

Mia Khalifa by Linder

Photographer Hazel Gaskin, Stylist Armelle Leturcq



Right page, "Dois Dappled Velvet Devore" dress in neon blue *Acne Studios*, Body chain *Sheytan*
"Jenna" necklace (worn as headpiece) *Justine Clenquet*
Previous page, "Toto Vis Crepe" top, "Ioshy Vis Crepe" skirt and "Crushed Cans" necklace *Acne Studios*
Photomontage Linder, Courtesy Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery





"Beaf Mule W" shoe in grass green *Acne Studios*
Left page, "Duda Devore Faille" dress in lime yellow *Acne Studios*, Rosary beads *Set designer's own*, Rings *Mia's own*
Photomontage Linder, Courtesy Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery



"Dissa Changeant Chiffon G" dress *Acne Studios*
Right page, "Kangelene Floral Applique Show" top and "Keelah Floral Applique Show" skirt in chocolate brown *Acne Studios*
Photomontage Linder, Courtesy Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery





"Toto Vis Crepe" top, "Ioshy Vis Crepe" skirt, "Crushed Cans" necklace *Acne Studios*, Earrings *Mia's own*
Right page, "Dissa Changeant Chiffon G" dress *Acne Studios*, Ring *Tétier x La Manso*, Bracelet *Mia's own*
Previous page, "Duda Devore Faille" dress in lime yellow *Acne Studios*, Rosary beads *Set designer's own*, Rings *Mia's own*, Hand chain *Shbeytan*
Photomontage Linder, Courtesy Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery





Left page, "Kangelene Floral Applique Show" top and "Keelah Floral Applique Show" skirt in chocolate brown *Acne Studios*
Photomontage Linder, Courtesy Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery

Artist Linder, Talent Mia Khalifa, Photographer Hazel Gaskin, Stylist Armelle leturcq,
Make up Kristina Andrews, Hair Sophie Jane Anderson, Set Design Lyndon Ogbourne, Stylist Assistant Roisin Breen
Photo Assistants Jamie Shipston, Will Corry, Production Ella Kenny at Noir Productions.



Mia Khalifa was born in Beirut in 1993 and later moved to the United States where she continues to live and work today. Her short career in the adult entertainment industry could be credited for her rapid rise to fame and viral status, but in 2016 she officially decided to retire from the porn industry and focus instead on other aspects of her life. Her interpersonal journey led her to become one of the most acclaimed figures on social media both for her past, which many have described as controversial, and also for her personality and her deconstruction and indictment of the sex industry, which has led her to lecture on the subject around the world, cautioning those susceptible to falling prey to an often deceptive and flourishing industry.

Linder Sterling, born in Liverpool and known commonly as Linder, is a British artist best known for her photographs, photomontages and performances that focus on femininity, feminism and its various conflicts and contrasts. In April, we met Linder for an interview (available on *crash.fr*) on the occasion of her exhibition *The Groom* at Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery in Paris. During the conversation, Linder expressed that she would love to do a project with Mia Khalifa and thus this project was born in which Linder photographed Mia in the Church of Mary Magdalene in London, dressed exclusively in Acne Studios...

LINDER STERLING When we were trying to find the right location for the photo shoot, we wanted a safe space, one of sanctuary even. It felt like a good omen that the only location available in the whole of London that day was the Church of Mary Magdalene: she who has the perfume of holy darkness around her, to quote the writer and diviner Selah Saterstrom. You were raised as a Catholic in Lebanon, you mentioned that your grandmother always had lots of rosaries around when you were growing up. As a child, did you have a sense of heaven and hell, good and bad, sin and virtue?

MIA KHALIFA Oh my God, the Catholic guilt is instilled in you from birth! It is crippling! You cannot breathe without someone saying that you should be thankful for your breath because there are people who don't have breath, and if you are not thankful for every breath you take, then you are doing a disservice to God! I think that I still carry anxiety like that from my Catholic upbringing. There is definitely a sense of shame, heaven, hell, good, evil: all of these things that for some reason Catholics need to have in a very black-and-white form. There is no room for

nuance and it is very frustrating to me. LS Regardless of which faith one follows, do you think that it's hard to erase the dichotomous thinking of good and bad learned in our formative years?

