

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Richard Avedon 'People' exhibition at Art Gallery of WA brings Dylan, Moss and Monroe to life

Gail Williams



Photographer Richard Avedon poses in front of his self-portraits, part of the exhibition Richard Avedon: Portraits,' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2002. Picture: AP

WHEN Bob Dylan comes to Perth next month many of his diehard fans will not identify with the man in the cowboy hat who wanders on stage.

Instead, their memories will return to a vivid image of their idol frozen in time by photographer Richard Avedon on a cold and wet February day in 1965 in New York's Central Park.

Avedon captured the brooding young Dylan, hands in pockets, with his right knee slightly bent and his defiant gaze daring the world to join his protest movement. Or not. Whatever.

Of course, inspired as much by his photogenic charisma as by his music, millions did jump on board the protest bandwagon. And half a century on, the haunting image -- along with many taken by the late photographer of poets, writers, politicians and fashion models of the time -- is as much a part of their psyche as his protest anthem, *Blowin' in the Wind*.

The portrait is on its way to Perth among 80 equally culturally-defining black and white Avedon photos taken between 1949 and 2002 for an exhibition at the Art Gallery of WA next month called Richard Avedon People. The exhibition took two years to put together by the National Portrait Gallery's Senior Curator, Dr Christopher Chapman who, after coming up with the idea, worked closely in partnership with the Richard Avedon Foundation based in New York to bring it on its first solo visit downunder.

Dylan was one of thousands of subjects -- famous and not-so-famous -- who was exposed to Avedon's endearing- yet-unorthodox photographic routine.

The sessions would often last days, as he whittled away at their armour to snap them in their most raw and vulnerable moments.

Relaxing them by asking them about their favourite foods and music, dancing with them or leaping about in the studio were all part of his strategy along with asking them psychologically probing questions and sharing mandatory long lunches together.

Such was the intensity involved during frenetic shoots that one subject remarked: “He sucks your soul out through your eye sockets, and leaves you utterly drained.”

The results speak for themselves and say as much about Avedon as they do about his subjects. It all adds up to why Avedon, who worked up until the day he died in 2004, aged 81, of complications from a brain haemorrhage is often cited as the world’s most revered photographers.

Over his six-decade career Avedon, after humble beginnings as a photographer’s mate in the US Merchant snapped his way up to international fame as a fashion, portrait and documentary photographer.

It was an obvious – make that, the only – career choice for the fashion loving young man who had grown up in a Russian-Jewish family in New York and spent his spare time taking pictures of his sister and mother with the family’s Box Brownie camera.

His legacy of work – preserved by the Richard Avedon Foundation – provides a pictorial history of celebrity and international pop culture of the latter half of the 20th century taking in the civil rights movement, the protesters, the artists, musicians, politicians, poets and writers of the time.

Stripped of celebrity and placed against a stark white backdrop Avedon’s subjects are seen close up, wrinkles, warts and on equal footing with the photographer and the viewer.

Through Avedon’s eyes we see Marilyn Monroe looking lost and vulnerable, caught during a moment when her public mask had slipped. Then in another shot she is once again “on show” playing the vamp with her arms around the neck of her playwright husband, Arthur Miller.

We see Nastassia Kinski’s inescapable sensuality immortalised with a slithery snake writhing around her body.

We blush at 15-year-old Brooke Shield advertising Calvin Klein jeans in a controversial campaign and feel for Truman Capote captured in an unguarded moment with his eyes closed and his head tilted away from the camera. Who knows what we should think of Rudolf Nureyev posing stark naked but still, very proud of his obvious achievements off point. But exposing far more than that -- while remaining full clothed -- are Andy Warhol, Dorothy Parker, Pablo Picasso, Kate Moss, Elizabeth Taylor and The Beatles as the lens bores deep into their souls and strips them bare.

For the first time such images, some measuring 1.8 metres high, will be shown in Western Australia, next stop after a successful three-month season at Canberra’s National Portrait Gallery.

Robert Cook, the project curator at the Art Gallery of WA is excited at the prospect of the unveiling them in a glittering opening night party on July 30 where VIP guests will have their memories jogged by the iconic images from the past six decades.

“It’s a history of celebrity, in a weird way,” says Cook. “It’s kind of like you see all of society unfolding under his lens.”

One of his favourites is the image of Monroe and Arthur Miller.

