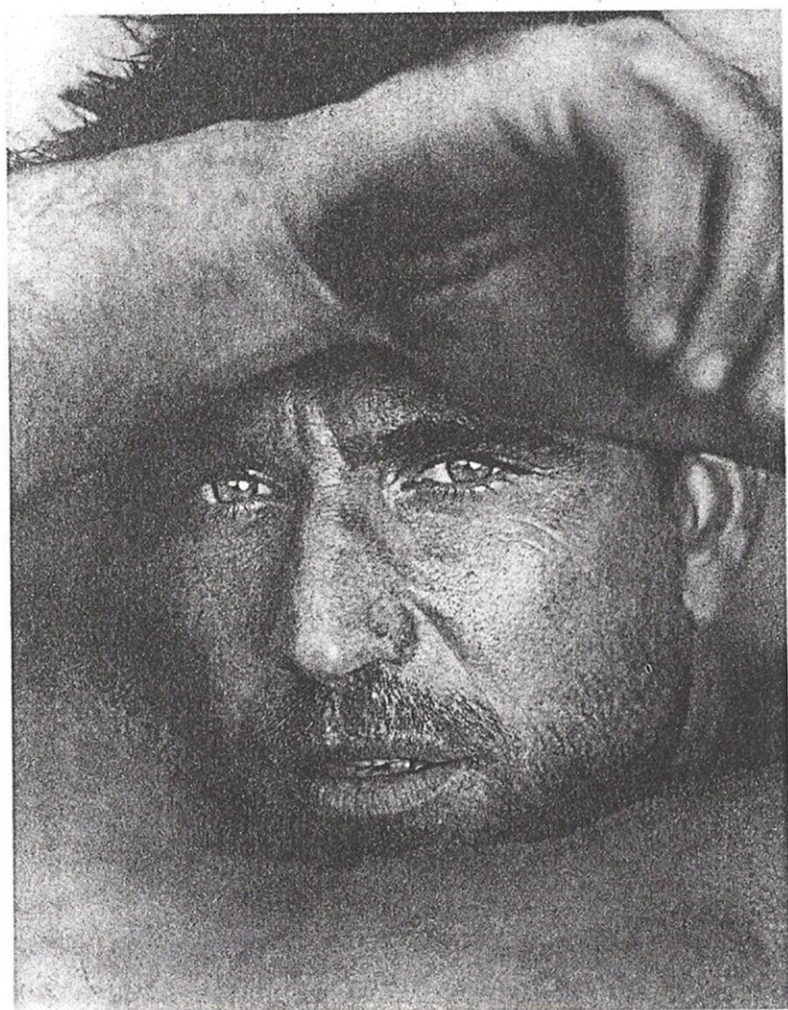


Trevor Gett profiles the photographer whose portraits are
seen in today's smartest magazines