MK Yes, but that has me thinking much more broadly, notably about the research into the ages where you absorb things like a sponge and then carry them for the rest of your life, either subconsciously or overtly. It's especially important to be aware around children between the ages of two to seven because what you instill in them during those early years that affects them even more than what they learn in their teenage years. Even if they grow out of childhood indoctrination and go on to form their own opinions and make their own decisions, I think that inherently there is still that underlying feeling of doing something bad or constantly feeling like you are in trouble.

LS A lot of the moral absorption from adults around us happens on a somatic level, sometimes it's only during therapeutic analysis in later life that we realise how burdened we are with formative experiences from childhood.

Today, when we examine some of the language used in the narratives

surrounding Mary Magdalene, we see it as a form of slut-shaming, everything attempt was made was to de-rank her within the church. Many women have been slut-shamed, including you for the characters that you've played in front of the camera. You were acting, often under duress but some people find it hard to separate you from the characters that you played.

Thinking about pornography in its original sense of "the writing of prostitutes", do you think that the language, narratives and consumption of pornography can ever be ethical?

MK I don't, even though I don't think that's a very popular answer to give, especially in the sex work sphere. I think there are a lot of women in that field who do not see me as a positive force or spokesperson for it. That's why I try not to be a spokesperson for it, since my experience has been an outlier compared to theirs. I'm not speaking from the same experience as they are, so I think my position comes off as a lot more privileged. I am in complete agreement though in that I do not think there is an ethical way to consume porn. If we take Only Fans, for example, you're creating your page,

you're the one doing whatever you want on it, but at the end of the day it's putting money in the pocket of a conglomerate owned by a company that also own the tube sites that are promoting underage sex, housing rape videos, and contributing to the sex trafficking industry. All of these things that are so evil. Even Only Fans is feeds into this, so at the end of the day I don't think there is an ethical way to consume porn.

LS Pornography is all to do with profit.

MK Yes, it's the oldest profession in history, so of course the industry surrounding it has found a way to dig its claws into it and not let go. I don't see that changing ever, but there are ways to make it safer for women. I think it starts with legislation. The contracts are what need to change first and foremost, and then we can worry about other things. All these young girls who are getting trapped in these contracts, putting aside for a moment the crime of sex trafficking, even the legal production of porn is extremely unethical, so I think the contract verbiage and law needs to change.

LS As we know, there are people agitating for change around the world but it's a

Mia Khalifa, interview by Linder

slow process because the opposition is so powerful and it's so difficult to track the perpetrators down. Racism often runs hand in hand with misogyny, did you get a double whammy when the haters began?

MK Absolutely, and I think it's still there. Just a few days ago, I got into a little back-and-forth with a woman on Twitter after I announced the launch of my brand. Her entire conversation towards me was that I haven't apologized for sexualizing the hijab. This is a very common thing that I get, to the point that it's yelled at me on the streets. Leaving a fashion show last season, a girl yelled at me that I need to apologize to Muslim women. I was shocked, because I have given people the government names of everyone who was involved in writing that script. I don't understand why people are so hellbent on going after me.

I was twenty years old when I made those films and I even tried to say no. I told the creators it was a bad idea and that they were going to get me killed for what they were asking me to do. There is only so much you can do at that age though. You're scared to say no and afraid of what is going to

happen to you if you say yes. Of course, I knew no one would force me to do anything, but that's not how anxiety works and it's not how you rationalize things when you are young and on put on the spot in the room. It's not like you get the script in advance. You get your make-up done, put your clothes on and then they tell you what's going to happen. At that point, you feel like you can't say no. It's frustrating to see how much race plays into it, but I think it all comes back to religious extremism, which I guess is the main theme of our conversation today.

LS Returning to Mary Magdalene, I found a quote by Bernadino de Siena, in which he lists her many sins. He said Mary Magdalene's third sin was "through her hair... she did all that she could to make herself more blonde". I was intrigued to see how you would look wearing a blonde wig. There is so much mythology around blondeness and purity, at the same time blonde hair also seems to signal sexual availability. How did it feel to be blonde for an hour?

