

Roxane Mesquida is not a model. It's a stifling, humid day, the height of summer, and all of a sudden the air in the expansive photographic studio has become too thick to breathe. Moments earlier, Mesquida had been moving sinuously; her head rolling dreamily, hypnotically, her eyes smouldering at the camera. Now she is dead still, fixing the photographer with a look that has elsewhere been described as a "glowering bad-girl glare". He has asked her to stop 'modelling', and now, her reverie broken, she fixes him in her striking gaze and purrs: "But I'm *not* a model."

Mesquida, we clarify later, has every reason to be sensitive on the subject. In her native France, where she has been a film actress since the age of 14, raw, breathtaking beauty - the kind she possesses - is not revered as it is in other parts of the Western world. As she explains: "In France, there is something weird about being an actor. I feel like people would never say, 'I want to be an actor', like it is superficial or something, not serious enough." She smiles, and chooses her next words carefully. "France is very, uh, they don't love beautiful people. You have to be smart, really smart to be respected. You have to work even harder if you are pretty than if you are less pretty, I feel."

That is not to say that, ultimately, her appearance has been a hinderance. She has appeared in countless glossy publications (including the infinitely more sophisticated French version of Playboy), has worked with some of the world's most renowned fashion photographers, and despite her dramatic turn during the fashion shoot - she and the photographer in question were, in actual fact, *simpatico* in every respect - she truly enjoys the process. "Promoting a movie, is so much about photo shoots, but I love it. I love the relationship between a photographer and his model." Mesquida knows her stance is not typical in an industry that now expects their movie stars to be cover stars also: "I sometimes see my friends, other actresses, they are very uncomfortable taking pictures and they don't want to change anything, they want to look like themselves. To me, it's like being in a movie. It's the same way I approach that. I try to be as sincere as possible".

For Mesquida, it's all an extension of her craft: "I like to explore different aspects of my personality. I don't know the word in English but (in French) it's '*exutoire*'. It's like when you express something and you feel better because you express it." The word translates to 'outlet' in English yet what she is describing seems to go deeper than that; it's as though she means to say that her work is cathartic. She agrees, referencing her role in the new film directed by pop-auteur Gregg Araki. "Sometimes I use movies for that - like *Kaboom*, I play a girl who is a lesbian witch. She has this relationship with a girl and she is so in love, but this girl leaves her, and she gets totally crazy trying to get her back. So I tried to use that feeling when someone that you loves leaves you and you don't know what you can do and what you're not supposed to do. You want to call 100 times and you can't! It's amazing that I was able to do everything that you are not able to do in real life."

Mesquida has been acting out her fantasies onscreen since she was barely a teenager. Born in Marseilles, to an Algerian mother and an Italian father, she spent her formative years in the tiny village of Le Pradet. From an early age, she considered creativity paramount: "My brother is a musician, and my mum is a writer. I think growing up in this family, art is the most important thing in the world to me." She harboured dreams of attending art school, even considered becoming an English teacher, however a chance encounter was to alter her life in an unimaginable way. "I was 13, living in this very small town in the south of France. One day I was out walking, and a director was driving around trying to find locations for his new movie, his first movie actually. He saw me walking, stopped his car and said, 'Oh, do you want to audition for my movie?' I really didn't want to be an actress. I was really surprised - I thought he was a tourist asking his way. So I said, 'Yeah, why not' and he hired me for his movie. So I got my first role."

The initially reluctant actress found that a whole new world opened up to her. "I fell in love with being on a set, because it was really new for me to be so comfortable with strangers. I think that's why I loved it at first." The film, *Marie Baies des Anges*, directed by Manuel Pradel, caught the attention of another director who was to become Mesquida's mentor, close friend and collaborator: Catherine Breillat. Their first film, *Fat Girl (À ma souer)* was the first of three they have since made together. Mesquida's face lights up when she talks about Breillat. "She is so strong and an

amazing director. She made me love my job for the real reason, and she made me love independent movies, very arty movies. I just got really lucky, I think, because when you start working with very interesting people, that attracts other interesting people.”

Despite her flourishing career, Mesquida finished her studies in La Pradet before taking the next, seemingly natural step. “I moved to Paris just after high school, because I didn’t want my life to change, I think I was really scared of that. I moved there because it’s easier to be in Paris and do movies. And then I got tired of Paris.”

