

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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America's original 'stylist' debuts down under

Sally Pryor



Registrar of the Richard Avedon Foundation Katrina Dumas at the Richard Avedon exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery which opens on Thursday evening. Photo: Rohan Thomson

From Dior-clad models to civil rights protestors, from a family on the beach to Marilyn Monroe, Richard Avedon was all about people.

The American fashion and portrait photographer created thousands of portraits throughout his long career, of well-known artists, actors, writers and political figures, as well as nameless individuals from all walks of life.

A major show at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra is giving Australians a rare chance to see many of Avedon's works up close, with 80 works showing the span of his career.

Included in Richard Avedon People are some of the 20th century's most iconic images, including Dovima with Elephants, showing a model in an evening gown posing dramatically surrounded by circus elephants, as well as portraits of writer, actors and major figures from the American civil rights movement.

Registrar for the Richard Avedon Foundation Katrina Dumas, who has flown to Australia from New York to oversee the show's installation, said this was a rare opportunity to see the original prints up close.

"When he drafted the foundation later in his life, he actually inserted it into his will that there would be no posthumous printing," she said.

Fashion photographer Richard Avedon and influential fashion editor of Harper's Bazaar, Diana Vreeland, supervise a fashion shoot of jewellery at Tiffany & Co.

Fashion photographer Richard Avedon and influential fashion editor of Harper's Bazaar, Diana Vreeland, supervise a fashion shoot of jewellery at Tiffany & Co. Photo: Supplied

“These prints were made during his lifetime in his studio. He approved and made edits to every single print in the collection.”

Avedon died in 2004 while on assignment for The New Yorker, at the age of 81.

Exhibition curator Christopher Chapman said while many Australians would be unfamiliar with Avedon's name, his style was well known.

Avedon pioneered the practice of taking models out of the studio and into different settings, like streets, cafes, circuses.

He also influenced a style of portraiture that is taken for granted nowadays – photographing his subjects in front of plain, white backgrounds, so as to draw out the individual's personality.

“This style, [where] all the other information about them is taken away so you've really got to relate to them on a direct level, has become enormously influential around the world, and again, it's Avedon who created it,” he said.

“I like to think that his work is very concerned with what we might now refer to as human rights, but I think in his time, the second half of the 20th century, is more about freedom of expression, really.”

Richard Avedon People opens at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra on August 23, and runs until November 24, when it will travel to the Monash Gallery of Art in Melbourne, and the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth.