

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE WEEK

It's a family affair

A new exhibition offers a glimpse of legendary photographer Richard Avedon's lesser-known work

Hunter Harris



May 3, 1970 (2015 print): The Ginsberg family, being photographed by Richard Avedon. | (Elsa Dorfman, courtesy National Museum of American Jewish History / The Richard Avedon Foundation)

There is photography, and then there is portraiture. As subjects of legendary photographer Richard Avedon knew, portraiture puts the sitter's story entirely in someone else's hands, allowing him to dictate what traits or flaws the world will see.

As Henry Kissinger once implored of Avedon, just before a photo shoot, "Be kind to me."

Despite portraiture's perils, many of the 20th century's greatest characters flocked to Avedon, and a selection of his stark, intimate portraits are on display as part of a new exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History, in Philadelphia. *Richard Avedon: Family Affairs*, on view through Aug. 2, unites two of Avedon's most distinctive bodies of work: a series of four portrait murals, and dozens of portraits originally published in *Rolling Stone* magazine on the eve of the 1976 election.

“This is work that he considered more personal than perhaps his art photography,” Dr. Josh Perelman, the exhibition’s curator, says. “It represents a period of significant innovation, both in terms of Avedon’s career and the history of photography, a period when he was defining a new style. He was using portraiture as a mode of documenting the historical events that surrounded him at that time.”

Avedon first rose to fame for his fashion photography for *Vogue*. He later counted James Baldwin and Truman Capote as frequent subjects, and even inspired a classic movie (*Funny Face*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire). But the work exhibited at NMAJH is perhaps some of Avedon’s most iconic.

“The signature style that Avedon created — the white background with the black border from the negative — his ability to both document an individual but draw on the essential humanness of that individual... There are a number of portrait photographers working today who will speak to Avedon’s influence on their work, even if their work has taken different directions,” Perelman says.

The NMAJH is the only museum in the United States to feature the exhibition, which is on loan from the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Perelman visited the photos in their permanent location in 2014, and he says he was especially thrilled to see Avedon’s 1970 photo mural of Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg, along with 14 members of his extended family.

“That photograph in particular is one of my personal favorites, and I’d been wanting to exhibit it for quite some time,” Perelman says. “Suddenly, here was this opportunity to bring that dream to fruition.”

Perelman says the NMAJH strived to cohesively arrange the diverse array of subjects, while still giving Avedon’s creative process and the photographer’s own history a leading role.

“We were very cognizant of the chronology of the works, of the historical context in which they were being created, and also of Avedon, both as a creator but also a character within the narrative of the exhibition,” Perelman says.

The *Rolling Stone* portraits in particular, which feature Washington, D.C., heavyweights such as Katharine Graham, George H.W. Bush (then still head of the CIA), and Rep. Barbara Jordan, speak to a different political landscape.

And while many of the exhibition’s portraits are of familiar faces, the central theme is still one of family, Perelman says, noting that the museum even offers visitors an interactive photo booth, where they can immortalize themselves in Avedon’s signature style.

“(The photo booth) is fun, but it also invites each and every one of our visitors to be included within the family of the exhibition,” he says.