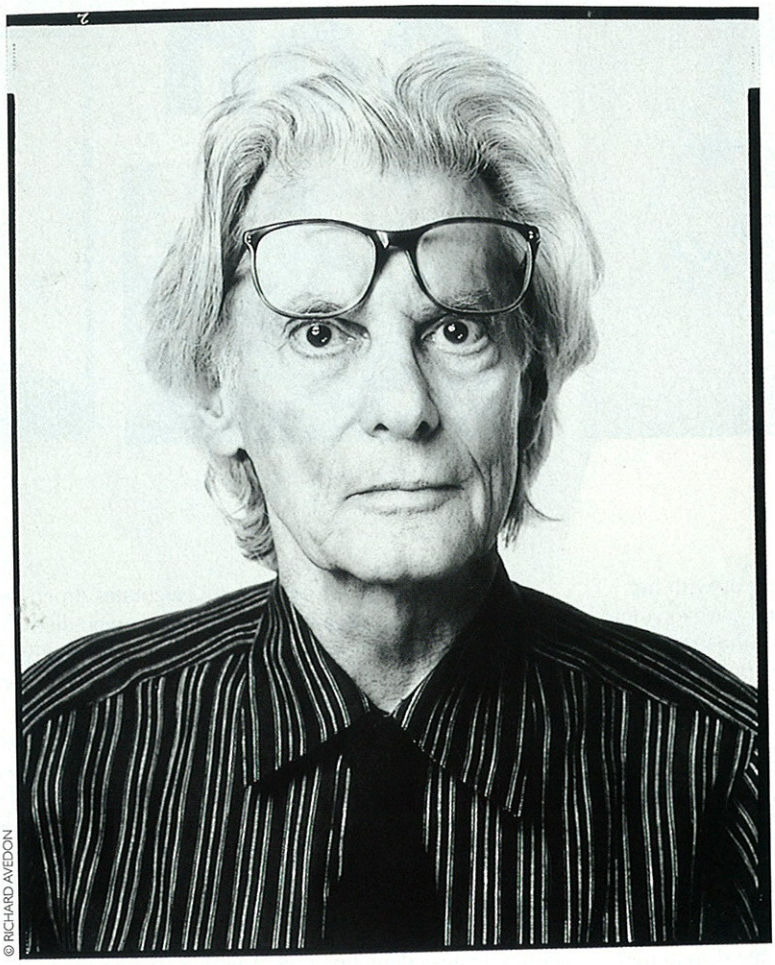
Portraits of the Artist



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Richard Avedon's distinctive, even eccentric vision has always been most apparent in his challenging portraits of the famous and the obscure. As a new exhibition makes clear, the work's fascination with age and masculine angst reflects Avedon's own deepest compulsions. Here, photo historian **Mary Panzer** considers the images that represent Avedon's surest claim to artistic immortality.

Opposite: Marilyn Monroe, after a photo shoot with Avedon, New York, 1957. This page: A self-portrait of the photographer, New York City, 2002.

This page: "Gus Grissom, astronaut, Langely Field, Virginia, 3/31/61." Opposite: "Andy Warhol, Artist, New York City, 8/20/69."