MK Honestly, it felt amazing! The wig was toned to a beautiful shade of blonde, there was no brassiness to it. I don't think there was a single crime

committed with that wig, it was so much fun to be blonde! I'm obsessed with those photos. I've never seen or imagined myself like that and I can now say that blondes really do have more fun. I want to be blonde again. I want to have a wig made up like that just to put on whenever I want. I've never dressed up and felt like I was different person before. I think it may be an alter ego that I will have to bring back. It was empowering!

LS There are many relics of Mary Magdalene, not only strands of her blonde hair but also her tears. You wore beautiful fake tears in her church as an homage. The Victorians especially loved tear catchers, known as lacrymatories from the greek origin of the word. Victorians were constantly catching their tears! So what makes you cry?

MK Everything! I cry over anything that moves me: anything that makes me happy, sad, excited... I feel like it's such a freeing thing. I don't think there is anything wrong with crying. But I'm also always very surprised and happy when I cry, because I feel like it's a barometer for something good. If I'm moved to that point, it's always a green flag for me. I can tell the difference

between crying from sadness, release or heartbreak versus crying from unadulterated emotion, and I love that. It's a great guiding light for me.

LS We're all expected now to have some sort of label by which people can identify us. At the moment, you identify as a designer, a spokeswoman and also an influencer. I wanted to investigate the origins of "influencer" and I see that the word "influence" emerges from astrology in the 14th century and it means "streaming ethereal power from the stars acting upon one's character and destiny." It's extraordinary! The word points towards flow and never being stuck in one fixed position. Being an influencer is a very fluid role, in some ways it's all about shapeshifting but on the flipside, were there ever any times in your life when you felt completely stuck and unable to escape from the unwanted opinions of other people?

MK There was a four or five-year period in my early to mid twenties when I felt like there was nothing else that I could do with my life. I had never seen anyone do anything else post-adult industry, so I didn't think change was possible. Going to therapy helped and

Of course, I knew no one would force me to do anything, but that's not how anxiety works and it's not how you rationalize things when you are young and on put on the spot in the room. It's not like you get the script in advance. You get your make-up done, put your clothes on and then they tell you what's going to happen.

There was a four or five-year period in my early to mid twenties when I felt like there was nothing else that I could do with my life. I had never seen anyone do anything else post-adult industry, so I didn't think change was possible. Going to therapy helped and getting older and wiser also played a huge role, but I felt stuck and it was really scary.

getting older and wiser also played a huge role, but I felt stuck and it was really scary. I think I'm most proud of myself in that period for not falling back into what people expected of me and struggling for a few years: driving a car in Florida with no air conditioning and living in a cockroach-infested 400 sq foot little space but it was worth it for me. I think I'm most proud of that time period, more so than of anything I've built or done since then. Not doing something was breaking barriers for me at that time as was not going back to what I was expected to do. There were so many people in my life who were saying it was just a matter of time before I would go back to the industry, so there were a lot of outside influences trying to keep me down. It was a very slow climb, it definitely didn't happen overnight. What really gave me confidence was seeing myself grow, even though I wasn't making money. I had millions of followers on Instagram, but I was dead broke. I was seeing growth and an audience being built, simply from me talking about my interests. I wasn't using social media as a career, since I was working in an office back then, but more as a little soap box for my insane musings. That helped me grow my confidence to think that I was not just known for this one thing but what I've built since this.

LS Did that stuck period become the psychic container for your liberation? Once the "streaming power of stars" had started to flow, after you had done the work, been in therapy and lived amidst the cockroaches? Followed by the glorious moment when the butterfly emerges from the cocoon. If you look at

cocoons they're usually brown, drab and seemingly dead. As soon as the butterfly comes out though, it's beautiful...

MK I love the imagery of the butterfly. In fourth grade, we did a project where each one of us had a caterpillar in an incubator. It formed a cocoon and then we all released our butterflies when they emerged. It was one of the best projects I've ever done! I love that imagery and I think about it all the time. I think about my incubation period when I was in the tiny ugly brown cocoon, and also about what comes from that, what patience can bring. No one sees the work you're doing on the inside, all they see is the ugly brown cocoon.