“People always talk about that relationship between those two being such a bad fit,” he says. “But in this picture there’s this gorgeous young girl with a man 11 years older than her who looks handsome and is amazingly youthful looking. It’s one of my favourites. Then there’s Truman Capote who looks feline and beautiful and so sure of himself.”

One of the images that will resonate with fashion lovers is the famous elephant shot which was so groundbreaking when it was taken in August, 1955 for a Harper’s Bazaar fashion shoot, that it changed the course of fashion photography.

It features the model, Dovima, in a Christian Dior gown, designed by the young Yves St Laurent, in between two elephants echoing the shape of their trunks with her outstretched arm.

Katrina Dumas, the Richard Avedon Foundation’s Registration and Exhibition coordinator says the picture is one of the most popular in the collection and was considered radical not just because it was shot on location in Paris at the Cirque du Hiver but because of the contrasts -- of the elegance of the model and the rough, earthy texture of the animals, youth and age, freedom and captured and grace and awkwardness.

“It’s a very graceful image,” says Dumas, who is coming to Perth for the launch of the exhibition. “It was so unexpected back then and Avedon took a whole crew to Paris to film it which was quite unheard of at the time.”

Avedon, who was 32 at the time, had been a professional photographer for ten years and had already established himself as a fashion photographer who – according to legend – had chosen to photograph models in outside locations because early on he was not allowed access to Harper’s fashion studio.

Yet, the beautifully lit shot photograph was considered a failure by Avedon who said he always lamented that he hadn’t got the sash to blow to the left to balance the picture.

It inspired many photographers around the world to take up photography. One of them was Frances Andrijich award winning Perth photographer who is well known throughout Australia for her painstaking magazine portraits.

She first saw the image as a teenager and began collecting his books and pictures of his work to learn more about his style.

“I think the image is amazing,” she says. “It has an edgy elegance to it and it stands the test of time. I love this image but the thing that jars me, are the chains restraining the elephants. This picture sums up how he created images that had an edgy elegance to them... considered and deliberate but effortless in appearance.

For him to be unhappy with it just says so much about his perfectionism. All of his work is so controlled yet appear so relaxed.”

Though his fashion work inspired Andrijich it was his later work which focused on ordinary people which she regards as his best.

“Avedon created some of the most iconic images of the most famous people of the 20th century. A master of photographing not only celebrated people, but also the uncelebrated as was captured in his series In The American West. It was these pictures that were perhaps my favourite.”

The series came about, in 1979, when after years of suffering heart inflammations he was commissioned for a project to portray everyday working class subjects.

The five year project saw him travel through several States of the US to photograph 762 people such as miners in soiled work clothes and farmers, placing them against a white background. One of the images, shows a teenage boy holding the guts and skin of a huge rattlesnake he has just gutted with an angelic smile on his face.

It was a turning point in his career, having spent much of the early part focusing on glamour and celebrities.

After leaving the merchant navy he had briefly worked as an advertising photographer for a department store before being taken on by Harper’s Bazaar where he radically departed from the norm by taking pictures of models laughing and dancing and in outdoor settings.

In 1962, after the editor Diana Vreeland left to work on Vogue, Avedon went too and worked on the magazine until Anna Wintour became editor in chief in 1988.

A workaholic who often talked about being obsessed by his work, he was working on an assignment on democracy for The New Yorker when he died in 2004.

Through his career he amassed hundreds of thousands of images and had already laid down strict instructions as to how they should be controlled.

Says Dumas: “We have about 315,000 images in the collection, all kept in climate controlled rooms as per his wishes.”

And when they were approached by Dr Chapman approached the Foundation about bringing his works to Australia they were delighted.

“We opened up the archives for him to come to New York and research,” says Dumas, who is coming to Perth with the exhibition.

“He was kind of captivating on both sides. The fashion side and the political activist side. He certainly moved in glamorous circles but he also was heavily involved in the civil rights movement,” she says.

“He was good friend with Truman Capote and went with him on his visits to the Kansas State Penitentiary where he visited Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, for his book In Cold Blood. He was very diverse.”

A further insight is given by the man himself, who once described his work as putting so much effort into it that he was simply photographing himself.

If you look at the Dylan image then that could be true.

Says Cook: “Dylan was on fire as an artist at the time, so confident and so powerful. At the same time he looks small yet ferociously powerful. Dylan was hard to pin down, was not tolerant of

the media and you get that sense that he's going along with it and doesn't need to show how successful he is."

And there will be a few fans wishing Avedon was still around to record the cowboy hat on the legend's upcoming Perth visit.