, sexy laugh that emerges frequently.

She still sews, too, even if it's only for herself. When I met her she was wearing a new Prada raincoat. "It was single-breasted with a long dopey collar, so I cut it to pieces, took the collar up and made the coat skinny and double-breasted with black trim and tight sleeves. I can't buy anything without completely re-doing it," she says.

What she mostly does, and what she has been doing since she left Paris in 1971, is make big, arresting sculptures. "My hands don't know how to do anything small," she says. These sculptures are nearly impossible to categorize. Some are geometric dialogues between form and its absence. Some look like Cycladic totems from an ancient invented religion.



Mia version 2017.

BLOUSE GUCCI.
JUPE LONGCHAMP.
COLLANTS LE BOURGET.
MULES ROCHAS.



Une *vibe* sixties au goût du jour.

COMBINAISON CHANEL.
PULL ROCHAS.
COLLIER CHANEL.
BOTTINES DRIES VAN NOTEN.

→ The most appealing are a series of dystopian robots cobbled together from leftover debris—empty laundry detergent bottles, old cereal boxes, soda cans—and cast in aluminum and bronze. “They look like someone had mixed together visual elements from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, the old *Honeymooners* TV show and the Egyptian Temple of Dendur,” says Steven Kasher, who organized a show of Mia’s robots at his New York art gallery in 2015. There have been other shows, but not so many. Some of the sculptures have found a smaller life as jewelry. Gallerie Maeght in Paris and Larry Gagosian in New York sell Mia’s robots shrunk down to brooches, pendants and earrings. They are delightful, and you can usually find Mia herself wearing a little robot or two or three.

Prête pour la révolution

But neither commercial success nor personal notoriety seems to have been the point. Mia’s is an old-fashioned American story of do-it-yourself chic and unforced elegance. The glamor seems almost accidental, the way it does in the old photos of Jacques-Henri Lartigue. You know you’re peeking into an absurdly fortunate life, filled with more beauty, fame, style, talent and money than fairness should allow. But everyone’s unaffected delight makes it all look so innocent that you can’t hold it against them. A little family background is in order here. Lisa Fonssagrives, né Bernstone in Udevalla, Sweden, met the Frenchman Fernand Fonssagrives when they were both young dancers in Paris. They married in 1935, and when they weren’t dancing they chased the sun around France. While Fernand aimed the Rolleiflex she had given him as a gift, Lisa dove from cliffs in the Ardeches, or leaped over the snow-covered slopes of Tignes in a white bathing suit or simply lay on the sand at Cabasson wearing only a sombrero as Fernand made her perfect body the canvas for stripes of sun and shadow. They sold these images of healthy outdoor fun to magazines around Europe, using what little money they got to keep on playing. (A selection of these images appears in the beautiful 2005 collection, *Fernand Fonssagrives, An Eye for Beauty*.) Just before the war came in 1939, Fernand and Lisa sailed away to Long Island. Not much changed for them except now they ran and jumped and swam on Montauk beach instead of Cabasson. In 1941, Mia, their only child, came along. They lived in Oyster Bay, Long Island then. In the summer Mia and her mother climbed into a big tin bucket of water to get cool (PHOTO). In winter, they made ice and snow sculptures in the back yard.

« Irving m’a enseigné la valeur du travail. Il m’a appris à tondre les moutons et à faire du caramel. »

MIA FONSSAGRIVES

With time, it became less exquisite for Lisa and Fernand Fonssagrives. Fernand was always a source of brilliant fun. He could make a machine that imitated the universe, using black velvet for the sky and white talcum powder for the stars. What he wasn’t so good at was looking after his family. “My father lived in a kind of mystical, joie-de-vivre fog,” Mia recalls. “If he made \$200, we would all jump in the car and drive to Montauk to look at the waves. He never realized that when a child comes along, things get more serious. My mother got tired of it.”

