AMERICAN PHOTO AVEDON

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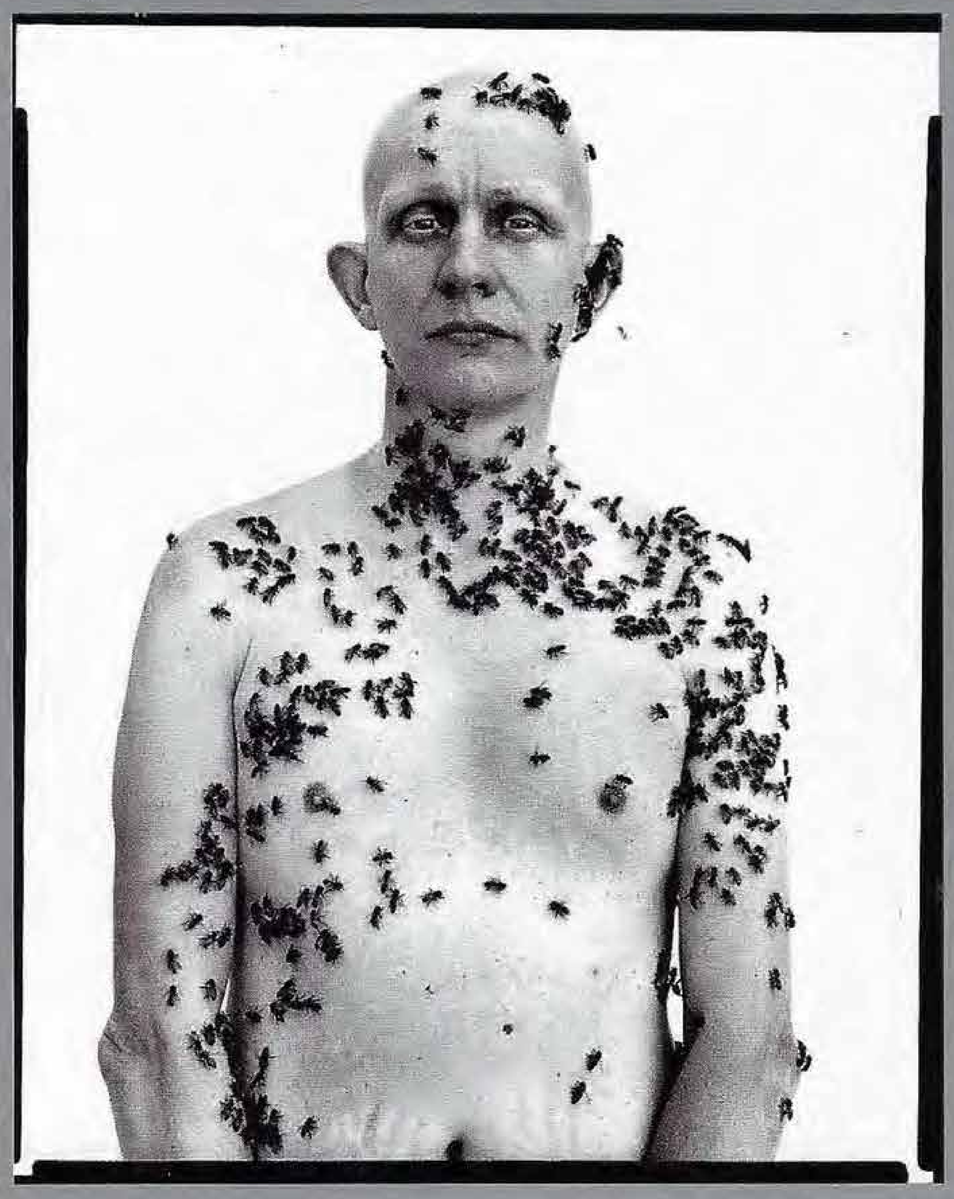
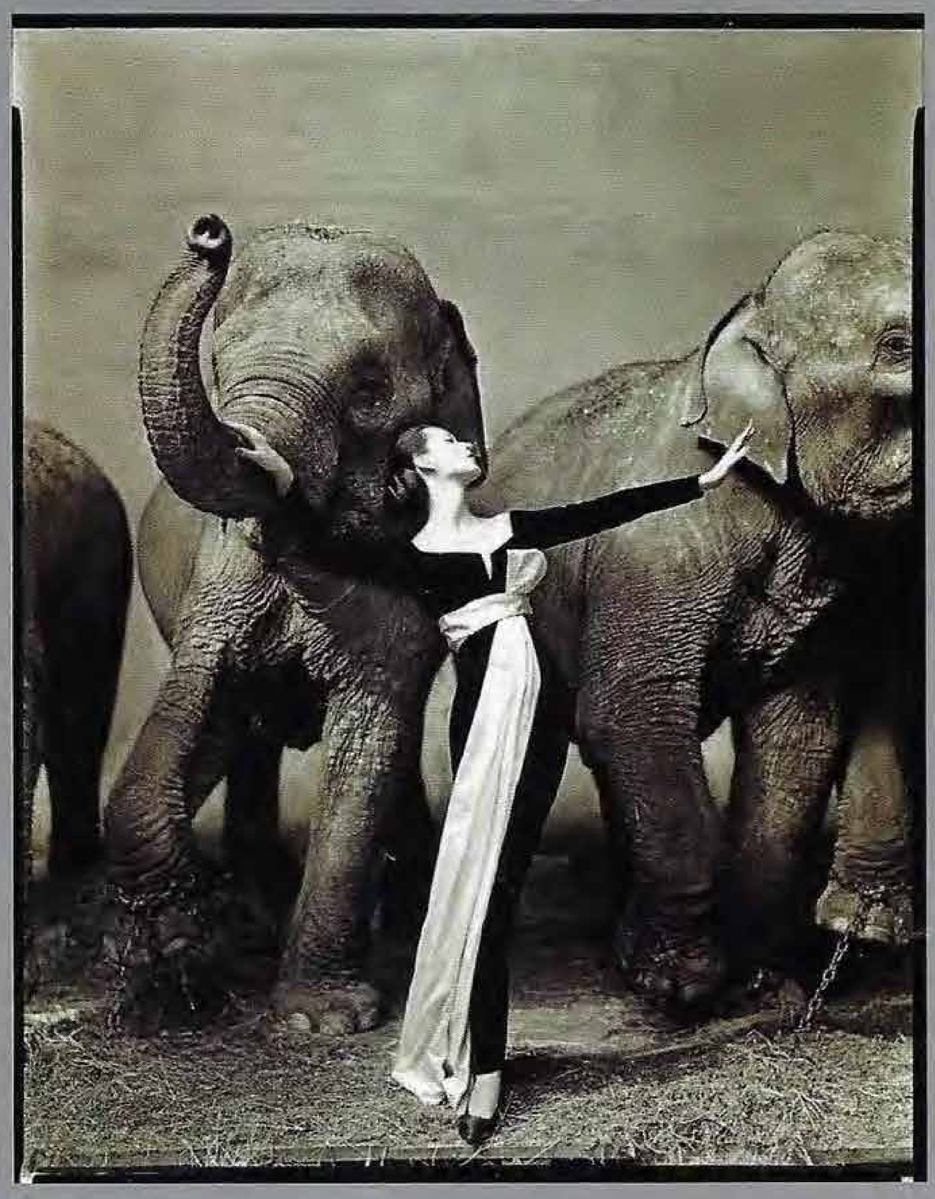
THE SECRETS OF AMERICA'S MASTER PHOTOGRAPHER

