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STRIKE A POSE

*Model and mum-to-be Coco Rocha talks to Alice Wasley about
walking the line between her rebellious nature and religious beliefs*
Photography **Darren McDonald** Styling **Kelly Hume**

Even if you don't know your Ghesquière from your Givenchy, your Tom Ford from Eileen Ford, you're more than likely aware of the fashion world's fondness for hyperbole. Words such as *genius*, *fabulous* and *ahmaaazing* are bandied about more often than is perhaps warranted. And, just as swiftly as someone is anointed a genius, darling, they can become old news. So, before watching model Coco 'Queen of the Pose' Rocha in action at *Sunday Style's* cover shoot at Milk Studios in New York, I'm not sure what to expect.

What I discover feels closer to performance art than a fashion shoot. The lithe, pale Rocha moves quickly and rhythmically through a succession of poses for the photographer. She's up on her toes, then jumping in the air, all the while twisting her body into a rapid-fire array of silhouettes. The hip-hop music in the background is somewhat at odds with her precision. Turns out Tyra Banks – who bestowed the regal title on Rocha when she was a guest judge on 2011's *America's Next Top Model* – was onto something. Though, no doubt Banks could take her in a 'smizing' contest, a term she coined to describe smiling with your eyes.

Rocha's ability to manipulate her body was fostered well before the modelling industry came knocking on her door. As a dance-loving 14-year-old (then going by her given name, Mikhaila), she was performing at an Irish dance competition in Vancouver, Canada (near where she grew up in Richmond), when she was scouted by the owner of a modelling agency. At first she thought it was a crazy idea and laughed it off, but after some further investigation, Rocha and her mother realised it was a legitimate offer. Not long after, she was off to model in Asia and learn the ropes.

"COCO IS A MODEL WHO BREAKS THE STEREOTYPE"

She signed with a New York agency and, in 2006, got her big break when she was shot by renowned photographer Steven Meisel for the cover of *Vogue Italia*.

High fashion favoured her long limbs and angular features. In 2007, Jean Paul Gaultier was casting his ready-to-wear runway show, a Celtic-themed collection, and caught wind of her Irish dancing background. He had her open and close the show dancing an Irish jig. This energetic deviation from the runway norm was dubbed the 'Coco moment' by American *Vogue*.

Now Rocha, 26, is in demand as much for her brand as her looks and contorting skills.

She has walked for all the big names and featured in campaigns by Christian Dior, Chanel, YSL and Dolce & Gabbana.

One of the most tech-savvy models around, she has millions of followers worldwide across several platforms, including Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr. And not many high-fashion models can count being a columnist for *PCMag* on their résumés.

Her latest project is the book *Study of Pose*, which documents her adopting 1000 different poses. It's designed to function as a beautiful coffee-table book and/or resource for artists, photographers and models. The concept was devised and captured for the book by photographer Steven Sebring. Gaultier, who wrote the foreword, says Rocha is a "model who breaks the stereotype, and here she is creating and pushing the boundaries in one thousand ways. I find that fabulous."

High praise from Gaultier. In what ways does she think she pushes boundaries? "There are many ways, I hope," she says when we sit down to talk after the shoot. "From how I move to how I work, what I stand for in the industry and how goofy I am. Of course I take my job seriously, but I always say we're not curing cancer, so we should have fun with it. That's what this book is – it's about having fun with what I do."

"I do stand for a lot of things [though]. I don't do nudes. I don't do semi-nudes. I really am specific about how I'm portrayed in photos. Gaultier knows all of that and he still works with me, and I love him for it. For someone like that, who's so creative in what he does, to say something like that about me is quite an honour."

Her husband, James Conran, also points to her mould-breaking ways. Rocha married Conran in 2010 in a lavish ceremony at a

French chateau, wearing a custom Zac Posen fishtail gown. And, not one to keep her fans in the dark, she posted a beautifully edited short film of the wedding on her Tumblr blog, Oh So Coco, which has since been viewed more than 600,000 times on YouTube.

Conran, who she met through mutual friends at 18 and started dating when she was 20, was her first boyfriend. She explains that she was consumed by work up until that point and had little time to date, but found herself wanting to turn down jobs to spend time with him. He was a muralist, and then became her manager not long after their wedding. Enjoying what was supposed to be

a temporary gig, he stayed on (I'm told they never fight about work, only trivial who-didn't-change-the-toilet-roll couple stuff).

Ask Conran how he views the Coco Rocha brand, and he says, "I think she's sort of like a rebel in a very non-traditional way. Models are expected to be sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, so to stand aside from that and be a wholesome girl, who's also a model, she's kind of an outlier in that way."

Faith plays a large part in guiding Rocha's professional decisions. Both she and Conran are Jehovah's Witnesses. When I begin to ask questions about her religious beliefs and how they influence her career choices, I'm politely asked to submit the questions over email, as she's nervous about being misrepresented.

In response to my initial question, she writes: "For me personally, respect for God, for family and for others affects my decisions greatly. I try to be consistent in my word and deed, so if I don't smoke or do drugs out of respect for the life God has given me, then I'm not going to portray that in an image, either. I try to make choices that make sense with who I am as a person and what I value."

