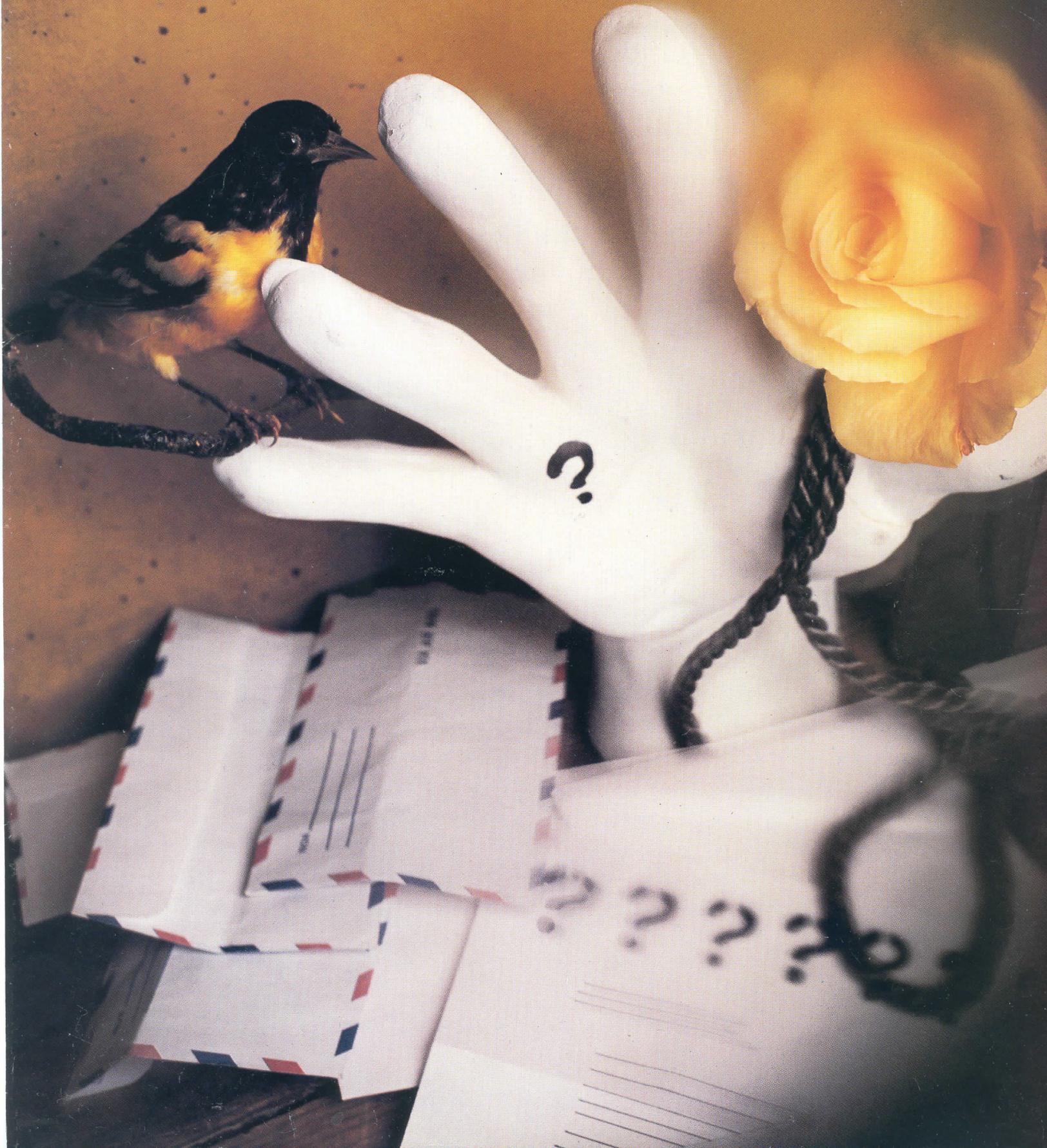


# PHOTO|DESIGN

FOR THE CREATIVE TEAM



# THROUGH THE

*This young master of portraiture, still life, food and fashion sees by the light of another age*

