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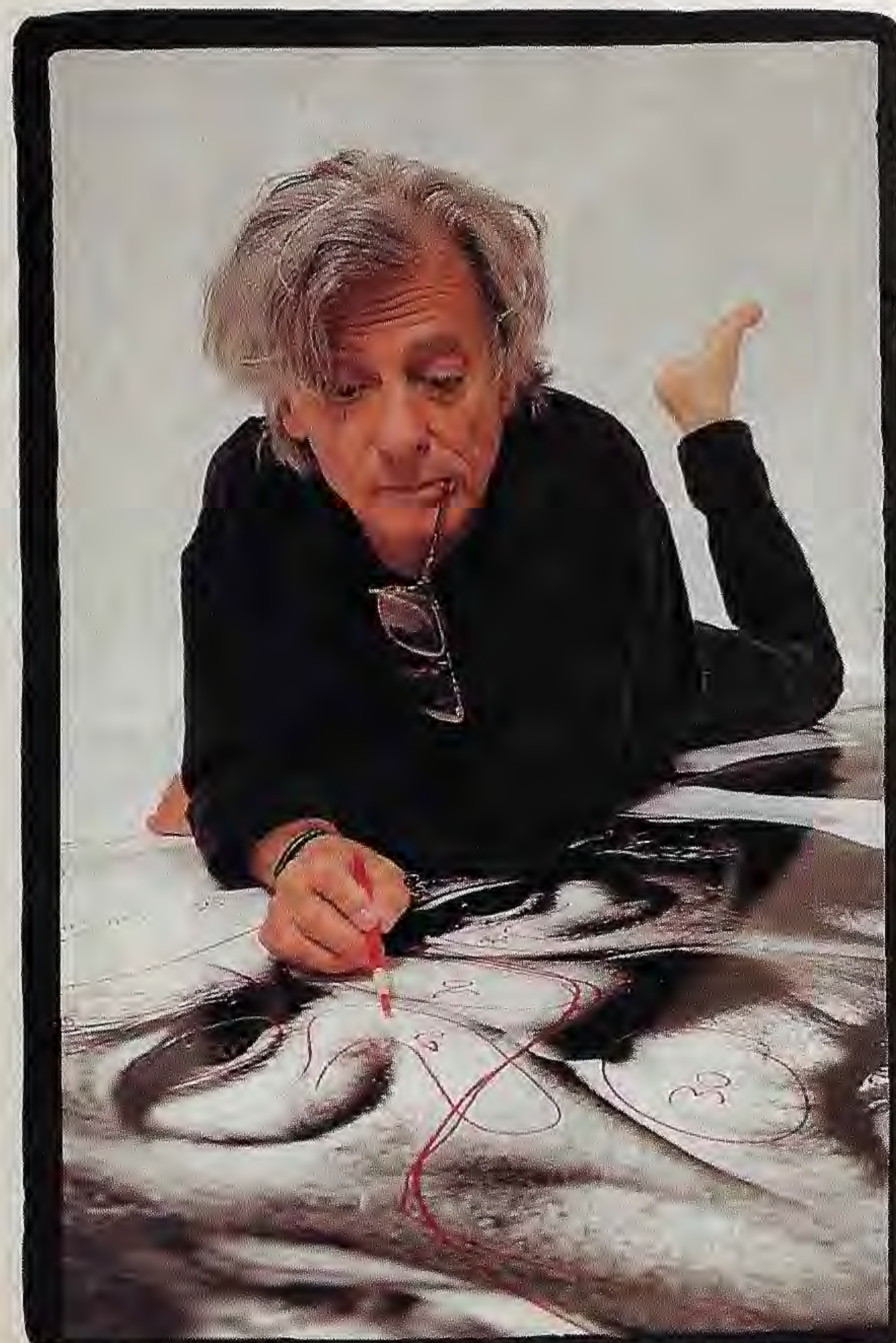
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Capturing the turbulence and glamour of our times, a great photographer sums up his life in pictures

AVEDON

By David Ansen



MAGGIE STEBER

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IT'S ALMOST TOO CONVENIENT, BUT THE FIRST thing you notice about Richard Avedon is his eyes: huge, brown, piercing. They are the eyes a novelist would invent if he were creating an archetypal image of a photographer. When he is working—and at this moment he is cruising Astor Place, in lower Manhattan, searching for an Avedon face to put in front of his camera—they widen even more, hungrily drinking in information. A writer or a carpenter would squint in the act of focusing attention, concentrating inward; Avedon becomes as alert and wired as a hunting dog, his spray of long, graying hair and his lean, wiry body calling to mind an Afghan on the trail of a scent.

The faces and bodies stream by. A bent old woman carrying a parcel briefly engages his attention. "Old age is not enough in itself," says Avedon, who made his reputation in portraiture as a young man etching in light the ravaged crevasses of Somerset Maugham, Isak Dinesen, Coco Chanel. He doesn't want to repeat himself. He has just done a portrait of 88-year-old writer Diana Trilling; not wanting to be cruel, he shoots her through a window. Old age moves him; he loves the signs of experience in a face, but he is all too aware of the charge of malice his critics have leveled against his work.

A burly, sun-scraped man appears at his side; he could have been one of the drifters in his book "In the American

Marilyn Monroe, actress
New York City, May 6, 1957

Marilyn started out as a model and felt more secure in front of a still camera than a movie camera. In photos, she usually performed the role of Marilyn. But this is a true moment. She wasn't performing.





Dorian Leigh, model
Pré-Catelan, Paris, August 2, 1949

Harper's Bazaar wouldn't publish this picture—it was considered unflattering. A fashion shot was artifice, this was all spontaneity; her laugh was a real belly laugh. Dorian, who was Suzy Parker's older sister, was a piece of work. She loved to cook, she drank champagne, she danced all night, she posed all day, she lived.

West." Another repetition. "Do I go for something theatrical or something moving?" Performance is a subject he knows a lot about, having grown up in a family in which one performed to survive. In his mind, the interaction between photographer and subject is a theatrical exchange. "Portraiture is performance," he once wrote. "I trust performances. Stripping them away doesn't necessarily get you closer to anything." The trick is to capture a performance that reveals, rather than conceals, an essence.

And now he has his first subject in front of his camera. A teenage boy, a runaway from Texas named Caddy, wearing a dirty T shirt that says MENTAL DISORDER. Avedon has set up his white canvas backdrop in a parking lot. He uses, as always in his portraits, an 8-by-10 Deardorf view camera on a wooden tripod, a big clunky machine not far removed from the camera Mathew Brady used to take his Civil War photographs. Working quickly and precisely, he steps up to Caddy, pushes his long, ropy hair back, asks him to tilt his head and tells him how he wants him to position his hands, holding the cup he uses for panhandling toward the camera. It's Caddy's hands he finds beautiful. He ducks under a black cloth to check the composition, then stands at the side of his camera—focused intently on his subject—to snap the

picture. He senses this is not a picture he will ever use—Caddy's pathos is too "easy"—but a less demanding eye would find it a striking shot. Avedon is not a man who has ever been easily satisfied.

He has the energy, the enthusiasm and the restless stride of a 30-year-old. He is, improbably, 70. Richard Avedon (Dick to everyone who knows him) is probably the most famous, successful and, along with his stylistic antithesis, Robert Frank, influential photographer of the second half of the 20th century. For the 50-odd years of his professional life he has been inescapable. You may never have leafed through a copy of Harper's Bazaar or Vogue in your life, but the revolutionary fashion photographs he made in those magazines have changed the way you regard female beauty. You

Oscar Levant, pianist
Beverly Hills, California, April 12, 1972

Levant came downstairs, a King Lear in his pajamas and bathrobe. Nothing came between his complex nature and the camera. For Avedon, he epitomized a fine line between genius and madness.





Suzy Parker and Mike Nichols, model and director, Maxim's, Paris, July 28, 1962 This picture was part of a series satirizing the much-publicized affair of Liz Taylor and Richard Burton while making "Cleopatra." Avedon used flashbulbs like the paparazzi. The photos ran in Harper's Bazaar with a headline that read "Mike and Suzy Rock Europe." A lot of people believed it was true.



**Janis Joplin, singer
New York City, August 28, 1969**

In the studio, Avedon played Joplin's version of "Summertime" while the singer sang along, sipping Southern Comfort. She was having too good a time to hold a pose. He had to catch the moment.



