

Self-portrait

I once enjoyed the rare opportunity to interview legendary couture queen Diana Vreeland, who was the high fashion world's reigning diva for as long as anyone could remember.

To my great relief and surprise, the upper crust hauteur I'd expected from Vreeland (which I presumed to be part of the job description for *any* editor-in-chief of *Vogue*) was pretty much absent. In spite of her lavish Park Avenue crib; the little Balenciaga number she "threw on" for our meeting (I was in Levis and a turtleneck); the autographed Coco Chanel sketches on her walls; and silver-trimmed powder horns, given to her by the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Diana Vreeland's personality and conversation style were disarmingly unaffected. She was completely candid on the subject of her freeform approach to publishing: "Never worry about the facts," she told her editors and art staff, "just project an image to the public." And that public, she well knew, was not necessarily the sleek women or the tony celebs who paraded through *Vogue's* glossy pages. The magazine was about dreams. "You don't do *Vogue* for the people who can afford clothes like these," she told me, "you do it for a secretary, home alone with the sniffles or crammed into a bus seat on a rainy Monday morning. She needs a little fantasy." Despite its elitist cachet, *Vogue* was a place where fantasy could interact with, and intercede in, real life. That notion was a sort of credo to the photographer whom Vreeland prized above all others, collaborated with and rhapsodized over until the end of her career.

He was Richard Avedon, one of photography's rare, iconic superstars. Under the tutelage of the great designer Alexey Brodovitch and the patronage of Vreeland and her contemporaries in the publishing world, Avedon coined a unique way of making reality glide unselfconsciously

# Retrospecting Avedon

through the constraints of the picture-taking process. The result was always an intimate image that seemed to probe beyond what appeared on film.

Of the dozen or so books that anthologize Avedon's distinctive oeuvre—both fashion illustration and editorial portraiture—in powerful collections like *In the American West*, *Richard Avedon: Portraits of Power*, *Avedon Fashion 1944–2000*, *Woman in the Mirror* and the stunning new showbiz compilation, *Performance*, one title is, by definition, a comprehensive wide-angle glimpse of Avedon's extraordinary versatility: *Richard Avedon Photographs 1946–2004*. The 1946–2004 collection began as the hardcover catalogue for a major retrospective exhibition of Avedon—the first since his death in 2004. Originally a cooperative venture between Copenhagen's renowned Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and the Richard Avedon Foundation, this collection, comprising about 200 images, is currently on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The book is abundantly available through bookstores, SFMOMA's onsite museum store and the usual online venues. The images have been pared down to 125, but they collectively represent what is probably the best single overview, between two covers, of this phenomenal artist's body of work.

Avedon began his career as a photographer of garments, and, early on, discovered that fashion illustration was an ideal medium for breathing life into tediously static subjects. He helped transform the fashion model from an inert mannequin for simply draping a piece of fabric into a creature that animated that fabric; gave it mood and personality. He dragged his shutter to blur the billow of a skirt or a windblown coif. He coaxed his models into edgy, incongruous backgrounds. Case in point: supermodel Suzy Parker, radiant in a Lanvin-Castillo gown, in the scruffy interior of a pinball parlor, or roller skating in a designer coat and scarf on a cloudy afternoon in the Place de la Concorde. The magnum opus among Avedon's fashion work is, of course, his celebrated series of luminous Dior-clad model Dovima, posed in arched silhouette between frolicking elephants at the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris.

Early in his career, the sense of counterpoint that drove his innovative fashion style expressed itself powerfully in the portraits, which collectively form the centerpiece of Avedon's contribution to modern photography. The portrait selection is beautifully represented in *Photographs 1946–2004*, nearly all full-page, and punctuated by a