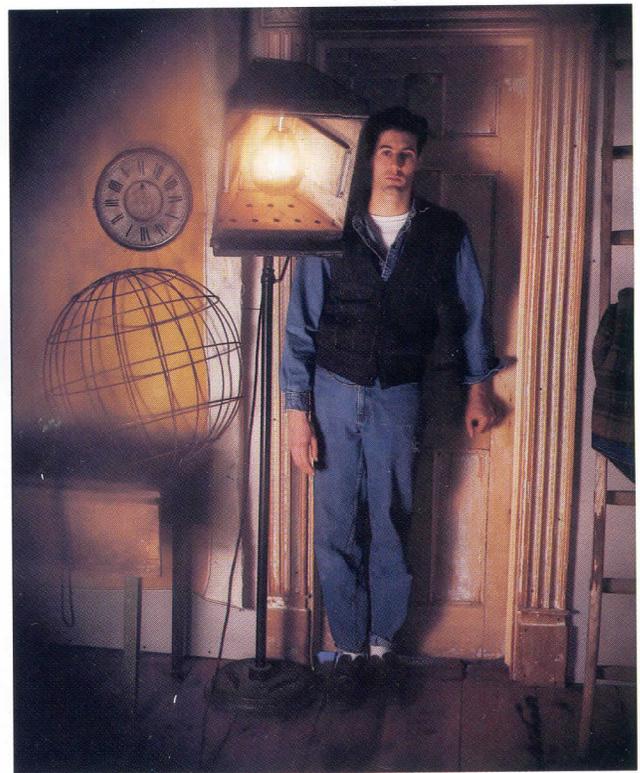
BY RUSSELL HART

**J**ohn Dugdale is an anachronism. In a high-tech world of watt seconds and optical derring-do, his photographic means and methods are startlingly straightforward. As if starved for that kind of honesty, editors and art directors in both the magazine and advertising fields are flocking to him. "His work is very pure and simple," says Tyler Smith, an art director who uses Dugdale's talents in an ongoing campaign for Armani's Joseph Abboud clothing line. "But it's still mysterious."

"One of the things that's so charming about John is that he prefers to work with this sort of shabby, good-luck equipment," says Jody Shields, a contributing editor for *Vogue* and *Details* who often does her own art direction. "But somehow, out of that seemingly haphazard approach, the pictures end up looking very finished." "I'm probably the least technical photographer you'll ever meet," Dugdale admits, "and some people are mortified by the way I work. But my methods have their advantages."

Dugdale's low-tech attitude is apparent the minute

Below: Self-portrait of John Dugdale with antique floodlight, done in his New York

