

‘I Keep Coming Back to the Room’

PATRICIA BLACK

on how she came to realize
her own beauty standard.





Even though I am not a writer and have never done anything like this, Patricia Black asked me to interview her, and I couldn't say no. Her request was likely a result of many hours we've spent talking about growing up "other." And while we are more than a decade apart in age, we share being brought up in America at a time when looking different was difficult. Being ethnic was so far from the standard of beauty that one was considered at best, odd, and at worst, ugly. Fortunately, that standard is changing, but for those of us brought up during this time, our attempt to fit into the mold, our inability to do so and our subsequent acceptance of our looks formed us and our opinions about beauty and style.

—PAUL CAVACO

PAUL CAVACO: What do you think about embracing one's beauty?
PATRICIA BLACK: Everyone wants to be able to walk into the room and feel like they belong in the room. Everybody wants a chance to sit at the table, right?

PC: We were brought up at a time when ethnicity wasn't highly regarded. What did you think about the way you looked as a child?

PB: My mother was full Hawaiian, my father was American but his family was from Scotland. It was at the time that Hawaii was being welcomed into the union. I was definitely the kid that was bullied in the room. I did not have the right skin color. I was from the wrong side of the street. I didn't have the right clothes, the right education. At one point I had all these football players chasing me down the hall screaming, "We're gonna kill you!" I made a run for it, then asked myself, OK, live or die? In that moment, I decided to live.

PC: What changed your mind about looking different, into realizing it was a good thing?

PB: I was different from everybody else where I grew up, but because of people like Bianca Jagger, I saw that at least there was someone out there who was very stylish and wasn't white. I remember seeing Janice Dickinson for the first time in a magazine and thinking, oh my God, there

is somebody who has brown eyes and brown hair and doesn't look like all the other glamour blondes that are being served up in the magazines. I was influenced by *W*, which came in the big folded newspaper format. In there would be the Saint Laurent show in Paris, and he used a lot of black models. Suddenly, there were all these exotic women coming down his runway. Again it struck me, if he is celebrating these women, then I must belong in this conversation.

It wasn't until I left home that I started to embrace my looks. I was swept away to Paris because someone was enamored with the way I looked. I was an accessory [laughs]. Isn't that a terrible thing to say? But I look back and realize that's what I was. He would dress me up, tell me what glass to pick up, what fork to use... While I was there, I was asked to model. Even though I hadn't thought about modeling, you get offered to do something and...

Eventually, I understood that being different was a good thing. I had all the "fellas," the guys that were in hair and makeup in the industry, that guided me. Worked it out for me. Showed me, "This is where you can go, this is what you can do." They opened the window a little further for me. If you have been beat down your whole life and suddenly you're having your makeup done and your hair done and you put on the perfect little dress and shoe and people applaud that, you think, I was living the wrong person.





PC: Once you felt you really belonged, what came next?

PB: I got into the room. When that happens, you have to embrace the differences about yourself—I had to embrace the differences about myself—whether the difference is being sexy or being exotic. Once you get that you are different, you have to know how to use it. You have to celebrate your difference, have confidence—be present in the room. It was again, a choice to be present.

Not to be all psychological—it comes from my baggage of not being seen, of being thought of as less than, of being the Hawaiian in the room—but I decided to be present, to own those things and be in control of them, so no one had the power to manipulate or categorize me. I did it first and owned it, so no one else dared. It separated me from all the white women in the room and brought me closer to the people in the room I was aspiring to be like because I was seen on my own terms. Being seen in a way that could not be bullied. I didn't necessarily want to own the room, I just wanted to be able to sit at the table easily and enjoy, share, be inspired, inspire, aspire—all the "spires" [laughs].

PC: What now, in this moment, do you think is beautiful?

PB: What is remarkable to me, is that I've had the opportunity to be part of the industry again, to be able to comment on beauty and style because of what I do at the Albright Fashion Library, to be in the room again with some of the leading people in the business who are creating, inspiring and informing what is beautiful today. We all recognize the perfect—the perfect eye, the perfect mouth, the perfect nose—but at this moment in time, I think it is the imperfections that create the most beautiful woman. It may be that the imperfections force a woman to create a sense of style because she is not serving up what we were brought up to believe is beautiful.

PC: How are you now part of the conversation?

PB: My part now is the clothes. Sometimes someone comes in the Library and they have no real interest in clothes. I put them in something and see the change; the posture changes, the eyes start to dance. I think that is the best part: when you catch someone who had no idea that they could be, that they could look or feel what they now feel about themselves because you changed what they were wearing. In the end it's not about the clothes or the hair and makeup, but how you feel about yourself, your place in society, the role you play in the room. I keep coming back to the room [laughs], but that matters.



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