**Central Park, New York City
November 17, 1949**

The little girl, with the threat of the man behind her, was a found photograph. Usually Avedon speaks with a subject, who re-enacts a pose or situation. This is real reportage, rare in his work.

may never have come across his books of portraits—chronicles, against stark white backgrounds, of the most gifted and powerful people of our age—but his eye has transformed the way everybody looks at celebrity. You may not have known it was Avedon, but his "talking heads" commercials for Calvin Klein jeans ("Nothing comes between me and my . . .") and his tongue-in-cheek Euro-swank

"My portraits are much more about me than they are about the people I photograph"

Obsession spots penetrated your consumer's unconscious. Probably someone you knew had Avedon's poster of a nude Nastassja Kinski, lounging with a python, on his wall.

Darting through six decades, capturing his passions on film, Avedon has had a knack for locating himself at ground zero of American

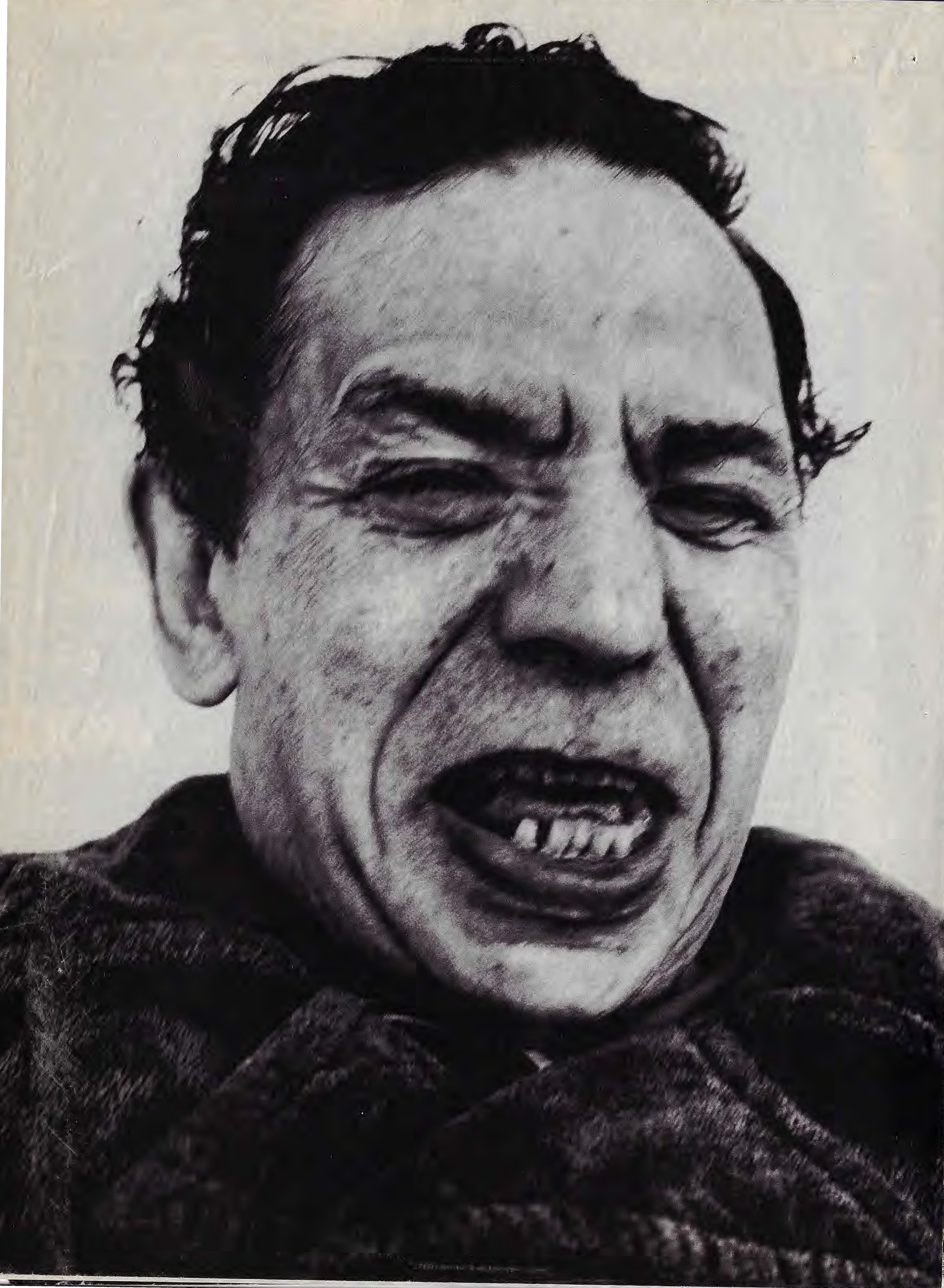
culture. He was in the South photographing the civil-rights movement; in Vietnam during the war; in Berlin after the wall came down. He's shot the Beatles and Bardot, Warhol and Dylan, Auden and Stravinsky, Eisenhower and Kissinger. When he spotted a striking 16-year-old basketball player on a New York playground, the unknown kid whose picture he took turned out to be Lew Alcindor. He has amassed a kind of unofficial public chronicle of a nation as it passed from postwar exuberance through the

manic turmoil of the '60s into the hardened political arteries of the '80s and '90s. His work has raised howls of protest and bitter, often misplaced criticism, for photographers are often naively confused with what they photograph—if you shoot the jet set, you must be a jet-setter. His very success as a commercial photographer has damned him in the eyes of the purists, for whom the terms "fashion photographer" and "artist" are mutually exclusive. But Avedon has triumphed by breaking the traditional rules of photography, embracing the contradictions of art and commerce. He likes to tell the story of his friend and collaborator, Marvin Israel, the graphic designer. Israel, a confirmed New York bohemian, was walking Avedon to his home on Park Avenue. "How could an artist live on Park Avenue?" his friend exclaimed in horror. "Marvin," said Avedon, "easily!"

Now, with the publication this month of "An Autobiography" (Random House and Eastman Kodak. \$100), a massive, very personal collection of his photographs, he

**Harlem
New York City, September 6, 1949**

From a series made for Life magazine but never before published, this, too, was an early foray into photojournalism. But it foreshadowed an Avedon theme: an elegant woman photographed in a real-life situation.