AVEDON





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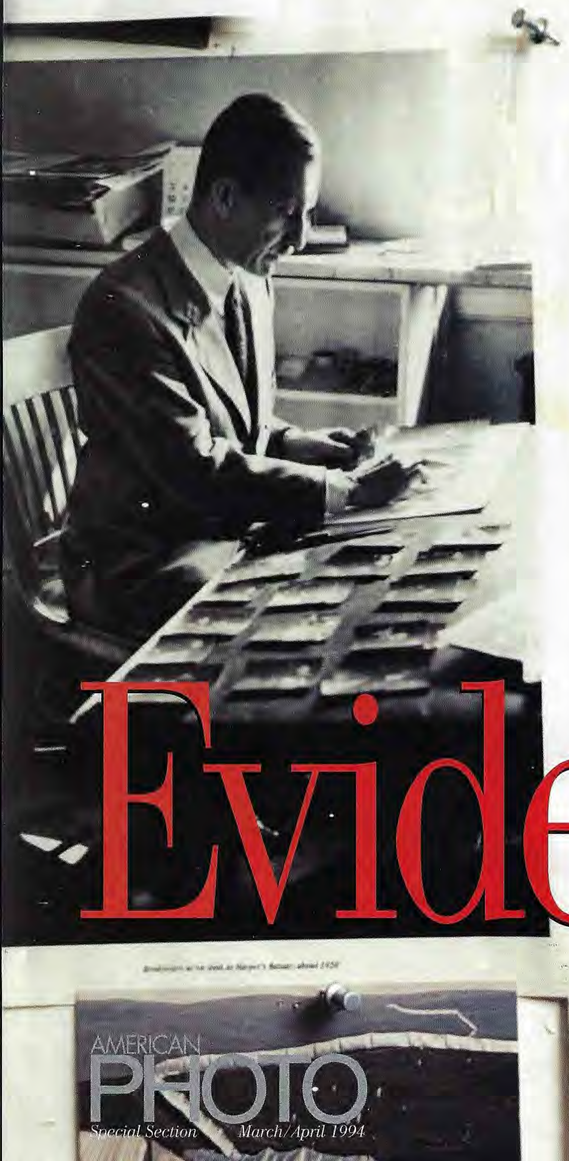
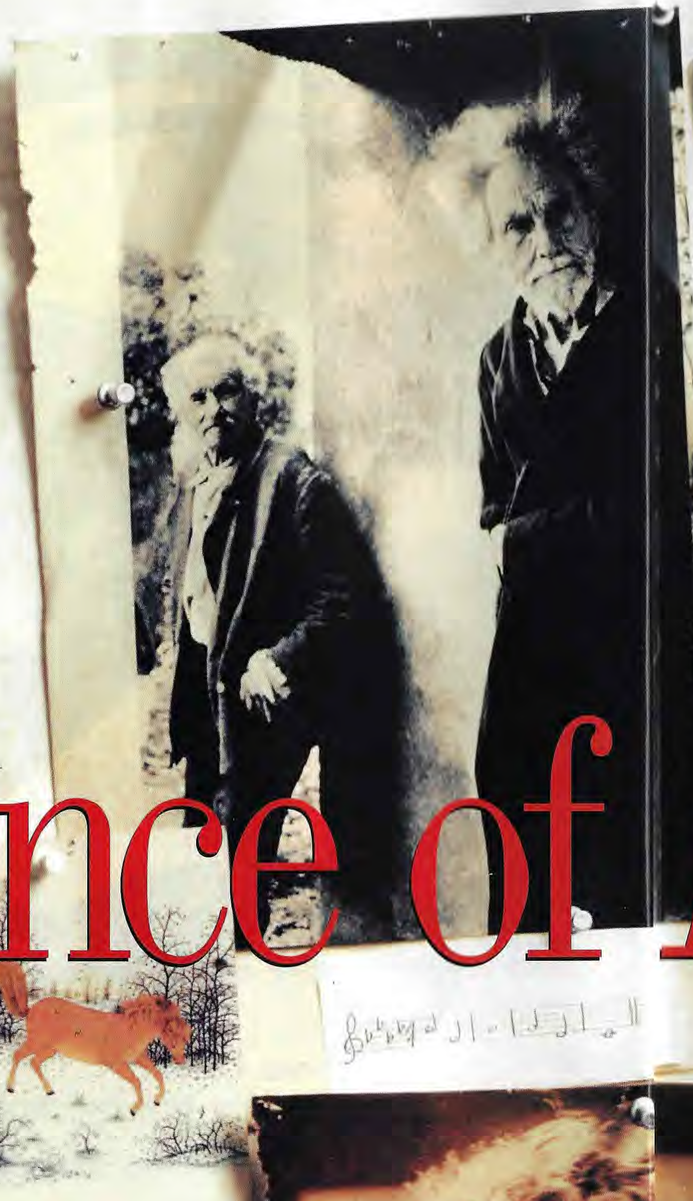




The most important photographer in America looks back and moves forward. Introduction by Owen Edwards

Richard Avedon's long career reveals an abundance of serendipity but few accidents. He possesses the rare ability to dream, to realize his dreams, then to up the ante and imagine where his talent might next take him. Usually, he gets there. In a way few artists ever manage, he directs and edits his accomplishments—an auteur's auteur. This process has intensified during the past few years as he entered his eighth decade and undertook what may well be the most ambitious individual photographic project in the medium's history—a series of big books for Random House and Eastman Kodak tracing his own life, his career, the events of the 1960s, and his considerable wisdom about the craft of photography. The first book in the series, *An Autobiography*, came out last October amid astonishing media fanfare. Intensely personal and conceptually challenging, the $100 volume nonetheless sold out its first printing before the end of the year.

Above: Avedon's photograph of a stilt walker was made in Palermo, Sicily, on September 2, 1947. Below: Rehearsing for a fashion sitting in Paris, Avedon shot into a dressing-room mirror and recorded three legends: *Harper's Bazaar* editor Diana Vreeland (rear), the model Dovima, and himself. The date was July 22, 1955.

Avedon's next book, *Evidence*, which *American Photo* excerpts in this issue, is being published in March in conjunction with a major retrospective exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum. A far-ranging tour of the art and artifacts of Avedon's career, including everything from snaps of him working with Marilyn Monroe to his sketched design for an implausible photo of beekeeper Ronald Fischer, the book offers a deep vein of information on a spectacular talent and novelistically plotted life. Those searching for the answer to what makes Avedon tick so vibrantly—whether fan or foe—may be sure that the clues collected in this rich excavation all have a meaning and a purpose. Then they must make of these clues what they will.

There is, for instance, the picture that Avedon chose to be the first in *An Autobiography*. Taken in 1947 in Palermo, Sicily, the photo is a little masterwork, the conceptual cousin of the fashion images Avedon was then beginning to create for *Harper's Bazaar*. The picture was Fellinieque before there was such a thing: A street performer on stilts leads a motley, awestruck crowd of children like some surrealistic Pied Piper. Rising perilously high, he strides along full of confidence and a young man's purpose. Can there be any doubt as to why Avedon—after half a century of amazing his audience, risking catastrophe, creating illusions, and rising to heights few in his line of work have reached—chose this unknown acrobat, recalled from an Italian summer afternoon long ago, to begin a book that declares itself an autobiography?

Avedon is not *sui generis*. No artist can be (although photography, with its by-the-numbers technology, allows pure instinct its best shot). The influences over Avedon have been well documented: his early duty taking mug shots in the merchant marine, the women-in-motion fashion photographs of Martin Munkasci, the demanding tutelage of *Harper's Bazaar* art director Alexey Brodovitch. At a deeper level there was the childhood culture of his family portraits, with all their artifice—appropriated cars and apartment buildings in the background, borrowed dogs up front. But those influential parts cannot fully explain the formidable sum that Avedon has become. He is one of a handful of photographers who changed everything, entering the carefully arranged household of the medium and rashly (some would say rudely) moving the furniture around to suit himself. As the history of music might be divided into the periods Before Stravinsky and After Stravinsky, so photography can be divided into Before and After Avedon.

Above: In departure from his freewheeling style, Avedon sketched the image (left) he wanted to make of beekeeper Ronald Fischer before taking the photograph (right). The picture was part of his controversial book *In the American West*. Below: Avedon and Marilyn Monroe in his New York studio on September 14, 1954. She was filming *The Seven Year Itch* at the time.

It seems fair to say that Avedon was, and remains, as thrilled by the camera as anyone has ever been. The keen edge of that thrill can be sensed in almost every picture—the wide-eyed wonder of a young Lartigue, or the relentless, sometimes morbid curiosity of a cigar-chomping Weegee. For all their visual sophistication—only Irving Penn is Avedon's equal at composition—his pictures derive their power from an ability to tap directly into our own childlike forbidden stare.

One feels Avedon's eyes popping at the sights as he sees; he shows them to us with the excitement of someone relating an experience almost too remarkable to be believed. He has described himself, in his earliest days at *Bazaar*, rushing along a Manhattan street toward the magazine's offices, his hands full of still-damp prints to show Brodovitch. He couldn't wait for others to see what he had seen, in just the way he had seen it. And even now, almost five decades later, the astonishment and delight (and, yes, horror) that propelled him still pushes him forward. His pictures, many recognized as emblems of our times, as icons, as *Avedons*, have an urgency and newness, a news-ness, as if they were dispatches sent from the front by a zealous, prodigally talented correspondent too new at the game to understand the danger.

Avedon looked at things as if he'd just been born yesterday, and his amazement and curiosity have inspired us to see as we never did before. Where fashion had been decorous, a reassuring minuet, Avedon improvised jazz riffs. Where portraiture had been respectful, a matter of the photographer taking what was given him by the subject, Avedon made a bonfire of vanity and looked for something that had only occasionally to do with illusion, more often to do with joy, energy, struggle, fear, anguish, ferocity, and a bedrock existential heroism that was almost never pretty. His subjects often must have been stunned by his view of them, but they've kept coming, whatever the risk. Coco Chanel never forgave him for exposing her aging neck, but along with her age Avedon also revealed and celebrated her formidable determination to remain glamorous; what came through in his photograph was not decay but unquenchable strength. No one else would have made this portrait, and, like it or not, no one who sees it can forget it.

Does Avedon betray an unwritten pact with his sitters? Perhaps, but he always remains true to photography. He sabotages politeness and sacrifices flattery in order to make pictures that trust nothing but surfaces. He believes in the absoluteness of the surface as a Franciscan monk might believe in the essence of the soul. And if the surface is wrinkled and old, or young and vacuous, or bewildered in the face of infirmity or death, so be it.

In an old story by the Russian writer Isaac Babel, the author's mother tells him, "You must know everything!" The breadth of the pictures revealed in *An Autobiography* and *Evidence* can make us *(continued on page 79)*

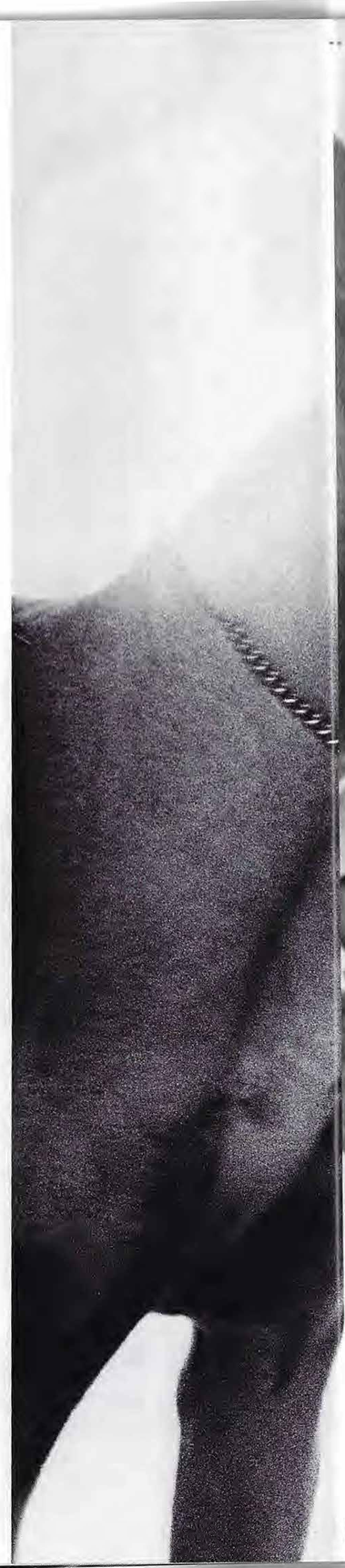
An Avedon Portfolio
Texts by Carol Squiers

