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ARTnews

RICHARD AVEDON: BEYOND FASHION

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TRANSCENDING

BY JAMIE JAMES

Despite his immense success—and a retrospective now on view at the Whitney Museum—Richard Avedon still worries that people don't take him seriously as an artist. "When will they ever stop judging me as a man," he asks, "and look at the work?"

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FASHION

For more than 40 years Richard Avedon has been one of the most successful and widely imitated photographers in the world. On hundreds of magazine covers, he has chronicled every ruffle and flourish of style that has coursed through American life since World War II. Over the past decade he has established himself as a major figure in the art world to a greater extent than any living photographer before him, with exhibitions at some of the most prestigious museums in the United States and Europe. This month a retrospective of his work opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; it will travel to Cologne, Milan, and Los Angeles.

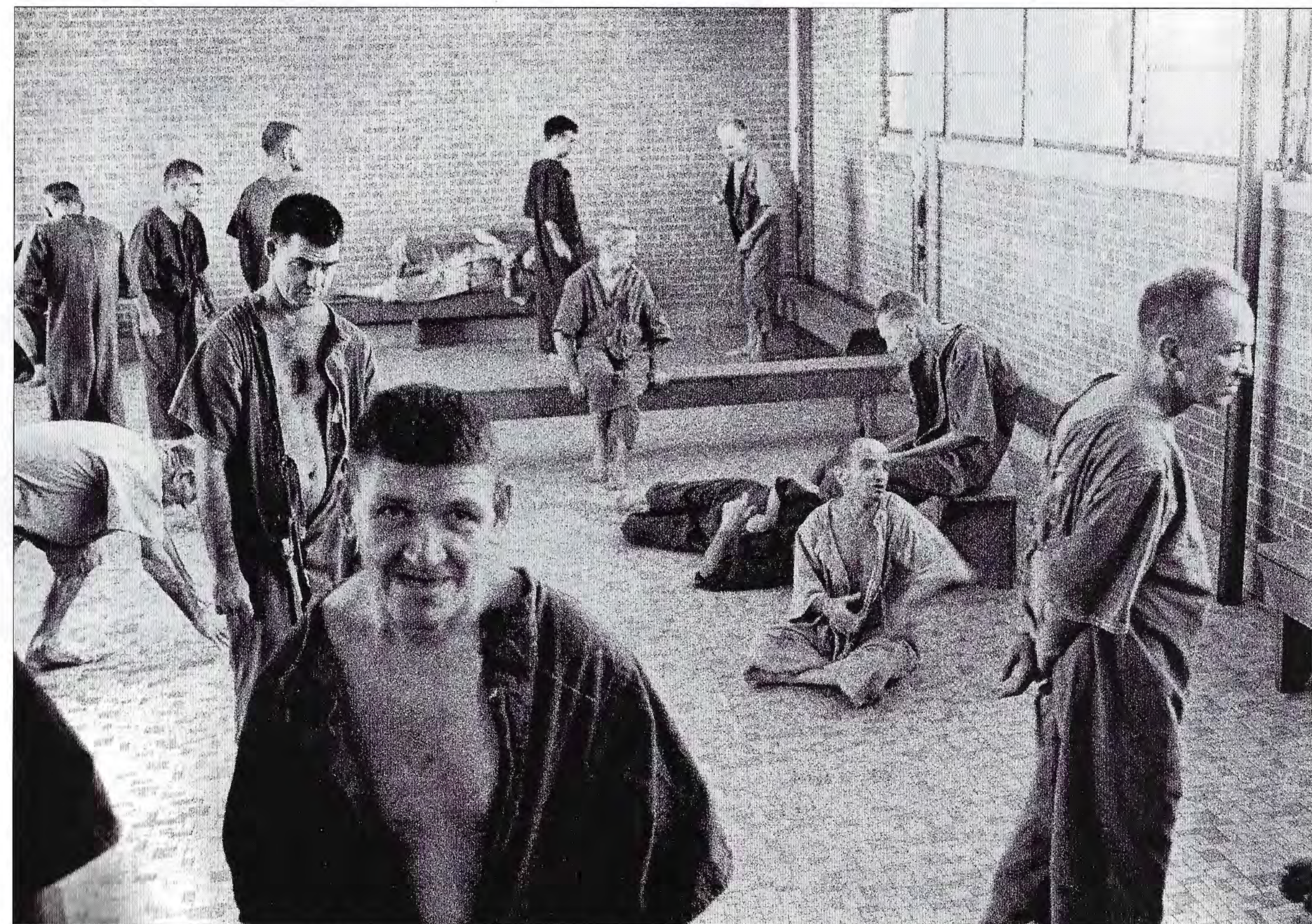
Avedon in his studio. Left to right: Volpi Ball, Venice, Italy, August 31, 1991; A. Philip Randolph, New York City, April 8, 1976; Carson McCullers, Writer, Nyack, New York, June 14, 1958.