They divorced in 1949, and Mia took it hard. She began drawing, and what she often drew were houses with sharp teeth. “That’s what my home had turned into,” says Mia, “and the only way I could let it out was through art. Nobody talked to children in those days.” Before long a new household formed in Manhattan and Huntingdon, headed by Lisa’s new husband, Irving Penn. Penn was everything the dreamy Fernand Fonssagrives was not: rigorous, distantly friendly and demanding. It is obvious Mia would never have made nearly as much of herself without him.

Fernand’s father—Vigoureux was his family name; Fernand took his mother’s name—was a sculptor with a big studio outside Paris at Avallon. He made towering art deco pieces (PHOTO), and when Mia visited, he taught her how to make plaster castings in the sand. “It was the most exquisite childhood imaginable,” says Mia.

“Irving taught me my entire work ethic. If you started something, you had to finish it. We could never, ever be late. Irving and I planted 65 saplings that are now six stories high! He taught me how to shear sheep and make fudge. I got 25 cen-

LA PEAU DOUCE

(1) Mia Fonssagrives aux 75 ans du restaurant Maxim’s à Paris, en 1968. (2) Ursula Andress entre les mains de Mia Fonssagrives et Vicky Tiel, costumières du film *Quoi de neuf, Pussycat ?* en 1965.



→ ts for polishing Irving's shoes and a dollar for driving the hay rake."

Most of the world knew Mia's mother, or thought they knew her, from her photos in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, many shot by Penn but also by such masters as Horst, George Hoyningen-Huene and Erwin Blumenfeld. It was Blumenfeld who shot the astonishing photo of Lisa Fonssagrives hanging off the Eiffel Tower, holding her fluttering skirt in the wind. But no one captured her quite like her husband. To see Penn's 1950 photo of Fonssagrives in a checked jacket and saucer-shaped Lilly Daché hat, giving the viewer a haughty sideways glance through her veil, is to appreciate the absolute perfection high fashion could occasionally attain.

Fonssagrives never saw herself as the woman in that photo. In her own mind, she was just a "clothes hangar," she said. Away from the camera, she was an earthy pioneer mother who gave Mia the rough skills she would need to survive on the prairie, along with some she wouldn't.

"She taught me how to change a tire, how to drive a Willy's jeep, how to work a tractor, and how to sew. I can clean like you wouldn't believe! I know how to build a house from the mud-sill up. We used to sail in Sweden during the summer, and my mother taught me how to build a fire in the rain on an island made of stone: you find lichen underneath the rocks to use as tinder. She always said to me, Mia, you have to be ready for the revolution."

La salopette en serpent d'Ursula Andress

In a funny way, Mia's mother was right. The revolution did come, even if it was only the hippie revolution of the 60s. Mia, sewing needle in hand, was ready for it. Mia Fonssagrives and Vicky Tiel arrived in Paris in 1964, straight out of Parson's School of Design. They didn't know anybody in town, but Lisa had given Mia the phone number for her friend Dorian Leigh, and that was more than enough. In her day, Dorian Leigh was as renowned a fashion model as Lisa Fonssagrives. She was also the inspiration for Holly Golightly in Truman Capote's story *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, which is to say she got around. By the time Mia and Vicky arrived, Leigh was running her own modelling agency. As Lisa told Mia, "She knows everybody who counts and she's married most of them." (In her memoir, *It's All About the Dress*, Tiel says Dorian Leigh passed Irving Penn along to Lisa Fonssagrives after her brief fling with him had ended.)

Leigh quickly took Mia and Vicky under her wing and invited the two girls to her wedding--it was Leigh's fifth. At age 47, she was marrying a 23-year-old Israeli scoundrel named Iddo Ben Gurion. (Ben Gurion turned out to be a drug addict who stole robbed Leigh blind. She divorced him two years later and never married again.) At the wedding, Mia and Vicky were seated next to Louis Ferraud and his partner Guy Rambaldi, who proposed that the two girls model their own designs in Ferraud's upcoming couture show in July. Here's how Tiel describes the moment in her 2011 memoir, *It's All About the Dress*:

"In Louis' show, Mia wore a purple suede mini dress cut down past her belly button, with an orange snakeskin belt, orange fishnet stockings and purple mules. I wore a denim minicoat lined in fake green fur, pale green lace stockings and miniboots. We pranced down the runway at the end of the show, neither of us ever having been a runway before. We sauntered and strutted



MANTEAU MARC JACOBS.
ROBE CHLOÉ.
BOUCLES D'OREILLES CÉLINE.
COLLANTS LE BOURGET.
MULES ROCHAS.

like old pros. The show ended with "Bravo's."