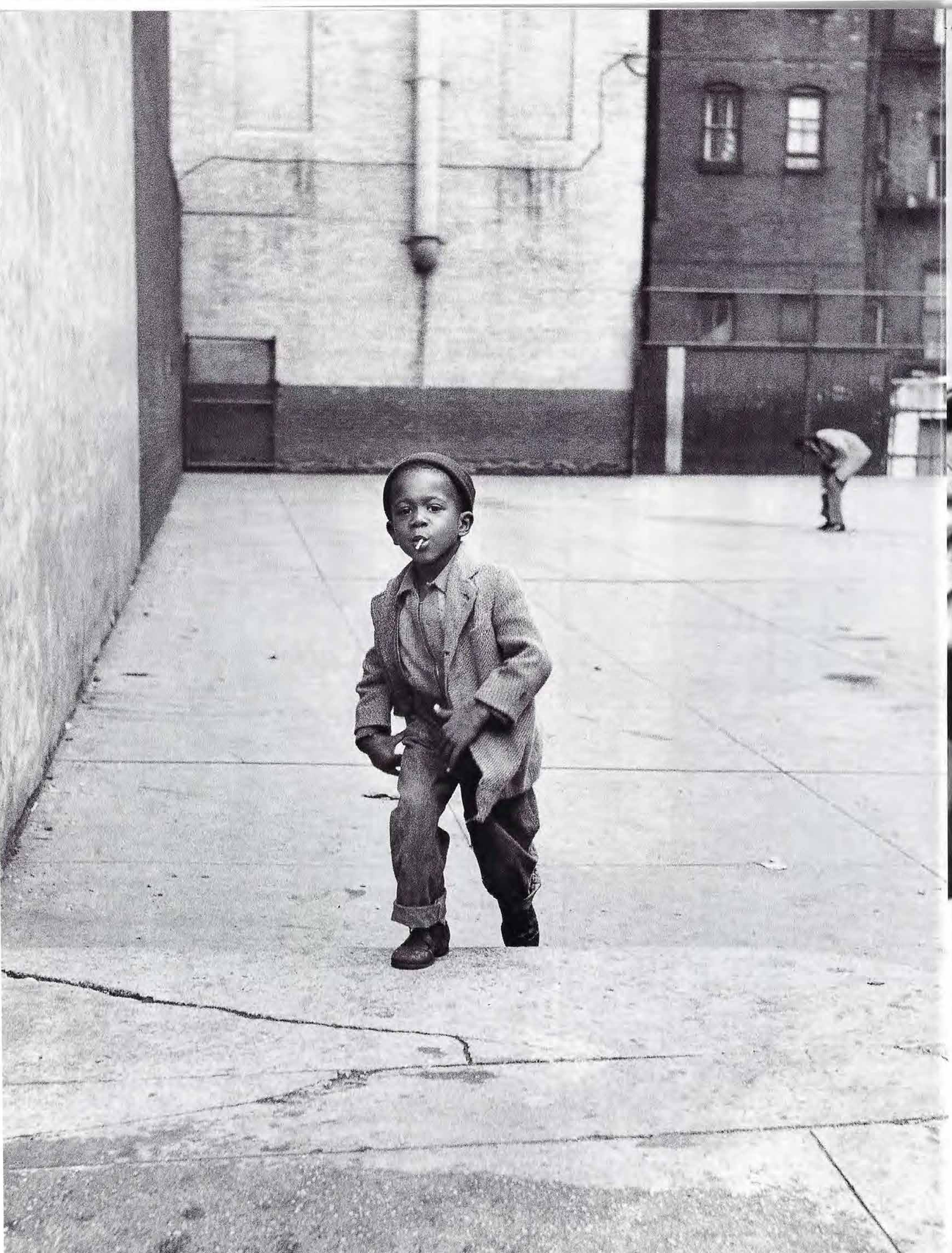
The legendary Carmel Snow, editor of *Harper's Bazaar* from 1934 to 1957, drew a striking portrait of the young Richard Avedon in her memoirs. She remembered the slender 20-year-old photographer bringing his pictures to show the great art director Alexey Brodovitch in 1944. Avedon, who'd grown up in New York and excelled as a poet while attending De Witt Clinton High School, had just served an enlistment in the merchant marine (his job: photographing other enlistees). He was still in uniform when he visited

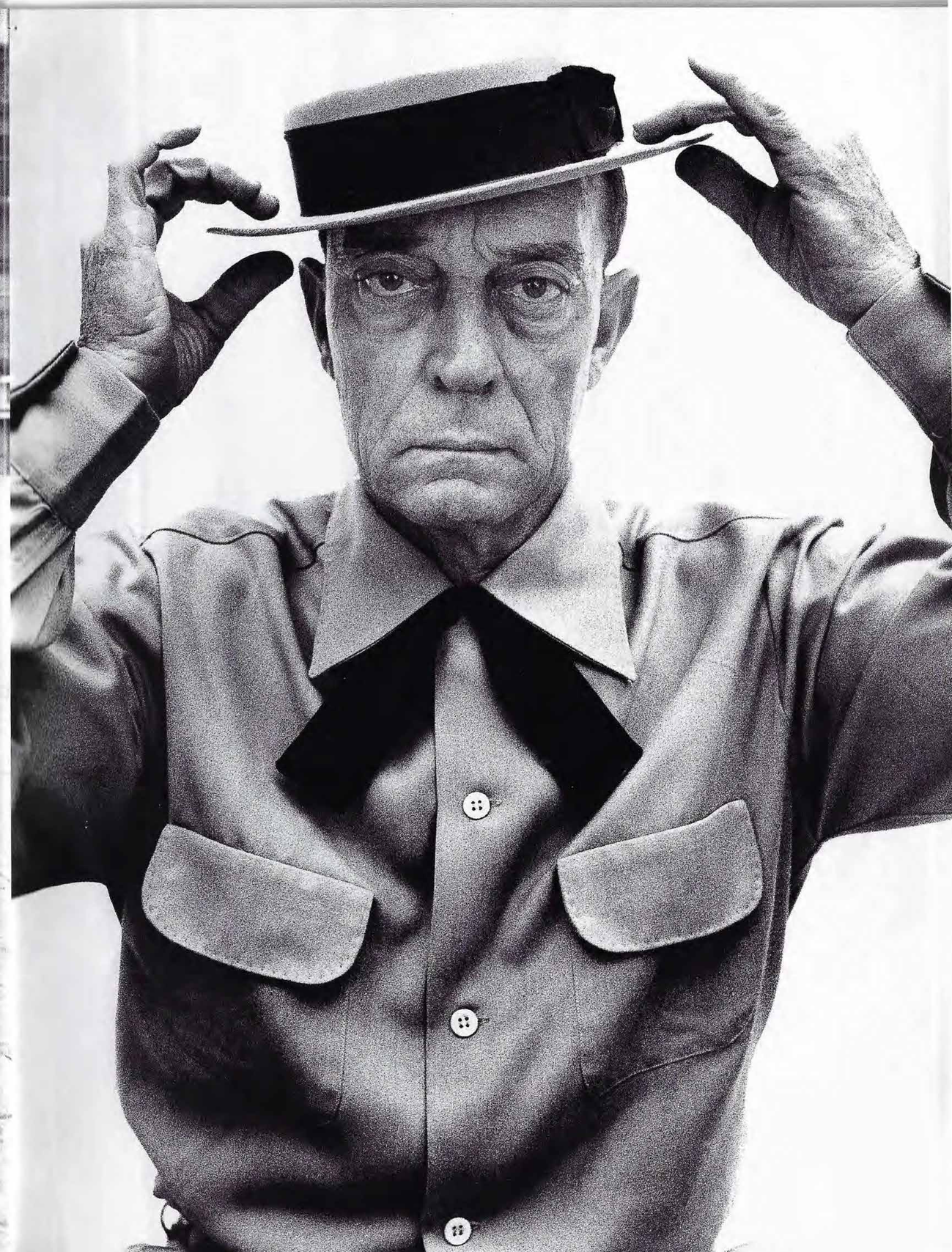
Brodovitch. "What he saw—pictures of seamen in action—made Brodovitch ask the boy to try doing fashions in the same manner," wrote Snow. "And when I saw the results I knew that in Richard Avedon we had a new, contemporary Munkacsi."

Snow's assessment dovetails with Avedon's own account of his early passion for the Hungarian-born Martin Munkacsi's pictures of fashion models running in the great outdoors. And her instincts were right: Avedon would soon become one of the most influential fashion and portrait photographers of our time.

Visually speaking, modern photographers can be divided into two camps: those inspired by the original *Life* magazine and those inspired by *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. Avedon, son of a women's clothier who owned a store called Avedon's Fifth Avenue, grew up with fashion magazines as a ubiquitous and natural part of the household. (According to one story, he papered the walls of his bedroom with magazine fashion photos.) But the vitality of photo reportage also made its mark on him, and is especially evident in his work from the 1940s and '50s. His pictures taken on the streets of Italian cities and in Harlem have a liveliness, a playfulness, and an eye for the melancholy side of happiness—qualities that would later make their way into his fashion work. Although he knew he was creating a postwar fantasy of ease and plenty, Avedon used the "look" of reality to liberate his models from their stationary poses. "Real people move," he explained in an early interview. His meteoric rise at *Harper's Bazaar* made him newsworthy while he was still in his 20s, when he was referred to by fashion insiders as the leading practitioner of a "New American Vision."