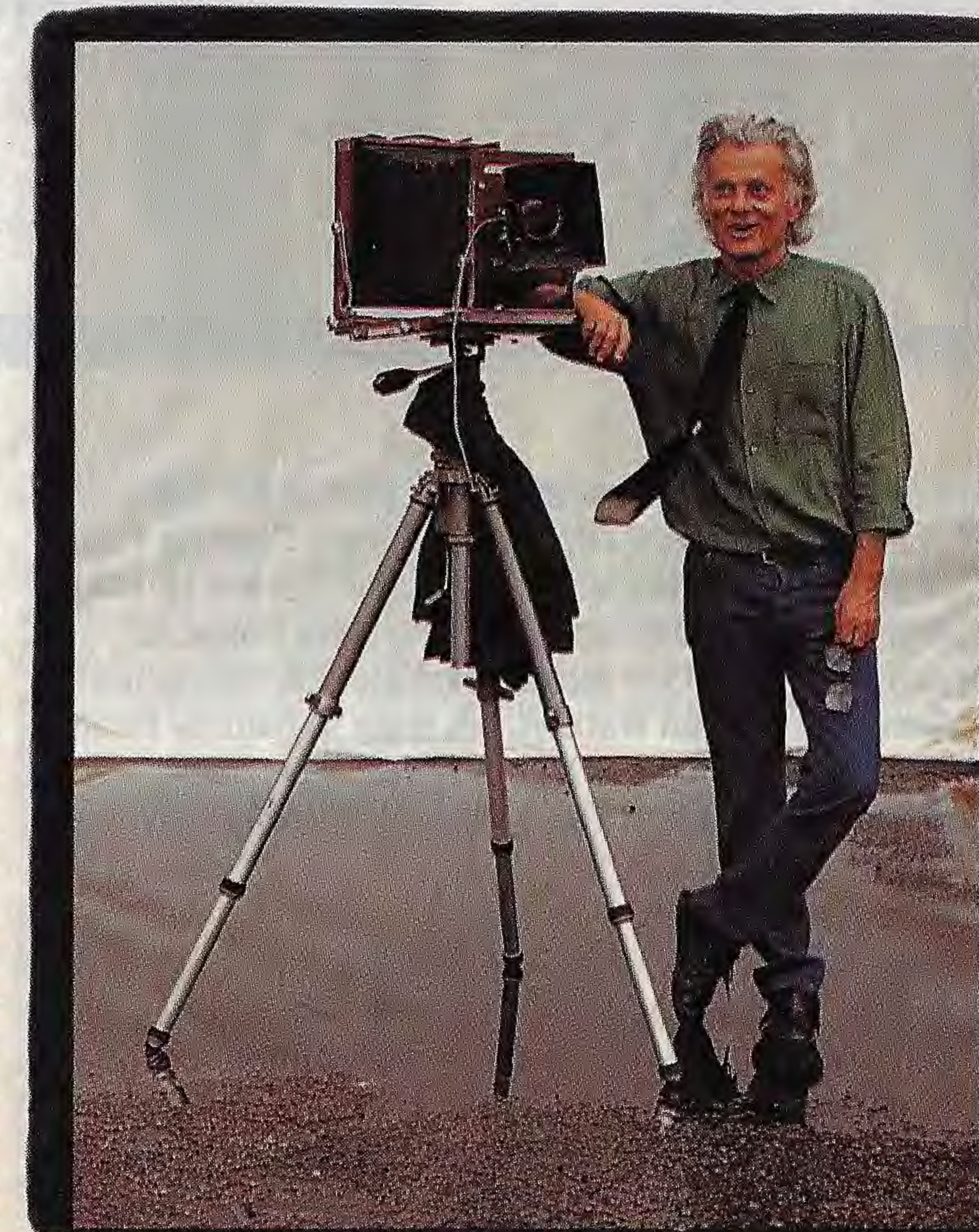


**Volpi Ball
Venice, Italy, August 31, 1991**

The picture, says Avedon, is a Proustian look at the death of aristocratic Europe, taken at the last great ball on the Continent. But what's especially significant is his technique: to get a stronger effect, he created a collage. It's almost impossible to detect how he manipulated the images.

is attempting to redefine and reposition his life's work. He wants to show that the seemingly incongruous parts of his career—fashion, photojournalism, portraiture, snapshot, collage—have all along been fused by a singular vision. Not chronological, this exquisitely printed book (designed by Mary Shanahan) weaves his thematic obsessions into a kind of narrative. It's meant to be read cinematically, so that each photograph is considered as part of a whole story: "the whole," he explains, "being my life in photography."

HE IS ALSO IN THE MIDST OF PREPARING, with curator Jane Livingston, a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum next March, which will give an unexpected emphasis to his work as a photojournalist. (The show has already been attacked, sight unseen, by his enemies: "This is the ultimate capitulation to celebrity, money and fashion at the expense of art," fumed old-guard art critic Hilton Kramer.) That show will be accompanied by another ambitious collection of his work, "Evidence," with two critical essays and a detailed chronology of his career. It is the second book in a 10-book, multimillion-dollar contract with Random House and Eastman Kodak that will keep him occupied until the end of the decade. They'll include four teaching books, a written autobiography, a volume on the '60s, one on fashion and a final collection called "America." In addition, he has been working as the first and only staff photographer of *The New Yorker* and teaching a master class to 16 handpicked students through



MAGGIE STEBER

Beside his trusty Deardorf 8-by-10 view camera

metically beautiful when the picture isn't about that," he says. When it was taken in 1957, his haunting, lost-in-space portrait of Marilyn Monroe may have seemed like a subversion of her golden image, but it is Avedon's melancholic take that proved prophetic—setting the tone for the revisionist myth that now threatens to become its own cliché.

BEHIND THESE PORTRAITS, BEHIND THE LAUGHING, anxious models he introduced to fashion photography, behind the grainy, almost unbearable photos he took in a Louisiana mental hospital in 1963, lies the figure of Avedon's younger sister, Louise. Growing up in Cedarhurst, Long Island, and New York City, she was considered the beauty of the family, and he feels that her beauty was "the destruction of her life. My mother used to say to Louise, 'With eyes like that and skin like that you don't need to speak.'" She was a shy girl. "There was no understanding in the family that her shyness reflected deeper problems." Louise died, at 42, in a mental institution.

Nine years ago he looked at the photographs he had taken of her when they were children, and he discovered, as he told the French magazine *Egoïste*, "that she was the prototype of what I considered to be beautiful in my early years as a fashion photographer. All my first models: Dorian Leigh, Elise Daniels, Marella Agnelli, Audrey Hepburn . . . They were all memories of my sister . . . Beauty can be as isolating as genius, or deformity. I have always been aware of a relationship between madness and beauty."

The Avedons were an upwardly mobile middle-class New York family. The patriarch, Jacob Israel Avedon, was a Russian Jewish immigrant who had grown up in an orphan asylum on the Lower East Side. (Avedon's 1972-73 portraits of his father, as he was dying of cancer, are among his most powerful and painful works.) He wanted his son

to be a businessman. Anna, Avedon's mother, loved the arts, got involved in politics and always encouraged her son to be an artist. Dick's knowledge of fashion came naturally: his father owned a women's department store, Avedon's Fifth Avenue, and there were always copies of *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* around the house. The family snapshots, Avedon is fond of recalling, almost always showed the family dressed up in front of expensive cars with dogs. The dogs were always borrowed; the cars weren't theirs. "All of the photographs were built on some kind of lie about who we were," he wrote in an essay, "and revealed a truth about who we wanted to be."

That wasn't the only performance. Avedon, an avid autograph hound, put on plays in the garage, tap-danced after dinner, recited poetry in the kitchen. "A successful performance," he says, "was the only way you earned the right to live." In 1941, at De Witt Clinton High School, he was named the schoolboy poet laureate of New York City. But academia bored him. "I certainly never got a good grade in my life," he says with a laugh. "And I certainly wasn't a jock. I really grew up feeling like a failure." At 18, he dropped out of high school and joined the merchant marine.

The passion of his youth was the theater. With his cousin Margie, his soulmate, he would sneak into the second acts of all the Broadway shows. "I saw 'Tobacco Road' 25 times. When I love something, I can't get enough of it." He still can't: a junkie for Ingmar Bergman's theater productions, he flew to Stockholm five times to see "Long Day's Journey Into Night," dragging friends along. When André Gregory directed a 1970 production of "Alice in Wonderland"—one of Avedon's favorite books—he became so obsessed he saw it 42 times and collaborated with the company to make a book of "Alice" photographs.

A theatrical sensibility is never far from the surface of any Avedon photograph. He doesn't "capture" reality; he

Making Prints: Avedon is both an artist and an artisan. To make the oversize print of the portrait of Petra Alvarado (next page) for the museum show, "In the American West," it took an enlarger using 4,000 watts of electricity. To balance the tones in the image—so that, for example, the dollars on her corsage are not overexposed—a mask is fashioned in the shape of the corsage to block out the light that will fall on the areas that require greater exposure.



Face Painting: To subtly lighten areas that are too dark, such as the eyes (always a focal point in an Avedon portrait), small cardboard pieces affixed to a long wire are waved in front of the light, creating a moving shadow: this is called dodging. The numbers within the circles drawn on her face record the precise number of seconds each section needs to be exposed; it's kept as a record for future printmaking.



Petra Alvarado, factory worker, on her birthday, El Paso, Texas, April 22, 1982 There's a tradition among the Mexican workers in the blue-jean and clothing factories near the border: when one of them has a birthday, she gets a corsage of dollar bills. The more she is liked by her co-workers, the more dollars get taped to her corsage. This woman was very popular.



Louise Avedon, sister
Long Beach, New York, July 11, 1932

When Avedon was growing up on Long Island, his mother would drive the kids to Long Beach for the day. He took this picture with his first camera, an Eastman Kodak box Brownie; he was 9, Louise was 7.



Anna Avedon, mother
Lake Placid, New York, summer 1932

That summer, the family story goes, Avedon was sick and his mother took him to the mountains to recover, where he snapped this photograph. Even at that early age, he seemed to have a knowledge of composition.

creates it. Indeed, some of his "portraits" are really acts of the imagination, like the bald beekeeper in "In the American West." Avedon saw the image in his mind, then sought a man who could enact it. "Dick is a theatrical director," says his friend, choreographer Twyla Tharp. "He pulls performances from his models, he gets them to play the role he has in mind." Just how explicitly he turns his subjects into actors is illustrated by his recent sitting with the Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni. Because Antonioni had suffered a stroke, Avedon couldn't engage him in conversation and direct him obliquely toward the desired emotion. "I had to be absolutely, bluntly direct." Avedon turned to Antonioni's wife: "Would you tell Antonioni that what I am looking for is a sense of bewilderment in the face of life." The director responded with a performance of great "subtlety and purity." To Avedon, the result is not a contrivance but a picture "more lucid than the reality of the moment."