They woke up famous. "Anyone in fashion over 25 might as well drop dead," wrote Eugenia Shepherd in the next morning's *International Herald Tribune*. The two girls were living in an orange-painted chambre de bonne on the rue Lauriston. Mia slept on the sofa, Vicky had the bedroom, and they spent their days dying fabric in the bathtub. "In October we got a knock on the door, and it was the Hollywood producer Dick Sylbert," says Mia. "He said, I've been reading a lot about you girls, how would you like to do the clothes for Woody Allen's first movie, shooting here in Paris—What's New Pussycat? I said, yeah well, only if we can see our names in red against a blue sky, like in a Western. It was such chutzpah! He said, I think that can be arranged.

Which is how Mia came to design the snakeskin and cashmere jumpsuit Ursula Andress wore in the movie (PHOTO). "One day, a man I didn't know comes up to me on the street and says, I'm reading more about you than I'm reading about myself, and Vicky → is frantically whispering to me, It's Richard Burton! And the man says, I'd like you to meet my wife Elizabeth," Mia recalls.

*« Voudriez-vous
vous occuper des costumes
pour le premier film
écrit par Woody Allen? »*

DICK SYLBERT
(producteur à Hollywood)



MÈRE ET FILLE EN LUMIÈRE

(1) La jeune Mia Fonssagrives en 1944. (2) L'ex-créatrice de vêtements se consacre aujourd'hui à la sculpture; les robots sont ses sujets de prédilection. (3) La créatrice en août 1964. (4) L'enfant Mia était déjà attirée par l'art en 1948. (5) Sa mère Lisa est considérée comme le premier top model de l'histoire de la photographie de mode. Ici en couverture de *Vogue*, en septembre 1940. (6) Mia devant ses premières sculptures, en janvier 1972. (7) Lisa Fonssagrives inspira beaucoup de photographes célèbres tels que Erwin Blumenfeld qui l'immortalisa sur la tour Eiffel en 1939. (8) Mia dans une des robes qu'elle a créées.

La mode d'aujourd'hui rencontre
l'esprit de Mia.

MANTEAU MIU MIU.
PULL LOEWE.

MODÈLE : LÉA ISSARNI @ NEXT
CASTING : ALEXANDRA SANDBERG
COIFFURE : OLIVIER SCHAWALDER @ ATOMO
MAQUILLAGE : DARIJA DAY @ ATOMO
MANUCURE : JULIE VILLANOVA @ ARTIST
DÉCOR : CÉDRIC-CYRIL COLOGNES @ QUADRIGA

→ Burton and Taylor put up half the money for the two girls to buy a boutique at 25 (CHECK THIS) rue Bonaparte. The rest came from the \$100,000 Paramount paid them for movie rights to their life story. “The store was a kind of velvet pit with hundreds of pillows and mosaic mirrors so you could see yourself thousands of times,” recalls Mia. This was where the sexual revolution’s shock troops bought their uniforms. “Amanda Lear, Dali’s girlfriend, was a regular—nobody walked like Amanda. And Sharon Tate, that poor girl.”