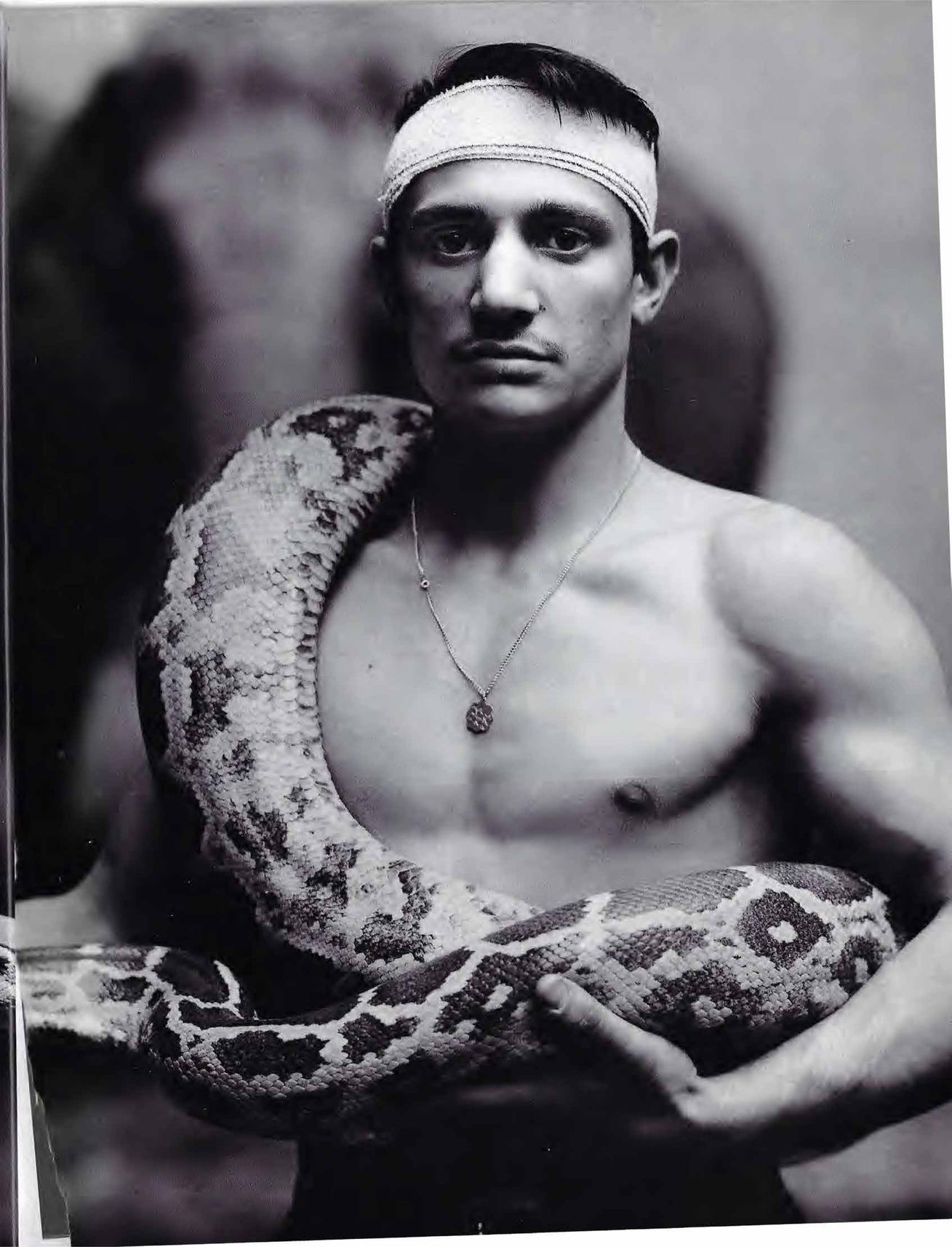




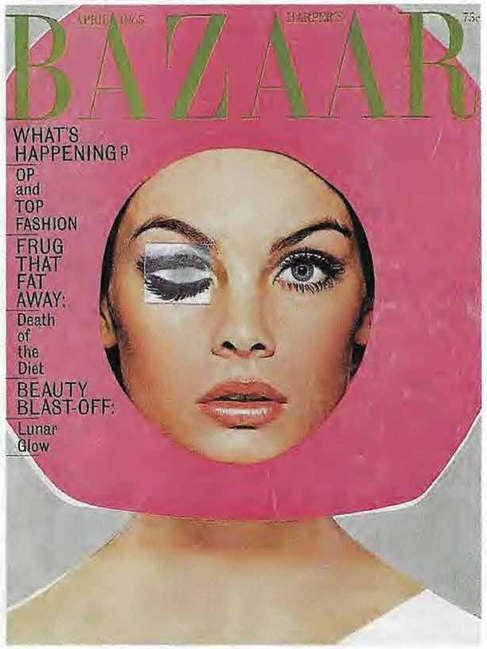


It is difficult to speak of Avedon without also speaking of Alexey Brodovitch, the fabled art director of *Harper's Bazaar* from 1934 to 1959. By all accounts a difficult but brilliant man, Brodovitch's influence still permeates the world of fashion magazines. Even while Avedon was rocketing to preeminence in his field, in the late 1940s, he was studying with Brodovitch in his famous Design Laboratory course at the New School for Social Research in New York (where, as Avedon later revealed, Brodovitch never complimented him). According to fashion historian Martin Harrison, by the time Avedon was chosen to cover the autumn 1947 collections in Paris, he was "clearly regarded as the principal photographer at *Harper's Bazaar.*"

Many of the visual qualities that we think of as typically Avedonian could be seen as equally typical of Brodovitch: his love of surreal visual conjunctions; his predilection for negative white space in images, and his cinematic approach to still photographs. If some photographers were terrified by Brodovitch's favorite exhortation—"Astonish me!"—Avedon apparently took it as a tantalizing creative challenge. His famous image "Dovima with Elephants," taken at Paris's Cirque d'Hiver, is one obvious example of the way Avedon repeatedly shook up standard expectations. "Throughout Avedon's years at *Harper's Bazaar,*" writes Martin Harrison, "his annual coverage of the autumn Paris collections was reserved for a series of dazzling spectaculars, the photographic events of the season, responsible for many of the icons of the genre." (The animal trainer at right was also photographed at the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris.)



In the 1960s, Avedon abandoned the use of daylight—it was too "romantic," he told Cecil Beaton and photo historian Gail Buckland—in favor of the harsh light of the strobe. He also moved back into the studio, where he married the spare isolation of that space with the Munkacsian movement he'd used in the '50s. His reason, as Janet Malcolm recorded it in *The New Yorker,* was that the

