

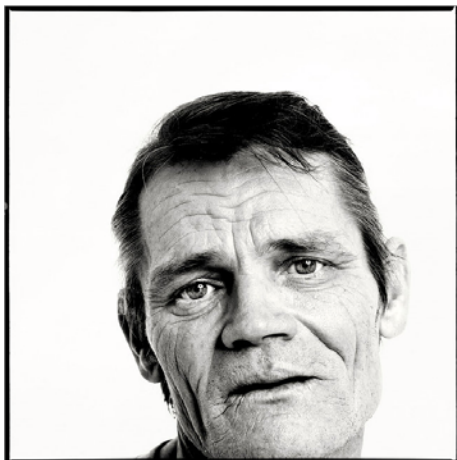
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Avedon, Breaking Through the Artifice of Celebrity

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER



Among the anecdotes circulated about the legendary photographer Richard Avedon (1923-2004) is one involving the Duke and Duchess of Windsor — that is, King Edward VIII of England and Wallis Simpson, the American divorcée he married after abdicating the throne.

In 1957, Avedon was commissioned to take a portrait of the couple, who were notoriously photo-savvy — way ahead of the curve of today’s paparazzi-beleaguered movie stars and royals. Knowing that they were dog lovers, obsessed with their own collection of pugs, Avedon is said to have told them that the taxi he had taken to meet them had run over a dog (which wasn’t true). The couple grimaced sympathetically, and — snap! — Avedon took the picture, which is on view in “Richard Avedon: Photographer of Influence” at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor.

The photograph’s title is very specific: “The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Waldorf Astoria, Suite 28A, New York, April 16, 1957.” And yet, it doesn’t tell us anything about its making.

The moral of the story: don’t take photographs at face value. We know this, and yet, photographs look so truthful, we continually forget. Avedon never forgot, though.

Born in New York in 1923, he was the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants working in the garment industry. His father owned a Manhattan clothing store, and his mother’s family, a dress manufacturing business. It was no surprise, then, that Avedon would grow up reading fashion magazines and gain recognition, initially, as a fashion photographer. By the time he photographed the Windsors, he was famous enough to inspire an alter ego in film: Fred Astaire’s fashion-photographer character in “Funny Face” (1957).

Some of his best-known fashion images are included in the exhibition. Early ones like “Elise Daniels With Street Performers, Suit by Balenciaga, Le Marais, Paris, August 1948” fuse street photography and fashion, and show the influence of Henri Cartier-Bresson (who fused Surrealism and photojournalism). Ms. Daniels catches our eye only after we see a contortionist perched on a table, although the captions in a magazine layout would have guided us toward the clothes faster.

Fashion images from the '50s and '60s capture proto-supermodels like Dovima, Suzy Parker, Jean Shrimpton, Penelope Tree and Veruschka in inventive street settings, and later, against the stark minimalist backdrops for which Avedon became known. Photographs of Veruschka from 1967 — one in a Bill Blass dress, the other in a dress by Kimberly — find her leaping through space, like a bird or a dancer, rather than posing as a static mannequin hung with clothes.

Outside the fashion world, however, Avedon is best known for his portraits. In the age of movements that challenged institutional authority, like those for civil rights and against the Vietnam War, Avedon's portraits broke through the glossy artifice of celebrity and official power and seemed more authentic.

We can see Avedon playing by the old rules in “Marlene Dietrich, Turban by Dior, the Ritz, Paris, August 1955”: we get the sultry Dietrich — smoking, of course — presented exactly as we imagine her. As the '50s wore on, however, reverence and rules were stripped away. Marilyn Monroe, photographed in 1957, appears not as a vamping starlet, but as a vulnerable, “real” actress. The elderly Igor Stravinsky is photographed in 1969 in a white shirt against a white backdrop, looking more like a hospital patient than a celebrated composer. Grizzled versions of Ezra Pound and Chet Baker hang alongside a bloated Truman Capote, calling to mind an anecdote about Henry A. Kissinger (whose portrait is not on view) half-joking to Avedon before his sitting in the mid-1970s, “Be kind to me.”

Avedon's virtuosity is particularly evident in photographs of couples, which attempt to unlock the nature of a relationship — or some version of it — in a single, still image. Monroe's affectionately hugging her playwright husband, Arthur Miller, in 1957 humanizes the clichéd beauty-and-brains equation. The playful moment set up in 1993 between the film director Michelangelo Antonioni and his wife, Enrica, includes comic hectoring in the upper portion of the image. But the couple's hands, clasped tightly in the lower part of the picture, suggest a profound, deeply intimate bond.

And then, of course, there are the Windsors and the famous dog story, which has a weird resonance with Avedon's own biography. In “Borrowed Dogs,” an essay adapted from a 1986 museum talk, Avedon described how, when he was growing up, his family would plan out their snapshots, standing in front of fancy cars and homes that weren't theirs, with borrowed dogs. “My family took great care with our snapshots,” he wrote. “We really planned them.” They were “built on some kind of lie about who we were, and revealed a truth about who we wanted to be.”

Avedon compared this version of portraiture to the portraits of the fin-de-siècle Viennese Expressionist Egon Schiele, which seemed to him “one of the highest examples of portraiture without borrowed dogs.” In Schiele's work, there was a “candor and complexity” that completely undid the “tradition of flattery and lies in portrait-making.”

Well into his career, Avedon was showing greater candor about his own history and process. The question is, then, how to present his work posthumously in a museum? The current exhibition omits some of the grittiest parts of his oeuvre: the controversial “In the American West, 1979-1984” series, which features homeless and disenfranchised people; photographs of his dying father; and a disturbing close-up of Andy Warhol's scarred torso, photographed in 1969, a year after he had been shot and seriously wounded.

Most tellingly for this show, perhaps, is the wall text posted next to the photograph of the Windsors. Taken from the official Web site of the British monarchy and Biography.com, it describes the “dashing, charming” Duke of Windsor and his union with Simpson as “one of the greatest love stories of our time.” There's no mention of dogs, or of Avedon, whose version of the couple presents them in a different light, offering one version of the truth — even if it was built upon a lie.

“Richard Avedon: Photographer of Influence” is at the Nassau County Museum of Art, 1 Museum Drive, Roslyn Harbor, through Sept. 4. Information: (516) 484-9337 or nassaumuseum.org.