HERB RITTS

In the World of

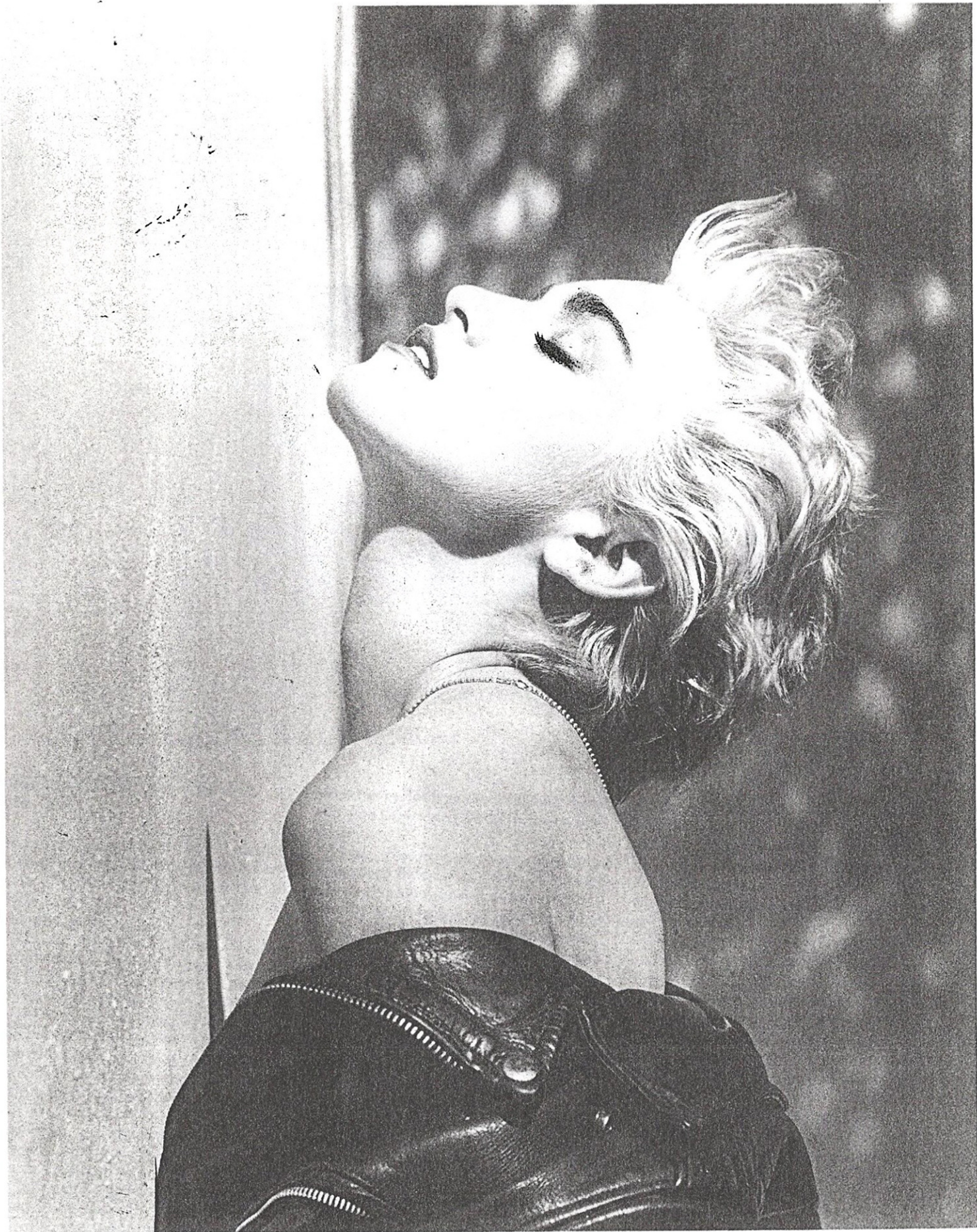
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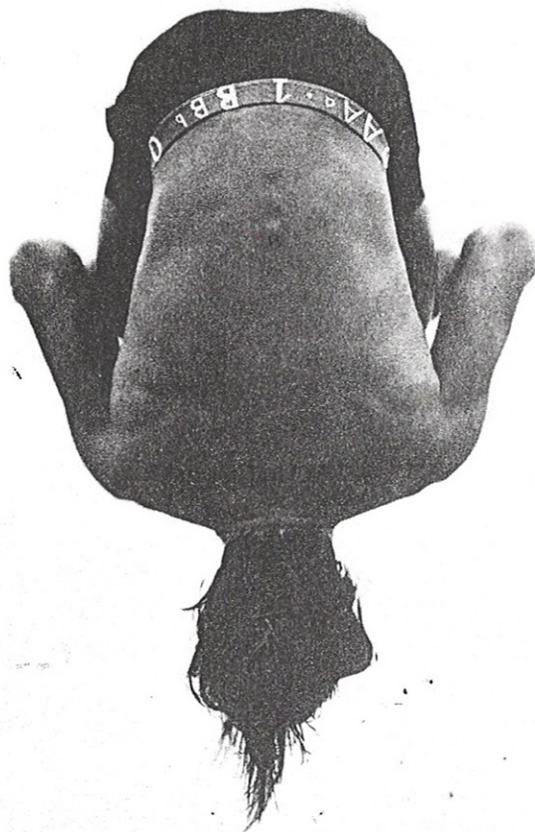


The hundreds of carefully stacked copies of *Rolling Stone*, *Interview*, *Vanity Fair*, *Tatler* and other glossy magazines in the library of Herb Ritt's home in the Hollywood foothills all feature pictures he's taken. The neatly framed vintage prints by masters he admires, like Irving Penn's surreal portrait of artist Saul Steinberg, reveal his interest in classic black and white images.