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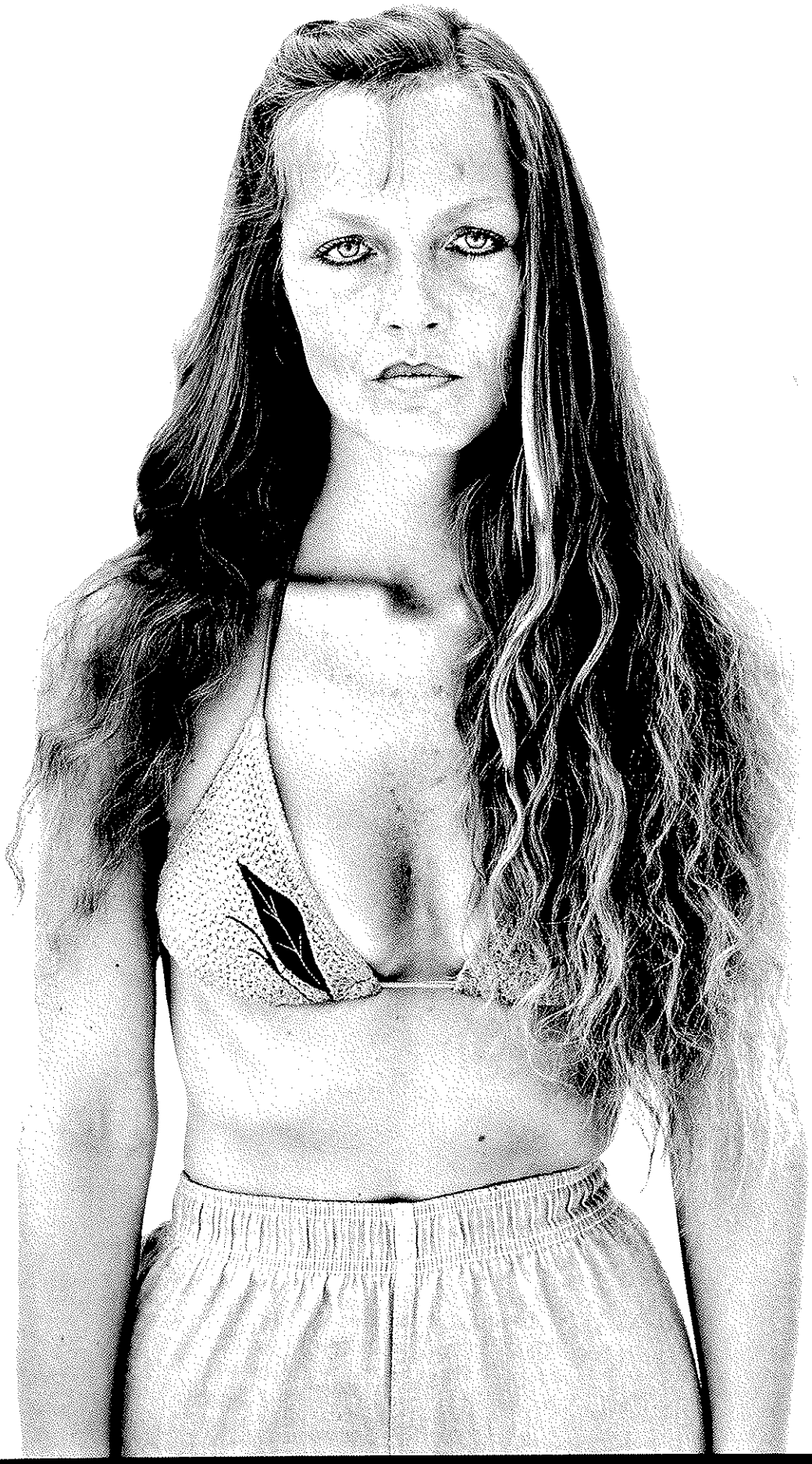