Although he has been at the pinnacle of success for decades, Avedon himself is openhearted and down-to-earth. The man is pure New York: friendly yet intolerant of fools, compulsively chatty, and even at 70 as quick and bright and edgy as a teenager. He still has about him the air of the streetwise hustler, self-confident yet eager to make a good impression.

A small, wiry man with dark, lambent eyes and a mane of gray hair even more remarkably thick in person than in his self-portraits, Avedon spends most of his time in the Upper East Side brownstone that houses his studio. A bright, open

Avedon published *An Autobiography*, a massive collection of some of his most famous photographs, which is itself closer to most people's idea of an exhibition catalogue than the book he is working on now.

The bulk of the catalogue is devoted to an Avedon time line. The whole life is there: childhood snapshots, a newspaper clipping announcing him as the winner of a high-school poetry competition, some pages from his school's literary magazine (which he coedited with James Baldwin), a photograph from his first portrait series—a picture ID for the Merchant Marines, one of thousands he shot when he was a ser-



East Louisiana State Hospital, Jackson, Louisiana, February 9, 1963, from a series on mental hospitals.

room on the second floor is lined with famous images, huge black-and-white portraits of haggard faces: Ezra Pound, Carson McCullers, Oscar Levant. Along one wall there is a row of neatly made beds—for his three grandsons, he says, when they come to visit.

At the rear is an airy kitchen, resembling a comfortable Long Island country home more than a Manhattan town house. Monstrous geraniums climb to the glass ceiling; an inviting breakfast of fruit and pastries on Tuscan crockery has been spread on the table. Typically, Avedon is busy at work, poring over the proofs of the catalogue for his Whitney retrospective, which are laid out across the kitchen range.

The catalogue contains a long essay by guest curator Jane Livingston and a reminiscence by critic Adam Gopnik, a close friend of Avedon's, but otherwise it resembles an autobiography in documentary form. Paradoxically, last year

Jamie James is arts correspondent in New York for the Times of London and author of *The Music of the Spheres* (Grove Press, 1993).

vice photographer during the war.

In the '40s the first ground-breaking fashion work, for *Harper's Bazaar*, begins to appear on the time line. (Because he had a retrospective of his fashion photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1978, the Whitney exhibition will not include that aspect of his career.) Avedon's first book, *Observations*, designed by Alexey Brodovitch, his editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, with a text by Truman Capote, is reproduced in its entirety in miniature. Turning over the pages slowly, he says, as though talking about a stranger, "As you look back through the work, you find that from the very beginning there was a mix of reportage, fashion, and portraiture."

The time line marches forward inexorably, mixing the various strands of Avedon's life and career: the work for *Vogue* in the Diana Vreeland era, reportage from Vietnam, the mental hospital series, and portraits of his first wife, Doe, whom he subsequently divorced. Farther along are images of his current wife, Evelyn, and their son, John, 41, a writer and

editor who works as a political consultant for the Tibetan government-in-exile. At the end comes his controversial *In the American West* (1985) and his work for *The New Yorker*, which in 1992 appointed him its first staff photographer.

"I have always been a magazine person," he says, "in high school, in the Merchant Marines [when he was a staff photographer for the service's magazine, *The Helm*], *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and now at *The New Yorker*. Magazines have always given me my power base."