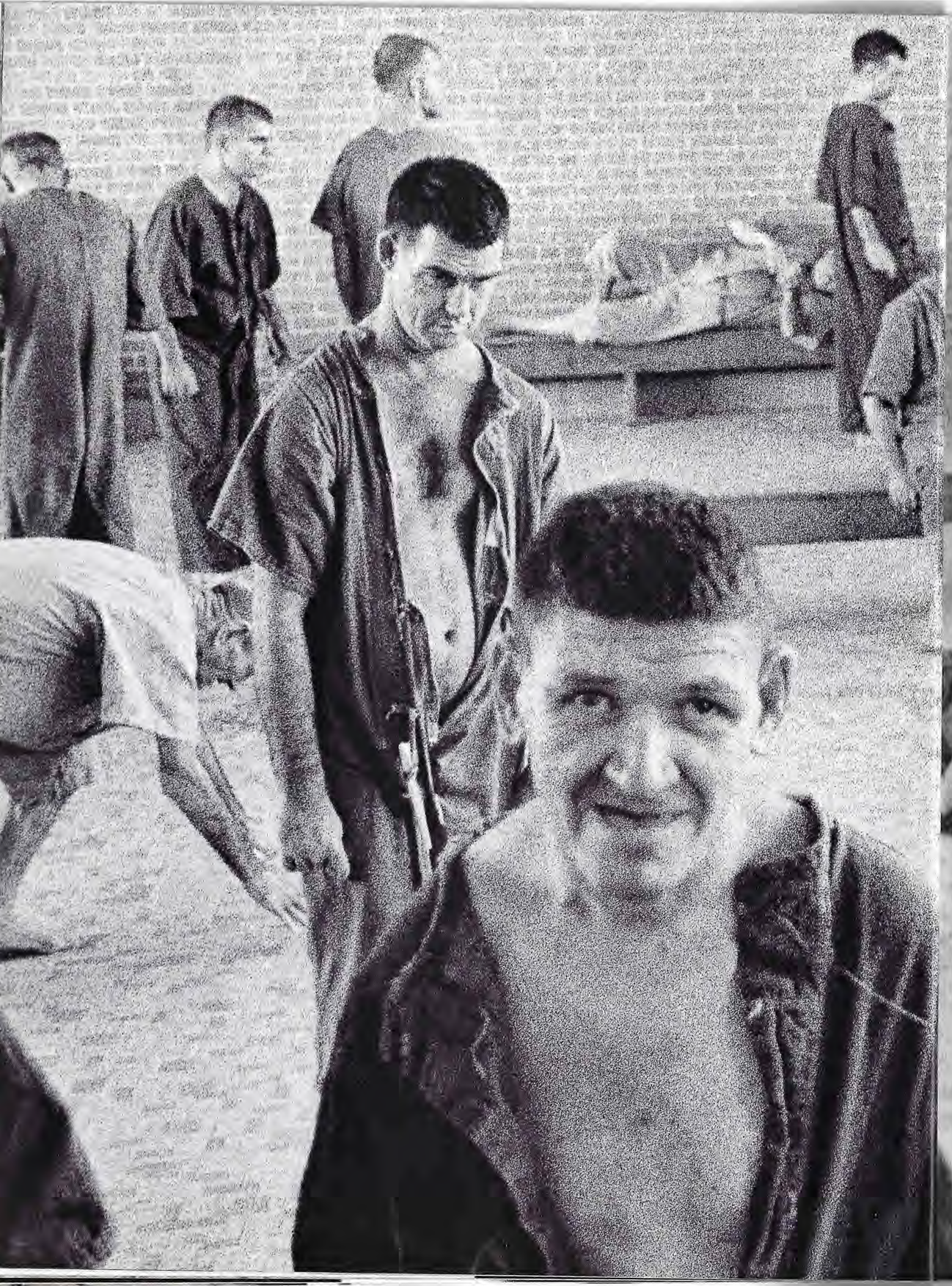


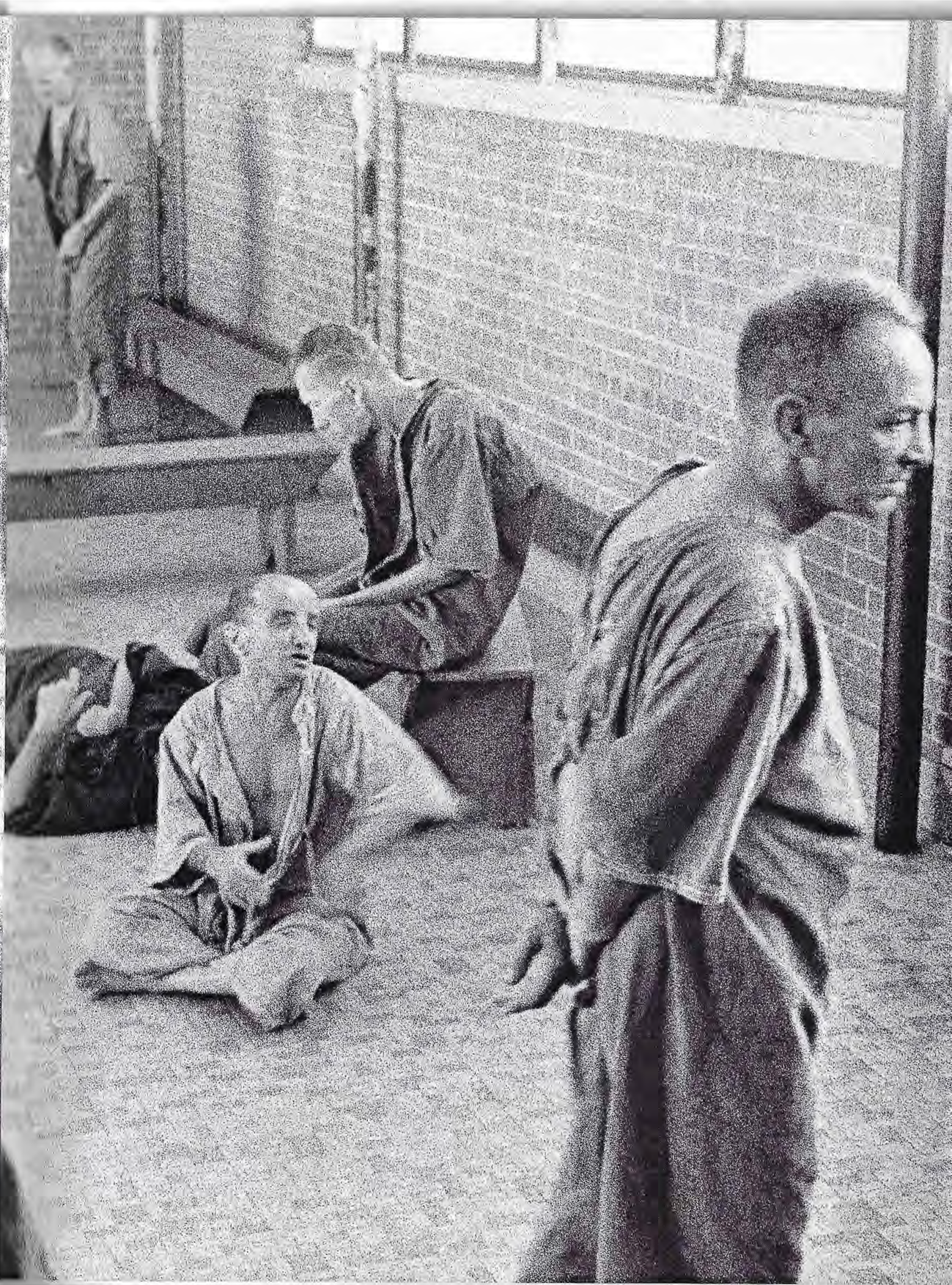
studio "isolates people...they become in a sense symbolic of themselves." His images of jumping, running, grinning models became a hallmark of fashion in the '60s, a perfect stylistic vehicle for conveying the rule-breaking, anything-goes atmosphere of the era. In his pictures, exotic or unconventional models such as Jean Shrimpton, Twiggy, Veruschka, Donyale Luna, and Penelope Tree vastly expanded the boundaries of female beauty.

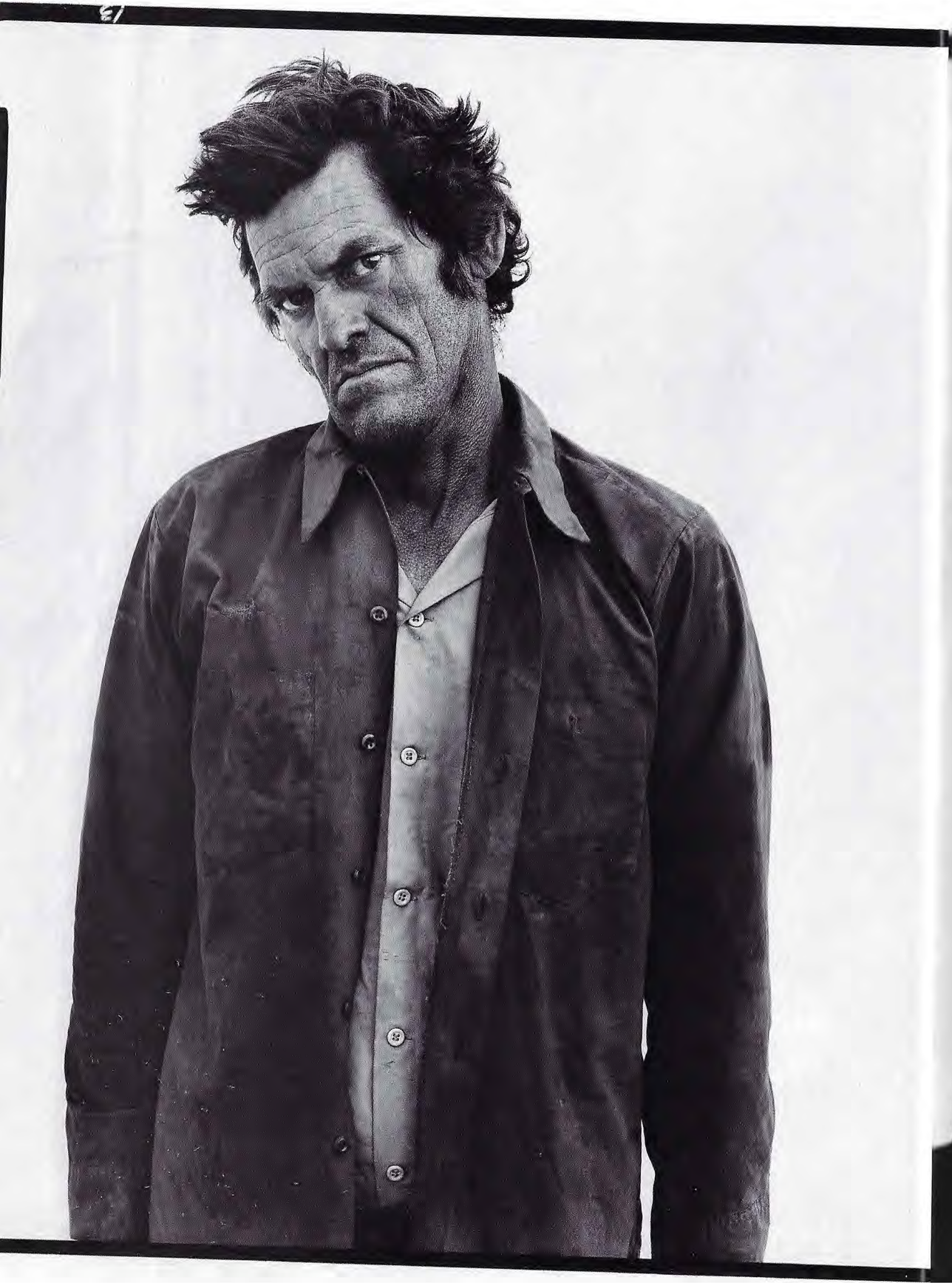
When New York's prestigious Marlborough Gallery first showed photography in 1975, its debut offering was a massive exhibition of Avedon's portraits. The pictures caused a gigantic dust-up that continues unabated. According to critics, there were too many photographs in the show (the official checklist says 99), many were too big (up to eight feet high and 35 feet wide), and the subjects were too famous (Marilyn Monroe, Truman Capote, Igor Stravinsky, the Chicago Seven).