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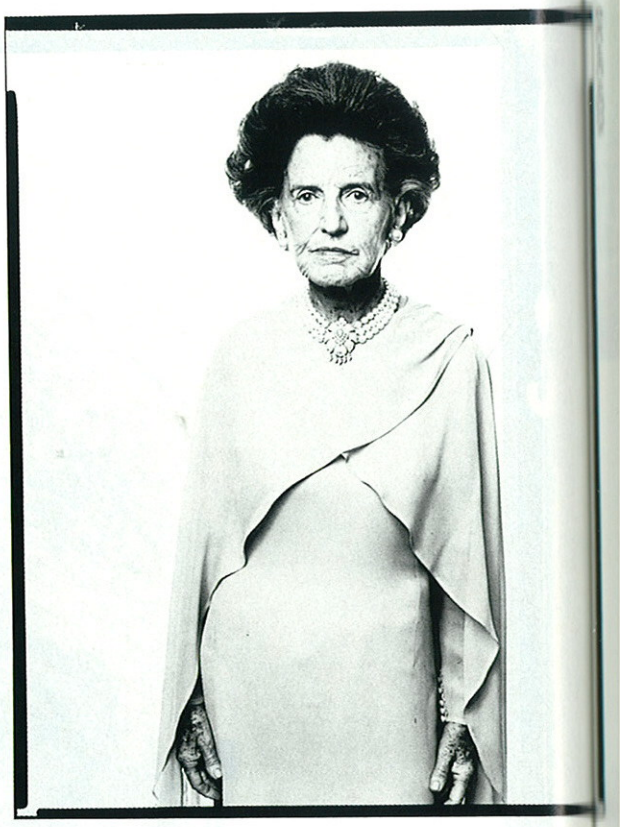
Opposite: "Charlene Van Tighem, Physical Therapist, Augusta, Montana, 1983."
This page: "Dwight David Eisenhower, President of the United States, Palm Springs, California, 1/31/64."



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"I became an artist out of terror. **Everything I couldn't control as a child**—time, motion, other people, their appetites, and mine—I could embrace safely from behind the camera."

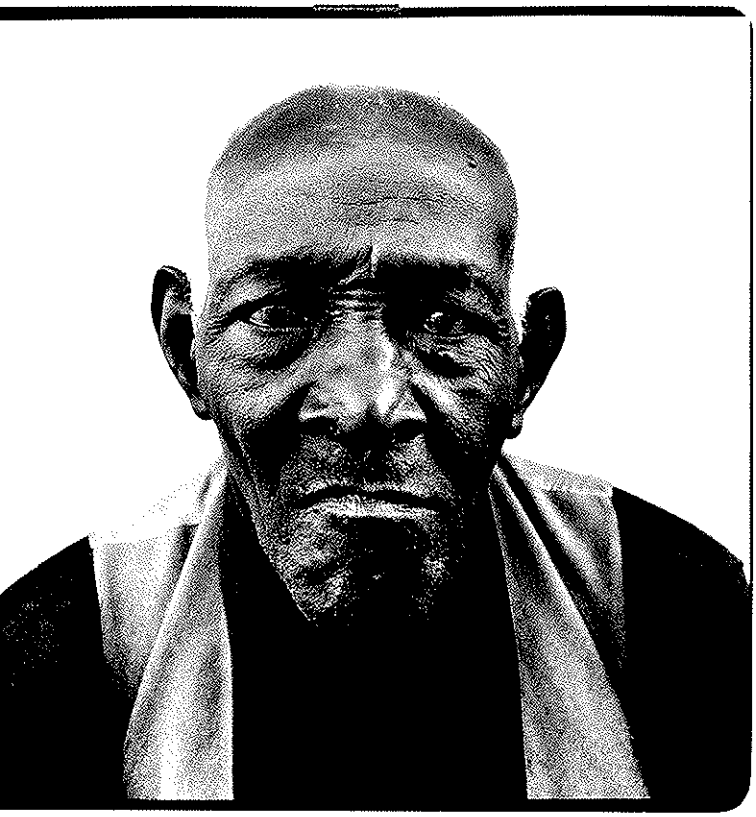
Richard Avedon greets you in his studio wearing jeans, a dark shirt, and a tie. His mane of white hair stops at his collar, his eyes bright and penetrating. His cool recalls the 1960s, when cool was more defiant than stylish. It's hard to remember that time of social upheaval; we tolerate so many things that once made people very angry—from integration and premarital sex to short skirts and tattoos. But talking to Avedon, you sense that he still knows how to make us angry.