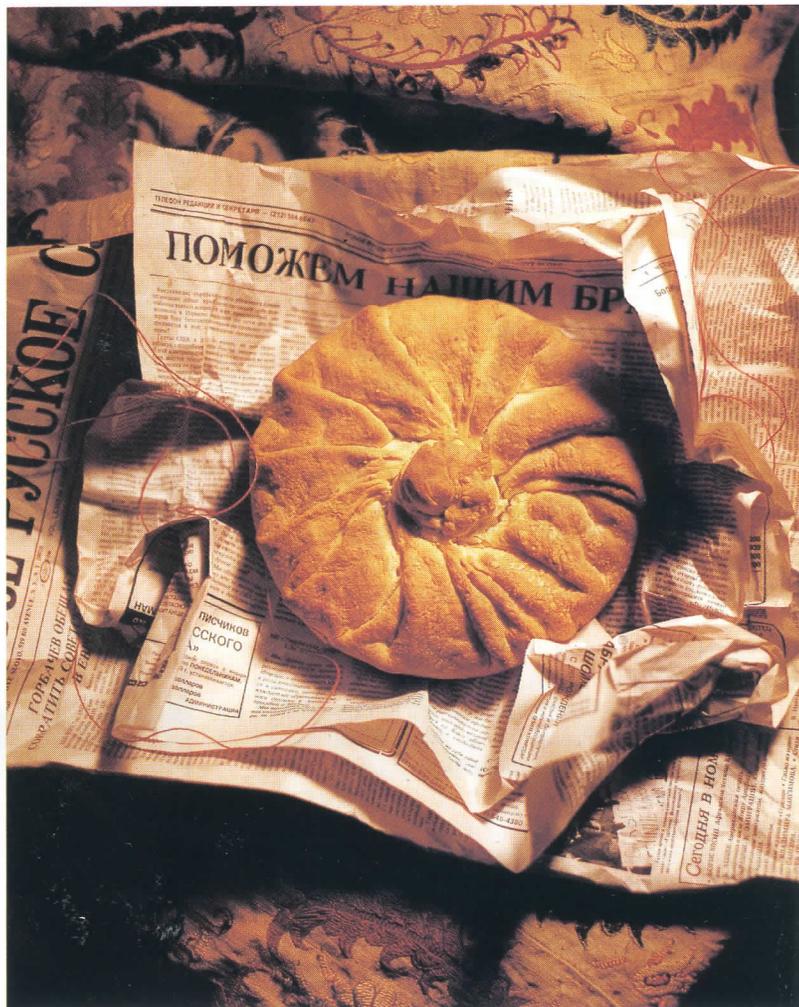


studio for *Photo/Design*, 1990. Right: Christmas gift story for *The New York Times Magazine* (incorporating "Man in Tank" by Migette Perard), 1989.

# PAST SHARPLY







Above: Round bread from story about the cuisine of Soviet Georgia in *The New York Times Magazine*, 1989. Left: Self-assignment, 1989.

1000-watt tungsten bulb.

Today Dugdale is using a commercial reflector to bounce the light back into the shadows from the other side of the table. But more often than not his fill light (if he has any) is provided by a far funkier source—a turn-of-the-century theatrical lamp with a strange, wedge-shaped wooden reflector that gives new meaning to the term inefficient. Dugdale has hooked the lamp to a dimmer so he can warm up its light, and when it's on it emits a pleasant, soporific buzz.

Dugdale regards electricity as something of a miracle. "In its primitive form, it's really beautiful and mysterious," he says. "But mod-



ern lighting has destroyed that feeling. They hide the wires and everybody takes it for granted." In an effort to restore the ramshackle 19th-century farmhouse to which Dugdale retreats almost every weekend, the photographer has actually been removing the building's electrical wiring. "I've been snaking BX cable out of that place for three years," he says. "I feel as if the house won't be pure until I get it all out." Visitors to the farm, which include Dugdale's agent Carla Grande, must while away their evenings by lantern light. And when Dugdale takes his work to the country with him, needless to say he shoots by available light.

Meanwhile, back at the studio, the banter between Dugdale, Daniel Feder his studio manager, and stylist Dimitri Levas continues, punctuated by whines from Dugdale's bull terrier Stanley, who's been cloistered in the bedroom and whose pink nose is pushed through the wide crack at the bottom of the door in a pathetic gesture of participation.

The doorbell rings, and Daniel makes the four-flight trip downstairs to let in chef Georgine Cavaioia, here for a *New York Times Magazine* shoot on Neapolitan Easter foods. She enters bearing a pantiera—a ricotta pie containing candied orange peel and wheat berries, beautifully cross-hatched with wide strips of dough. Dugdale finishes shooting the cocoa, Dimitri clears the table, and the pie is transferred to a porcelain dish and placed on the table. Without further ado, Dugdale begins to construct a still life around the pantiera. A dense bouquet of wheat stalks, left behind from a previous shoot, is commandeered and turned on its side so that the brushy fronds seem to reach out for the pie. Then Dugdale walks over to his pantry, a freestanding antique wooden cupboard that doubles as a prop closet, located just outside the door of the tiny kitchen. "It's great that I'm doing so much still life," he says. "I can justify all the interesting stuff I buy."