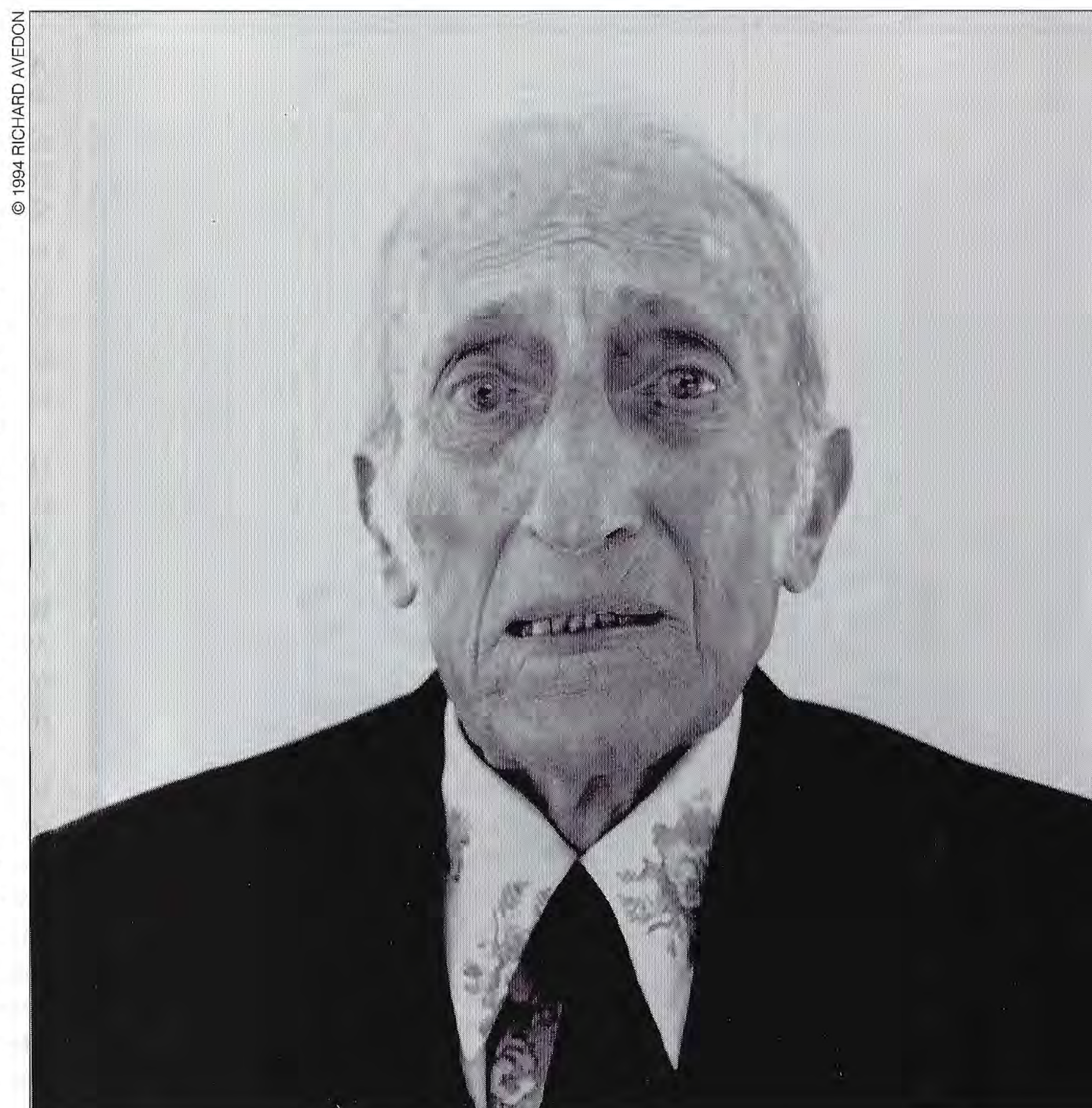
Avedon appears to be enjoying himself hugely as he traverses this capsulization of his own life. Then he looks up suddenly with a sly twinkle in his eye and says, "Don't you think it's vulgarity of the highest order to know everything about a person's life?"

Yet Avedon has an evident willingness to tell anything and everything about himself. Despite his immense success—or perhaps because of it—he at moments evinces a fear that others do not take him as seriously as an artist as he takes himself. "Everyone thinks that I sort of just take the pictures," he says. "But I always know what I'm going to do. Often I make a sketch long before I meet the subject." For example, the Whitney catalogue includes a sketch he made for his portrait of Ronald Fischer, a much-published picture of a bare-chested beekeeper covered with bees. It is an interesting choice, since it would seem to be the most straightforward of images, but in fact Avedon made the sketch before he found Fischer.

