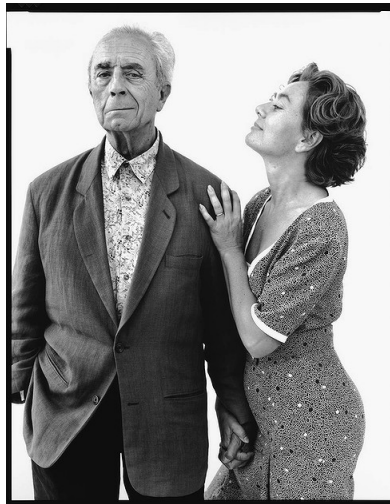


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Sydney Morning Herald

Fame and falsehoods: Richard Avedon's photos are works that can lie

Andrew Stephens



Michelangelo Antonioni, film director, with his wife Enrica, Rome, 1993. © The Richard Avedon Foundation Photo: Richard Avedon

Richard Avedon once said that all photographs are accurate – but none of them are the truth. It's a fascinating distinction, one revealed in the way Avedon worked: he would take scores of shots of a subject – Marilyn Monroe, for example – and then select just one to be printed for public consumption. The rest would be archived, protected by the Avedon Foundation, never allowed off the negative or the contact sheet.

Thus we see a particular photograph of Monroe (or of Elizabeth Taylor or of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor), selected by Avedon from a specific session, there to present a certain moment of emotional intensity or shade of character.

Avedon is one of the world's most famous photographers, one of the few who can accurately be described as legendary, especially given there are so many anecdotes surrounding his work and life. He is also one of the most analysed 20th century photographers. He died in 2004 (while doing a job for *The New Yorker*) and while we see only what he wanted us to see, he has no control over our responses or inquiries.

Curiously, he would tell lies to reveal some particular truth. One of the most famous stories about him relates how, to catch King Edward VIII and American divorcee Wallis Simpson off guard, he told them, while shooting a portrait of them in 1957, that he was sorry for being late but his taxi had just run over a dog (which wasn't true). He captured them in that moment of being aghast, knowing (he is reported to have said) that they loved dogs more than anything.

The photograph of them is accurate – we see what happened at that precise point in time – and we see one truth about them. It is not, though, the whole truth and unless you know the anecdote, their expressions could mean any number of things.

Kelly Gellatly is well aware of the many shades of interpretation that can be imposed on Avedon himself, as well as his work, which crossed many formats and genres during his life. He started out as a fashion photographer but moved towards portraiture and social documentation as the years passed, with his work at the high end of fashion opening doors into the upper echelons of society and celebrity.

Gellatly, director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, showing a large exhibition of Avedon's work titled *People*, says he was a master of control whose work goes to the heart of the vexed question about who "owns" a portrait – the sitter or the photographer?

"The tension between him as the artist and the subject is fascinating," Gellatly says. "There was great kudos in being shot by him – but in offering yourself up to him and his camera meant a loss of control over the results." Sitters, she senses, must have had great respect for the work and trust in Avedon, given there were no assurances they would be captured in the way they might want to be; indeed, that was highly unlikely. Extraordinarily talented and attractive individuals would offer themselves to him and some – such as Rudolf Nureyev or Elizabeth Taylor – were so beautiful they probably didn't have too much to worry about. Others weren't so fortunate: Gellatly points to a couple of portraits in particular, such as one of author Dorothy Parker where she looks pouchy, pinched and ruined with exhaustion. Hardly glamorous.

While Gellatly is less interested in his celebrity work than his street scenes or social documentary in the American west, among her favourites is the one of Monroe and another of Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni and his wife. Both capture, she says, small, unexpected but telling moments. The contact sheets of the Monroe sitting, she says, reveal the power of Avedon's selection. Even if he had chosen the next or the preceding frame, it would have something quite different to say.

The one of Antonionio shows the couple holding hands, a tenderness Gellatly says shifts the tone of the whole image, speaking powerfully and naturally of their relationship in a way that wasn't directed. "Those moments appear across the whole show. The subject really is laid bare."

Gellatly says Avedon's own discussions of himself as an artist are fascinating, revealing that he saw the portraits as "his" – not in terms of ownership but in terms of the craft, "the specifics of selection, his creation of a particular mood, or the sense he gives of providing a particular insight into a subject".

"I think the reason why his portraiture is so powerful is that it subverts, undermines or shifts that public sense of 'knowing' someone." We might think we know a celebrity through repeated exposure to their image and the details of their lives, but Avedon disrupts that.

While he was always conscious of this power, it didn't play out during the making of the image, Gellatly says. "They are just what they are. If you were completely directorial you'd read something else - there'd be a resistance or a formality in the sitters." That said, he was keenly aware of the power of the final print – its scale, size, tone, texture and paper quality – all elements that can never be experienced if viewing Avedon's work in a book or on a screen.

Some of his prints are enormous (up to 150 centimetres high), as stipulated by the Avedon Foundation – which he set up and whose role he carefully decreed.

“When you stand in front of them there is a powerful quality to them,” Gellatly says. Avedon, she says, did alter the tonality of a photograph during printing, but he revealed the edges of the print and did not crop. “It says that this is the image you are dealing with. There is a constant pushing of his subjects in the way he photographs them - but there is also an incredible pushing of the medium.”

Despite the magnetism of these famous portraits, a whole other world is found in his documentary-style photography – people shot with or without their permission – that is of especial interest to Gellatly. She says Avedon’s portrait chronicle, *The Western Project*, commissioned by the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth Texas, spanned five years from 1978 and was extraordinary and compelling. In these, she says, we get a sense of his social consciousness as an artist through both the subjects he has chosen.

“Avedon is really interesting in terms of 20th century photographic history because you have someone who started in fashion photography but very early on saw himself as an artist. This is about photography in a way that is different to contemporary practice, where an artist might use any medium and photography is just one of them. [Avedon’s work] was always about the specifics of photographic practice: printing, framing and what you can achieve with the medium.”

Thus his photos in this series were printed at an enormous size. When we stand in front of them, we become more than observers or onlookers. We fall into this world, through his eye and the prism of his lens. He once wrote that portraiture is “performance”, and that he trusted performances. Perhaps, in entering his world, we are performing, too – we just don’t know it.

Richard Avedon: People is at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, December 6-March 15. art-museum.unimelb.edu.au