

Richard

vedon

*FLOWER IN THE DESERT*

I first encountered Richard Avedon's photography in a tiny bookshop in the middle of nowhere, deep in the uttermost west. I had started in photography having neither seen books of photographs nor shows of them, and stumbling across Avedon's book *Portraits* had a profound effect. It was as if I had discovered an alien flower in the middle of the desert.

This was at a time when the only live photographers I knew were hopelessly in love with their Hasselblads, Strobe flash packs, Land Rovers and huge studios with all-white 'psyche walls' as they misnamed them more accurately than they realised. Their talk was always of the technology, never the photographs, though each secretly harboured a copy of *Cowboy Kate* and spoke of Sam Haskins with a reverence more appropriate to God.

Until Avedon, photography as a life among people, not machines, and based on making photographs as an outgrowth of personal experience, seemed like self-delusion. Yet, here was an artist at the heart of America's corporate world, knowing all there was to know of his medium, and with no shortage of funds to use in expressing a vision so uncompromising as to border on the brutal.

The photographers of my early experience subscribed to either the romantic myth of the artist starving in a garret but creating masterpieces out of nothing, or the hero of advertising reaping a fortune out of pack shots. Avedon showed up both clichés as the fabrications they were.

Very little of Avedon's work turned up after that, other than on the covers of US *Vogue*, while the books *Avedon: Photographs 1947-1977* and *In The American West* failed to appear in that part of the world. After a silence of nearly a decade there are two new Avedon books, published recently as part of a ten book deal with Random House, *An Autobiography* and *Evidence: 1944-1994*. This may prove to be the decade of Richard Avedon as he begins to expose the patterns of his life, thoughts and work in print.

*Evidence* is described as the companion volume to *An Autobiography*, and each is indispensable to the other. *Autobiography* is the exhibition we won't be seeing in Australia after all, turned into a book to be read like a fotonovela, a silent movie seen as a series of stills, with *Evidence* the voice-over commentary spoken by the curator, the art critic and Avedon himself. It includes sketches, contact sheets, samples of magazine and book layouts, and a time-line section doubling as checklist for the current exhibition and a visual biography, relating Avedon's work to his life and influences.

Avedon has always been generous with praise for other artists, citing Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray and Martin Munkacsi, and adding Australian photographer Anton Brühl in a recent interview. Although the period from the 1940s to the 1970s could be legitimately named the era of Avedon,

he described another Australian, Helmut Newton, as 'the leader of the post-Avedon, post-Penn period' in fashion photography, 'because after Newton you can't do a certain kind of picture any more', of a woman without the intrusion of the erotic.

However, Bruce Weber sees Avedon's own influence as being alive and well: 'He's influenced a whole generation of photographers who are working now, me included, in that just purely and simply you want to take photographs and to photograph your own life at the same time. Dick's work is not about fame. It's really about still being a kid and not being afraid to show it.'

**C**hildhood is precisely where you go to begin to understand Avedon. Like his friend Diane Arbus, he grew up in a department store-owning family, when department stores could still be family affairs. *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* were always around the house, and when the stockmarket crash claimed the store, these magazines kept alive memories of the life they had lost, as did the rituals of family photography.

The Avedons would borrow a dog, a car and a house frontage as backdrop and pose in their Sunday best to preserve the illusion that all was well in their world. Avedon was a fashion photographer long before he made the decision to be one.

He found the prototype Avedon model in his younger sister Louise. Avedon spoke of the second family tragedy in *Égoïste* magazine: 'Louise's beauty was the event of our family and the destruction of her life. She was treated as if there was no one inside her perfect skin, as if she was simply her long throat, her deep brown eyes. I think she believed she existed only as skin and hair, and a beautiful body. She was the prototype of what I considered beautiful in my early years as a fashion photographer. All my first models were brunettes and had fine noses, long throats and oval faces. They were all memories of my sister.'

Like so many women of whom nothing more is expected than their beauty, Louise gradually withdrew from the world and died in a mental institution while still young.

Avedon's fashion photography subsequently never fell into the dead end of the vacant eyes and limp pose that he so abhors. His women are real, their beauty a trap and a blessing as they fidget, exchange hysterical laughter and prod at themselves in the mirror while pondering the darker side of life. After he himself retreated, from the street into the studio, Avedon's models focused their nervous energies into giant aerial leaps across the seamless paper, as if in flight from fright to safety.

**M**any fledgling fashion photographers have dreamed of the perfect client who sees the unique vision lying latent in their folio, and who then nurtures them into limitless growth. Avedon found that in the teacher and art director who became his collaborator of

twenty years at *Harper's Bazaar*, Alexey Brodovitch, along with a team including legendary editor Diana Vreeland and fashion editor Polly Ellen Mellen.

After Brodovitch left and the rest of his surrogate family went to *Vogue*, Avedon followed but the writing was on the wall for his sole dedication to editorial fashion. 'When I went to *Vogue*,' recalls Avedon, 'I said to [art director Alex] Liberman, what is it in my work that you'd like me to develop at *Vogue*? And he said, your Dupont ads. I said, what do you mean? This was the strictest of commercial hack work. He said, you can make a woman look more beautiful than anyone in the world.'

'Liberman replaced ideals of wit and elegance with glamour and sex, to make it read for a mass audience. But there was a time when editorial work was completely free. There was a way of being socially observant and being a fashion photographer.'

**F**rom the mid-sixties Avedon wove the thread of social commentary into his portraiture instead, and it is portraits that comprise the bulk of both volumes and his retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The next book to be published will be *The Sixties*, followed by one on his fashion photography, then several teaching books based on his studies with Brodovitch at the Design Laboratory of the New School For Social Research and his own teaching.

Avedon is about to reveal the full extent of his contribution to a vision of contemporary American society, and to almost all fields of photography during the second half of this century. ✨