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ARTISTS AS SUBJECT

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 50-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE, RICHARD AVEDON TALKS ABOUT HIS PICTURES, HIS PROCESS AND HOW DEEP A PORTRAIT CAN GO.

Diane Hellekson, Staff Writer

Richard Avedon has trouble saying no.

Here is a man who could afford to turn down anyone he pleased. He changed the face of fashion photography and, for the last half-century, made portraits that have become icons. His retrospective, "Richard Avedon: Evidence 1944-1994," which ranges from beauty and light to madness and death, opens today at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the last stop of an international tour.

He's rich, he's handsome, and about as famous as a living artist can get.

He could say no.

But Avedon is saying yes - to an hourlong phone interview for a newspaper he's never heard of.

Perhaps it's generosity - or perhaps it's his dogged devotion to his work and its reputation.

Avedon is not yet ready to let history, or the media, take its course without his help.

So Avedon dives into the interview with the collaborative zeal he finds in some of his best subjects. But he's unwilling to submit to the same rules they do; he wants to retain control.

Though his Manhattan studio is closed for the holiday weekend, he calls, a second time, from his Montauk, N.Y., summer home, to nudge his quotes into more concise and dramatic form.

None of our conversation will reveal the real him, he warns at the beginning of the hourlong conversation. "This is everything I hate."

Born in 1923, Avedon grew up in New York City with his businessman father, artistic mother and a lovely sister who was his first model.

Avedon collected autographs "the way other boys collected baseball cards," he says. "My heroes were a very strange group - puppeteers, great Jews, Supreme Court judges and writers. This was the world I wanted to enter: of artists, of creative people, performers, achievers. People who gave of themselves - selves with a capital S - to the world."

He took pictures throughout his youth, and experimented even then, once taping a negative of his sister to his arm and going out in the sun, literally burning her image onto his arm. But he aspired to be a writer. Feeling intellectually inadequate for that, he made the auspicious shift to images at 18.

Although he became the sort of man who reads a Samuel Beckett poem taped to his mirror when he

shaves, Avedon for years was ashamed of never having graduated from high school.

In 1944, after a two-year stint as photographer in the Merchant Marine, Avedon began to study under Harper's Bazaar art director Alexey Brodovitch, head of the Design Laboratory at New York's New School for Social Research.

A year later, Brodovitch hired him at the magazine.

It was Avedon's charmed life as fashion photographer that inspired a friend to write the script for "Funny Face," the 1957 film starring Fred Astaire as a photographer named Dick (as Avedon is known to his friends) and Audrey Hepburn as his muse. Avedon did the glorious, high-style credit sequence and served as visual consultant for the film.

Although only the fashion milieu and the detail of his first marriage to a model are true, the film was meaningful for Avedon.

"I remember being 9 years old, having seen an early Astaire movie, running up the aisle, imitating him, kicking the aisle seats and realizing, at 9, there was another way to be a man than what they told me," he says, "that you could make love with your feet and win the girl by dancing.

"Then to have the phone ring, so many years later, and be asked if I would work on a movie with Astaire as a fashion photographer. I wanted to be him, and he ended up being me."

"Funny Face" captured some of the giddy thrill of Avedon's early career, shooting fashion in New York and Paris, under the tutelage of his brilliant creative mentors at Harper's Bazaar: Brodovitch, editor-in-chief Carmel Snow and fashion editor Diana Vreeland, a group he has called a second family: father, mother and crazy aunt.

His pictures were a gust of fresh air in the staid halls of fashion photography. Avedon conjured up quirky narratives for his models; in his pictures, women and clothes moved.

During the 1950s, the decade when he made such indelibly glamorous images as the model Dovima with elephants, Avedon also made portraits of a melancholy Buster Keaton, a grieving Bert Lahr and a haggard Dorothy Parker.

In the 1960s, when he captured a leaping Veruschka and Twiggy with her hair asunder, he also documented mental patients at the East Louisiana State Hospital.

His views of celebrity included not only a wholesome-looking Simon and Garfunkel for their "Bookends" album and a red-and-fuchsia portrait of John Lennon, but a shot of Andy Warhol's brutally scarred abdomen, the result of an attempt on his life.

Literally, with Warhol, and figuratively many times more, Avedon has worked to get beneath the facade of celebrity, to mine the depths - sometimes by waiting until a subject is old enough, or tired or surprised enough to reveal something more than a public face.