IN THE MERCHANT MARINE DURING THE WAR, AVEDON discovered his vocation. He worked as a photographer, taking thousands of ID photos, discovering his fascination with "the emotional geography of a face." When he returned to New York, he had set his goal: to work for Harper's Bazaar. "That was the pantheon." In its pages, as a teenager, he had been awed by the work of Martin Munkacsy, a Hungarian whose athletic, exuberant fashion work introduced an open-air freedom to

the genre. There, he found the most exciting photographers of the day—Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, Kertesz, Bill Brandt, Brassai. The man responsible for Bazaar's prominence in the '40s was its legendary art director Alexey Brodovitch, the White Russian who became Avedon's guru. He enrolled in Brodovitch's classes in design at the New School, and began the education, completed during his 20 years at Bazaar, in every aspect of photography, from printing to layouts to caption writing. Brodovitch designed Avedon's groundbreaking first book, "Observations" (1959), with a text by Truman Capote—a volume filled with classic celebrations of performers (Marian Anderson, Bert Lahr, Charles Chaplin poised like a devilish satyr)—and his rule-breaking layouts changed the way photographs were displayed. If Avedon is famous—and infamous in some quarters—for his fanatical need to control every detail of his work, it's an inheritance from his mentor.

Just as crucially, Brodovitch disabused him of the "damaging myth" that commerce and artistry are incompatible. He inspired Avedon to be as creative and daring in his magazine work—and to take it as seriously—as he would his personal projects. With the notable exception of his great rival at Vogue, Irving Penn, few photographers have been able to wrestle with this conundrum so successfully.

Success came very early to Avedon, but the young man was a bewildering mixture of ego and insecurity. "I was really painfully shy. I never graduated high school and I would wake up in my late 20s with nightmares that everyone

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MAGGIE STEBER

"He's definitely the impresario," says his student Barry Munger, "the man in the red coat and top hat at the center of the circus." Below, on the Paris set of "Funny Face," he taught Astaire how to play Avedon.

would find out." Surrounded by brilliant people, he felt "stupid." "They were all smarter than I was. Certainly the people I'd photograph. Would you believe I couldn't have a conversation with anyone? I'd blank out sitting at a table." Imagine how he felt when the imperially aristocratic Danish author Isak Dinesen strode into his studio and announced: "I judge people by what they think of 'King Lear'."

Yet he retained an uncanny sense of himself. In 1949, Life magazine paid him \$25,000 to shoot an entire issue on New York City, a phenomenal opportunity for a 26-year-old. "At the end of the six months I returned the money, put the pictures in an envelope and never looked at them again. My feeling was I was entering a tradition that belonged to Helen Levitt and Lisette Model and others, and I didn't want to be part of a school that already existed. I felt that my interests were different. It wasn't me."

Some of these pictures, many taken in Harlem, first appeared in Jane Livingston's 1992 book "The New York School," and many are scattered throughout "An Autobiography." For what Avedon discovered, looking at them 40 years later, was that "all of my concerns" were present in those shoots—his fascination with beautiful women, with elegance captured in surprising places. They may not be his most distinctive work, but in the book they create fascinating echoes with the fashion work he was doing at the time.

When Avedon went to Paris in the late '40s to do fashion shoots for Bazaar, he was delirious. His mission was to recreate a mythical, prewar Paris. "It was so heady," Avedon remembers. He was in love with a beautiful model, Doe, his first wife; he was seeing Paris for the first time; he was



DAVID SEYMOUR—MAGNUM

introduced to Colette by Cocteau. He created a glamorous fantasy based on the movies he'd loved as a kid—Astaire and Rogers, the Lubitsch of "Trouble in Paradise."

But while he was re-creating cinematic myths of the past, he was unwittingly creating a legend for himself: the photographer as superstar. Screenwriter Leonard Gershe, a friend of Doe's, used Avedon as the model for the glamour photographer hero of "Funny Face," the 1957 Gershwin musical. Audrey Hepburn, who had modeled for him, was cast as the bookworm who is transformed, Cinderella style, into a high-fashion goddess. And playing Avedon's alter ego (named Dick Avery) was no less than Fred Astaire, his childhood idol.

"The first time I saw Fred Astaire making love to Ginger Rogers with his feet, I thought, 'I get it. That's a man a person could be proud to be,'" Avedon has written. "I ran up the aisle of Radio City Music Hall kicking the seats, imitating him. Then, years later, Astaire ended up playing me in the movie 'Funny Face.' It's all very strange. I'd learned how to be me by pretending to be him and then I had to teach him how to pretend to be me." He worked alongside director Stanley Donen as a special visual consultant, creating an innovative, dreamy cinematic style.

Though Avedon lives intensely in the present, these memories provoke a hint of nostalgia. "We laughed so hard

in those days. The '50s was a time when people of my generation made this enormous effort to have fun together. There were charades games, there were poker nights, anagrams, events at parks. Everybody was singing. I remember giving a birthday party for my son that was a treasure hunt all over New York City. And the clues would be in a kangaroo pouch. And you had to find the kangaroo. We worked at it—at making a life."

He still does. His small circle of close friends include people like director Mike Nichols, novelist Renata Adler, Twyla Tharp, the writer Doon Arbus, who collaborates with him on his TV commercials, and André Gregory; most would testify to the enormous creative effort he puts into his friendships, his gift for turning an encounter into an occasion. Tharp remembers a time when Nichols was trying out a play and had an awkward period of time between the matinee and night shows. "So Dick rented a limo and put champagne and caviar in, and went and picked up Mike after the afternoon show, drove him around and entertained him until it was time for the next show. It's not a question of meaning to impress your friends, it's a question of meaning to engage your friends."

Avedon has been married to his second wife, Evelyn, since 1951. Their son, John, 40, who works with the Dalai Lama and is the author of a political history of Tibet called



Palermo, Sicily
September 2, 1947

Avedon finds the vitality of early Fellini films in this image of an Italian street performer. The picture reflects Avedon's fascination with actors and performing artists of all kinds and his joy in discovering Italy for the first time. "We all perform . . . all the time," he has said, "deliberately or unintentionally."



He is like you,

the little

exotic one.

So beautiful

and so fragile.



Peter Orlovsky and Allen Ginsberg, poets, New York City, December 30, 1963 *In the '60s, everyone seemed to be taking their clothes off—it was a political act. But this picture, a precursor of the gay-rights movement, was especially controversial. Avedon wanted to include it in his 1964 book, "Nothing Personal," but his publisher and his lawyer advised against it.*

As one
in a world of
flowers and sun.
Tell me,
how can I keep
you here,
away from home?




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Henry Kissinger, secretary of state, Washington, D.C., June 2, 1976 Kissinger was photographed for "The Family," the huge project for Rolling Stone about the power elite. Avedon didn't direct the subjects; he wanted each portrait to be as objective as possible. In his new book, he put Kissinger facing Ginsberg and Orlovsky to symbolize opposite ends of the political spectrum.



Charles Chaplin leaving America, New York City, September 13, 1952 *Hounded as an alleged communist sympathizer — and smeared by the court of public opinion after he lost a paternity suit — Chaplin left the U.S. right after this picture was taken.*

Avedon was awed and asked Chaplin to pose in a formal manner. Finally Chaplin asked, "May I do something for you?" He put his head down and came up with the horns and the grin — see what a devil I am? That was his message to America.



W. H. Auden, poet, St. Mark's Place, New York City, March 3, 1960 Avedon woke up one day, saw the snow falling and imagined this picture. He called Auden, whom he'd photographed before; the poet somewhat grumpily agreed. Avedon took just 12 exposures, outside Auden's apartment in the East Village.



Ronald Fischer, beekeeper, Davis, California, May 9, 1981 This is a work of fiction: Avedon came up with a surreal image, sketched it, then advertised for a beekeeper model. Hundreds sent Polaroids before he found the perfect subject. Avedon smeared Fischer's body with queen-bee pheromone so the drones would alight where he wanted them. During the shoot, both were stung.