For now, Dugdale settles for prosaic ingredients—flour, eggs, oranges. He brings them to the table, opens the jar of flour, and pours a neat pile onto the table next to the pie. Half of it seeps through a crack to the floor. "Stanley will take care of that later," Dugdale says. Yesterday, it seems, Stanley consumed the better part of 20 pork chops that were the subject of a shoot.

Dugdale distributes the oranges and eggs, a trinity of each, throughout the still life. He uses a fourth egg to round out a hollow in the pile of flour, then cracks the egg open and deposits the contents inside. Using a somewhat



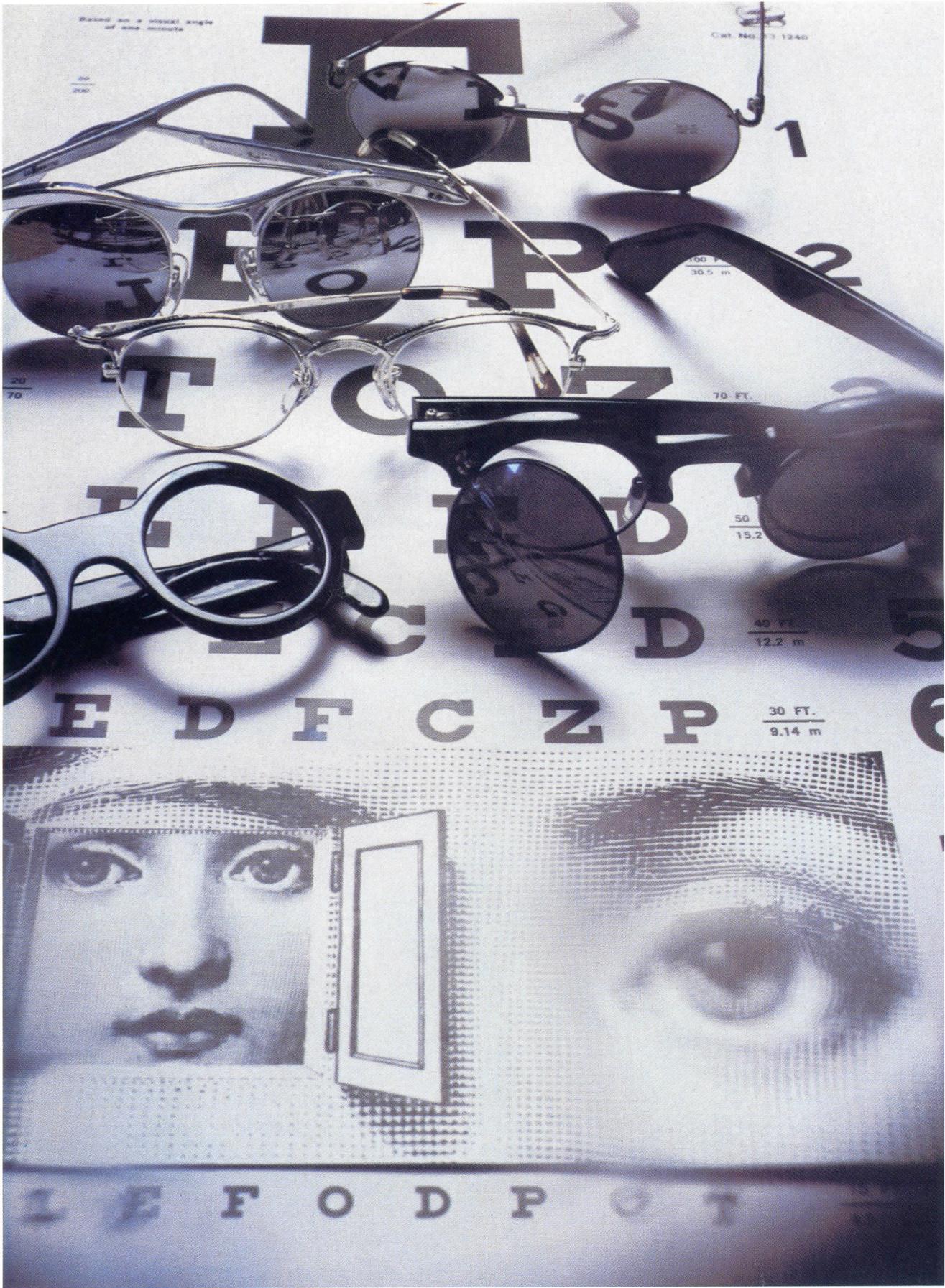
This page: Clothing by Romeo Gigli and Geoffrey Beene, from an "image" booklet of famous designers' apparel for Dayton's Oval Room, Minneapolis—shot at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, 1989. Opposite: Eyeglass story for *Philadelphia*, 1989. Part of the image was deliberately blurred to focus attention on the glasses.