In an upcoming documentary for the American Masters series on PBS (it previews at MIA today), Avedon recalls the circumstances of some of his best pictures of celebrities.

He describes Oscar Levant in 1972, with a stained bathrobe and "absolutely no narcissism," giving Avedon "the gift" of creative genius, despair and madness, all in one ravaged face.

He remembers Marilyn Monroe, performing for hours in his studio before collapsing and allowing Avedon to photograph her spent and lonely side.

Sometimes, self-consciousness is part of the picture, as in the icy-blank likeness of Henry Kissinger from "The Family," a 73-portrait portfolio of power in the United States, published in Rolling Stone in 1976.

"Public figures have a devotion to their image of themselves, and usually it's perfect to leave them alone," says Avedon. "If someone resists being photographed, or revealing themselves, well, it's wonderful, because the picture is of someone who isn't going to reveal anything."

While some portraits emerge from the experience of the session, others, such as the striking shot of a hairless man covered with bees, first occurred to Avedon in a dream; he sketched his vision, advertised for a bee-sympathetic model, then carefully set up the shot.

Avedon says it's hard to explain the moment the shutter snaps because "it's not on an articulate level." He compares himself to an athlete, building intensity in order to "pole vault into this place I want the picture to be."

He compares the picture-making process to that of an interview: "Control is for the purpose of eliciting spontaneity."

And the control is always his.

"Every once in a while I've done something extreme to get a reaction," he says. "It's happened only twice in a lifetime that I played a trick to get something to happen."

He wouldn't tell on the phone, but in the documentary, he revealed a terrible trick he used when photographing the Duke and Duchess of Windsor in 1957.

Wanting to capture "the loss of humanity" he had observed in them, Avedon was confronted with the couple cheerfully posing with their beloved dog. So he told a fib.

"I said, 'If I seem a little hesitant, a little disturbed, it's because my taxi ran over a dog.' And both of their faces dropped."

The result is one of Avedon's most grim and poignant efforts.

"The expressions on their faces was true," he said, "because you can't evoke an expression that doesn't come out of the life of the person."

It's portraits like this that have made his critics protest what they call his cruelty.

The outcry was never so loud as in 1985, when Avedon's "In the American West" series debuted. Rather than cast his unflinching eye on celebrity, the East Coast artist focused on the grittier aspects of the western United States: coal-miners, rattlesnake-skinners, people with nothing to lose.

The idea of portraits as also self-portraits is nothing new, but with Avedon's frankly unflattering works, it's a crucial concept. "All the photographs in the exhibition are people I've chosen to photograph because I've been able to express them and myself at the same time, but probably more of myself.

"I chose them because of their lives, their faces, their affect on me. The work is a direct connection between everything about myself and them and portraiture, together."

As for the notion of truth - Avedon says we can't expect it from photography. "We're too close to the idea that when it's of Max, it must be about what we imagine Max looks like, or wants to look like, or what his mother would want him to look like." For many years, in his personal work, Avedon has been able to ignore what people want and still live a very comfortable life.

He can afford to spend parts of six years on a project like "American West," he says, not just because a museum sponsors him, but because of his lucrative commercial work for such clients as Calvin Klein and Gianni Versace. (He has received major grants from Eastman Kodak, which co-published the "Evidence" book.)

Contrary to recent reports, his relationship with The New Yorker, for which he became its first staff photographer in 1992, "had nothing to do with money," he says. "I can work all week for The New Yorker and not pay my staff's salaries." He is now one of several photographers for the magazine, picking and choosing from the assignments it offers.

Of all his many genres, some connects with a higher part of him. But there's no hierarchy of pleasure: "I just love working. I love when advertising agencies come with their agendas and problems," he says. "The only time I'm depressed is when I'm not working and I have to fill the hours."

In the same way that plum commercial jobs help fuel his personal work, so too does his fame, which came in part from being associated with so much celebrity.

"It's been of value in that my work reaches more people, it means my books sell. And because they do I can have better engravings and better paper and the pictures look truer," he says.

"Fame can be an asset. It brings people to the work. It brings you to the telephone."

Some of the prints at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts are the same ones that were there in 1970 for one of Avedon's first museum shows - organized by MIA photography curator Ted Hartwell, who now has nabbed "Evidence." The retrospective has appeared, in four different Avedon-choreographed forms, at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art and in Cologne, Milan and London.

