

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Richard Avedon, Photographer of Influence and Power

Michael Kaminer



Photo: Getty Images

Photographer Richard Avedon might have made his living on fashion, beauty and celebrities. But the eye behind some of the 20th century's most iconic images also brought a keen political edge to his work, shooting political activists, elected officials and agitators, along with pop stars, designers and movie idols.

Now, the National Museum of American Jewish History is showcasing some of Avedon's most provocative pictures in "Richard Avedon: Family Affairs," an exhibition originated by the Israel Museum, which owns a trove of Avedon's images.

"Family Affairs" showcases two major bodies of work. Originally published in *Rolling Stone* on the eve of the 1976 Presidential election, "The Family" presents series of 69 portraits of men and women who embodied power in the United States. "It was not only a bicentennial year, but a transitional year — from the counterculture, from the Vietnam war, from Watergate, into a new and unknown future," said Josh Perelman, the NMAJH's chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections. "A pivotal moment in history."

Four massive murals by Avedon complement the portraits, including a haunting, majestic image of Allen Ginsberg's extended family.

The work in "Family Affairs" emerged from a turbulent moment in American history — and a critical time for the artist. "At a moment when America's changing, Avedon's experiencing a

reinvention of his photographic style,” Perelman said of Avedon’s signature minimalist approach. “Many issues encompassed in the exhibition — issues of living in an uncertain, changing world, the changing notions of family, civil rights — are fundamentally a part of headlines today.” Though little of Avedon’s work is explicitly Jewish, his body of work reflects deeply Jewish values. Born in New York City in 1923, Avedon “came of age at a moment when politics and art were in a symbiotic relationship,” Perelman said. “He had deep sense of social mission and social justice. I see that as a manifestation of his sense of his own Jewishness and of his sense of connection to that kind of Jewish cosmopolitan world in which he formulated his identity.”

Avedon “played with his Jewish identity a little bit,” Perelman added. “Like any public person, he foregrounded and backgrounded it as suited him.”

Most of the material in Family Affairs comes from the collection of the Israel Museum, which presented “Richard Avedon: Family Affairs” last year. The NMAJH expanded the show with loans from the Avedon Foundation and the Smithsonian. “One of the curatorial choices I made is to present a photo of Avedon with the YHMA camera club in Central Park as a 12-year-old,” Perelman said. “Then you meet him in 1964 in a D.A. Pennebaker film we’re running in the gallery — he’s the dashing, charming Richard Avedon. And we end with a triptych self-portrait in 2002, two years before his passing.”

Perelman shared his insights on some of the exhibition’s most striking images.

Allen Ginsberg’s Family, Paterson, New Jersey, May 3, 1970



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“This was one of just four group portraits Avedon made — Andy Warhol and the Factory, the Chicago Seven, and the Mission Council running the war in Vietnam were the others. If you look at these, and look at the title of the exhibition, you see Avedon’s playing with the notion of family, and of individuals playing within a cohort group. In this photo, even though there are warm relations evident, there’s a tension between the suburban life of the father and the radicalism of the son.”

“Ginsberg and Avedon had crossed paths a number of times before this photo was taken; Avedon had photographed Ginsberg and his partner nude and caused a bit of controversy. But the two had talked about a family photo for a while.”

Katharine Graham, Chairman of the Board, The Washington Post Company, Washington D.C., March 11th 1976



Photograph by Richard Avedon © The Richard Avedon Foundation From the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem Joint gift of Gagosian Gallery and the American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President, to American Friends of the Israel Museum

“Graham was one of the few women of that time who’d reached the pinnacle in the nation’s business and political elite. She’s depicted for her role as publisher of The Washington Post, but also for her connection to Woodward and Bernstein and their revelations of the Watergate scandal. Avedon used a Deardorff 8 x 10 camera, which allowed him to stand next to the camera. He could stay in dialogue with the sitters. Avedon played coach, charmed them, provoked them, and sometimes receded. He truly tried to capture individuals and portray them for who they were. Graham’s pose here represents her strength and fortitude.”