The house itself, a trendy update of a white-walled, twin-turreted 1904 bungalow is very Los Angeles and part of

Right: Madonna trusts Herb Ritts to project her changing images. 1986. LEFT: Mel Gibson, handsome despite all that stubble, in 1985 portrait by Herb Ritts.





Midair backflip for swimwear editorial in *Tatler*. 1987.

the movie star world. It has the sweet smell of success. Yet even before he became the favoured photographer of 1980s mega-stars, Ritts was familiar with this scene.

The son of a family which had become wealthy by building up a lucrative furniture design company, he grew up with Steve McQueen as a next-door neighbour. In the late 1970s, while working on the selling side of his father's business, he began taking pictures with a small Miranda camera which had a 105mm fixed portrait lens. From Snaps, such as those recording a trip to the Caribbean, he graduated to informal portraits of friends. When one of these friends failed to turn up as arranged, her boyfriend agreed to pose. He happened to be Richard Gere, then little known to the public but soon to have

his name in lights as the star of films like *American Gigolo* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

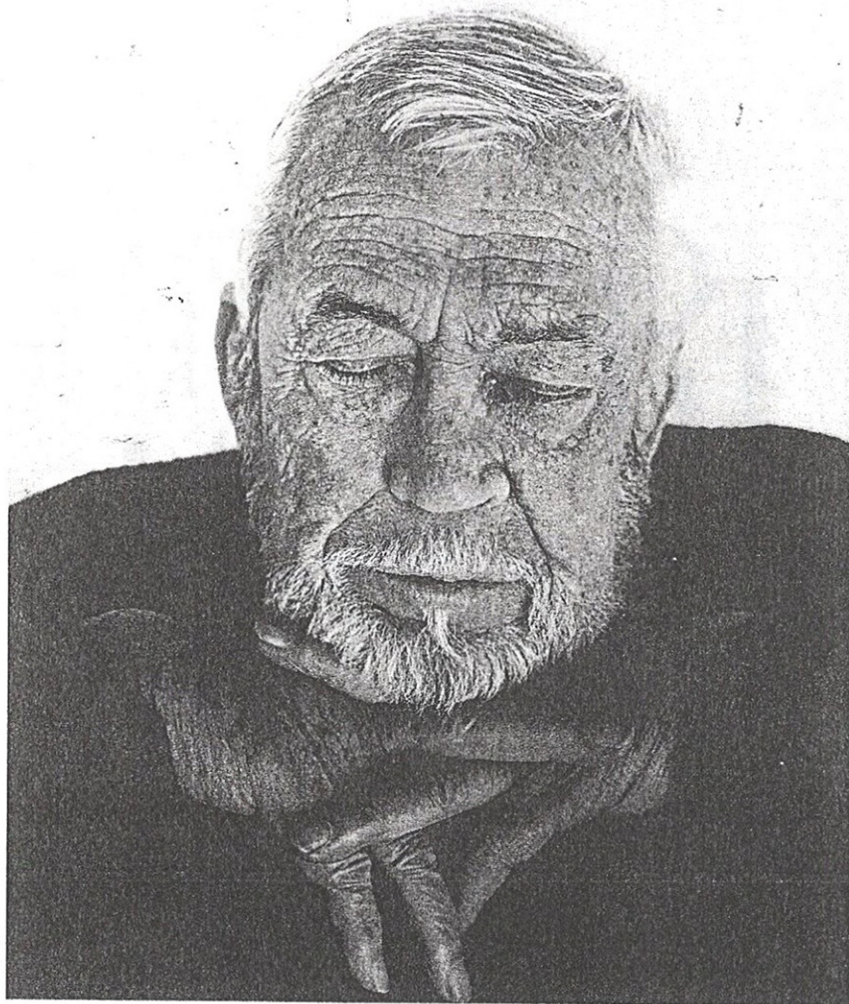
Vogue, *Esquire* and other magazines clamoured for offbeat shots of Gere the new sex symbol and Ritts was able to provide them from that chance session and a subsequent one. Gere, who still visits Ritts, believes that growing up in Hollywood has helped the photographer to stay cool when dealing with the egos of the celluloid world.