The presentation at MIA is elegant, but unorthodox: some pictures are framed, but all are without glass. Many are larger than life and hanging loose on the gallery walls. There's an undeniable grandeur to it all, but also, as Hartwell points out, an intentional intimacy: Nothing lies between the viewer and the images.

The show opens with a wall of huge, free-hanging prints of fashion models from the 1960s. "It's kind of an overture, like striking up the band," says Avedon. "These are not boring fashion pictures, these are women racing with the wind. There's a kind of joy to it."

Once inside the main galleries, however, the fashion is over; viewers leap back to his subtle street photography of the 1940s, then move on to portraits of Eisenhower, Groucho Marx, Carson McCullers.

An undercurrent of alienation and, undeniably, madness runs throughout. Avedon's sister, whose beauty was echoed in many of his early professional models, spent the last years of her life in a mental institution, a fact that the artist seems to hold close. In addition to moments of madness in the creative people he so admires, there is the real-life madness of patients at the Louisiana hospital.

In one room, the walls are all but covered with four mural-size group portraits: the Chicago Seven and the officials who oversaw U.S. war efforts in Vietnam; the poet Allen Ginsberg's extended family and Warhol's libertine cohorts at The Factory.

Next, the subtle portraits of creative souls: artist Francis Bacon; filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni; Avedon's wife, Evelyn. Then, the quiet clarity of the time before death, in pictures of his father with cancer.

Four photographs burn their way into memory: from 1971 Saigon, people scarred by napalm.

They still disturb Avedon. "I'm always torn between the horror of their predicament and the beauty of the

[photographic] tonalities," says Avedon, insisting the pictures be dimly lit out of respect.

Despite Avedon trademarks like the naked white backgrounds and absence of props, the show's photographic vocabulary is surprisingly varied. His recent shots of New Year's Eve at the Brandenburg Gate are blurry studies in chaos; chilly pictures of a society ball in Venice are made with multiple negatives.

Avedon chalks it up to his need for creative tension: "When a photographic technique begins to lose its sense of urgency, I find I move on to a new way of expressing myself," he says. "Also, my feelings change. The feelings of a young man are not the feelings of an older man." In the book accompanying the show, most every picture of the artist - and there are many - is animated: Avedon cavorting in the studio, peering out warmly from behind his glasses, looking as though he could play the part of a brilliant filmmaker, a fashion designer or a man 15 years his junior.

The most-striking exception is a 1993 portrait by his colleague, Irving Penn, which casts Avedon in a shadowy, but revealing light. Avedon the subject looks doubtful, curious, melancholy, and all of his 72 years.

The photograph shows the part of him he wants remembered: the part that took the pictures of Bacon, of Beckett, of his father. The fashion may be the overture, but the portraits are the aria.

The PBS shoot lingered over the details of his studio-living room, especially the giant bulletin boards that were his studio walls. Afterward, Avedon stripped them down. He put a big bed in the center of the room, and moved in more chairs, including two designed by Brodovitch that he's never really used.

"When I look at the place now, it's like a clue to me as to what might be coming. It looks like I'm preparing for a cozier, more private time," he says. "Maybe I'm preparing for getting older, reading more, becoming more contemplative, less 24-hours-a-day of work, more time for old friends."

But suggest that this slower pace might start sometime soon and Avedon startles: "Are you crazy?"

Indeed, even on his holiday weekend, Avedon is not letting any detail escape his scrutiny. He can't leave one last quote alone:

"I control one thing, my work - and I try with my words. I will never go back on anything I said. I just want a chance to say it better. But saying anything right takes a lifetime.

"No, why don't we say, 'Saying anything, getting anything right takes a lifetime.' No, let's just say 'Getting anything right.'"

Photos

1. Avedon over the decades: Top a portrait of painter Francis Bacon taken in Paris, 1979. Above, left, Ronald Fischer, who answered Avedon's ad calling for a model to pose with bees in 1981. Above, right, a 1947 street scene in Palermo, Sicily.
2. Richard Avedon
3. Contact prints from a 1972 sitting with Oscar Levant, whom Avedon described as having absolutely no narcissism."
4. "Dovima With Elephants," Paris, 1955.