Yet that very straightforwardness in Avedon's work has



Francis Bacon, Painter, Paris, April 11, 1979. "It was always portraiture that interested me," says Avedon.



Jacob Israel Avedon, Father of Richard Avedon, Sarasota, Florida, August 25, 1973, from a harrowing series taken in the last days of his father's life.

caused him at times to feel confrontational toward those photography critics who esteem candor over style, who prize the immediacy of the moment over the photographer's intention. On being asked the question that the world never tires of asking, Avedon rolls his eyes and replies, "Is photography art? Is cooking an art? Is loving an art? Is art art? Only when it is raised to the level of art. The bogus issues surrounding photog-

raphy will be so humiliating in the future for the people who are writing them now."

Asked about the source of his work, he says, "The main influences on me were not visual, they were literary. I read a great deal. I read Proust very early on, and again and again, because I'm so interested in behavior and manners, and the rising and falling within the social structure. I read and reread *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, Sartre, and then the Russians." Currently, he says, he is reading a new edition of Chekhov's short stories.



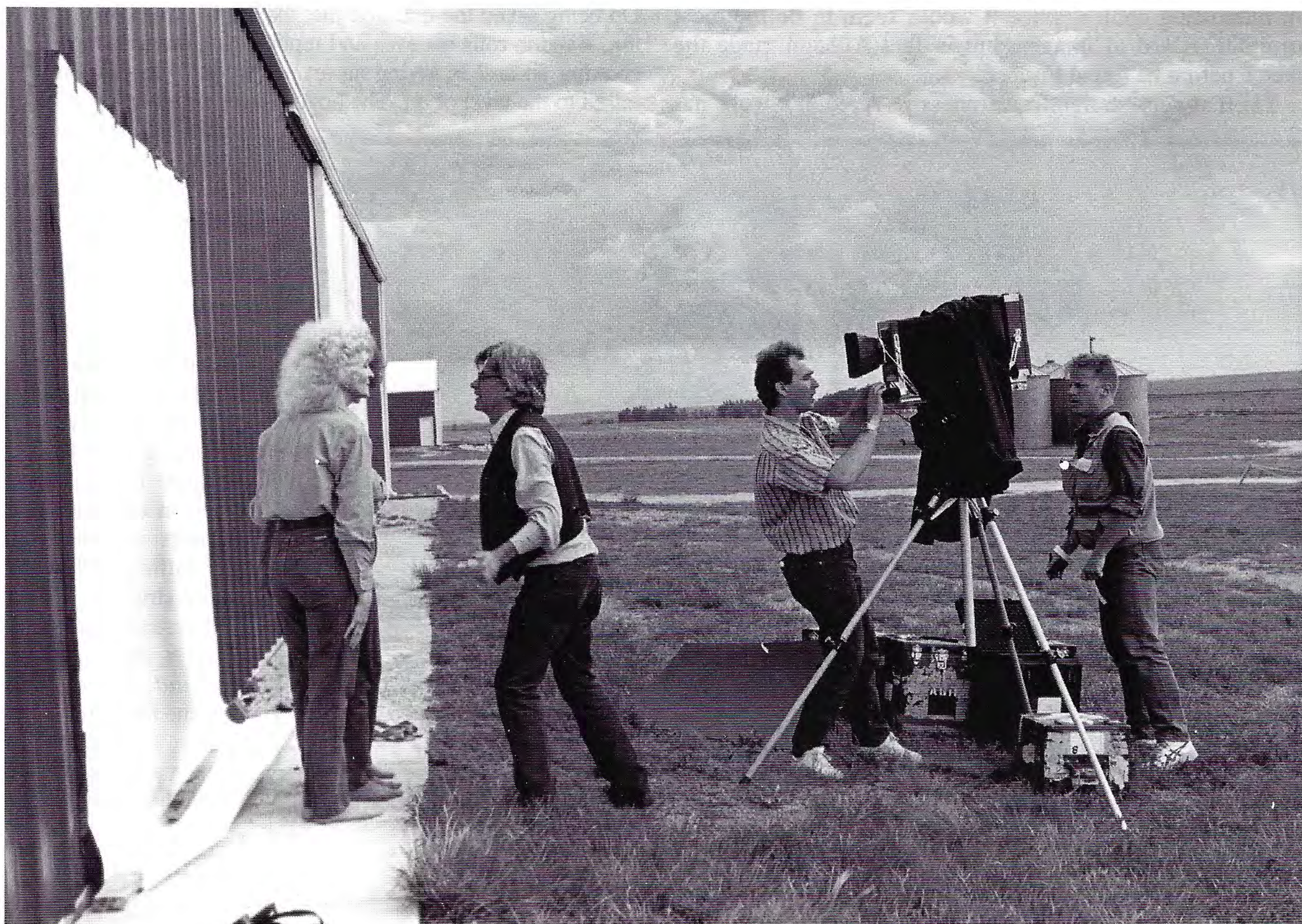
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Avedon's father owned Avedon's Fifth Avenue, a Manhattan department store. "When I was a child, from the time I was about 13 till I moved away from home, I lived one block from the Met, on East 86th Street. Because we lived in a very small apartment, I would go to the Met, which in those days was empty. It was before the museum became big business, before Hoving. I used to do my homework there, because it was quiet."