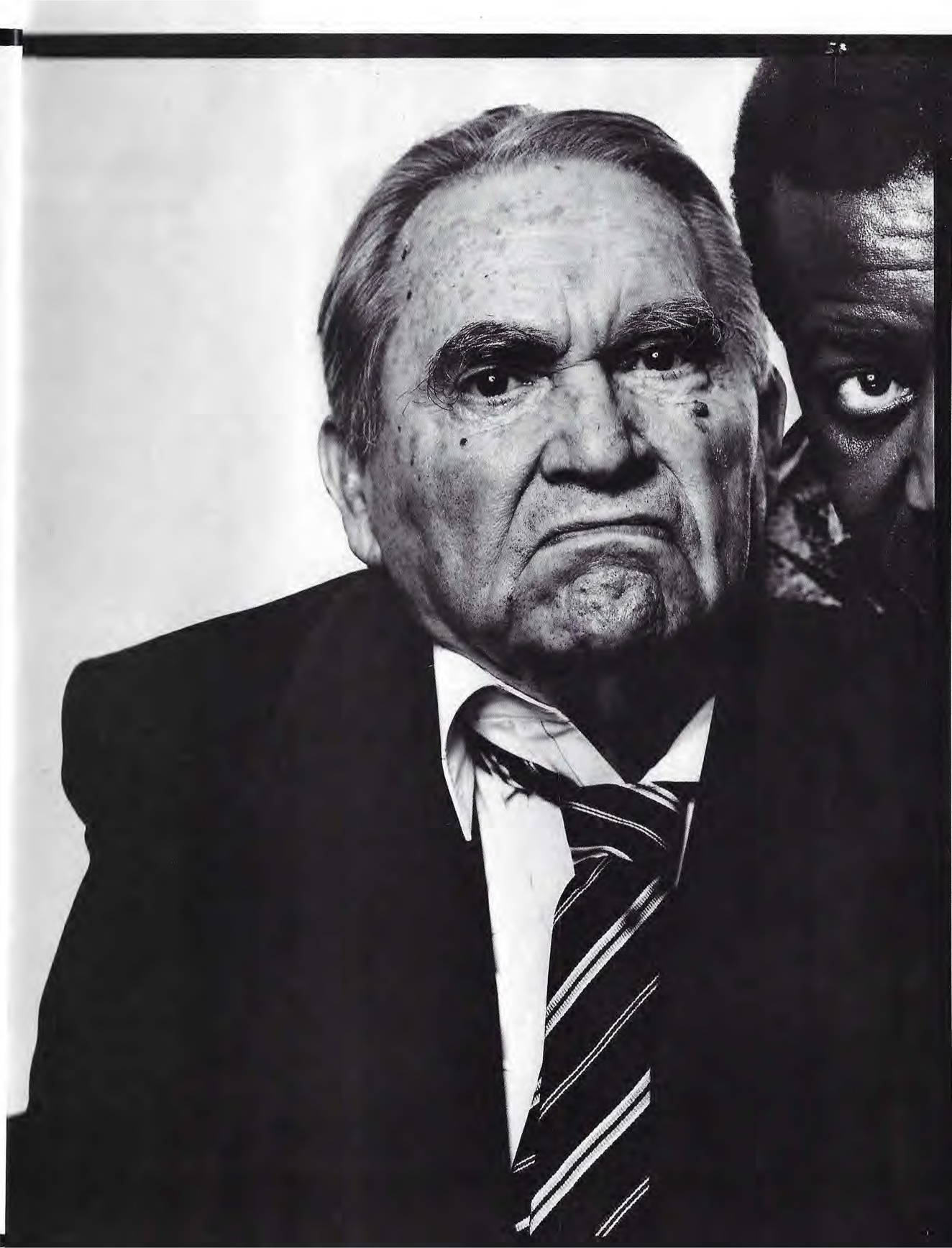
But the biggest problem for the commentators was that the photographs were just too...photographic. Avedon showed every wrinkle and bump in fine detail, and many of his sitters did not look at all happy. What bothered many critics, it seems, was the notion that these harsh portraits should come from a famous fashion photographer who usually trafficked in beauty and perfection.

Avedon's darker vision was one topic addressed by the esteemed art critic Harold Rosenberg, who wrote an essay for the book *Portraits*, which accompanied the Marlborough exhibition. In his essay, Rosenberg called Avedon a "difficult" photographer, which was meant as a compliment. "Avedon's camera refuses to confer poetry or distinction on his painters, writers, and other famous personages," Rosenberg wrote. "It meets each individual head-on; he is allowed only such graces as may come through the vacant stare of the lens." Few would subject themselves to such conditions, presumably, if the outcome was not worth the self-revelation.









Avedon developed a strong bond with another gifted art director, Marvin Israel, in the early 1960s, and the work they did together influenced Avedon's subsequent career. Israel designed *Harper's Bazaar* from 1961 to 1963 as well as Avedon's 1964 book, *Nothing Personal,* and his 1978 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Israel was a like-minded, iconoclastic cohort for Avedon as anti-fashion images began issuing from the photographer's studio. "When you work with Dick," said Israel, "you get the feeling that you are working on something, whatever it is, that has never happened before." Such was the case when the two men introduced nudity into the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* in Avedon's then shocking frontal shot of Contessa Christina Paolozzi, which resulted in canceled subscriptions and controversy. (Years later he was still courting dissension, with images like the 1971 shot of Viva at left and the 1992 shot of Stephanie Seymour at right.) Then Israel and Avedon burlesqued the hysteria of the Paris collections by showing the models Margot McKendry and China Machado posing cooly in the midst of predatory photographers and grasping editors. But when they staged a fictional paparazzi scene as a fashion spread, with model Suzy Parker and comedian and director Mike Nichols battling bloodthirsty photographers, they seemed to have gone too far (especially in the penultimate picture, one of a wan Parker in dark glasses and big hat with bandaged wrists—the tormented celebrity driven to near suicide—being supported by a nurse). The genie, as they say, was out of the bottle. Avedon has continued to produce images that shock and alarm, commenting on the morality, aesthetics, and values of the culture in which they are made and acclaimed. ■

Trastevere
Rome, 1946

Avedon (far right) with the YMHA Camera Club
New York City, 1935

Venice, 1948

Elise Daniels, model
Paris, 1948

Harlem, 1949

Veronica Compton, model
New York City, 1949

Harlem, 1949

Buster Keaton
New York City, 1952

Emilien Bouglione, animal trainer
Paris, 1955

Louis Armstrong
Newport Jazz Festival, 1955

Dovima
Paris, 1955

Cover celebrating Avedon's 20th anniversary with Harper's Bazaar *April 1965*

Jean Patchett, Betsy Pickering, and Marilyn Amborse, 1958
Harper's Bazaar

Wedding of Mr. and Mrs. H.E. Kennedy
New York City, 1961

Coco Chanel
Paris, 1958

Margot McKendry and China Machado, models
Paris, 1961

East Louisiana State Hospital
Jackson, Louisiana, 1963

Malcolm X
New York City, 1963

Bob Dylan
New York City, 1965
Harper's Bazaar

Jean Shrimpton
Paris, 1970
Vogue

Andy Warhol
New York City, 1969

James Kimberlin, drifter
New Mexico, 1980
In the American West

George Wallace with valet Jimmy Dallas
Alabama, 1993
The New Yorker

Brandenburg Gate
New Year's Eve
Berlin, 1989

Viva, actress
New York City, 1971

Stephanie Seymour
New York City, 1992

(continued from page 47) think that once upon a time Avedon's mother might have demanded, "You must see everything!" For him, as for all the great photographers, seeing *is* knowing. But what raises Avedon above so many others is a flaring energy—an unslakable, sometimes unseemly lust—that has driven him throughout his career always to see more and to know more. Somehow, he transmits that energy and desire to everything and everyone he photographs.

Of all the subjects that have drawn him (and which he has so deftly drawn), Avedon's most abiding fascination has been women, of all ages, stations, and states of grace. His fashion photography can be seen as a byproduct of this fascination rather than the other way around. From the time he began photographing his sister, Louise, when he was nine or so, Avedon has been charmed by women, and has charmed them tirelessly in return.

To watch Avedon work with models, or sit at a dinner with a woman of any age, is to see the transforming magic of simple admiration and true interest. The intensity of his attention might seem only a flatterer's ploy, but it's a quality that Avedon probably can't turn off even if he wants to. For all his strategizing, he is a man pulled through life by his eyes. In a fine introduction to *Evidence,* Adam Gopnik, the art critic of *The New Yorker,* describes a classic Avedon happening: "Once, in a taxi going uptown, he saw a woman in her 50s crossing Park Avenue with what seemed to him the perfect, the *necessary,* mixture of grace, purpose, aplomb, and eccentricity. 'I jumped out of the cab and ran after her,' Avedon said later, 'but I lost her. I wanted so badly to go up to her and say, "Now let me tell you what I've just seen," and describe her to herself.'"

Perhaps because he was an unfulfilled poet instead of a frustrated painter, Avedon has never believed that the camera offers an immutable, objective truth. This is a painful realization for most photographers, and one still powerfully resisted. For Avedon, the revelation may have come instinctually or through watching his family stage-manage their ritual snapshots (a recollection he's described touchingly in many interviews). Whatever, the notion that truth was not relevant represented real freedom. He could approach photography as the *making* of pictures, not the *taking* of pictures, and go from there. It's no accident that for the 1971 book he did of André Gregory's production of *Alice in Wonderland,* Avedon made some of the best theatrical photographs ever. For him, every picture,

whether a fashion fantasy or a portrait of an angry old man, is theater. Life is theater. Even death is theater. How else, he seems to ask, could we grapple with it? The wonder is that Avedon, with his genius for setting things so memorably in motion, never deserted the obduracy of still photography for the fluid legerdemain of the movies.

Finally, the simple wonder is Avedon. Those who can't wait to see what he'll do next may be reassured that the end seems nowhere in sight. As he has with disconcerting regularity, Avedon recently reinvented himself yet again, becoming the first staff photographer in the long, cameraless history of *The New Yorker* magazine. As his images energize the staid journal's pages, the possibilities offered by the job draw him onward at the same time as his books brilliantly sum up what has gone before.

Time moves on, inexorably, but can't seem to outrace him. He is like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass,* who was always running but took the landscape with her as she went. As Avedon's periodic self-measuring self-portraits begin to resemble the haunted, haunting faces of others he has photographed over the years, he still continues to dazzle us with his footwork. But in an interview with a West Coast newspaper late last year, he called *An Autobiography* "a window into my life as I move into its last room. You realize the passage of so much time, of so many enthusiasms, such a range of experience....It's just amazing to me how quickly it all happened."

