

#3 February 2013 *Cameraderie* Richard Avedon (1923-2004)

Richard Avedon was one of the premiere fashion and portrait photographers of the mid and late twentieth century. We have all seen his covers and features on and in *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *The New Yorker*. His shots of Brooke Shields, Veruschka, Kate Moss, The Beatles, Audrey Hepburn, Katherine Hepburn, and hundreds of others, well and lesser-known, are icons of modern photography.

The Wikipedia article on Avedon accurately sums up his trademark style as follows:

“His portraits are easily distinguished by their minimalist style, where the person is looking squarely in the camera, posed in front of a sheer white background. Avedon would at times evoke reactions from his portrait subjects by guiding them into uncomfortable areas of discussion or asking them psychologically probing questions. Through these means he would produce images revealing aspects of his subject's character and personality that were not typically captured by others.”

See his official website here: www.richardavedon.com. Please go and spend at least ten, preferably 30, minutes browsing through his images, soaking up his “minimalist-white-background” style. It is really quite remarkable, shooting against pure white like that. It focuses all our attention on the subjects' expressions.

Have you noticed that his work is *mostly black and white*? Monochrome is not to be neglected in photography, and Avedon shows us why it is still an essential expressive mode in photography today. (Perhaps you have noticed the increased use of black and white in advertising in the last few years, both still and video—there is much to be expressed with black and white—the subject matter is front and center.)

If you have not looked at Avedon's images at this point, please go to his web site and spend a little time there. The experience is intense, I promise you. If you already know his work, OK, let's move on.

Let's look at a few of Avedon's portraits from his website, almost at random.

Here is Burt Lahr

(<http://www.richardavedon.com/#s=1&mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&p=3&a=0&at=0>), acting in Beckett's “Waiting for Godot.” Lahr's expression is intense, complemented by his clasped hands—what a pose! Avedon shoots against his trademark pure white. But look, Lahr's costume is pure black, in contrast, with no detail visible. Avedon is not afraid of either whiteness or blackness. They are essential elements of his compositions.

Here is Avedon's set of black and white portraits of the Beatles for their *Abbey Road* Album (<http://www.richardavedon.com/#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=11&p=1&a=0&at=0>), as well as a dramatically solarized color set published in *The New Yorker* (<http://www.richardavedon.com/#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=12&p=1&a=0&at=0>) the same

year. There is a lot to be interpreted out of these portraits, aside from their smashing impact on the viewer. Let's just consider the black and white set, and note the variations in the use of shadow on the dark side of each of the great pop musicians' faces. John Lennon's face has the deepest shadow on one side and Ringo Starr has the least. Very little is unplanned by an expert portraitist, so I am inclined to read this as a gentle reflection on the depth of the personalities of the subjects.

Here is his portrait of Ronald Fisher, a beekeeper, taken in 1981, that appeared in *The New Yorker* fairly recently:

<http://www.richardavedon.com/#s=14&mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&p=7&a=0&at=0>. I am vastly understating my reaction to this image to say that I find it disturbing. In fact, it is disturbing in so many ways at the same time that I would not have thought this possible. Again the white background, the white skin, the dangerous insects all over the man's body, his strange serenity, his baldness, the framing just below his naval, his mysterious hands not in view, and a suggestion of martyrdom. It's too much. It's like an entire city of strange winding streets, all leading to unexpected and dangerous cul-de-sacs.

The UK magazine *Professional Photographer* list of the 100 most influential photographers of all time on their website puts Avedon in first place

(<http://www.professionalphotographer.co.uk/magazine/photographic-inspiration/100-most-influential-photographers-of-all-time>). He is certainly in the top ten on my list. Please, spend some time at his official website, www.richardavedon.com.