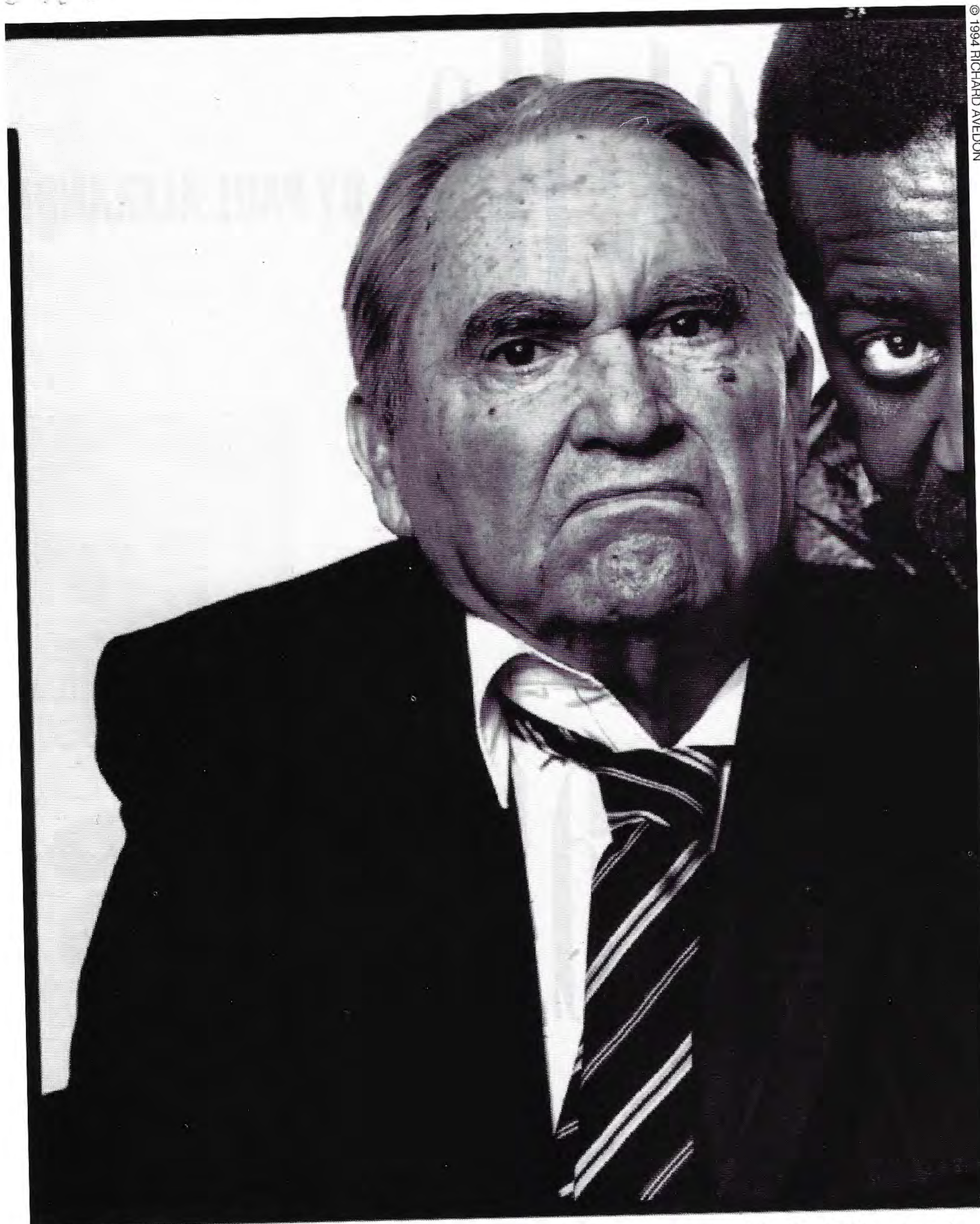
He spent a lot of time walking around the museum, where he found himself drawn irresistibly to the portraits, in all their manifestations: the Fayum portraits in the Egyptian wing, the Roman busts, Renaissance portraits, Soutine and Modigliani. "It was always portraiture that interested me. I just loved thinking about the people in the portraits in the Met."