Clearly it hasn't all happened yet. In a letter to a friend shortly after his 70th birthday, Avedon wrote about the hectic pace of his life and the new work being done. "If this is what 70 is like," he wrote, "I can't wait to be 80."

Amen, Maestro. Amen. ■

MAGGIE STEINER

Evidence of Avedon: The Master's Craft

Above: In his studio bedroom, Avedon scopes contact prints from a recent shoot. Below: An in-progress model of Avedon's Whitney show and a rare double-exposure exhibition print of Rev. Al Sharpton. Opposite page: Avedon's 8x10 and lighting gear inhabit a small closet when not in use.

While much has been written about Richard Avedon the artist, little has been noted about the extraordinary craftsmanship he brings to his photography. Behind the images we see in books and on museum walls lies an exacting technician and business manager—as all good photographers must be. This side of Avedon is evident in the unmistakable (though astonishingly simple) lighting techniques he has developed over the years—lighting that others imitate but never manage to duplicate. It is evident in the quality of an Avedon print, which has almost certainly been made by a particular artisan who knows the master's dictates intimately, and in the careful choice of tried and true equipment. It is evident in the remarkable workshop that Avedon has conducted with a group of handpicked students. And it is evident in the bustling Manhattan atelier he has built—a place where he is able to clear his mind to meet the creative and technical challenges of his vision.

As we prepared the preceding portfolio of Avedon's art, American Photo *contributing editor Russell Hart was camped out in the photographer's studio taking notes. On these pages he gives us a rare glimpse behind the scenes, showing a master craftsman at work.*

RUSSELL HART

THE ATELIER: Avedon Inc.

Richard Avedon's Upper East Side townhouse is a far cry from the fussy minimalism of many Manhattan photo studios. Its spaces are small and labyrinthine, and each turn seems to take the visitor into another part of the master's mind and experience. In the studio, which also serves as a viewing area for Avedon's enormous exhibition prints, a double-exposure portrait of the black leader Rev. Al Sharpton done for *The New Yorker* runs across ten feet of wall, while a foam-core mock-up of Avedon's Whitney show, complete with HO-scale photographs, awaits further planning. Downstairs in the darkroom, prints of model Nadja Auermann (from a recent Neiman Marcus shoot) float in circles in the wash tray. Upstairs in the art director's office, an entire wall is pushpinned with small photocopies of Avedon's greatest hits, arranged in sequence for his new book, *Evidence*. In small adjacent rooms, countless boxes of chromes, prints, and contact sheets have labels that read like a roster of 20th-century America's most celebrated people. Open one box and out spill Avedon's black-and-white proof sheets from his 1967 Beatles shoot for *Look* magazine, minus the psychedelic colors that were added for publication. Open another and you find prints of Suzy Parker modeling the Paris collections of 1956.

Avedon's own living quarters on the second floor (where he resides when not at his Montauk, Long Island, home) seem just an extension of the building's working areas. Indeed, one long wall is a bulletin board layered with old pictures, family snapshots, newspaper clippings, postcards, and miscellaneous scraps that have caught his inquiring eye.

Turning this rambling environment into a virtual beehive of activity are Avedon's 11 full-time employees, plus assorted freelancers. Some of their roles are familiar—a receptionist (Bill Bachmann), a manager (executive director Norma Stevens), and four assistants (Marc Royce, Kara Glynn, Steve Wiley, and John Mannion). But some play parts that few other photographers could afford, such as in-house archivist (Molly Logan), full-time art director (Mary Shanahan), and sales and usage manager (Andrew Thomas), not to mention a full-time accountant and housekeeper. (Also on hand are two freelance print spotters who worked full-time on the Whitney show, three art assistants, and sundry other help.) By the way, Avedon Incorporated provides staffers with health insurance, paid vacation, and even a pension fund.

CAMERA CLOSET: A Case Study

What camera becomes a legend most? It depends. Richard Avedon's immense talent can't be reduced to hardware, but most of his current work is done with two film formats: 2¼ square and 8x10.

Medium format's mobility seems to lend itself to Avedon's fashion work. A foursome of Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex cameras with standard 80mm f/2.8 lenses are the photographer's front line, quickly loaded and reloaded by assistants during a shoot. "The Rollei is Dick's true love," says Marc Royce, Avedon's first assistant. "He feels totally comfortable with it." When Avedon wants a tighter shot (head or head and shoulders), he slips a supplementary closeup diopter on the Rollei or switches to a Hasselblad 500CM with a longer 150mm f/4 lens.

Portraiture is more or less the domain of Avedon's 8x10—though he alternates his preferred formats freely, according to his assistants. ("It's partly a matter of how fast he needs to work," says Royce. "The 8x10 slows him down, and sometimes that's good.") For 8x10 work, which is done with either a 360mm f/6.8 Schneider Symmar-S or a 360mm f/6.3 Fujinon-W lens, Avedon relies on an aging Sinar p1; on location, a collapsible

RUSSELL HART

Deardorff wooden field camera fills in for the Sinar. Lighting—if not daylight—is always strobe, powered by 2,000-watt-second Elinchrom packs.

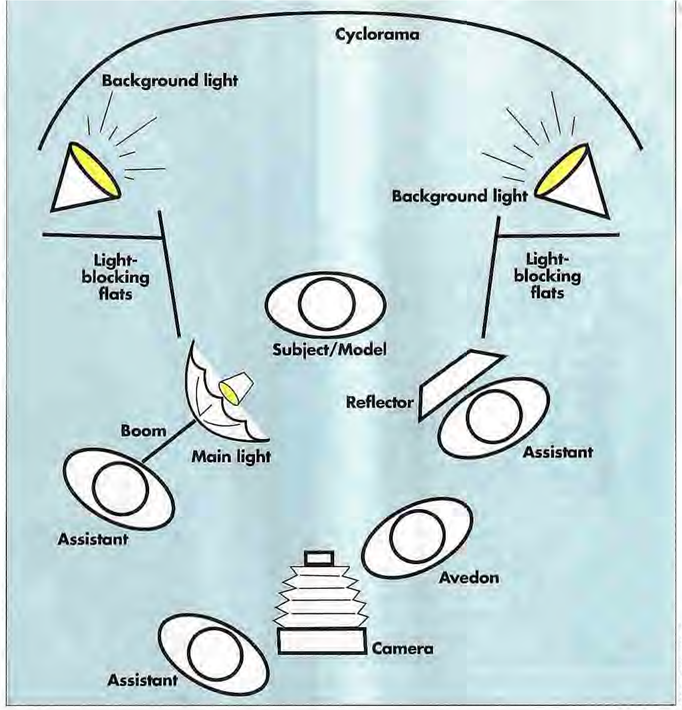
Film is just as basic. For 2¼, Plus-X (rated at E.I. 80) is Avedon's choice, though with daylight he switches to Tri-X—the amateur (ISO 400) version, because it pushes better. Professional Tri-X (rated at E.I. 200) is the standard for Avedon's 8x10 work, in any light. Avedon negatives are dense, due in no small part to his disregard for recommended development times. Even with normal exposure, Tri-X may get as much as 15 minutes of development in a deep tank of D-76—over half again the usual amount.

All that said, film and equipment are the furthest things from Avedon's mind during a shoot. "It's more about a feeling for him," says Marc Royce. "He doesn't care what he's using as long as he's getting what he wants out of it." And what about the all-important relationship between photographer and sitter? Does Avedon coach or coax his subjects? His strategy seems to be to make them feel at home, then single out the gestures or features that most intrigue him. "Dick stands in the same position, oftentimes, as the person he's about to photograph," observes a former assistant from the *In the American West* project. "It's something I do unconsciously," says Avedon. "I want to know how it feels. I think I want to encourage the thing I like about the way he stands. I want to encourage without words."

As an exception that proves the rule, Avedon recounts a White House sitting with Gerald Ford in which the president's most telling feature was his hands. "His face was impassive, but his hands were twisted and tense. And I thought, that's it, that's the contradiction in the photograph that will tell what it's like to be who he is at this moment. And I made the mistake of telling him. I said, 'President Ford, your hands are beautiful. Just don't move.' And as I went back to lower the camera to include them, his hands became benign and perfect and boring and revealing of nothing."

RUSSELL HART

Above right: A bird's-eye view of a typical Avedon portrait-lighting scheme. Below: A bevy of TLRs stare out from Avedon's camera closet.



MARK GARTLAND

LIGHT SCHEME: Artistry Illuminated

The secret to Richard Avedon's studio lighting should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the freewheeling, energetic style of the photographer's fashion work. Instead of mounting his main light on a stand—the usual practice, and one that limits the subject's movement—he has first assistant Marc Royce hold it at the end of a telescoping boom. Once the light's angle and position are to Avedon's liking and a strobe reading is taken, Royce follows the model with the light the way a sound technician on a movie set would track an actor with a boom microphone. As Avedon fires away, his subject is free to move around. "It's motion that gives life to the picture," says Royce, no doubt speaking for the master.

For consistent exposures, Royce has to keep the light at a steady distance from the subject—though black and white, the bulk of Avedon's current work, is more forgiving of variations than color transparency film. (When Avedon shoots color, or works with 8x10 rather than 2¼, his light is more likely to be fixed in position.) Even so, there's a calculated margin for creative error in that approach. "Avedon likes the subtle, unexpected changes that happen when you work this way," says Royce.

Avedon's moving light is usually bounced into an umbrella or a small, mylar-covered parabolic dome to soften it, while his second and third assistants (Kara Glynn and Steve Wiley, respectively) angle small squares of metallized cardboard to reflect light into the subject's eyes. A fourth assistant handles film changes. The background—always the same white-painted cyclorama, dubbed "the cove" for its smooth, enclosing curves—is lighted by two strobe heads on adjustable poles held in place with floor-to-ceiling tension. If Avedon wants a gray background behind his subject, his assistants power down the lights so that they're two stops less bright than the main source. (A typical incident reading at the subject is f/16.5, for which gray would require a reading of f/8.5.) If Avedon wants a white background, the lights are powered up to within a half-stop of the main light (f/16) to insure just a hint of tone. ("He doesn't like a pure, pure white," says Royce.) Adjustable flats are placed to either side of the subject to keep unwanted background light from filling shadows or causing flare.

