

TRIBAL SKINS

*How a certain luxury
item wove a connection
between the diverse
subjects of one
photographer's work*

By Gillian Laub



One afternoon in the winter of 1998, Gillian Laub, then a student at the International Center of Photography—at the time still based in a townhouse on the Upper East Side—joined a few of her classmates on their smoke break. The group was made up largely of foreign students, many working on what could broadly be described as socially conscious material, including one street photographer focusing on capitalism in America. As the young artists huddled together in the cold, he talked to them about his project, and the wonder and disgust he felt at many of the scenes he was capturing. “Take, for example, those women across the street,” Laub remembers him noting, while gesturing at a large group of women walking together, most in lush fur coats. “Who wears stuff like that?”

Just then, several of the women came close enough to see. “Gillian!” they yelled in unison. It was a walking tour for participants of an art-appreciation class—and among the fur-wearers were Laub’s mother, grandmother, and aunt.

She felt exposed, and mortified. But also torn: The child of a family in which success was grounded in earthbound realness—the inheritance of her beloved Brooklyn-born proud *shtarker* of a father—she felt embarrassed by what, in the eyes of some, was the supposed moral degradation of her privileged background, and then guilty for feeling ashamed of the deeply good people who raised her.

And so, like any artist worth her salt, Laub got to work. She began to make pictures of her family.

It’s perhaps no wonder that the original inspiration for this project also ended up threading through Laub’s career. Fur: an opulent, magnetic, utterly politically incorrect must-have accessory for anyone in this country with something to shout about. A first-glance communicator of upward mobility and aspiration. The luxury item that, if you consider it, brought together many

of the people in this country with sky-reaching ambition but no legitimating Mayflower roots.

In fact, fur’s minting as the emblem of the opposite of oppression (human-to-human oppression, at least) has roots in the history of Jews, stretching all the way back to early medieval times, when Jews were forbidden from joining regular—read: Christian—craft guilds. What they were permitted to do, however, was run their own guilds, though even these had to be natural outgrowths of Jewish ritual requirements, which fell under religious rights protected here and there by the nobles. (The nobles also required that Jewish artisans sell their goods at the lowest possible price—which, ironically, meant that they soon beat out their Christian competition.) All of which explains how we have the biblical prohibition against mixing linen and wool to thank for the Jewish domination of the garment and fur industries.

“Transcending the circumstances of its birth, a fur coat symbolized America’s bounty and beauty,” the historian Jenna Weissman Joselit wrote in her 2001 book, *A Perfect Fit: Clothes, Character, and the Promise of America*. “A fur coat bore witness to the promise of America. In homes across the nation, especially those inhabited by immigrants and their children, the purchase of a fur coat was experienced not as a failure of will or as a sign of moral turpitude. It was experienced as a triumph and a vindication, as material evidence of America’s blessings.”

This kind of ambition is, in fact, a throughline in Laub’s work. From presidents and celebrities to Middle East terror victims and teenagers determined to desegregate their Georgia hometown prom after more than three decades, Laub has made an art of capturing driven people at moments when we can both see them clearly and also actually catch a glimpse of the energy running through them. In these pictures, the fire being unleashed—striving, aspiring, proud—cuts across all demographic groups. And though it’s swaddled in layers of fur, it’s quite clearly—for them all—more than skin deep. —Alana Newhouse



(Previous page) *Grandpa Helping Grandma Out of the Limo*, 1999.
Lil' Kim Being Fitted, 1999.



The Pageant Winners, 2001.



Wesley, the Subway Hero, 2007.



Simone Walking Jolie, 2013.



*(Above) Ladies After Church, 2001.
(Right) Eve, 2002.*



Aunt Doris, 1999.