Anna Magnani, actress, New York City, April 17, 1953 She was visiting New York, and Avedon had an appointment for noon. She finally emerged right out of sleep from the bedroom of her suite at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, wrapped in nothing but a taffeta evening coat — no makeup, creases from the pillow still on her cheek. She asked, "Do you want me as myself or someone else?"

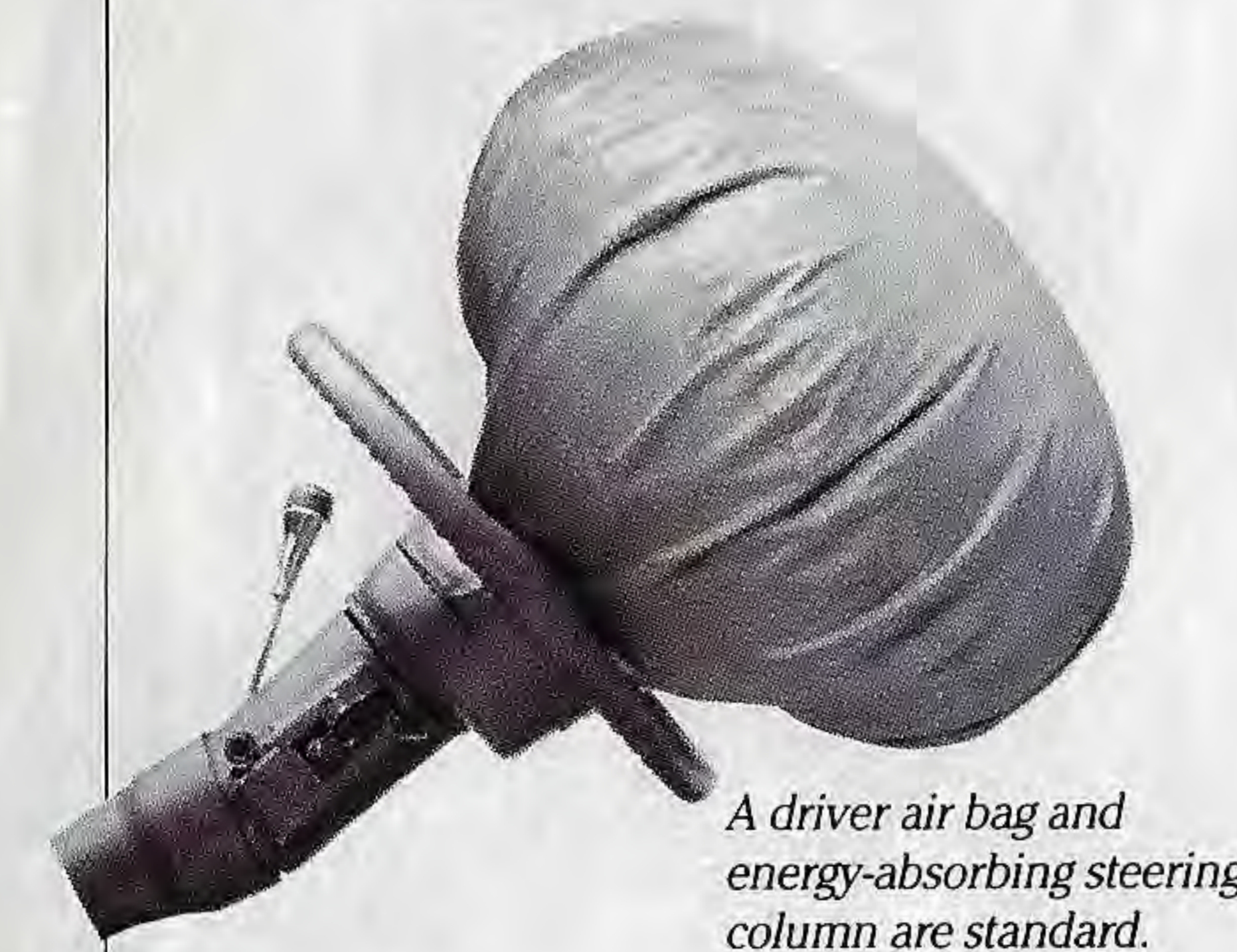


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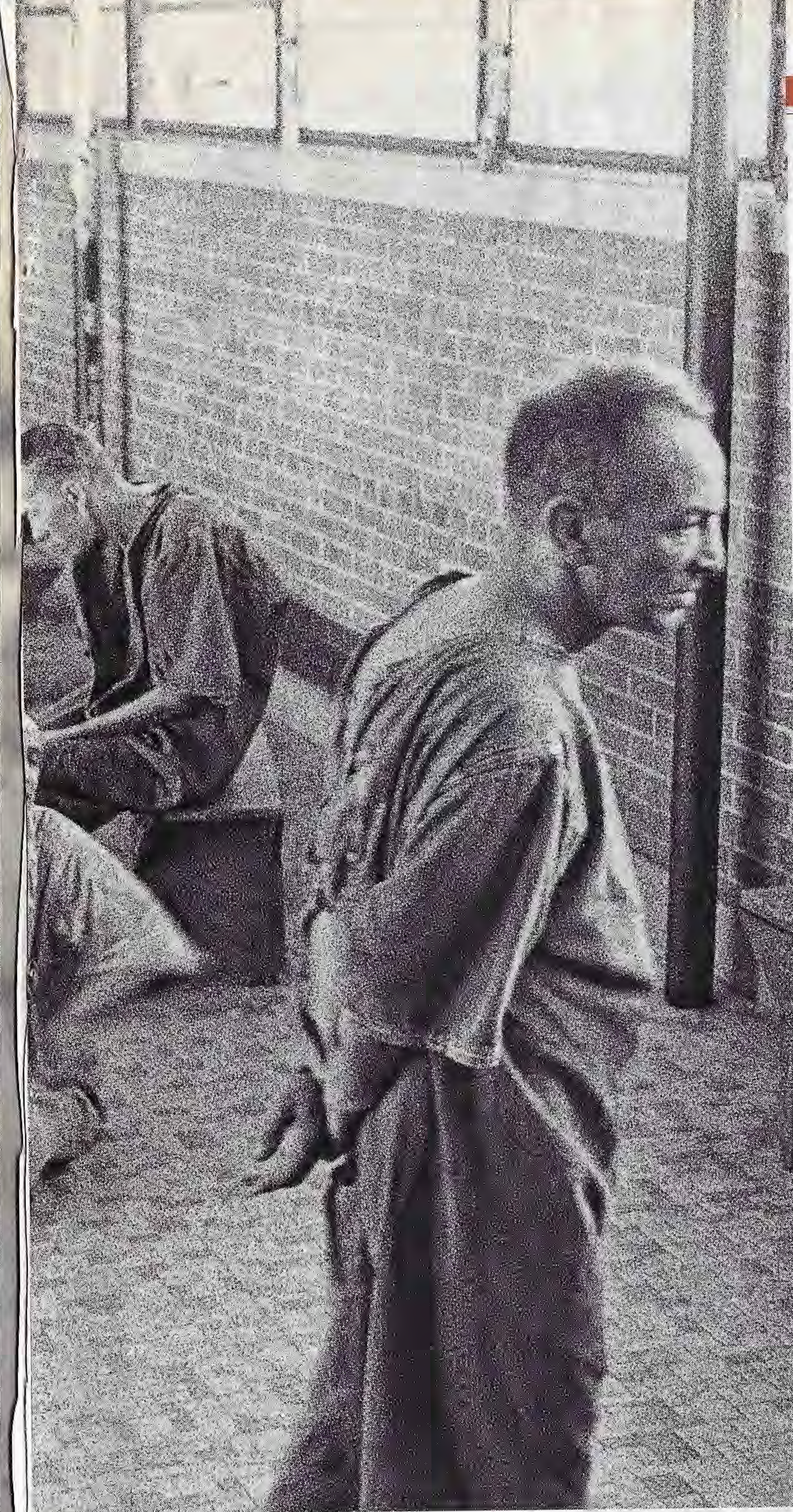
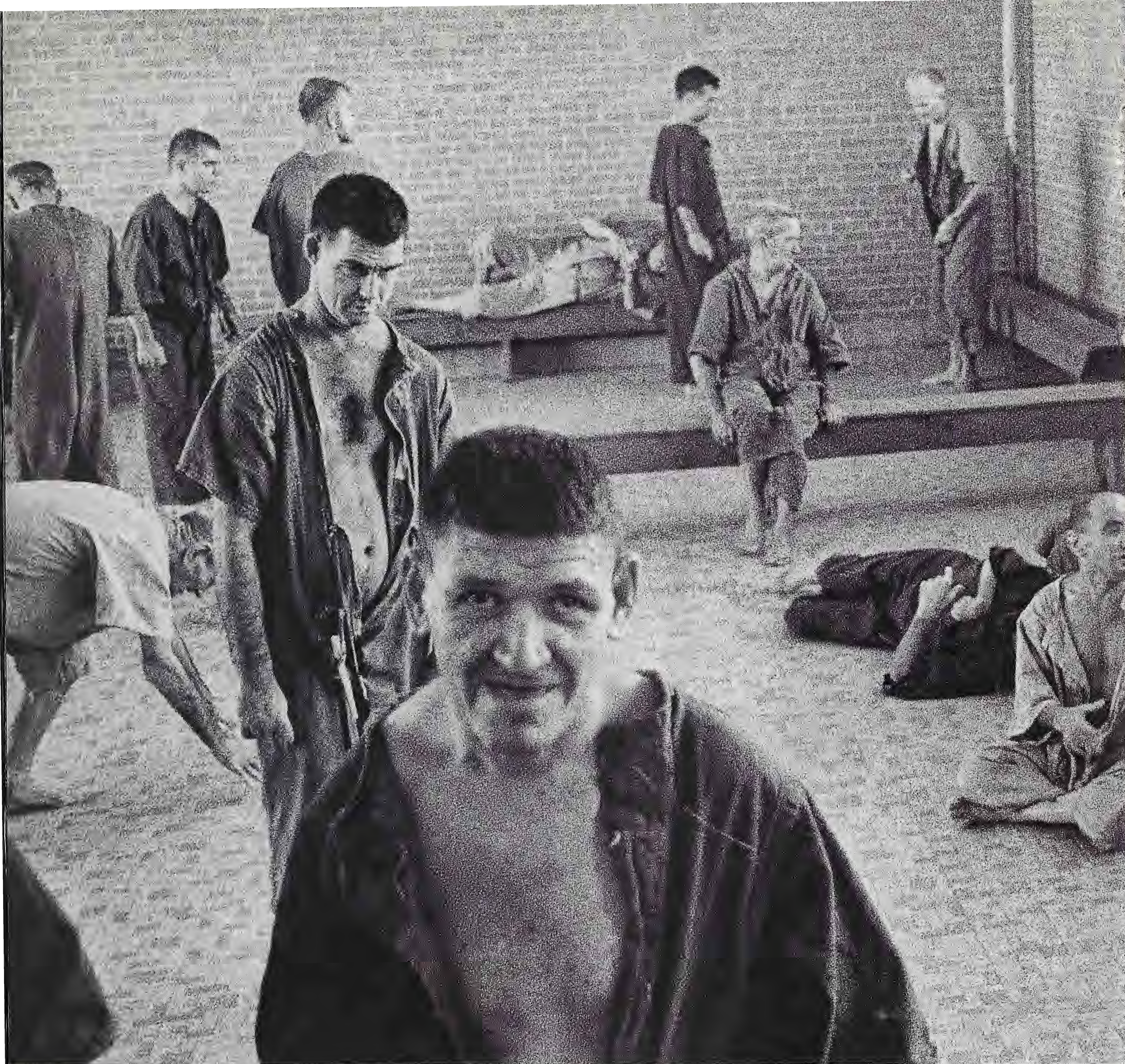


