



Tyra Banks Embraces Her Curves and Age on the Cover of SI Swimsuit 2019

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A few months before Tyra Banks was scheduled to be photographed on a sun-soaked Bahamian beach in a skimpy yellow bikini, she flirted with the idea of losing some weight. She had been photographed 23 years earlier on the same island in a different tiny bikini, and thought if she slimmed down folks would marvel, "Tyra looks the same!"

She consulted a nutritionist, cut out carbs and started drinking two liters of water a day. "I know how to control my body," Banks says. "I can lose weight easily."

But then she went to her mama's house. First, Banks got into the -Cheetos. ("They were so good.") Then she started with the ice cream. Not just one flavor, either. She drove to the store and picked up eight pints of vanilla Swiss almond, butter pecan, matcha coffee and strawberry. She set them on the counter with three spoons, and Banks, her mama, and York, her three-year-old son, had themselves an ice cream party. After that, it was pretty much game over for the diet. "I had the F-its!" Banks declares. "I just didn't care. But," she adds, "I know the tricks. Like, the thicker you are, the smaller the swimsuit should be. It makes your curves look more luscious than stuffing yourself into giant underwear-type bottoms. So, I needed a suit that was like dental floss."

Banks is describing the ice cream orgy and the barely-there bikini sitting at a picnic table in a courtyard at Stanford, where she had just finished guest-lecturing the first of a series of three-hour classes on personal branding at the Graduate School of Business. “Project You: Building and Extending Your Personal Brand” is one of the most popular electives in the program.

Banks picks up her phone and scrolls through pictures from the Bahamas photo shoot. At 45, she’s decided to return to modeling. The industry typically uses “mature” models as signifiers of elegance or sophistication. Meaning they are almost always photographed fully clothed. But Banks specifically chose the Swimsuit Issue to announce she is coming out of retirement. This, she says, is where it all began.

Twenty-three years ago, Banks made history as the first African-American model to grace the cover of this publication. She was photographed, smiling brightly, with blonde-haired Valeria Mazza, on pristine sand in South Africa. The following year, Banks earned a solo cover. The now iconic image—sun dappled, thumbs hooked mischievously in the waistband of her pink polka-dot bikini—garnered more newsstands sales than any other Swimsuit Issue in the last three decades.

“Compared to my first SI shoot,” Banks says, peering at photos on her phone, “these pictures are so much . . . saucier.” If by saucy, Banks means over-the-top sexy, then yes, the pics she’s scrolling through—in the bumblebee-yellow string bikini; topless with her hands cupping her breasts; shot from behind with her derriere rising majestically over the waterline of the aquamarine sea—are positively dripping.



“There is this stereotype that only a 20-year-old woman in a bikini is hot,” says Banks. “Like once we reach a certain age, we are no longer desirable. But I want to show that modeling has no age. I’m coming out of retirement to practice what I preach.” That said, Banks’s comeback is also part of a bold new business plan. In a career that has seen Banks crush almost every venture she’s embarked upon—from modeling, to television, to teaching—this next move may be her biggest risk yet.



It’s 11 a.m. on the first day of class and Banks, dressed in a faded navy NFL T-shirt, sweats and sneakers, is balancing on a platform high above a redwood forest, in the Santa Cruz Mountains, about an hour from Stanford. Prompted by Brian, a zip-lining guide at Mount Hermon Adventures, Banks turns around, slides her heels over the end of edge of the platform, then leans back until she is suspended by her safety harness dangling over the 100-foot drop. Banks insists that “the lean back,” a trust exercise, is less scary if you close your eyes. But she keeps hers wide open. She’s going all-in on this insanity during the two-hour zip-lining sesh she’s booked this morning. Apparently, this is how Banks wants to start her day. “I thought I could get my blood going,” she says. Never mind that most people just drink coffee.

Zip-lining leaves Banks with a wicked case of helmet head. But she’s planned for this, too. In the rest room, she slips out of her sweats and into teaching clothes—dark jeans and patent leather heels—and tops off her outfit with a jaunty yellow beret to hide the indentation across her forehead. Then she books it to class with only moments to spare.

“Maybe unconsciously I was trying to put myself in my students’ shoes,” she says of the zip-lining expedition. “Some of them are reserved, and the stuff we ask them to do in class can be very uncomfortable.” Her 25 graduate students include physicians, entrepreneurs and tech wizards—“literal geniuses,” Banks calls them. “Some of them are already changing the world, but they’re so modest.” To apply for the class, students submit a short video describing their personal brand. Banks, who has been guest-lecturing at Stanford for three years, recalls one student: “In his video he said, ‘I’ve done some cool things. But I really don’t know what my brand is.’ It turns out he invented a type of heart valve that has saved thousands of people! I’m teaching students, ‘If you don’t say it, nobody will.’ ” Personal branding is considered an essential business skill. And Banks dominates this game.

“Tyra is an expert at this,” says Allison Kluger, a management lecturer at the grad school, who co-teaches with Banks. Kluger proposed the idea for the class to Banks after hearing her give a speech at the university. “She was talking about pivoting her personal brand,” says Kluger. “She had all these amazing lessons about how to cold-call people and pitch ideas. She’s seriously a marketing genius.”