*Dayton's Oval Room, Minneapolis*

**Geoffrey Beene** Dayton's Oval Room is pleased to present,  
*"Geoffrey Beene: The First Twenty-Five Years,"* in Gallery 12, 12th Floor.

Dayton's Minneapolis. This must-see exhibit is a unique opportunity to see  
 how this eight-time Coty Award winner's talent has evolved. The exhibit will  
 be open to the public, September 21 through October 4.

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Based on a visual angle  
of one minute

CAT. NO. 11 1240

20  
200

1

60 FT.  
30.5 m

2

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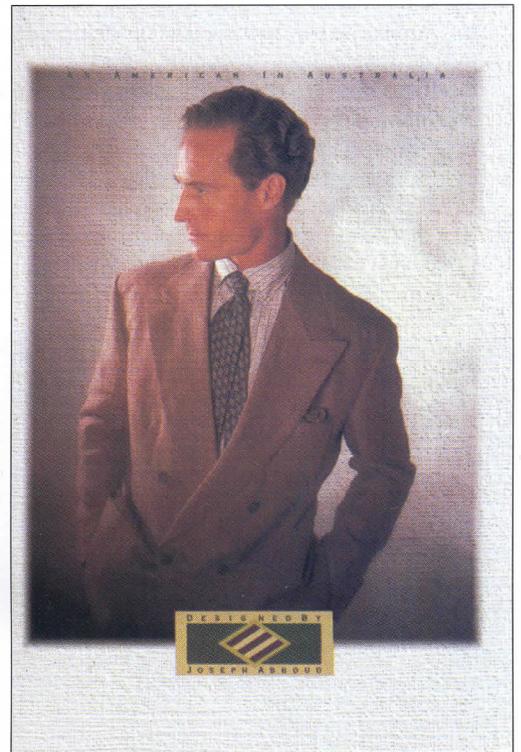
30 FT.  
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E D F C Z P

L E F O D P O T



From far left: Portrait  
of performance artist  
John Kelly etching



glass, 1989;  
promotional image for  
Nobart clothing  
company, 1988; ad for  
clothing designer  
Joseph Abboud, 1989.

meager pot of daffodils to complete the arrangement, he then sits down behind his camera again.

Dugdale's way with food isn't surprising, given that he was a waiter for six years and, before that, spent the better part of his adolescence in his grandfather's Connecticut doughnut shop. "I thought I was going to end up a big doughnut mogul," he recalls. His waitering experience took him to the other end of the gastronomic spectrum, to Manhattan's Chantrelle—a four-star restaurant frequented by downtown glitterati, where Dugdale catered to the likes (and sometimes the peculiar tastes) of Louise Nevelson, Virgil Thompson, and

Robert Rauschenberg. Dugdale credits that experience with his visual instincts for food. "I presented food to people night after night for years," he says. "All you have to do is give me the ingredients and I can arrange them on a plate to make a still life."