The early influences were not all so highfalutin: "My family had *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Harper's Bazaar* in the house every month. I would tear out the theater photographs by Steichen and by someone called Anton Bruehl. The fashion photographs seemed very remote to me, except for one photographer, and that was Munkacsi. It was the sense of freedom and movement and vitality. I was young, and I liked that pulse of movement in fashion photographs."

LEFT Ronald Fischer, *Beekeeper*, Davis, California, May 8, 1981. BELOW Photographing officials of the Loretta Lynn Fan Club, Wild Horse, Colorado, June 16, 1983.



© LAURA WILSON



Governor George Wallace with Valet, Jimmy Dallas, Montgomery, Alabama, July 31, 1993, was published in *The New Yorker*, where Avedon has been staff photographer since 1992.

Among young photographers on the scene today, Avedon says he sees "great potential in Nick Waplington, who did a book called *The Living Room*. I liked Nan Goldin's first book. And Joel-Peter Witkin is some kind of a weird master."

Throughout his work Avedon often makes art-historical allusions, even in photographs that are largely the result of improvisation in the studio. His Warhol triptych, depicting the late artist and members of The Factory, from 1969, contains both carefully planned elements as well as serendipitous insights into the subjects. The three male nudes in the central panel, for example, were intended as a satire on Renaissance images of the Three Graces, while other figures evolved in the course of the shoot. "We began with Joe Dallesandro and Paul Morrissey standing together. Then as we developed the group, Dallesandro, being an ambitious young guy, worked his way over to Andy and touched his leg. Then I caught Paul Morrissey giving him a very hard, jealous look."

One of Avedon's most famous works is the series of pho-

looking at my father in the last moments of his life, and my father was looking at me, and in a sense he *became* me in the photograph."

An Autobiography may be interpreted as an attempt to raise that equation to the highest level, to show how the artist's life is defined by what he transmits through his work: seeing is being. Reactions to the book have polarized along the same battle lines that always seem to dominate the discourse about Avedon. "The ordinary reader of photography books won't read my *Autobiography* the way I meant it to be read," he says. "It's more like a film than a regular photography book. It's mysterious."

Avedon believes that his fame as a fashion photographer has prejudiced some people against his other work. "I'm just famous as a fashion photographer. You don't make a living from *In the American West*. No one paid for my trip to Vietnam. When will they ever stop judging me as a man and look at the work?"

tographs of the actor, pianist, and humorist Oscar Levant, which were shot shortly before his death in 1972. Levant at that time was in the final stages of debilitating mental illness and drug addiction. Avedon's photographs captured a ravaged soul poised terrifyingly on the edge of the abyss. "I didn't know how to talk to him. He came to the door in his bathrobe and slippers, and he was free-associating like mad, just rummaging around in the drawers of his mind. It was the thing itself, complicated and raw." He pauses, chuckles. "On his piano there was . . . wait, you'd better not quote this. Oh, what the hell. On his piano there was a photograph of him hugging Judy Garland. Levant told me, 'That was the greatest pharmacological embrace in history.'"

Another harrowing series of portraits are those of his father in the last days of his life, when he was dying of cancer. For Avedon, when photographer and subject confront each other, it becomes a process of communication and ultimately of identification. "I was