Banks has an impressive list of accomplishments. She’s founder and CEO of Bankable Productions, a television and film production company, and she heads Tyra Beauty, a cosmetic line. Banks also founded TZONE, a nonprofit aimed at empowering girls and women, and has authored three books, including the young adult best-seller *Modelland*. One estimate puts her net worth at \$90 million. It might be tempting to dismiss these achievements as the spillover gains of hitting the genetic jackpot. But if success were that easy, every supermodel would be a mogul. In reality, Banks’s ascent is the result of a series of carefully planned moves in which the star leveraged her notoriety in one sphere to enter another.

There’s an anecdote Banks likes to share. Think of it as her personal-branding origin story. At 19, she was two years into a successful career as a high-fashion model when her agent in Milan informed her that she was getting too curvy. Several top designers no longer wanted Banks to walk in their shows. Banks’s mother, Carolyn London, took her out for pizza and to devise a plan. Her mother told Tyra to write down the names of companies that liked curves, or as she put it at the time: “Who likes ass?” On the white butcher paper covering the table Tyra scrawled *VICTORIA’S SECRET* and *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*.



“Those are your new clients,” her mom declared. With that, Tyra made the decision to pivot. She bounced from the exclusive world of high fashion and landed, spectacularly, on the cover of one of the most prominent arbiters of male heterosexual desirability in America. It was more than a savvy business move. “SI changed my life,” says Banks.

Before the pink polka-dot bikini, Banks was known mostly among fashion insiders and fans. “But after SI, my Q Score went to No. 1. Suddenly, I had household-name status. I was reaching young, old, male, female—everybody,” she recalls.

“It was a game changer,” adds cultural critic Michaela Angela Davis. “At the time mainstream America did not identify black women as sexy, beautiful or desirable. But here you had an American institution, read by everyone from subscribers to women on Madison Avenue, with a brown girl on the cover. And she was gazing right at you. It was steamy, wonderful and amazing.”

By the early 2000s, Banks had positioned herself as a one-woman media juggernaut. She'd left modeling for good and was focusing all her energy on television, making her mark as the refreshingly candid big-sister patron saint of young women everywhere. Covering hot topics like relationships, sex and self-esteem, her eponymous daytime talk show debuted in 2005, immediately capturing the 18-to-34 demo and winning two Daytime Emmys. Even more impressive was the success of America's Next Top Model.

Banks's brainchild became one of the longest-running competition reality shows of all time, airing in 180 countries and spawning 40 international versions. The show features contestants vying for a modeling contract. But Banks is undeniably the star. One of her many skills is an uncanny ability to coin instantly meme-able phrases, like flawsome—a portmanteau of flaws and awesome, as in, when your quirk turns out to be your greatest asset—and booty tooch, which you should probably just google.

Banks also made sure the aspiring models featured on the show represented a range of ethnicities and beauty ideals, promoting diversity in the fashion industry before it became cool. There were nerdy girls and curvy girls, a model with vitiligo, another with alopecia. The most recent cycle included a 42-year-old grandmother.

In front of her class, just like on her shows, Banks dispenses wisdom in bite-sized catchphrases. “Perfect is boring,” she proclaims (which is also the title of the 2018 memoir she cowrote with her mother), and “different is better than better.” She exhorts her students to embrace their vulnerabilities while reminding them, “Your personal brand needs to be so strong that you can withstand anything. If you fall down, you can get back up!” The students lean forward, in rapt attention.

Banks, who in 2012 completed an executive training program at Harvard Business School, peppers her lecture with plenty of personal anecdotes. But she doesn't share her biggest business news of all. Banks is leveraging two decades of fame (or, as they say in business school, “brand equity”) to launch her most ambitious project to date: Modelland, a one-stop wonderland of all things fierce. “It's like Disneyland for beauty and fashion,” Banks explains.

Scheduled to open later this year, in a 21,000-square-foot space just steps from the Santa Monica Pier, Modelland will give visitors the experience of being a model for a day. There's going to be “amazing food and delightful shopping,” she adds. “The whole family can have fun.”

The attraction also has an elaborate backstory. “Modelland is a fictitious modeling academy,” Banks explains. “A really negative place, with very narrow confines of beauty. However, a girl named Tookie De La Crème—who also stars in Modelland, the novel—with a big forehead gets accepted to Modelland, and she has no idea why. While at school, Tookie and her squad of atypical beauties change the face of beauty worldwide.” Banks grins: “It's kind of like me 20 years ago, but Tookie's getting the credit.”

Banks calls Modelland, which she's been developing for the past decade, “the biggest dream I've ever had.” But like all things Banks, the endeavour is about much more than bringing modeling to the masses. It's a celebration of reinvention, fantasy and, as she puts it, “finding your fiercest self.” Most of all Banks aims to inspire playful abandon. Like that feeling you get when you have an ice cream party before a swimsuit shoot. Which brings Tyra back to what she is doing on the cover of this magazine dressed in nothing but a dental-floss bikini.

“I am telling people that beauty comes in all shapes, sizes and ages” she says. “I have to put my money where my mouth is. I have to make sure my message is pure.” Banks, who signed with a new modeling agency, NEXT, in April, is also adopting a new moniker for her comeback. Banks, the model, will from now on go by BanX, with the X representing X-ing out cookie-cutter beauty. “Mononyms are exciting in the industry,” she says. “But usually models use their first names, like Iman. I want to flip the script and go by my last name. I’m taking something familiar and making it new. I’m wiser now,” she adds, “and thicker. BanX is me, but she’s also every woman. BanX represents rebirth and that beauty boundaries only exist to be broken.”

Jeannine Amber lives and writes in Brooklyn. This is her first story for Sports Illustrated. You can reach her on Twitter @jamberstar