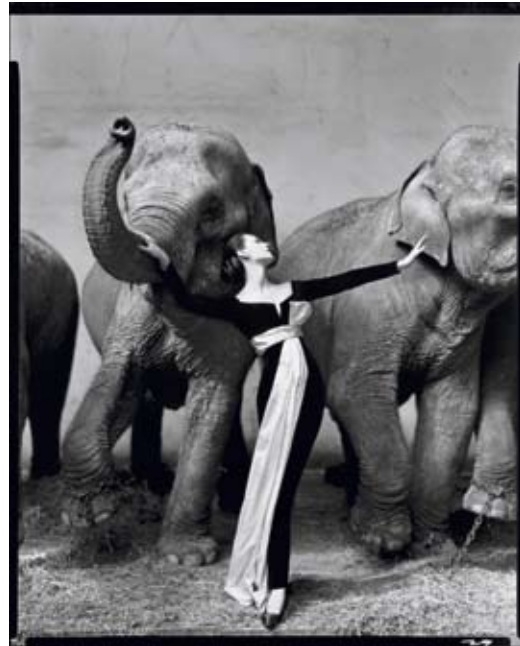
RICHARD  
AVEDON  
PHOTO  
GRAPHS  
1946  
2004

## More Information

*Richard Avedon: Photographs 1946–2004*  
The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art  
(<http://www.louisiana.dk>)  
The Richard Avedon Foundation  
(<http://www.richardavedon.com>)  
192pp.



Bob Dylan

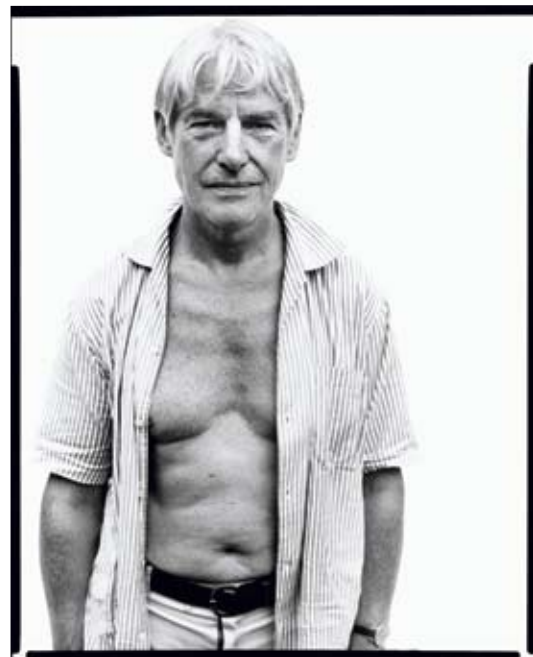


Dovima with Elephants

PHOTOGRAPHS ©2009 THE RICHARD AVEDON FOUNDATION



Katharine Hepburn



Willem de Kooning

handful of critical essays. There are detailed accounts in some of these, of specific shooting situations—controversial poet Ezra Pound, the day before he fled this country in exile; Bob Dylan, early in the lightning bolt of his career. There are samples of the street portraits and documentary work during the 60s—the era that Vreeland called America’s “youthquake.” For the most part, the writers and the picture editing concentrate on Avedon’s signature portrait style—simple, disarmingly (sometimes uncomfortably) intimate studies of his subjects, nearly all in black and white, usually with white or gray limbo backgrounds. The frequent impression is that the sitter has been isolated *in vitro* to reveal a momentary and profound interaction between photographer and subject. This was Avedon’s *métier*, and nowhere is it better demonstrated than in two of the book’s chapters: his Reagan-era images, shot out west, of ordinary, blue-collar

Americans, each isolated against a well used white seamless, and lastly, the now familiar series of revealing editorial portraits of the powerful and celebrated people who paraded through Avedon’s New York studio.

*Richard Avedon Photographs 1946–2004* is a brilliantly assembled tribute to the career of a great American artist, whose portrait work in particular is a tribute to that elusive quarry every photographer seeks in his own images, that “single honest moment.”

The exhibit, *Richard Avedon: Photographs 1946–2004*, is currently on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) through November 29, 2009. Address: 151 Third St., San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 357-4000; [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org).



*Jim Cornfield, a veteran commercial photographer and travel writer lives in Malibu Canyon, CA, and regularly contributes book reviews and features to Rangefinder.*