

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Richard Avedon: 'Murals & Portraits'

By Hollan Cotter



Richard Avedon/The Richard Avedon Foundation

The lawyer Florynce Kennedy, in 1969, shot by Richard Avedon.

If you were reasonably sentient in the 1960s and early '70s, as some of us were some of the time, you'll remember how far beyond strange those years were. And all of their surrealness comes back in this knockout show of Richard Avedon's colossal photomurals at Gagosian.

Avedon, who died in 2004, began his career as a fashion photographer but had a roving, hungry eye. By the 1960s he had turned his energies toward making studio portraits of civil rights workers, politicians and cultural dissidents of various stripes in an America fissured by discord and violence. An exceedingly personal book called "Nothing Personal," with a text by his high school classmate James Baldwin, was the result. It appeared in 1964, and if you happened to be a teenager at the time, and it fell into your hands, as it did into mine, your view of the world around you was very likely to be transformed.

After that Avedon's fashion work continued, notably at *Vogue*, but so did his topical portraits. These became ever more ambitious in scale and moral scope, culminating, between 1969 and 1971, in a quartet

of immense, multipanel group likenesses, which together stand as a kind of heaven-and-hell-on-earth equivalent of the Sistine Chapel.

In Chicago in 1969 he photographed the seven radicals — Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin among them — on trial for incitement to riot at the Democratic National Convention the year before. He traveled to Saigon to shoot the dozen United States government officials known as the Mission Council, who were in charge of directing the war in Vietnam. (There are 11 in the picture; one didn't show up.) Back in New York City the band of angelically pretty exhibitionists who made up Andy Warhol's Factory preened for his camera, as did three generations of suburban New Jersey siblings, aunts and in-laws who made up the poet Allen Ginsberg's extended family.

Michelangelo divided the cosmos into saints and sinners. In Avedon's morally complex and indeterminate vision, such opposite categories twisted together and mingled. They still do, as individual and collective histories captured on film 40 and more years ago continue to play out and change over time, into the present.

Gagosian has given the work deluxe packaging in an installation designed by the architect David Adjaye. Partitions divide the gallery into a giant X formation, which gives each mural a framing niche and also provides niche-like areas behind the walls for the display of materials related to the pictures.

In a series of 1963 photographs, Ginsberg and his longtime lover, Peter Orlovsky, nude and embracing, present an alternative version of the American family, one all but hidden at the time, now a new norm. A tender 1960s portrait of the aged social activist Dorothy Day chastens and deepens the smirky irreverence of the Chicago Seven's yippie posturing. A close-up of the napalm-melted hands of a Vietnamese woman offers the ruinous, irreparable back story to the image of power writ large in the Mission Council mural.

The past season has given us some memorable photography shows in the city's museums and galleries. None have been better — technically more audacious, emotionally more varied, ethically more unanswering — than this one.