

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Must see: 'Avedon: Women' at Gagosian Beverly Hills

Booth Moore



Burden right after he had a friend shoot him in the arm. Image: Courtesy of the artist

Richard Avedon was one of the most accomplished photographers of the last 50 years and a new solo exhibition of his work at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, "Avedon: Women," explores his interpretations of beauty, both conventional and unconventional.

There are more than 100 images in the show, ranging from a portrait of artist June Leaf (1975), which is beautiful in its unvarnished earthiness, to highly stylized fashion photos of models Penelope Tree, Suzy Parker, China Machado and Twiggy.

"What you start to see when you look at all these photos is that it wasn't about traditional notions of beauty," says Kara Vander Weg, one of the directors at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, and liaison to the Avedon Foundation, who showed me around the exhibition. "Certainly he saw that, but there was something else he saw in these women that drew him to them, and he was able to draw out of them the best of themselves."

Avedon, who died in 2004, starting working for Vogue, Harper's Bazaar and other magazines in the 1940s. In addition to his most iconic fashion images (Dovima with elephants, Nastassja

Kinski with snake, Veruschka twisted like a pretzel), the exhibition features Avedon's reportage work as well.

"He was very interested in civil rights," Vander Weg explains. "In the 1960s he took a trip to New Orleans to photograph an African American debutante ball." There are also several images from his "In the American West" project, commissioned in 1979 by the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth. But one of my favorite photographs is from a series he took at the Volpi Ball in Venice in 1991. I love the composition and the Surrealist quality.

"It's interesting how he was able to capture personalities," Vander Weg says. "And he seemed to know when he got the image he wanted without seeing it on a viewfinder, which is hard to imagine today."

Avedon was also masterful at coaxing movement out of his subjects. His photographs of Marilyn Monroe from 1957 are particularly illuminating.

On one wall hangs a portrait of the bombshell looking expressionless and "off." And on the opposite wall is a series of images showing her dancing and crackling with life.

"To think of the craftsmanship it took to do that," Vander Weg says, explaining how the images had to be layered on top of one another to create the can-can line effect. "And this was done before the era of Photoshop."

"Avedon: Women" runs through Dec. 21 at the Gagosian Gallery, 456 N. Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, (310) 271-9400, www.gagosian.com.

An accompanying book, also titled "Avedon: Women," by Joan Juliet Buck and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, will be published Nov. 19. It describes the experience of modeling for Avedon via interviews with his subjects.