LS When you started acting in front of the camera in the adult industry, you took your beloved dog's name Mia, which is a very tender and reassuring gesture. Then you plucked a rapper's surname from the air, Wiz Khalifa. Did your new name offer you a cloak of invisibility, even when you were at your most denuded? What powers did your new name grant you and at what point did the name feel like a curse?

MK When I first came up with the name, they said: "Can you pick a different name? Mia is too slutty." (*laughs*) I was more offended because it was my baby's name and they just called it slutty! If they had said anything else, I would have changed it but it's not slutty! Khalifa seemed like the safest Arabic word, because the Burj Khalifa and Wiz Khalifa were popular at the time. Immediately after my first few months in the industry, I started to feel like my name was a curse. I realized that this was because of all the shame I

harbored around it. I used to cringe when I heard the name in public. I hated hearing it, even though I didn't do anything to change it. It got better once I grew out of my shame and learned to forgive and accept myself. I still felt protective over it, because it was my dog's name! I'm not going to stop using it just because other people think I should stop using it. If anyone has claim to it, it's me. I'm proud of myself for growing out of my shame, because now I feel nothing and that's the best I can hope for. My reaction was more a reflection of how I felt about what I had done with the name, and now I'm proud of it.

LS Do you use your two names for two different aspects of yourself? Do Sarah and Mia ever argue?

MK It's such a blend of both, to the point that when someone asks me which one I prefer, my honest answer is whatever comes to mind first. I'm very impartial to it, and I think that has to do with the fact that Sarah is Mia. I don't have a different personality online other than who I am, and I think that helps me mentally. I think a lot of other people in my situation struggle with having these two sides to them, a public-facing persona versus who they are as a person. In reality, I'm proud of how much I've been both. A rose by any other name is still a smelly rose! I think the mask I take off is my extrovert mask, because I'm a severe introvert to the point where I need to stare at a blank wall for hours after I do a fashion show.

LS Speaking of names, can you tell me all about Sheytan? Everyone in the world wants to know about your jewelry right now, what can you tell me about it?

MK Everyone wants to know about the name! We knew that would happen, but I'm still taken aback by how struck people are on the name. I thought it would be the same group of people who are always stuck on anything that has to do with religious extremism. Everyone's a little more fascinated by it than I had originally expected. I don't have much to say about the name except that it's cheeky! Get over it! It's body jewellery! We're going to get called little devils for dressing the way we do anyway, so that name makes the most sense for the brand.

LS There is something so fluid about the sheytan aesthetic, it definitely has the "streaming ethereal power from the stars"! It looks both divine and devilish. Are there any other avenues of design you would eventually like to explore?

MK Of course! Even before we launched, we had been working on plenty of other things. We wanted to launch with a core collection though to show what the brand is all about. In the future, we have so many other things we want to do outside of Sheytan. It's given me confidence to believe I can design in other areas, even if it's just for fun. A friend of mine owns a vintage furniture shop, and he suggested we make a chair. So we took a beautiful set of vintage chairs he found, ordered a bunch of Jean-Paul Gaultier fabric samples, decided on one and now we are in the process of making the chair! It's exciting for me to feel confident doing these projects. I think it's also a testament to having creative people around me. My partners are the ones who pushed me to see that if I want something, then there is nothing stopping me from

designing something for my own house.

LS This design process can then radiate outwards from your home because it's in the nature of creativity to want to share your ideas with other people. This is just the beginning for you, isn't it?

MK That's what it feels like. This entire year has made me understand that saying that life starts after thirty. I think it's because you have the confidence, the resources, the wits. Everything clicks into place after a certain age. Now I feel like I'm in a race against time to do everything I want to do.

LS I hope that the Mia mansion happens one day! When Hugh Hefner realized that he could wear pyjamas all the time, he was so happy, like a little boy. You love your robes though?

MK Robes are my preferred clothing. I have one that has little feathers on the trim. I have one that is heavy and velour. There's a robe for every mood!

LS You've been very open about your body and how your curves and contours have changed over the years. Were there times when your curves excluded you from participating in fashion?