We are meeting to discuss his new exhibition, "Richard Avedon: Portraits," which opens at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art on September 26 and runs through January 5, 2003. There is nothing modest about the show, which includes more than 180 images and is the first truly chronological survey of this body of work. The Met's director, Philippe de Montebello, has officially welcomed Avedon's portraits to their "proper place within the larger history of art," calling the work "the culmination of the time-honored tradition of public portraiture." It is a reception Avedon has pursued with characteristic intensity, and however inevitable it might appear to us, from Avedon's perspective it has never been assured.

In his long career, Avedon has produced every genre of photography, from advertising pages for clients such as Revlon and Pabst Blue Ribbon to fashion spreads for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* to rarely seen documentary projects. But his portraits, as critic Whitney Sargent put it in 1958, "constitute his most valid claim to consideration as a serious artist." Avedon has always separated his work for hire from the images he makes for himself. His portraits, which are too unflattering in the traditional sense to serve any ordinary honorific function, certainly seem to fall into the latter category.

The earliest images in the show come from the late 1940s; the most recent, a portrait of photographer Lee Friedlander, comes from 2002. On the whole, these are people Avedon admires, or for whom he feels compassion. In 1974, he compared his relationship with his sitters to that of a doctor or a fortune teller—people come to him to find out how they really are. But he delivers the news in ways that can make them uncomfortable.

In 1964, Avedon published *Nothing Personal,* a book that could serve as a manifesto for much of his future work. The foreword by James Baldwin (a high school friend of Avedon's) caustically laments America's refusal to acknowledge "the terror within," and sees national tragedy ahead. But Avedon's pictures tell a different story. The book opens with a tragicomic suite of couples from the city hall marriage license bureau, followed by the faces of mostly famous people—faces that lack any conventional camera cheer but do not resist emotion. The grim, lost expression on Dwight D. Eisenhower's face, the emptiness



Opposite, left: "The Generals of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 10/15/63, Washington, D.C." Opposite, right: "Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, Hyannisport, Massachusetts, 1976." This page, left: "William Casby, born in slavery, Algiers, Louisiana, 1963"; This page, right: "John Ford, Director, Bel Air, California, 4/11/72."

of Marilyn Monroe caught between performances, even the opaque expression of William Casby, born a slave, are startling. The images seem to shimmer between the countenance we expect, or think we know, and the one that could only be the work of Richard Avedon.

The photographer himself has described that quality as the "unresolved mystery between reporting and storytelling." Avedon has never disguised the fact that his own response is more important to his finished picture than the feelings of the person he photographs, that his portraits are "less a portrait of them than...what I think of them."

In this exhibition we see his skill as a portraitist unfold against a historical background that some of us will remember firsthand and others will view as ancient. For those not charmed by retro fashions, Avedon's history comes without nostalgia or sentiment. The figures from the 1970s make us shudder—from the Chicago Seven, Andy Warhol and his Factory, and the Mission Council in Saigon to the entire 69-image suite of *The Family* that appeared in *Rolling Stone* in 1976. The exuberant, chilly collection of images he made in *In the American West* now look almost prescient in their brazely strange glamour.

These images, like most of Avedon's portraits, met an ambivalent greeting from critics when they first appeared. The new show will also be typical of Avedon, arousing anger and exposing the few taboos that remain. But his portraits hold our interest long after the shouting has stopped. From Avedon's images of John Ford to Friedlander to his own father, Jacob Israel Avedon, we confront his fascination with age. Even his self-portraits revel in the very process that most people frantically try (and fail) to hide. The most recent, made in the summer of 2002, shows Avedon at 79, two years younger than his father was when they began their elegiac collaboration. In one recent interview he said with a laugh, "I'm starting to look like someone in an Avedon portrait."

There is in the collection a paucity of women's portraits. Exceptions are the striking portrait of writer Renata Adler made 25 years ago; Avedon's second wife, Evelyn, as she appeared in 1975 near the end of their marriage; fashion editor Polly Mellen, with her white hair cut like a schoolgirl's; and political matriarch Rose Kennedy in chiffon, ready for dinner at the White House. These women are like mythical sirens who no longer pose any danger to Ulysses. In fact there is almost no sign of the luxurious beauty Avedon has celebrated so memorably, unless you count Candy Darling in Andy Warhol's Factory.

