

# SHOWSTOPPER RICHARD AVEDON

PHOTOGRAPHS 1946-2004  
JULY 11-NOVEMBER 29  
SFMOMA  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

A provocative portrait isn't dependent on a dramatic pose or the theatrical effects of makeup. Those are so often addendums. A photographer's ability to seamlessly coalesce a person's spirit with their external presence substantiates a director's sensibility for deftly engaging his subject. It's an ingenuity far beyond the simple act of pointing lens and shooting the shutter. An infectious energy, prodigious curiosity, and virtuous skill set must align to frame that perfect moment. Hardly any such photographer personified this captive artifice like Richard Avedon, a standout among preeminent American photography VIPs. On view through November 29 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the sole United States venue for this retrospective celebrating Avedon's lifetime of portraiture, exemplifies the artistic touch with which he revolutionized the genre. Plainly, "His daring style rejected conventional poses and instead captured both motion and emotion in the faces of his subjects, often encapsulating their intrigue in a single moment," as described by SFMOMA.

A New York City native, Avedon's career launched in 1945 when he was hired as a staff photographer for *Harper's Bazaar*, where he worked for 20 years capturing movie stars,

stage celebrities, artist and writing figures. By the 1960s and '70s, Avedon responded to the era's paroxysm of social, cultural, and political tensions by taking up shooting distinguished people in activist groups, counterculture circles, and politics. "I wanted to ... respond to the demands of the time," Avedon repeatedly affirmed later in his career of his socially conscious drive. With his death in 2004, Avedon's six-decade career saw the artist reinvent himself as a photographer time and again, simultaneously progressing the genre's guidelines to become one of the century's sovereign observers of social and cultural life. Through fashion, stripped-down American folks, contemporary figures, while neither shying away from individuals whose image touched on the controversial, Avedon's frequent use of white backdrops manifest "in which the elimination of extraneous detail produces a concentrated sense of human presence."

"It was amazing to work with Dick, he was a genius—difficult at times—but so rewarding because of his passion towards his work," Norma Stevens said, executive director of the Richard Avedon Foundation. "It's not about camera or craft, it's about a vision, his own and hard work. What made it difficult at times

was he was hard to keep up with. He could work 24/7. He was a perfectionist, and to live up to that is difficult as a personality. He was charming, intelligent, and very, very witty. And curious about everything."

Roughly 200 images spanning Avedon's career are arranged largely chronologically, focused on major themes within his oeuvre: such his early, post-World War II street scenes; groundbreaking fashion work in 1950s Paris; the expansive survey of '60s and '70s American counterculture; a series following ordinary people living in the western US during the Reagan era; portraits of the country's most influential people, as well as unsparing portraits of himself and members of his family.

"Avedon is one of our great photographers whose work only increases in influence and resonance," SFMOMA senior curator of photography Sandra Phillips closed.

—Erin Dyer



JUXTAPOZ



*Marilyn Monroe*  
Gelatin silver print  
May 6, 1957  
©2009 The Richard Avedon Foundation

