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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

BAZAAR^{Harper's}

AVEDON'S WOMEN

*A new exhibition of Richard Avedon's portraiture
celebrates the photographer's seminal
take on female beauty. Here, with some
of his most memorable images for Bazaar,
Joan Juliet Buck salutes an icon.*

Photographs by Richard Avedon

Cyd Charisse, dress by Macrini, New York, June 9, 1961. From the October 1961 issue of *Bazaar*.



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RICHARD AVEDON TOLD DIANA VREELAND, "I can't think of myself as a purveyor of beauty to the world."

He wanted the real.

Avedon's women are radiant and intense in a way that has never been equaled and never will be. His images of models, actresses, and society women became emblems of their time, of his eyes on those times: Dovima flanked by elephants, capricious Suzy Parker, elongated Marella Agnelli, Veruschka folded into herself, Nastassja Kinski with a snake. But Avedon pushed beyond the restrictions of fashion to record a deeper level; his portrait of June Leaf, for instance, contains worlds.

"Portraiture is performance," he wrote in 1987. "You can't get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface. All that you can do is manipulate that surface—gesture, costume, expression—radically and correctly."

In Avedon's portraits, gesture is one accessory common to his sitters: Writers tend to show a hand, maybe both. In his fashion pictures, costume is shown to best advantage, or whipped into suggestion by the movement of leaping girls—all the bounty of the accessory table deployed, makeup wild, hair billowed into sails by the wind machine, much of it extra hair, Dynel falls, sometimes credited to a mysterious entity named Tovar Tresses. And yet the individuality of each model seems fully revealed in the perfect retouched images, as if artifice were also a way of exploring depth.

A precocious master who started working for *Harper's Bazaar* at 22, Avedon knew that the magazine's Russian-born art director, Alexey Brodovitch, had a romantic idea of prewar Paris, where he had grown up. In his editorial photographs, Avedon re-created the giddy Paris he had seen in the Fred Astaire movie *Roberta* (1935) and replicated the soft focus of 1930s cinema.

The models he used were dark and delicate: the cheeky Maxime de la Falaise; Elise Daniels, whose quality was "either romantic or irritated"; and Dorothy Virginia Margaret Juba, who had re-created herself as Dovima—*Do* for Dorothy, *vi* for victory, *ma* for her mother. Dovima's face, said Avedon, "really was a kind of mask that lent itself to makeup."

Two of his emblematic beauties were Dorian Leigh and Suzy Parker. Leigh was "the Anna Magnani of the fashion world," he said. But when he first met Suzy Parker, Leigh's sister, Avedon recalled, "she was frightened and static and dull and had a lot of baby fat, and it took me a long while." Once she had lost the baby fat and learned to flirt with Avedon's camera, Parker came to be, along with Marilyn Monroe, one of the symbols of the 1950s.

Avedon noticed that different parts of the body were compelling at different times. "It was Suzy's mouth more than any other part of her body, and it was Marilyn Monroe's mouth," he said. "It started with the energy that came in laughter." In Jean Shrimpton's time, the focus was "all eyes," he said; then the emphasis shifted to the legs. ►



It was the mind that caught his attention, not the surface.

He commanded, and expected, a deep grasp of cultural references.

China Machado was one of the first non-Caucasian models in the pages of *Bazaar*. Half Chinese and half Portuguese, a runway model for Givenchy, Machado had started posing for Avedon in the late 1950s, contemptuous and sophisticated in stiff brocade, with an attitude and a cigarette. Her story was a bodice ripper: Born in Shanghai, raised in Argentina and Peru, her first love was the legendary bullfighter Luis Miguel Dominguín; her next, the movie star William Holden, before she settled down, temporarily, to marriage and children with a Frenchman. But the time was not ready for her. When told she would never be a commercial model, she joined *Bazaar* as a fashion editor. She continued to work with Avedon on editorial and ads for decades.

It was easier for magazines to accept ethereal, almost virginal, women—Audrey Hepburn, or Marella Agnelli, the wife of the glamorous owner of Fiat, Gianni Agnelli. “If a girl walked in with a small head and a long throat like a swan, there was an immediate set of gut reactions and emotions to that as a very beautiful thing,” Avedon said. “Sexually beautiful girls in those days were not considered beautiful enough to be in *Harper’s Bazaar*.”

He exalted them all, but it was not personal. To the young women he photographed, Avedon was a grown-up, and pretty much a god. Few ever presumed to call him up for dinner. The wise China Machado observed him closely. “Dick’s mind was like a sponge, he could stare at someone and if they were interesting he wanted to know all about them, get all the information he could, and he would use it to expand his mind,” she says. “He’d put all his energy into them for about six months, and then, boom, no telephone calls. He knew that I didn’t want to cling to him, so that was why our relationship lasted so long.”

“The women I photographed were not the women I fell in love with, were not particularly the kind of women that excited me or turned me on or interested me,” he told Doon Arbus, before adding, “That’s not true.” His first marriage was to a dark-haired model named Dorcas Nowell, whom he nicknamed “Doe”; the movie *Funny Face* (1957) is said to be based on their relationship, with Audrey Hepburn as Doe and Fred Astaire, his childhood hero, playing Avedon. His second wife, Evelyn Franklin, the mother of his son, John, was a beauty but

never a model. Later, he was close to three intense, intelligent, talented women, each of whom created new forms in her field: the writer Renata Adler, author of *Speedboat* (1976); the choreographer Twyla Tharp; and, until the end of his life, Nicole Wisniak, the creator and one-woman staff of her own magazine, *Egoïste*. The photographs he took for *Egoïste* are among his most playful. In one issue he re-created Gustave Courbet’s painting of two naked lesbians, *Le Sommeil* (1866), which one of his collaborators called “two fat women in bed.”

It was the mind that caught his attention, not the surface. He commanded, and expected, a deep grasp of cultural references—visual, theatrical, artistic, literary. “He was looking,” Machado says, “for women who were really in tune with their own art.”

Richard Avedon died in San Antonio, Texas, on October 1, 2004, on assignment for *The New Yorker*. “He died with his boots on,” says Lauren Hutton.

At the time, he was beginning to work on a project about four of his “muses.” He’d talked to Anjelica Huston, Jean Shrimpton, and Penelope Tree. A year before he died, he called Veruschka and asked her to his studio.

She remembers: “He said, ‘It’s amazing what we didn’t show because of the clothes, of the fashion.’ *Vogue* said, ‘No, we want this and that and not this one, because this dress is not important to us.’ So the very beautiful things were never seen. He said, ‘You know what we lost because of the fashion.’

“I left, and he brought me to the stairs,” Veruschka continues, “and as I went down, all of a sudden I felt his eyes on me. I felt *him*. So I turned around, and there he was, standing up on the top of the stairs, and looking so serious, staring intensely. I thought, ‘What is this?’ It felt like a lot of things he didn’t express—something we never fulfilled was all in this look. Maybe unconsciously he thought, ‘That’s the last time I will see her.’ I can see it in front of me, this face, the intensity of him looking without saying, ‘Bye! See you soon,’ nothing. I was gone down all the stairs, and then I felt he was still there, and looked around, and there he was, standing, with this look.” ■

Excerpted from “Women of a World,” in Avedon: Women (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2013). The exhibition “Avedon: Women” is at Gagosian Beverly Hills through December 21.

