**REBECCA A. SENF**

**Curator of the exhibition**

***Richard Avedon: Relationship \****

Photographer Richard Avedon, with a more than six-decadelong career, produced innovative work in fashion as well as captivating portraits. Over the course of his lifetime, he worked with a number of models and a wide range of portrait subjects, creating a powerful body of pictures that allow his viewers to study the likenesses of actors, ballet dancers, celebrities, civil rights activists, heads of state, inventors, musicians, visual artists, and writers. *Richard Avedon: Relationships* uses a selection of these fashion photographs and portraits, from the extensive collection at the Center for Creative Photography (CCP), to delve into his approach to photographing people. By comparing works, we can enrich our understanding of both his practice and his subjects.

The CCP’s holdings of Avedon’s fashion photographs can be roughly grouped into two periods. His early works, those made prior to 1960, are set “on location” and stage models in the role of actors to evoke a narrative. The later works suggest no narrative. Instead, they concisely focus on the model and their garment. In these later pictures, Avedon often employed a minimal, solid-tone background and frequently put the model in motion, using the fluid body shape to reveal the construction, fabric, and flow of the clothing.

Although all of Avedon’s portraits offer a singular, centralized focus on the subject, an unrelenting attention to detail, and static compositions, he developed the specific style for which he is known around 1969. Among the most important elements of this signature approach was the use of a blank white background, which allowed him to eliminate the potentially distracting elements of a setting and emphasize qualities of posture, gesture, and facial expression. Additionally, he worked primarily with a large-format camera, photographing near enough to his subject that they fill much of the frame, thus heightening the viewer’s awareness of the negative space between the figure and the border. The interplay between figure and void, body and space, solid form and picture-defining edge is critical to the power of Avedon’s images. It is not only composition that makes Avedon’s works so entrancing, but also their intimacy. He creates powerfully descriptive portraits that bring viewers close to his subjects. The ability to see each hair in someone’s eyebrows, the contours of each facial line or wrinkle, or the texture of a sitter’s clothes put the viewer at a distance typically reserved for spouses, lovers, parents, or children. In that private space, we are allowed to linger, slowly absorbing the details that describe someone’s face, their hands, their clothes, their body. For instance, in *Louise Nevelson, sculptress, New York, May 13, 1975*, we can admire the seventy-five-year old’s close-cropped hair, the way her eyes examine us from behind lashes heavily coated in mascara, the subtle sheen of her lip gloss, or the stunning applique on the sleeves of her coat.

Avedon offers viewers the opportunity to study faces without crossing any socially imposed boundaries about staring too long. He encourages viewers to think about the people before them, the lives they have lived, their private personalities and public personas, their struggles, accomplishments, disappointments, and joys.

*Richard Avedon: Relationships* explores two questions. First: What can we learn about Avedon, the sitter, or the relationship between the two when Avedon photographs the same person over an extended period of time or across a sequence of pictures? Second: How do Avedon’s portrait and fashion images shift when he includes multiple people rather than a single person?

***Same Person over Time***

***Portraits***

Avedon had the opportunity to photograph a number of his portrait subjects on more than one occasion. Within *Richard Avedon: Relationships* it is possible to see painter Jasper Johns in 1965 and 1976; novelist Carson McCullers in 1956 and 1958; politician George Wallace in 1963 and 1976; and poet Allen Ginsberg in 1963 and 1970. Perhaps the most dramatic and powerful example of Avedon’s ongoing photographic relationship is that with his friend, collaborator, and subject, Truman Capote.

Capote, American novelist and short story writer, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1925. He became a celebrity at age twenty-four when he published the novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, to critical acclaim and controversy. The semi-autobiographical novel recounts the story of thirteenyear- old Joel Harrison Knox’s search for his father. The coming-of-age story distinguished itself by direct engagement with LGBT themes and the radical proclamation in the book’s last lines that Joel embraced his homosexuality. Avedon first photographed Capote in 1949. Then, in 1959, they collaborated on Avedon’s first book, *Observations*. A collection of Avedon’s portraits, the book includes the likes of vocalist Marian Anderson, artist celebrity Pablo Picasso, and marine scientist and explorer Jacques Cousteau. The book was accompanied by an essay and comments on the photographs by Capote and was designed by Alexey Brodovitch, the legendary art director at *Harper’s Bazaar*.