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**East Louisiana State Hospital
Jackson, Louisiana, February 9, 1963**

Avedon lived on the ward for days so the patients would grow used to him and his camera. Though a mental institution is full of horror, his pictures are dreamlike and fragile, even in the way he printed them.

Avedon (and Baldwin) as "show biz moralists," "café society performers," "outrage exploiters." "The really curious thing is why a photographer, who spends much of his career flattering celebrities with soft lights and blurred effects, should also wish to transform these same subjects into repulsive knaves, fools and lunatics."

The intensely moralistic nature of photography criticism is repeated over and over through the years; just this January, The Washington Post's Henry Allen, writing about a new exhibition of "The Family," Avedon's starkly objective portraits of the American political and corporate elite that ran in Rolling Stone in 1976, called them "the photographic equivalent of road kill." Perhaps his most controversial book, and most attacked, was the 1985 "In the American West." Instead of famous faces, he focused on coal miners, drifters, prisoners, cowboys. It was said that he was exploiting them, condescending to them, turning the West into a freak show. Art in America magazine concluded that Avedon exhibited "a failure of decency."

Clearly, there is something in the nature of photography—its democratic ethos, its presumption to "reality," the thin line that separates the amateur's snapshot from the professional's "art"—

that elicits such passionately personal responses. Avedon's portraits sometimes seem like Rorschach tests that tell more about the critic than the picture (Janet Malcolm's virulent description of the "slack-jawed" background figures in a Dior fashion photo is insanely at odds with the rather benevolent figures on display). Because everyone has been photographed at some time in their life (and who doesn't want to look his best?), Avedon's starkly lit stares become a personal affront to our notion of courtesy: *what would he make me look like?* we wonder. But the obverse of flattery isn't necessarily cruelty. Our fear of old age and wrinkles is not necessarily *his* fear. Avedon attempts to deal with these issues in his introduction to "In the American West" when he calls his pictures *fictions*. "A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion . . . All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth."

Undoubtedly true, but one has to be responsible for one's fictions, too. Yet the issue of Avedon's alleged misanthropy does seem off the point, a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Avedon gaze. It assumes that his eyes are pronouncing judgments; that these pictures can be reduced to simple thumbs-up, thumbs-down moral verdicts. Occasionally, at his weakest, he succumbs. He says

**"A picture
never killed
anybody.
A picture
never mugged
anybody.
At worst it
betrays your
own illusions
about
yourself."**

"In Exile From the Land of Snows," sees his father as a man of "tremendous drive, tremendous generosity and tremendous intellect," with an insatiable curiosity about life. "He will not let any obstacle get in the way of the goal he sets." John recalls that when he was 11, he developed an obsession with J.R.R. Tolkien. So his father wrote a letter to Tolkien at Oxford requesting a visit. He was turned down. When the Avedons were in England, "My father, to my immense embarrassment and shame and total gratitude now, bought a birthday cake—he knew it was Tolkien's birthday—and drove us down from London to Oxford and rang the man's doorbell. His wife, who really did look like a hobbit, came to the door, and he introduced himself and said, we know it's your husband's birthday and we're here to present a cake . . . My father barged us in and suddenly I

was heading upstairs with this man I considered a tremendous hero. And my father said, 'My son wants to be a writer.' And Tolkien looked at me and gave me a half-hour lecture on the importance of writers learning Latin and Greek. It was a moment in life I cherish."

The social paroxysms of the '60s changed, and darkened, Avedon's work. To a man so finely tuned to the Zeitgeist, how could they not? Photographing both civil-rights workers and segregationists in the South and, later, the antiwar movement, he ventured for the first time into political waters. At both Bazaar and Vogue, to which he moved in 1966, his editorial fashion work took on a brittle, sometimes critical edge: a shoot in Sicily is inspired by Anton-

ioni's classic of ennui, "L'Avventura" and sends up the emptiness of high society. Three models in identical dresses fling themselves into the air in fits of manic laughter, an image of gleeful desperation. The Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton scandals are satirized in a witty mock-paparazzi scenario using Mike Nichols and Suzy Parker to play the press-hounded lovers.

His portrait style, influenced by the expressionist white-background paintings of Egon Schiele, grew more astringent, satirical. The exuberance of "Observations" gave way to the harsher, more clinical vision of "Nothing Personal," a 1964 book with a text by his former high-school classmate, James Baldwin. The critical response was withering. In The New York Review of Books, the drama critic Robert Brustein set the tone for all attacks to follow, denouncing



Truman Capote, writer
New York City, December 18, 1974

When Capote drank, his voice deepened, the back of his neck thickened, his mind grew sharper, less entertaining, more thoughtful. He had a look of power, a certain malevolence.



Boyd Fortin, rattlesnake skinner
Sweetwater, Texas, March 10, 1979

The boy, on the cusp of maturity, has gutted the snake and cut its head off. The image, says Avedon, goes to the heart of castration fears, sexuality ambiguity, the beginning of manhood. It is about the rite of passage.