Meanwhile, Mia had fallen deeply in love with Louis Ferraud. She married him when he left his wife Zizi, who, according to Vicky Tiel, seemed not to mind so much. The two had always gone their separate ways in love. Luckily for Ferraud, Zizi remained Ferraud’s design partner, which he needed more than a wife. He had been a baker from Arles before

stumbling into the fashion business. “He was a really fun guy. He would throw fabulous parties and grill steaks in the cheminée. But he couldn’t draw a dress if you paid him,” Tiel told me. It was all a groovy psychedelic daydream that couldn’t last. Mia and Vicky were, as they used to say, on two different trips: “Vicky was doing her version of frilly 1940s décolleté, and I was mo-

-ving towards science fiction jumpsuits. They’re ridiculous and uncomfortable but I just love that look, and when you’re in your 20s, who cares?

“I was also constantly longing to do my paintings. I had had enough of fashion. I wanted to make something with more gravitas than a T-shirt with paillettes. So Vicky and I separated, and I said, You keep the boutique. She was in shock, but I had to move on.” The marriage, too, went up in 60s smoke: Mia wanted children badly, Ferraud wanted to live in Tahiti. And that was pretty much that.

It is worth pausing here, at the point where Mia Fonssagrives plunges back into anonymity, to consider how seldom this is seen today, how contrary to the current spirit of building a personal, selfie by selfie. The way things are meant to work now, it would be considered ungrateful and perverse not to monetize such astonishing, unasked-for gifts of family, fame and talent. It would be like getting a visit from the Three Kings and saying, Thanks but I don’t really like myrrh.

Et Michel-Ange sauva son père

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She was learning how to work in wood from a family that made furniture. “I hated California, but I learned everything about wood—from how to make furniture to how to build a house,” says Mia. “And then the earthquake came”—that would be the San Fernando Valley quake of 1971. “I was staying in a little cottage in Malibu built on stilts, and I was thrown clear out of bed, so I got up, put everything I owned in a van, and said goodbye to everybody I knew there. My father met me at the airport and we drove back across the country together.”

Fernand Fonssagrives had become a highly successful photographer himself by now. As Fernand and Mia crossed an iron bridge in Arkansas, he stopped the car and said, “Just look at those red I-beams!” They hauled a large sculpture by Mia out of the car and Fernand shot it on the bridge. It looks like a giant creature with large holes where its stomach and its

« Je voulais créer des choses plus profondes qu’un shirt à paillettes. »

MIA FONSSAGRIVES

face would be. It suggests the visual themes Mia Fonssagrives would explore as a sculptor over the next forty or so years. “All through those early years of sculpture, the negative space was as important as the positive space,” says Mia. “It was always this big hole of longing—somebody missing, somebody not there.” In her life, if not her art, Mia Fonssagrives seems to have filled the big hole of longing effectiv-

ely. Not long after returning to New York, she met and married Sheldon Solow, an important New York real estate developer (9 west 57th Street, the building off Fifth Avenue that looks like it’s melting at the bottom, is perhaps Solow’s best-known project.) Her elder son Stefan—she has two sons—is a farmer, if that’s the right word for someone who owns and manages around 150,000 acres of agricultural land. He also gave Mia the barn in East Hampton where she works today, not to mention 11 grandchildren who often accompany her in groupings of two or three or four on her frequent travels. “

I love that—that’s who I am,” says Mia. “It took a long time to get where I am now with my art. You’re a woman, you have a husband and children, you make that work. I wasn’t the kind of woman who just wanted to hang out with the art crowd at galleries and bars. I’m a different kind of person.”

Lisa Fonssagrives died in 1992. She had cut short her modeling career in the mid-1950s and devoted herself to creating sculpture and paintings. Fernand Fonssagrives died in 2003 in Little Rock, Arkansas. His fame as a photographer had vanished long before, but his engagement with beauty had not. “When he was 84, he got very sick and told me, Mia, it’s time to get rid of me,” she recalls. “I said no, Papa, you haven’t seen Michelangelo’s David yet. So I took him to see it and it brought him back to life.” He ended up living another 9 years.

Irving Penn died in 2009, but before he did, Mia got to show him some of the robot sculptures she had begun producing. “They were Irving’s favorites of all my work. I said, Pa, do you think I should find a gallery? He said, No! Just do the work.”