Long ago, when one interviewer noted the absence of typical male heroes among his sitters, Avedon demurred, admitting his dislike of rivals. But this show gives us a striking array of interesting men; in effect it is an essay on the surprising shape of masculinity in the last half of the 20th century. Portraits of murderer Dick Hickock and his father, Walter Hickock, provide a haunting illustration of filial attachment; Gus Grissom in his astronaut attire looks so fragile you can't quite believe he will survive (he eventually perished in a launch-pad fire in 1970); the Chicago Seven are sweet, exuberant, infuriatingly smug; artist Roy Lichtenstein is *(continued on page 93)*

Portraits of the Artist

(continued from page 53) spectral, like an angel or a ghost. In contrast to the vulnerable faces of these media stars, the anonymous citizens of the American West seem confident, strong, and hard.

In a recent interview, Avedon confessed: "I became an artist out of terror. Everything I couldn't control as a child, or for that matter as a man—time, motion, other people, their appetites, and mine—I could embrace safely from behind the camera."

And yet he depends upon his subjects. He acknowledges the generosity of the figures who posed for him in *In the American West,* what he often calls his most successful body of work. The project began in 1979 with a portrait of 13-year-old Boyd Fortin holding a butchered rattlesnake. To Avedon, he was a symbol, "an adolescent rite of passage and everything that's about—loss of innocence, sexual ambiguity, castration fears."

His self-portraits revel in **a fascination with aging**. In one interview he said, "I'm beginning to look like someone in an Avedon portrait."

A portrait is like a conversation, or like dancing. It comes out of an exchange between artist and sitter that relies on artifice and transcends time. A conversation can be better than solitude, just like a waltz with the right person can be better than sitting side by side at the movies in the dark. The controlled steps you both know make it possible to inhabit, for a moment, a world where you understand each other perfectly. ■

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Everyday Heroes

(continued from page 61) explains, "this is a completely self-centered project—the idea of capturing everyone who is essential to you, either emotionally or financially."

The idea for the project came from Grace's fascination with the timeless quality of old photographic portraits. "Everything around can change—transportation, dress, technology—but the people in those pictures are just like you or me, only frozen in time. That's how universal the picture becomes," he says. By formally photographing the people he saw on a daily basis, Grace hoped to identify and capture essential human qualities—qualities that blur distinctions of race, social class, and economic status.

Grace threw himself into the project in 1993, and since then has created about 150 detailed and highly crafted portraits of everyone in his life in the past nine years. He began by lugging his 8x10 view camera to places where one wouldn't necessarily expect to find a photographer—his tax attorney's office, an auto-body shop, and his local shoe repair store. After a difficult operation, he returned to the hospital to photograph his surgeon. "There may be things you'd rather not go through," says Grace, "people you wish weren't essential, but they are." He stops and laughs, saying, "Hey, I'd rather never have to see my surgeon again, right? Or my divorce attorney. But that's how my life was at the time, and so I needed to photograph them."

For a perfectionist like Grace, the technical aspect was essential to the project. Ever since he covered the 1988 presidential campaign by making astonishing formal portraits of the candidates with a 2¼ Rolleiflex TLR, Grace has been a staunch supporter of slowing down the process of portraiture. He likes to speak about the time an editor at *Life* magazine jokingly called him a Luddite after seeing him shoot. "That's always stuck with me," he laughs, "because in a way, I have been going in the opposite direction in this field—when everyone else was getting digital and motorized, I wanted to slow down, capture the moment more carefully, really finding the truest, most detailed representation of a person." By capturing that detail and freezing that moment, Arthur Grace has assembled a unique landscape of Americans of all kinds and underscored how interconnected all of our lives are. ■

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