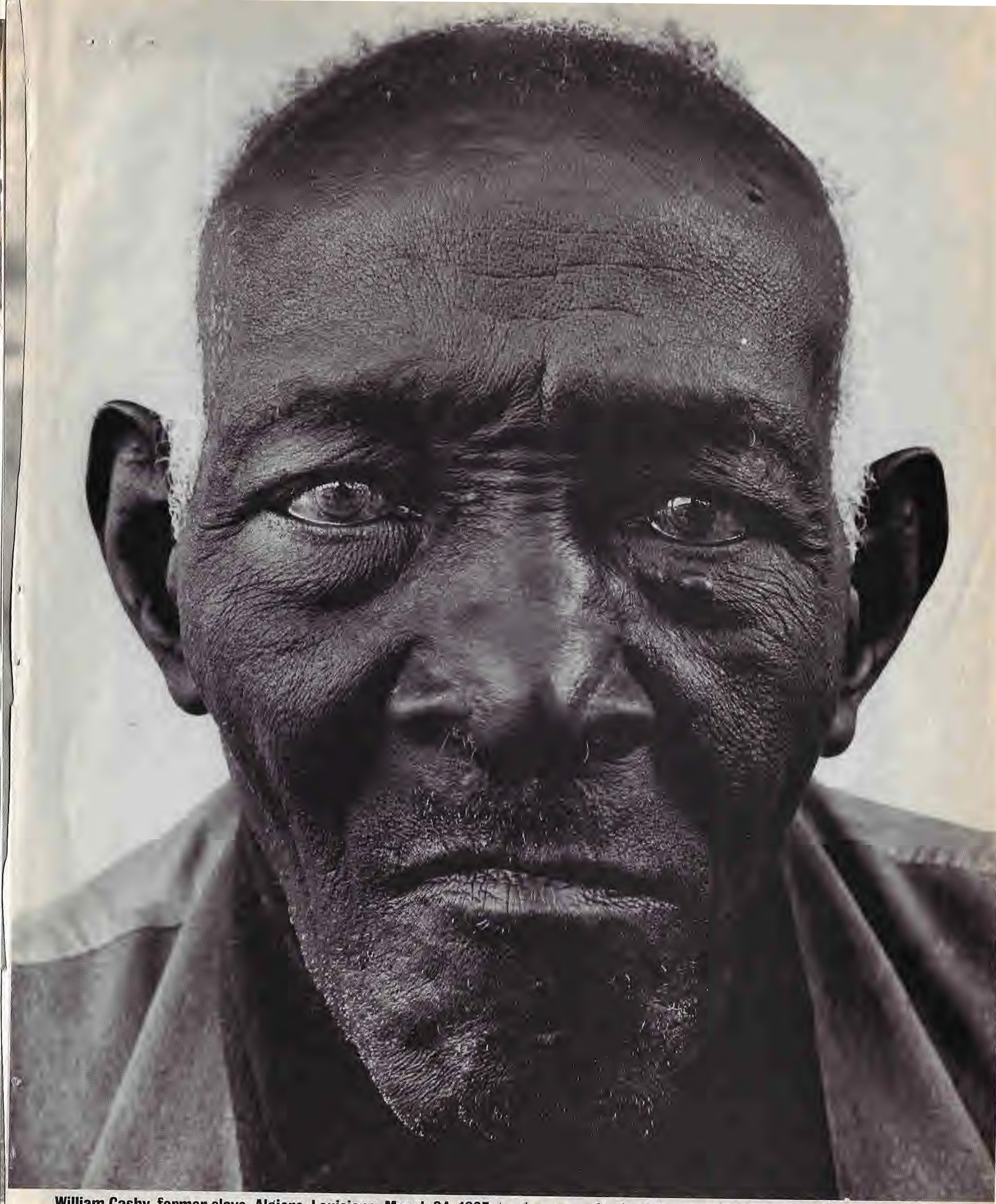
that his pictures of George Wallace and Leander Perez in "Nothing Personal" are failures. He told Baldwin that he thought they were lousy: "I've turned Wallace into a cartoon, a caricature." To which Baldwin replied, "Dick, he is a caricature." His heroic portrait of handsome, clean-cut Julian Bond, posed with fresh-faced young civil-rights workers, makes a striking poster image, but it's so patently on the side of the angels it has nothing to reveal but its own virtue.

But these are atypical, didactic works. Time has proven to be on Avedon's side. So many of the photographs that seemed to many stunningly unfriendly at the time—Monroe, the wreckage of Dorothy Parker, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor—no longer shock us, partly because Avedon altered the terms of psychological honesty in portraiture; he opened our eyes. We can now see sympathy where we once perceived disdain. The Avedon photos that are his weakest (and they are the ones that date) are his most overtly theatrical. The frenetically dynamic "Alice in Wonderland" photos pile Andre Gregory's theatricality on top of Avedon's, resulting in overcooked emotional rhetoric. The least palatable portraits in the "West" book are the most overdirected; the artifice refuses to melt into art. It's not that they're mean but that they try too hard to *mean*.

Avedon isn't a social realist; he's after bigger game. The juxtapositions of "An Autobiography"—leading us from the opaque eyes of a sated Truman Capote to the staring eyes of an adolescent boy in Texas holding a rattlesnake,

from the hands of a high-fashion model to the hands of Andy Warhol revealing his cut and stitched belly, transforming a shrouded Jean Shrimpton into an image of death—invite us to recognize and contemplate the improbable affinities and contradictions of life. His subjects become performers in an allegory that might be called *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

Dick Avedon is famous for his charm, beloved by his friends for his loyalty and generosity—and he can send shivers down the back of someone who crosses him. Some call him a control freak. Avedon is happy to illustrate just how far he'll go to get his way. In 1976, when "The Family" was about to be printed in *Rolling Stone*, he flew to St. Louis to the printing press to check out the results. He had stipulated to Jann Wenner, *Rolling Stone's* publisher, that his good friend Renata Adler get credit as editor of this special issue; she had worked alongside Avedon for six months on the project. But when he saw the first issues rolling off the press, her credit read, "edited from 125 photographs down to 70 by Renata Adler." "It's a typical Jann move. Like she just eliminated some pictures!" Avedon gets on the phone with Wenner, screaming betrayal. Wenner says it's a mistake, it'll be changed. Avedon goes back to his hotel room in the wee hours of the morning, lies down and thinks, "Why should I trust him?" At 3:30 he goes back to the press and hears them still running; the credit



William Casby, former slave, Algiers, Louisiana, March 24, 1963 *Avedon set up his backdrop on the shady side of Casby's little wooden house. The sitter was 104 years old; in the middle of the session, he got up to cook lunch for his bedridden wife. Later, Avedon shot his family—his "greats" and "great greats," as Casby called them—but he knew the ex-slave was his real subject.*

hasn't been changed yet. The foreman explains that Wenner says it's too expensive to hold the press until the typesetter arrives, and besides, these issues will be seen only in Hawaii and Alaska. Avedon acts unconcerned. Having stored away information on how the press works—and what can go wrong—he quietly strolls back to where the rolls of paper are running, takes his big hotel key and rips the paper, knowing he has destroyed the rest of the run. Then he innocently strolls off. By the time the press is fixed, so is the copy. Long after, he told Wenner what he had done. "I said, 'You don't f—k with me on something like a promise.'"

ONE OF HIS RUN-INS WAS WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHY director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Van Deren Coke, who was putting on an Avedon show. "He's the most sincere egotist I've ever met," says Coke, who found that Avedon's "unreasonable demands" for the show were far beyond what his museum's budget could accommodate. "He's like a lot of people in the fashion and theater world—they think that is the real world. . . . He feels he can control both people and situations because of his eminence and the amount of money that flows through his hands."

His image as a café-society photographer to the contrary, Avedon is neither an extravagant man nor a social butterfly. Most of the money he makes for commercial work gets poured back into his studio, to pay for his own projects. At this particularly hectic moment, he is employing some 15

assistants (mostly aspiring photographers) in his four-floor studio. Its walls are cluttered with Avedon prints, headlines ripped from tabloids, a sports-page photo of an athlete stretched like a dancer, family snapshots. An Irving Penn cigarette study leans against another wall. A lifelong autodidact, he has crammed his bedroom with books (he excitedly touts Frank Conroy's new novel "Body & Soul") and videotapes (Jean Renoir, he concludes, is a greater artist than his father, Auguste). In his bathroom hangs a Beckett poem, next to a volume of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Everyday at lunchtime, everyone gathers around a big table to share a take-out gourmet meal. "He's actually sort of monastic in his own personal life," says his son, John. "He's not interested in accumulating wealth or tremendous material comforts, but when he's on vacation he loves material comfort. He's figured out the right balance."