The lucky break with the Gere pictures brought more and more offers and fortunately Ritts displayed an inherent ability to elevate his subjects into the realm of myth. Often this has meant holding out to get his own way as in the case of the 1985 pictures of Sylvester Stallone and Brigitte Nielsen for a *Vanity Fair* feature titled *The Ecstasy and the Ecstasy*. Rambo and his lady wanted to go with the initial plan of using a conveniently situated Manhattan gym as

the setting but Ritts thought there would be more impact from outdoor pictures. By gently sticking to his guns, he persuaded the two bodies beautiful to allocate a whole day for the shoot and travel down to the Catalina Beach Club on Long Island.

Seeing some of these pictures in his book *Pictures* published recently by Twelvvetrees Press, I realised the extra effort was well justified. Another appropriate location thought up by Ritts was the colourful fun fair where he posed Tom Cruise in a toy airplane at the time of the star's triumph in the aviation epic *Top Gun*. The best shot from this session was spread across two-pages in a 1986 issue of *Rolling Stone*. This also carried a strong, side-lit, head-on portrait of Cruise by Ritts on its cover as well as nine more of his pictures inside the magazine.

That same year saw some of Ritts's most famous pictures of Madonna, in-



Film director John Huston towards the end of an outstanding career was photographed by Herb Ritts in 1985.

cluding the closed-eye profile for the cover of her *True Blue* LP and a gutsy black and white half-length of the singer in jeans and an off-the-shoulder leather blouson which was the lead picture in *Rolling Stone's Yearbook*.

Having photographed Madonna since the early 1980s, Ritts has charted her various image-changes and played a part in establishing them via his pictures. She trusts his judgement, likes his low-key handling of sittings and the freewheeling way he lets things happen instead of deciding in advance what he must get on film.

Madonna's faith must surely be shared by other stars who have yielded to somewhat offbeat suggestions by Ritts. Debra Winger, when five months pregnant, agreed to a *Vanity Fair* shoot;

Miami Vice designer cop Don Johnson obediently waded out into the Atlantic dressed, as usual, to kill in the latest fashion; a fully-clothed Jack Nicholson submerged himself under the waters of a Jacuzzi; and Mel Gibson posed with several days growth of stubble on his chin, looking like the world's handsomest coalminer.

Besides shooting star portraits, Ritts has worked in fashion, again with a highly personal approach which grew out of an initial Bruce Weber influence. This is hardly surprising since the two trendies have been good friends for a number of years. Weber's let's-get-physical style where clothes are played down in favour of lifestyle was attractive to Ritts and is reflected (to cite one example) in the midair backflip shot the latter took for a swimsuit feature in the English magazine *Tatler* during 1987.

Ritts shares Weber's interest in photographing the physical perfection of nude figures though is perhaps more

prone to treat them in a sculptural way with graphic interplay of sunlight and shadow and textural juxtapositions involving sand, stucco, granite walls and diaphanous fabric veilings.

Fastidious about the tonal values of his images especially when printed for limited edition portfolio sales, Ritts has earned the reputation of a perfectionist.

Though he could continue to move in the fast lane as a celebrity photographer of celebrities, a sort of latter-day, West Coast Cecil Beaton, he is determined to develop his talent along more serious lines. Previewing the recent major exhibition at the Staley-Wise Gallery in New York's Soho, I felt sure that Herb Ritts is here to stay, whichever path he eventually follows.

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