Linda Wells, food editor for *The New York Times Magazine*, appreciates Dugdale's inventiveness. "John gives a lot of thought to how all the different elements of the shot work with the story," she says. "The first picture he did for me was of a round loaf of bread, for a story on Soviet Georgian foods. He surrounded it with Russian newspapers—simple but brilliant. The connection isn't always obvious, but

if you look closely at his pictures, you'll see the little things he sneaks in. You'll see a mind at work, and often a sense of humor."

It's no laughing matter that Dugdale nearly wound up at the Hyde Park Culinary Institute. Thanks to the coaxing of a high school photography teacher, however, he ended up at New York's School of Visual Arts instead. There, any notion he might have had of taking pictures for a living was promptly quashed. "One teacher said to me—I remember his exact words—'John, just give it up. You'll never be able to do commercial photography. Your light's not right, your sensibility's all wrong.'" Four years later, Dugdale left school thinking that his only hope was to be an art photographer, his only feasible living as a waiter.



Dugdale continued to wait tables at Chantrelle and in his spare time taught himself the lighting techniques that he never learned in school. His favorite model was performance artist John Kelly, of whom Dugdale claims to have some 3,000 portraits. "John would sit still for me, and I'd have a book of old Hollywood studio stills and one little light with a shade from Canal Street," he says. "I'd move the light around until it matched the picture. To this day, I don't use much fill light. I'll always be a Hollywood-style keylight photographer."

With his Chanterelle savings, Dugdale bought a farm in the Catskills, and moved  
*(Continued on page 86)*



Clockwise from right:  
Helmet hat from upcoming book on historic hats, with text by Jody Shields, to be published in 1991 by Clarkson Potter;  
Carolina Herrera bridal gown, from ad for Bergdorf Goodman, 1989; story about boots for *New York Woman*, 1988; *Vogue* story on antique pens (incorporating the 1929 "Solange at Neuilly" by Jacques-Henri Lartigue), 1988.

## THROUGH THE PAST SHARPLY

(Continued from page 67)

there filled with visions of a nineteenth-century idyll. "I thought I would be a farmer. I bought all these animals and started renovating the place, removing layer after layer of 1970s dreck—indoor-outdoor carpeting, wood-grained contact paper, dropped ceilings."

Then the roof fell in. In less than a year, Dugdale had to move back to the city to nurse a sick friend, and his remaining savings were quickly depleted. He couldn't take the time away to work and he couldn't pay his mortgage. "I was losing everything that I loved," Dugdale says. "The foreclosure notice was nailed to the farmhouse. It was like an old movie." Resolving not to go back to waiting tables, Dugdale called a friend for names of photographers' reps, and compiled a portfolio of personal work.

"I must have seen 50 people," he says. "I saw people on Madison Avenue, in fancy big offices with a million phones, cigar-chomping guys like Broadway Danny Rose—'Yeah, Yeah, we love your work.' And I saw people on the Lower East Side who operated from pay phone to pay phone. Everybody said the same thing: 'We love your work, it's so wonderful, it's so about you, it's beautiful and timeless, but we don't know what to do with you.' What they really meant was 'You're not booking \$100,000 a year, so we don't want you.' That was the bottom line."

Dugdale was about to give up his search when he connected with Carla Grande, who like himself had just taken a year off from city life. "I remember the day very well," says Grande of her first meeting with Dugdale. "I couldn't believe the work I was seeing." It turned out that Grande was a long-lost former roommate of Dugdale's sick friend, who vouched for the integrity of both photographer and rep. "I just shook John's hand and said, 'Let's do it,'" Grande recalls. Dugdale is still the only photographer whom Grande chooses to represent.