MK I think the biggest assault on society is low-rise pants! That era in the early 2000s is the reason for all my self-esteem issues. I grew up so chubby and the only thing that was in fashion was low-rise pants. It ruined me. With everyone I saw on TV and in magazines, it was like three miles of flat stomach. I still can't wear low-rise jeans! Maybe that's body dysmorphia that I need to work through, but I still feel excluded from fitting into that. I will say that it has gotten much better though. It's not perfect and I don't know if it ever will be.

LS Fashion often co-opts the visual language of pornography. Is there a danger though when fashion flirts with pornographic postures? Does it glamorize the often grim reality of pornography?

MK My thoughts are less about the danger of promoting pornography, but rather in the appropriation of it and the continued exclusion of the people who they are building these foundations off of. Certain brands try to drive home porn-positive and sex-positive messages, but at the end of the day they are not doing the work. They are often still the ones closing doors in the faces of people who have any relation to that industry. They continue to gate-keep and look down on sex workers. They are building all these aesthetic things off the backs of sex workers, and sex workers aren't seeing any acceptance or inclusion in this industry. My issue is more with the appropriation, even though the glamorization is also inherently dangerous. Glorification of sex work is hugely problematic and I find it borderline grooming. If you talk too positively about it, it grooms young women who are in vulnerable positions and mindsets into thinking that it is something empowering and positive. You have to lead with the negatives and all the issues that come along with it.

LS For fashion brands, it's a way to be sexy or edgy. But for the people working in that industry, it's beyond edgy. They're very vulnerable...

MK It's topical considering that a soundtrack to one fashion show was just moans from porn. I see the fashion industry leaning more into the salacious aspect of porn, but using it like

that is dangerous and wrong. It's hard to have this conversation because of freedom of speech but there is an inherent responsibility you have to have when you put out work like this, because it's consumed globally by so many young people. There needs to be a sense of responsibility with what you are putting out there and what mantras you are subconsciously implementing into these kids' heads. I've been on a set where I've had to have them change the set completely, because they thought it would be a good idea to put me in a pink dorm room with pigtales. When you put that together, the tone and message is not something that needs to be perpetuated. I'm a thirty-year-old woman. I don't need to be in a pink room with pigtales. Pick one!

LS Looking through old playboys and other vintage porn magazines, there's a repeated trope of a young nude model in a bedroom holding a cuddly toy. It's an unsettling genre, still around in the mainstream.

MK I don't know how deep we want to get, but I think it also touches on society's pandering to pedophilia. I feel a visceral need to protect young women. If you take a fully-grown, thirty-five year-old woman and dress her up like a child, you are inherently sexualizing a child and endangering young women.

LS As someone who was shown pornography at a very young age, I believe that we absorb messages about the world on a deeply somatic level as children. I think that we're in the scariest time now in terms of how fashion and pornography are interweaving. If you then stir artificial intelligence into the mix...

MK I'm happy that the conversation is becoming more widespread, and that one of the most jarring things that has come out of the writers' guild strike has been the conversation the studios are having about using the licensing and image of actors. I'm happy that mainstream and traditional media are having this conversation because no one listens to people from the porn industry. It needs to be the privileged who feel the need to make a change for it to become a blanket law for everybody.

LS It's true that it has to come from the "influence of the stars". They have the influence and they can cast whoever is needed, because they have the clout...

MK This strike could truly be the catalyst for the next great economic revolution, because the two things are in place for it. There are two currencies in the world: fame and money. The two people who seem to have all of it, the famous and the wealthy, are the ones who are protesting and are out there saying that we need change. So they might be the ones who are going to change the world after all!

LS Lastly, just before meeting you, I read Najja Jraisaty Khoury's book of fairy tales that she'd collected in Lebanon. Her heroines are resilient, funny and creative, I caught glimpses of you in so many of her stories. Maybe the starriness of being one of the most important influencers on the plant means that you can radically save the world in some way? Mia Khalifa as superwoman? Now that you are thirty, I see you taking flight just like that beautiful butterfly did after you opened up the jar! Thank you and let's stick together now! ■