At 70, he is spurred by a "sense of time running out." He wants to "up the ante." Much of his most daring recent work has been done for *Egoïste*, a remarkable annual publication edited by Nicole Wisniak in Paris. Pushing photojournalism into controversial new areas, he shot the 1991 Volpi Ball in Venice, a gathering of desiccated aristocrats he captures with a Proustian eye. What the viewer won't see is that these pictures are collages: he's guiltlessly manipulated the party to create his stifling images of alienation. His recent striking Academy Awards photos in *The New Yorker* were more obviously cut-and-paste jobs. Wisniak accompanied Avedon to Berlin for his New Year's Eve



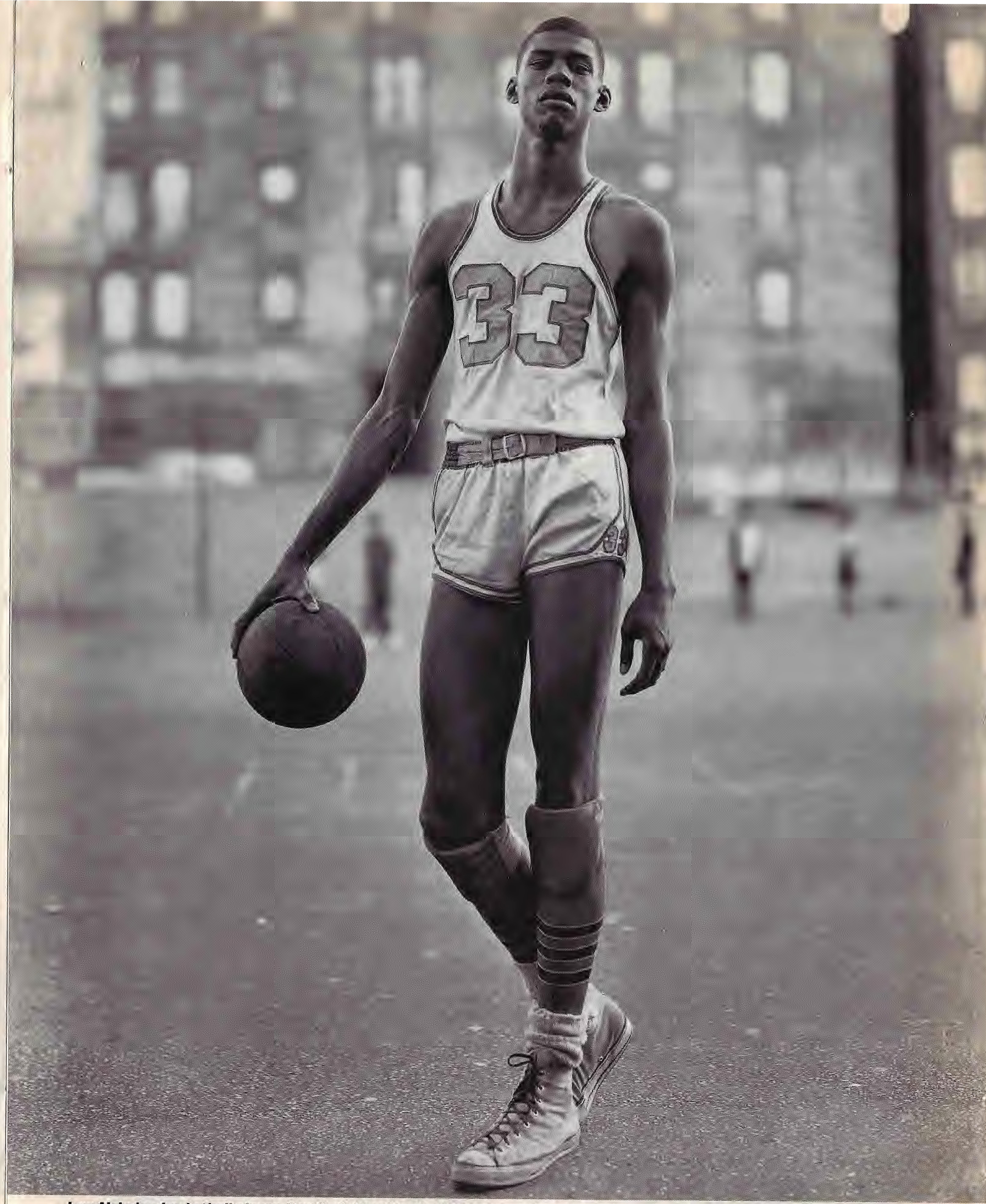
Jean Shrimpton, model
Paris, January 27, 1970

Originally, this image of a Cardin dress was printed delicately so that it was a lyric fashion photograph. But as Avedon printed it darker and darker, it lost its fragile effect and became ghostly and ominous.



Napalm victim
Saigon, South Vietnam, April 29, 1971

Avedon has never published this picture before and has ambivalent feelings about doing so. Atrocity pictures, he argues, should stop war, but they could as easily add to the sum of violence in the world.



Lew Alcindor, basketball player, New York City, May 2, 1963 While taking a cab down the West Side of Manhattan, Avedon saw an amazing kid playing basketball in the schoolyard of Power Memorial high school. He had no idea the boy, then 16, would become Kareem Abdul-Jabbar; but after he photographed him, he found out that serious sports fans had already discovered him.



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Dovima, model
August 5, 1955

In his book, as above, this picture runs next to the image of Avedon's dying father. They echo his themes: beauty and despair. Keeping up an elegant appearance is a brave, universal way of denying death.



Jacob Israel Avedon, father
Sarasota, Florida, December 19, 1972

Avedon took a remarkable series of pictures of his father as he was dying of cancer; some were shown at the Museum of Modern Art. This one, taken after surgery, has never been published before.

shoot at the Brandenburg Gate for the celebration of the fall of the wall, and the pictures are chilling. "He worked until 6 in the morning. It was like a war. When many people were confident about the idea that the German unification would be a success, he photographed the despair. He was two years in advance about it—what he saw was anxiety, fear. What he was catching was vanishing hope."

STILL, AVEDON SEEMS HAUNTED BY WHAT HE HAS been unable to achieve. "I've never been able to put all I know into a photograph. A photograph can be an adjective, a phrase. It can even be a sentence or a paragraph, but it can never be a chapter. So it's been a lifetime of frustration in terms of expressing myself because of the limitations of the visual image. I believe in it—but it's limited." The genesis of his new book came with the "revelation that when all of the photographs were put together, they seemed somehow to embody everything that I've ever felt and believed."

How do you reconcile Avedon's dark, increasingly apocalyptic vision with the gregarious, enthusiastic, playful man himself? The harrowing concluding section of "An Autobiography," filled with nightmare images of death and madness, stuns the viewer with its bleakness. "He's a man of lost illusions who has no bitterness," says Wisniak. "He's an optimistic man photographing despair and still believing in struggle. He's a man who loves both Beckett and Astaire."

It all comes back to the eyes. Simply put, great photogra-

phers see more than you or I, and it is their luck and their curse that they can't turn their vision off. There is a mystery about what separates a photographer from the rest of us. Anyone can take a picture. The mystery is in the fraction of a second when the photographer chooses to snap the lens. André Gregory, for one, still can't figure out how Avedon does it. Gregory needed a head shot of himself, and Avedon told him to come over to the studio. "He took, I think, one roll, and this for me is just a total mystery. As he's shooting, he says, 'Should we have a romantic one for your mother's piano?' And he's just shooting. And then he says, 'Maybe we should get a kind of a sadistic Nazi look?' And as far as I

can see, the light hasn't changed, Dick hasn't changed and I haven't changed. And out of it comes a Hollywood glossy, a gorgeous Chopinesque romantic picture for my mother's piano and a picture in which I look like Adolf Eichmann. How he's able to do that, God only knows."

It takes the chutzpah of a voyeur, the soul of a poet, the intuition of a novelist, the reflexes of an athlete. Avedon ranks with the great hit-and-run artists of our time.

With ABIGAIL KUFLIK in New York

"I think all art is about control—the encounter between control and the uncontrollable"