It has been reported that Rocha and Conran preach door to door on occasion. I wonder if she is ever recognised and, if so, are people more – or less – receptive to what she has to say? She responds: "I do go door to door as much as I can. We do it because it was one of the last things Jesus asked his disciples to do at the end of the book of Matthew – to teach others the good news contained in the Bible."

"I've been recognised as a model a handful of times, but usually, if people listen to me, it's because they are at a point in their life where they have a spiritual need. Some people we find are genuinely searching for answers to questions they have had their whole life, and we are happy to try to help them find the answers in the Bible. Others we come across aren't at all interested in what we have to say, and we certainly respect that, also."

Over the years, Rocha has gained a reputation for being outspoken, fuelled by the unfiltered way in which she uses social media to get her views across. She fights for the rights of younger models through her involvement with the non-profit Model Alliance, and advised her protégées on last year's series of reality-TV show *The Face* that staying true to their values was worth more than any job.

"Yes, of course it stemmed from me being religious, but it's also about what I stand for in the industry, for the young girls, as well," she explains of her moral position. "[For example] if they don't want to wear fur, how can they ►

HAIR: TRAVIS BALCKE. MAKE-UP: KANAKO. MANICURIST: MAYUMI ABEKUKU

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step up to the challenge and be able to say, ‘No, thank you,’ and stand for what they believe in?”

Far from the cliché of the mute model who acts as a blank canvas, Rocha enters the fray. When, in 2010, *New York Daily News* asked the question (albeit incredulously): “Is she too fat to be [a] runway model?”, Rocha responded by posting “My Uncensored Point of View” on her blog, expressing her concerns about the pressure for models to be rail thin. She sees her social-media presence as part of her job and advises young models to take ownership of their image. And it’s a great way to control it, too, I point out.

“WE LIKE TO DO EVERYTHING DIFFERENT”

“That’s the best part,” she says. “You control what you’re sharing with people. There isn’t this secret website finding all the information. It’s, in fact, you.” Then there’s ‘Uncle Terry’. Successful celebrity and fashion photographer Terry Richardson, who favours young, near-naked girls in his images, has been repeatedly accused of sexual harassment by models he’s shot. Rocha has voiced her disapproval. “I’ve said I won’t work with Terry, but the issue of sexual harassment is bigger than him,” she explains. “There are a lot of

people in our industry that you don’t even know about.” Rocha says she hopes to help cultivate an environment where shoots are safe for young models and girls can speak up if they’re uncomfortable. “When we hear a story, we should be paying attention, making sure it’s true, then working out what we can change about it. That’s something we’re all trying to do – me, The Model Alliance and others out there who are wanting to protect models.” This maternal instinct should serve her well in the coming year. In October, Rocha and Conran announced her pregnancy via a controversial 15-second video posted on

Facebook. It was shot using ‘the rig’, a set-up involving 100 cameras capturing images of Rocha’s bodysuit-clad baby bump from 360 degrees (she used the same technique in *Study of Pose*). The clip ended with the words “Baby Conran arriving spring 2015”. Commentators found fault with the accompanying music, a nursery rhyme that, paired with her blank expression, was described as “creepy” and “scary”. “We like to do everything different, so of course our pregnancy announcement had to be different,” laughs Rocha. ►



MODEL MUM-TO-BE (clockwise from above) Coco Rocha and husband James Conran; the model’s pregnancy-announcement video; in New York in September.

And what of the reaction? “If people are disturbed by the musical choice, which is a little music box, a child’s thing, then they’ve got bigger problems.” Rocha says she’s more than ready to embrace the changes motherhood will bring – both physically and to her lifestyle. “I’m always looking at photos of women with a big bump and I’m kind of jealous,” she laughs. “When is this going to happen? Right now, I just feel like I ate a burrito. I can’t wait to experience [the definite feeling of pregnancy] for sure.” Renovations on Rocha and Conran’s home in Westchester, New York, were finished earlier this year. She laughs about her attempts to cook without poisoning Conran and finding him commando-crawling across the living room, so as not to disturb the deer at the

window. After living in Manhattan earlier in their marriage, it seems as if they are happily settling into a quieter family life. “For sure,” she agrees. “We got this house knowing we’d want to raise a family in it. It’s not a shock; we’ve definitely been thinking about it.” Being “the type of person who likes to prepare”, Rocha found out the sex of #BabyConran and posted a video of the ultrasound of her “little lady” on Oh So Coco. I mention the recent launch of her book and publicity trips to China and Canada, noting that pregnancy hasn’t seemed to slow her down. “I’ve been feeling good, so we’ve been continuing on until the baby shows,” she says. “I can’t wait to have the baby and then I’ll be out for a while. I’m excited to just be Mummy.” **S** FOLLOW ALICE ON TWITTER @ALICEWASLEY *Study of Pose* (HarperCollins, \$79.99), by Steven Sebring and Coco Rocha, is out now.

(above) **COCO WEARS** Calvin Klein top and skirt, calvinklein.com (right) By Johnny dress, byjohnny.com.au