The first order of business was Dugdale's mortgage, so he and Grande staged a "save the farm" print sale, inviting everyone they knew to an open house at which any one of

4000-odd Dugdale prints could be had for a mere \$50. The sale raised \$6000, more than enough to catch up on the mortgage payments.

Then Grande hit the streets with Dugdale's portfolio, looking for editorial and advertising work. "It was just personal prints—nothing commercial," she says. "But everyone said, Oh my God, he's incredible. Why haven't I seen his work before?"

Dugdale recalls his first commercial assignment: "I spend half the time with my mind in the nineteenth century, and I try to get plastic out of my life—so naturally my first editorial job was to shoot a plastic lettuce spinner. It's so ugly I couldn't believe it. What could I do? So I brought it home and put a big light behind it really close, and ended up melting a hole in the back. Then I figured, well, it's ruined now, I might as well just put the light inside it. And it glowed like a spaceship, and I put big bunches of lettuce around it and sprayed the whole arrangement with water. I had no preconceptions about what you could or couldn't do for magazines."

That was Dugdale's attraction for Tyler Smith. "He's someone who doesn't pander to art directors," says Smith, remembering the portfolio that got Dugdale the Joseph Abboud account. "Most photographers show you what they think you want to see. You want fashion? Here's some fashion. You want still life? Here's some still life. They show you computers because they know you have a computer account. But in John's case, it wasn't the subject matter that influenced my choice so much as his attitude. He's really a fine-art photographer, and that's the sensibility we were looking for."

Jody Shields, with whom Dugdale has spent a good deal of the last year working on an illustrated history of the hat, echoes Smith's view. "With some photographers, you can previsualize what the picture will look like before you even get to the studio," she says. "But with John, you never know how it's going to turn out. You're always surprised."

Back at the studio, Dugdale is touching up his pantiera still life and expressing bewilderment at the tricks of the food-styling trade. "I get people asking, 'Did you coat those with glycerin?' 'Is there dry ice in that cup?' 'Did you put marbles in the

soup?' No—I just cooked it, put it on the plate, and photographed it." That au naturel approach is why Dugdale shoots for Linda Wells several times a month. "A lot of photographers treat food as if it were a precious art object," says Wells. "But I want it to look as if someone just made it in their kitchen, and that's the way John makes it look."

Dugdale peers through the viewfinder of his Pentax 6x7cm SLR—except for an old 8x10-inch field model that he's just acquired, the only camera he owns. He recalls working with a stylist who had a big fishing tackle box of food-styling stuff. "It contained every disgusting, unnatural product you've ever seen!" Dugdale exclaims. "She made the ice cream out of lard and sugar and Crisco. She put the seeds on the buns with tweezers." Now Dugdale and Grande make sure the client understands that stylist or not, Dugdale has the final word. "The stylist brings a whole pile of stuff, then I pick and choose from it, and add stuff of my own."

Dugdale grabs the heavy metal stand of his big-bowled light and pulls it a little forward. Daniel steps in and takes a meter reading: 1/15 second at f/16. Dugdale holds a battered enlarging-diffuser device against the rim of the lens, moving it around slightly as he looks through the finder so that its plastic blades soften just the right parts of the still life. When he's found that sweet spot, he holds the diffuser in place, rests his other hand across the top of the camera, and trips the shutter. "Some of my friends are already warning me about success," Dugdale says. "They talk about their friends so-and-so who were the hottest photographers in the sixties and bought Ferraris and houses and then lost everything. But I tell them not to worry—I've already created the life I want. I have a wonderful place to be in the city and good people to work with. And I've got a big still life upstate—although I wish I could go there in a horse and buggy. It always seems unnatural to me that I can get up there in two hours when it should take me two days." □

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*Russell Hart is a writer, photographer, and editor based in New York. Starting with this issue, he is also our View Finder columnist.*