After completing *The Last Mistress (Une Vielle Maîtresse)* in 2007 - another Breillat production - Mesquida decided to “just pack up and go to New York”. It was a brave move; she didn’t know anybody there, her English faltered in the midst of fast-talking Americans and even foreign names confounded her. Yet she persevered, enrolling at the Barrow Group, an acting school that is a breeding ground for Young Hollywood and Broadway. “I had never taken any acting lessons, had never been to theatre school, and I really wanted to do that. It was amazing to me. I learned so much - how American people work. They’re not so lazy, they work so hard, like it’s their last chance. That wasn’t something I had seen in France. It was really good for me. Now I work so hard. I’m more prepared when I do a movie.”

While Paris, and the insular French film industry, had lost some of its lustre, she found New York harsh and unyielding. “They are both amazing places, I love going to museums, so I really enjoyed that about New York, but I need to be around positive people. I don’t want to be stressed out about my life. It’s already really stressful to be an actress, because there are a lot of actors and not that many amazing roles. I mean, there a lot of roles, but not really that many that I want to do.”

Mesquida is passionate about film, in fact she’s something of a connoisseur. “I think you need to be a cinephile when you are an actor, so you can understand who you want to work with, and what you want to do. I like ‘popcorn’ movies, but I’m really into independent movies that nobody sees. I also try to see a lot of movies at the festivals. When I went to Cannes, I changed my ‘plane to see two movies that I wanted to see. It’s like food for me.”

It was at Cannes, last year, that she met her American manager, Mimi DiTrani who persuaded her to finally make the move to Los Angeles. Mesquida had been there on a promotion junket and was already enamoured with the place. “I’m really lucky, Mimi is so amazing. She has great taste, I trust her. It was a very big thing for me to meet her, it was one of the best days of my life.” DiTrani evidently supports Mesquida’s yen for offbeat cinema. 2011 has already seen the release of Araki’s *Kaboom*, and a rather unusual film that was directed by a man who is better known as an electro-house DJ: Mr. Oizo.

“It’s called *Rubber*. This guy, Quentin Dupieux made it. It’s about a rubber tyre. The tyre falls in love with me and follows me everywhere. It’s like a horror movie, very inspired by the ’70’s. It’s very funny, a really weird movie because it’s so different. I think it’s really cool,” says Mesquida with obvious glee.

Her current project, which has been shooting all over Europe for the past month, has now brought her here, to Auckland, for the last phase of filming. Called *The Most Fun You Can Have Dying*, it’s the first feature film from New Zealand director and screenwriter Kirstin Marcon. Based on a novel by Stephen Gannaway called *Seraphim Blues*, it’s a twisted love story involving a terminally ill man who misappropriates funds meant for his treatment in order to spend his last days living large. Mesquida is lavish in her praise of both Marcon and the film.

“Kirstin was looking for a French girl, so I got the script from my agent. I said, ‘This is one of the best scripts I have ever read, she’s so talented, I have to do it.’ I went on the internet and saw pictures of her short films and loved that there is something really dark about her work, even if it’s a romance. I can’t wait to see it, because I am so proud. I love her because I feel like she is so talented.”

Mesquida's theory is that if she keeps working with directors, and on films she feels passionate about, her trajectory is assured. Case in point, Marcon initially set her sights on Mesquida due to her work in a previous film. "She saw *Fat Girl* a few years ago and got a really strong impression. She only wanted me to be in the movie, and I'm really thankful for that."

She's clearly enjoyed her time here in New Zealand, teasing the crew at the photo shoot with an impressive array of local vernacular. Her body of work, sharp intellect and palpable onscreen magnetism have already assured her movie star status in France. With her move to the United States, and her second English language film in the can, she is now exploring new horizons.

Still, she remains vehement about her artistic freedom, and the career she has built from one good choice after another. She may have moved to Hollywood - that great machine of celebrity - however her integrity, and reasons for being an actress, are intact. "I think the most important thing is to be happy, whatever you do, and I don't want my happiness to depend on movies. My hope is to keep working with amazing people, like I'm doing," says Mesquida, finally. Don't be surprised if she turns her back on the whole business and runs off to art school one day, like she always dreamed she would. But don't be surprised if she is making her own films in years to come either.