



Melvin Sokolsky, *Bubble on the Seine, Paris, Bazaar*, 1963

The Picture | The Story

Harpers Bazaar Japan contacted me recently asking if my “Iconic Bubble on Seine” was shot in color. Bazaar Japan informed they are publishing a book of iconic images including many of the images I shot for American Bazaar over the years.

My immediate response was “no”.

The next day I remembered that I elected to shoot both color and B&W, as at the moment the editor could not tell me which was to be a b&w or color page. The Bubble on Seine image in color; couldn’t get it out of my mind as I remembered I did shoot some color. I decided to go through my archive of images that were never scanned. I came upon a box marked Bazaar 2 ¼ x 2 ¼ color 1963. Would you believe I found a 2 ¼ strip of Bubble on Seine; and many other surprises.

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Now for the back story. How the Paris 1963 came to be a reality.

In early December 1962, Nancy White, the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, called to tell me that I had been chosen to photograph the Spring Collections in Paris. This exciting news triggered an idea that had been hibernating for a long time.

On my 14th birthday, my father took me to a bookstore where I came upon a book of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch and found myself spellbound by the detail of a man and a woman in a veined caul-like bubble growing from a strange plant. That image in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* had a profound effect on me—it resulted in a recurring day dream of myself in a bubble floating across exotic landscapes.

I was excited when the idea of shooting the Collections in a Plexiglas bubble suddenly came to mind, only to give way to many reservations that made the project seem increasingly unrealistic. Once committed, there would be no turning back. The project at this point had become so intriguing that adventure overtook reason and moved on as if of its own volition.

Ali MacGraw was my personal assistant, stylist, and producer. We had met a few years earlier at *Harper's Bazaar* where Ali worked as Diana Vreeland's assistant. Ali was a gifted communicator who could translate ideas and make them readily accessible to art directors and editors. Ali would make sketches of my ideas as I related them to clients. The drawings were a great relief, as they were instant depictions of my ideas that readily seduced the viewer.

Eli Pollack was my studio chief and collaborator in the construction of devices that helped transform my ideas into reality. The bubble was rendered from a design that I sketched on a brown paper bag. It went through a battery of rigging and safety tests and then made its maiden flight in my studio. Simone d'Aillencourt, my favorite model at that time, walked up to the bubble, which was suspended from one of the studio skylights. She studied it, smiled, and remarked, 'You're going to fly it over the Eiffel Tower, yes?' Suppressing a grin, I said, 'Maybe.' Simone climbed into the bubble and explored the walls of the sphere as if to find a new body language that would express the future in the strange spacecraft.

I shot the cover for the March 1963 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* with Simone in the bubble overhanging the cliffs of Weehawken, New Jersey. The shoot went off without a hitch creating a memorable iconic image.

On January 20, 1963, my team and I flew to Paris to photograph the Spring Collections. The telescopic crane we hired drove up to the designated spot, followed by a small van. Its rear doors opened to reveal the bubble nestled in its cradle. Guy, the crane operator,

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then lowered the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch cable over the bubble so that Eli could attach a fine 1/8 inch barely visible aircraft cable to the grapple. The bubble seemed to defy gravity.

The bubble was suspended a few feet off the ground and hinged at the top like a Fabergé egg; for easy entry. Guy was at the crane's controls eagerly following the hand signals of his partner Michel as the bubble was guided to the final position. The morning we shot on the Seine river, Michel's overzealous hand gestures overdirected Guy to lower the bubble into the water, flooding it up to Simone's ankles and ruining an important pair of designer shoes.

I was made aware that photography in and around Paris was under the jurisdiction of the Beaux-Arts, which required three months prior notice for the necessary permits. I enlisted my friend Serge Marquand, a well-known character actor in France, and appointed him as our official liaison because I was aware of his friendship with the Chief of Police. Serge cajoled his card playing partner (Chief of Police) into bending all the rules in order to accommodate our shoot. I might add that Serge was a madcap joker who would do anything for a laugh.

On the morning of the last shoot, Serge and the Chief were nowhere to be found. We exposed one and a half rolls of film without them, when a convoy of police cars immediately surrounded us. My assistant and printer Francesco Finnochio, who spent many sleepless nights keeping up with the schedule and propelled the team with his dry humor, took the camera from my hands and pretended to photograph Simone in the bubble. I was puzzled, as he covertly stuffed the rolls of film and a *Hasselblad* magazine into my pocket. The police began to swarm and arrest the crew. I slipped into a taxi as everyone else was hauled away in the French equivalent of a paddy wagon.

Hours later, I met up with Francesco and the crew in the lobby of the St. Regis Hotel. I reached into my pocket and handed Francesco the undeveloped rolls of film. He looked angrily at me and said, 'I thought you would've developed the film by now. We're never going to make the deadline.' Suddenly, he broke into a broad smile. 'Congratulations, kid,' he said. 'This collection is now history.'

Memories are the essence of who we are. In reviewing my work fifty years after the many shoots, I realize the best images were never published. Magazine management are most interested in fashion detail. Somehow great images, at a bit of a distance, are deemed less important. I am thrilled to go over my archive with fresh eyes. The new surprises have reinvigorated my zeal. Watch for the new surprises.

- Melvin Sokolsky (June 23rd, 2016)