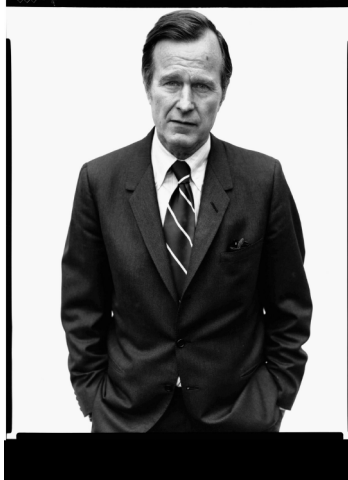
Bella Abzug, U.S. Congresswoman from New York, New York, June 19, 1976



Photograph by Richard Avedon © The Richard Avedon Foundation From the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem Joint gift of Gagosian Gallery and the American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President, to American Friends of the Israel Museum

“One of things I love about this image is that we have her iconic hat in our core exhibition. It’s on loan from her daughter. It was a delight to discover that connection. Bella Abzug was a forerunner, not only as a woman but as a Jew. And as a politician, she represented a particular genre of New York politics. I think that for Avedon, she represented a kind of politics grew up with, and came to be associated with.”

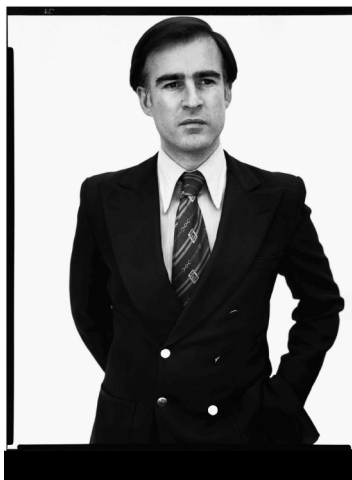
George H.W. Bush, Director, CIA, Langley, Virginia, March 2, 1976



Photograph by Richard Avedon © The Richard Avedon Foundation From the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem Joint gift of Gagosian Gallery and the American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President, to American Friends of the Israel Museum

“Bush is certainly one of the individuals in the exhibition who’s most familiar to visitors, considering what he went on to become. At the time, he was director of the CIA, at the front and center of the power elite in D.C. There’s a wonderful letter he wrote to Avedon where he said that he didn’t know who was more nervous — Avedon coming into the CIA for the shoot, or Bush getting photographed by the great Richard Avedon.”

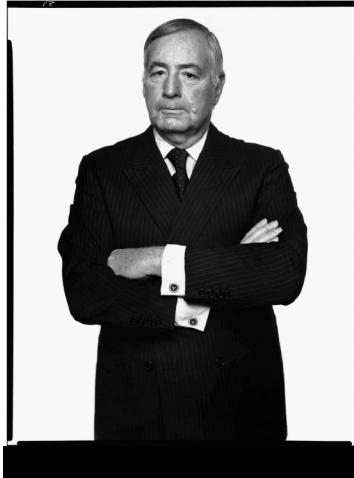
Jerry Brown, Governor of California, Sacramento, California, March 20, 1976



Photograph by Richard Avedon © The Richard Avedon Foundation From the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem Joint gift of Gagosian Gallery and the American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President, to American Friends of the Israel Museum

“One of the staff favorites — he was quite the looker. He was a central figure not only in counterculture politics, but also Governor of one of our largest states, and someone who made the transition from Governor Moonbeam to a very effective politician. Avedon captured in this pose a sense of seriousness, a seriousness of purpose. In 1976, Jerry Brown was coming into that identity.”

Walter Annenberg, publisher, Radnor, Pennsylvania, May 10, 1976



Photograph by Richard Avedon © The Richard Avedon Foundation From the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

“We chose to feature this one because of Walter Annenberg’s connection to Philadelphia. At the time, Annenberg was the longtime publisher of the Philadelphia Inquirer, which was one of nation’s major broadsheets. He was a major figure in the worlds of media and philanthropy. We might be looking at history when we look at that type of media mogul. But if you look at Mike Bloomberg, Mark Zuckerberg, Sheryl Sandberg, Marissa Mayer, we still have the same types of moguls shaping the world as we know it. The difference is that they’re working across many different types of platforms, reaching audiences significantly larger than Annenberg could ever hope to reach.”

Barbara Jordan, U.S. Congresswoman from Texas, New York, July 14, 1976



Photograph by Richard Avedon © The Richard Avedon Foundation From the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem Joint gift of Gagosian Gallery and the American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President, to American Friends of the Israel Museum

“Everybody brings a different experience to these portraits. One of joys for me is hearing stories of what these people represent to viewers today. Barbara Jordan is a person of such significant historical importance — first woman from Texas in Congress, first African American to give the keynote at the Democratic National Convention — and it was 1976, so she would have been on people’s minds. She was an outspoken advocate for civil rights, finding a path for African Americans, but also for all Americans.”

“It’s a powerful image of a powerful woman and an outspoken, fiercely passionate advocate, and that comes through with immense clarity in the photo.”