The next year, Capote and Avedon worked together again. While Capote was in Garden City, Kansas, in 1960 researching the book *In Cold Blood,* the chilling true crime novel describing the sensational quadruple murder of the Clutter family in rural Kansas, Avedon joined him on four separate occasions. The photographer made portraits of the accused killers Perry Smith and Richard “Dick” Hickock, who were awaiting trial for the murders.

In *Truman Capote, New York, October 10, 1955*, the writer was just thirty-one years old. The picture features the young man unclothed, eyes closed, arms back behind his torso, and chin raised. Avedon surrounds Capote with wide margins of empty space, emphasizing his slight frame and setting him apart from the world, casting him as a near-angelic figure. The photographer’s choice of a pose underscores the vulnerability of the young Capote—he is laid bare for our scrutiny and delectation.

Avedon’s last portrait of Capote was taken in 1974 when the writer was fifty. The lithe sensuality of the earlier image is gone. Avedon now focuses on Capote’s head—which fills much of the frame—off center and sitting atop a dark shirt, jacket, and bowtie. Capote looks out from puffy eyes, his thinning hair retreating from his spotted forehead. A large welt on his head and a raised sore on his lower lip make you wonder: “What has happened here?” The mind that produced some of America’s most acclaimed writings of the twentieth century is there, but instead, we see the face, with its age and damage. The fluid motion and grace of the younger man’s body have been replaced by a set jaw and an intractable stare. Each of these portraits of Capote is enriched by the other, and by knowing that Avedon was not just Capote’s photographer, but his friend and collaborator.

***Fashion***

There were many models with whom Avedon worked extensively. Dovima, China Machado, Suzy Parker, Jean Shrimpton, Penelope Tree, Twiggy, and Veruschka all appear in many of Avedon’s celebrated fashion photographs. Models often act as muses to photographers and Avedon derived inspiration from the women with whom he worked. For instance, Dovima and Avedon had a unique kinship that allowed them to make spectacular photographs, such as the iconic *Dovima with elephants, evening dress by Dior, Cirque d’Hiver, Paris, August 1955*. Dovima described it this way: “We became like mental Siamese twins, with me knowing what he wanted before he explained it. He asked me to do extraordinary things, but I always knew I was going to be part of a great picture.”

Suites of images featuring Penelope Tree or Jean Shrimpton reveal how Avedon might work with the particular qualities of a model’s face or physique, and a group of three photographs of Dorian Leigh from 1949 demonstrates how Avedon worked with her to bring out a range of characters, transforming her with different settings and clothing to embody distinctly different roles. In *Dorian Leigh, coat by Dior, Avenue Montaigne, Paris, August 1949*, the model is swathed by the fur collar and voluminous sleeves of her coat. She sits on the seat of a cabriolet with a hat box, a bouquet of roses, and a puppy nestled alongside her. Leigh looks down to her lit cigarette, held in a gloved hand, as smoke swirls before her. Her soft bangs, gentle expression, and distracted attention suggest innocence and approachability, despite her elegance and beauty.

In contrast, Leigh presents a formidable and haughty figure in *Dorian Leigh, evening dress by Piguet, Helena Rubinstein’s apartment, Île Saint-Louis, Paris, August 1949.* Avedon presents Leigh in profile, standing before a mirror, lost in consideration. Hands on hips; hair, makeup, and jewelry all perfectly arranged; and posed in a setting that asserts high class, refinement, and style. Leigh here becomes a style icon, whose spectacular, sculptural dress and confident self-presentation make her distinctive.

Leigh again transforms before Avedon’s lens in *Dorian Leigh, Schiaparelli rhinestones, Pré-Catelan, Paris, August 1949*, in which we find ourselves standing alongside her at a crowded evening event—a gala, a fancy dinner, or perhaps a high-style wedding. Avedon depicts her dark hair elegantly adorned with sparkling jewels. With her hand resting on the lapel of her appreciatively smiling date, we see her in the midst of a real, open-mouthed laugh. This Dorian Leigh is expressive, engaged in a social life, engrossed in an experience, and deeply connected to her companion.

Avedon was so talented at creating these tableaux, with just the right balance of details and ambiguity, lighting and environment, action and pose, that the difference between these “scenes” is clear and distinct. His rapport with Leigh, and her talent at realizing his various ideas, allows them to produce images that continue to appeal to audiences seventy years later.

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***\* Excerpt from the text in the catalogue Skira***