For larger subjects (elephants included), Avedon rents more spacious quarters downtown, lately favoring a daylight studio. Or he goes on location. "He hates the studio these days," says Marc Royce. "He's looking for something new and better."

DARKROOM DRAMA: The Printer's Art

Avedon's driven lifestyle doesn't afford him the luxury of printing his own work. But while others may get their hands wet on his behalf, he is involved in every step of the process. "Dick is extremely specific about an emotional quality that he wants in the print," says Ruedi Hofmann, a former Avedon assistant who now makes the photographer's large-scale exhibition prints. "He'll talk about making a print angry or fiery or romantic or kind." By Avedon's own account, Hofmann has been roundly successful at translating that feeling into the language of darkroom technique. Says the photographer, "When it comes to printing, Ruedi and I are one person."

Marc Royce, who with Avedon second assistant Kara Glynn makes prints up to 20x24 inches in the photographer's surprisingly spartan basement darkroom, remembers vividly his first experience with Avedon's demanding approach to printing. "I arrived thinking I was a pretty good printer," he says. Royce's darkroom self-esteem quickly plummeted, though, when Avedon handed him a negative and asked him to make a series of prints from it with a wide range of exposures and contrast levels. "When I gave him the prints, he took a pair of scissors and cut the head from one contrast and put it on the body from another contrast, then cut out a portion of a building that had the lightness he wanted and put it with another building that was darker," says Royce, who ended up making most of the prints for Avedon's recent *An Autobiography*.

Hofmann's experience is much the same. "When I show Dick test prints, he'll choose one with the best eyes, and if that print isn't the best for him overall, he'll cut out a nose or a mouth from another print and paste it on," he says. "The final print is often a composite of all the test prints I've made. But you have to be careful when you give Dick a final print, because he's likely to grab a grease pencil and start marking it up all over again. For him, printing is always a *process*."

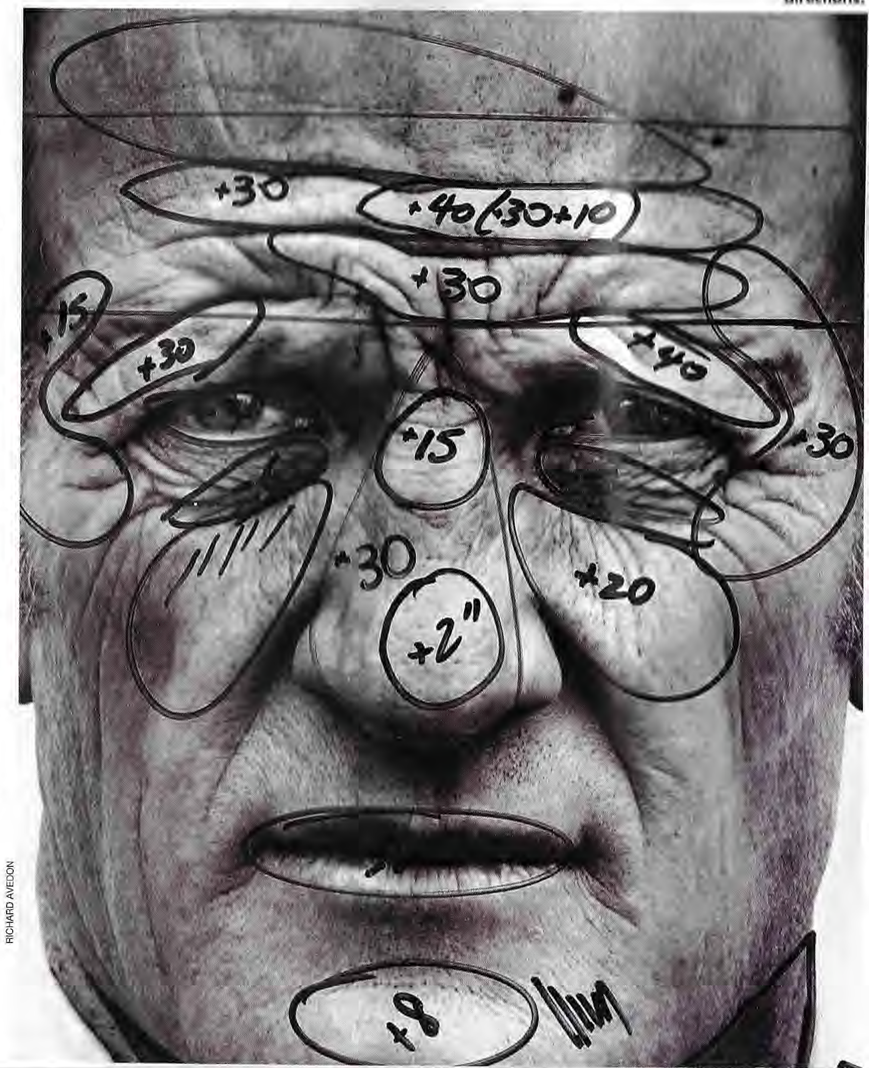
Eight by ten feet and beyond in scale, Avedon's biggest exhibition prints are exposed with a modified horizontal enlarger outfitted with a superbright pulsed-xenon light source, then developed with a 30-year-old chain-drive trough processor. (Their size requires that they be created in sections cut from 50-inch rolls.) Making them presents a physical challenge even greater than the darkroom's usual demands, according to Hofmann. Yet curiously, their proportion offers a degree of creative control not possible with smaller prints.

Take the example here, a portrait of three Mormon men from Avedon's *In the American West* project. The print's larger-than-life size means that dodging and burning-in can be used actually to modulate the tones of the individual faces. (Specific times are indicated on the detail by Hofmann's grease-pencil markings.) That manipulation, next to impossible in a print of conventional size, gives the face a dimensionality it wouldn't otherwise have. "Big prints require a very different approach," says Hofmann. They also change the viewing experience in a qualitative way. As Avedon himself once said of an outsized portrait, "I saw things in his eyes... that aren't revealed in a 16x20." The print's size, he remarked, "shifts the meaning of the picture."

The printing for Avedon's blockbuster Whitney show has consumed three years, off and on. "When we first started, it took as long as a week to finish one image," says Hofmann, who makes an edition of from two to eight prints once Avedon gives the final go-ahead. "Now we're down to about one a day."

RICHARD AVEDON

Below: A detail from a 5½ x 6¼-foot Avedon exhibition print of a Mormon father and his sons (above) shows printer Ruedi Hofmann's precise dodging and burning-in directions.



RICHARD AVEDON

MAGGIE STEBER

Avedon meets with members of his class. Standing from left to right: Julie Genser, Mark Lyon, Barry Munger, Kevin Funabashi. Seated: Susan Oken, Avedon, Nina Drapacz, Billy Cunningham, Jill Graham, Eileen Travell, Maxine Henryson, Nelson Bakerman.

THE MASTER CLASS: Inspired Instruction

For the lucky 16 people who made the final cut, Avedon's master class has been an invaluable photographic boost. It's not that the photographer's cachet has netted them bigger and better assignments, though many have been doing extracurricular shooting for *The New Yorker* magazine under his direction. Rather, the experience has changed the way they think about—and go about—their work. "I felt I'd hit a wall with what I'd been doing in the 1980s," says Chris Callis, a class member and respected photographer in his own right. "But through this process with Avedon, I came back to what first excited me about photography."

"He taught as much by example as by instruction," says Amy Arbus, daughter of Diane Arbus and contributor to publications such as *The Village Voice.* "He's just amazing to be around. He's absolutely tireless. And whatever he's doing at the moment is the most important thing in his life. He took the class so seriously, it made us all want to do the same thing."

Sponsored last year by the International Center of Photography in New York, the master class revolved around six Avedon assignments given over the course of six long weekends, once a month. (Avedon chose his students from several hundred portfolios submitted for admission.)

Perhaps inspired by Avedon's own 1945 workshop experience with the great Alexey Brodovitch, the class's teaching method centered on critiques—by Avedon and by fellow students. "I worked incredibly hard on the first assignment," says Callis. "I did four pictures, with big constructions that each took a week to make. And when I brought them in, instead of criticizing them directly, Avedon told me that in his experience the more production a shoot requires, the more the photograph really takes itself—and makes him feel left out, in creative terms. Other people were more direct; they said the images were boring, and that I should have a drink and loosen up."

Callis himself was unhappy with the results of the next assignment, to shoot New York's St. Patrick's Day parade. But Avedon's third assignment was the perfect antidote to Callis's studied, technical approach: to make family snapshots. "It was a sort of revelation," says Callis. "It brought me back to photos I'd shot of my frat brothers in 1963. Those pictures had a life to them, a joy, and these new images had the same feeling."

Callis has since returned to catch-as-catch-can street shooting, and Avedon's injunction to get loose has had an effect on other class members as well. "The trick is to be able to let it go," says Amy Arbus. "You should know what you want going into a photograph, but sometimes you become so stuck on getting what you want that you miss what's there."

Since the last assignment—an Avedon-dubbed "portrait hootenanny" held at the photographer's Montauk home, in which participants photographed each other—the class has continued to meet informally, with and without its famous teacher. Members now call on one another freely for advice. But what remains with them, above all, is the example of the master. "What you go away with is that he's an extremely brave guy," says Chris Callis. "A lot of photographers are stopped by their fears, but nothing will hold Avedon back from making a photograph. He'll do whatever it takes to fulfill his vision." Says Amy Arbus, "Avedon made us realize that you can't dilly-dally with this thing you love. You have to push it to a new level. He made every one of us feel we had a responsibility to be not just a good photographer, but a great one."

Alas, the class was a one-time affair. The good news: One of Avedon's upcoming books will be based on his teachings. That's how-to knowledge from the top. ■