



About face

Albert Watson has been voted one of the 20 most influential photographers of all time. On the eve of a major retrospective in his native Scotland, he tells the stories behind the shots to **David Usborne**

Naomi
Campbell, 1989

Over the 30-plus years that Albert Watson has been wielding his camera, he has heard variations on the same somewhat tiresome theme – that he may be the best little-known photographer in the world. But that dissonance between gigantic commercial success and relative popular obscurity is starting to change.

Quite likely, you still haven't heard of Watson, a Scot who left for the US in 1970, settling first in Los Angeles before moving to Manhattan where he remains today. But for sure you will have seen his work. He has shot no fewer than 650 television commercials and delivered countless covers to magazines such as *Vogue* and *Rolling Stone*. He does film posters too, most recently for *The Da Vinci Code*. Recently, you could have counted six Watson images on advertising billboards around Times Square.

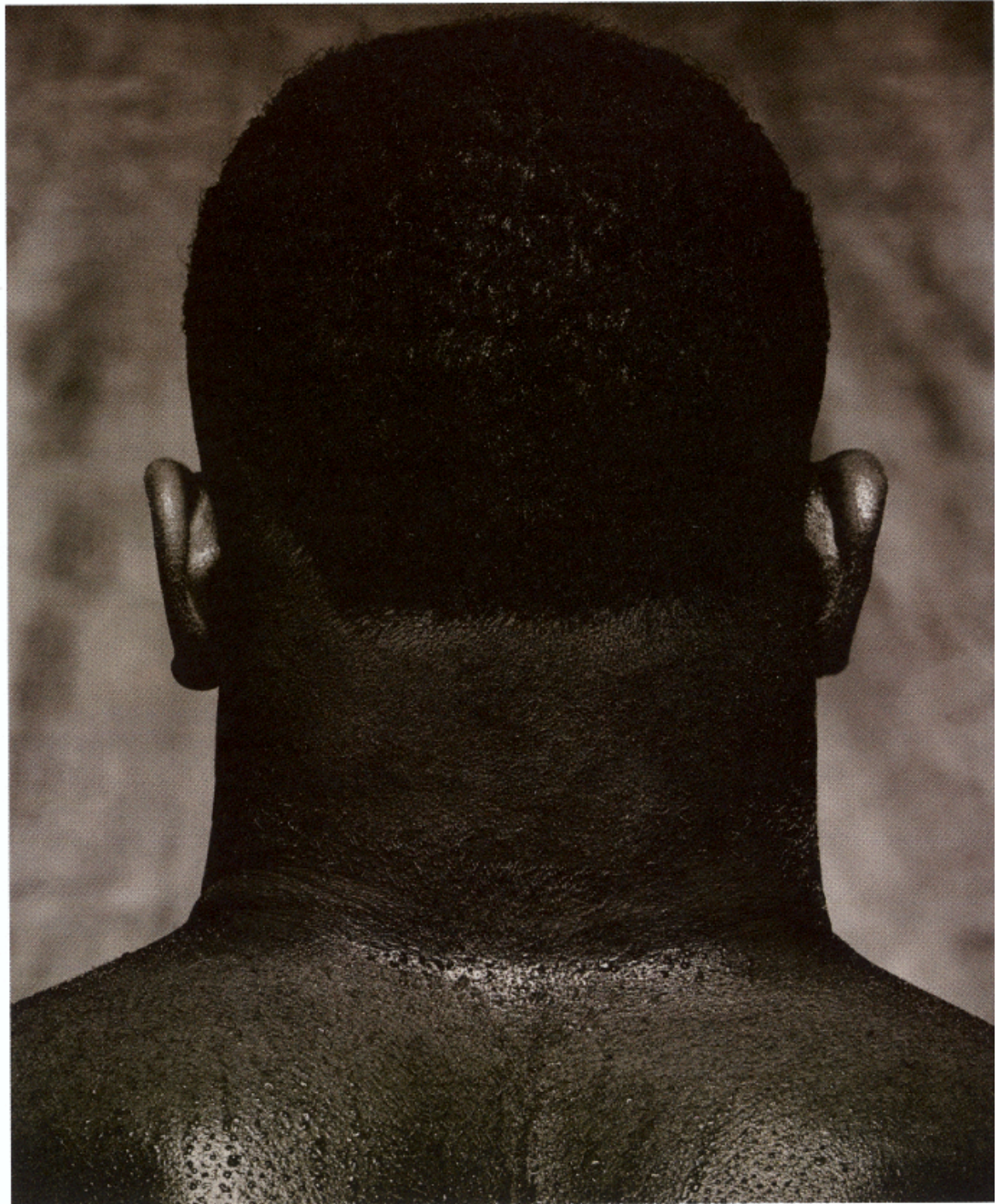
Thinking about his work as a body of art, rather than just a series of commissions, came to him relatively late in life. Finally in 1994, he got around to assembling enough of his images in one place to produce a book. It was called *Cyclops* – on account of Watson being blind in one eye – and suddenly the nature of his existence changed: he was seeking not just fees, but also artistic appreciation.

Exhibiting his pictures in museums was the next natural step, but even that was a long time coming. Eventually, two years ago, an enormous collection of Watson photographs appeared at the Museum of Modern Art in Milan before being transferred to Vienna. This August, however, the roadshow arrives in a place with far greater personal significance: his work is to get his first outing ever in his own Scotland.

Sitting in a pristinely neat studio inside the squat brick building that serves both as his headquarters and his home in Manhattan's West Village, Watson, now 63, professes to feeling great excitement about the exhibition, which will open in the City Arts Centre in Edinburgh to coincide with the Edinburgh Festival. The show promises to be monumental – 220 pictures, most of them 8 x 6ft, and all possessing the same vivid and graphic quality of light and detail that is a Watson trademark.

Known in industry circles for years primarily as a fashion and celebrity photographer, →

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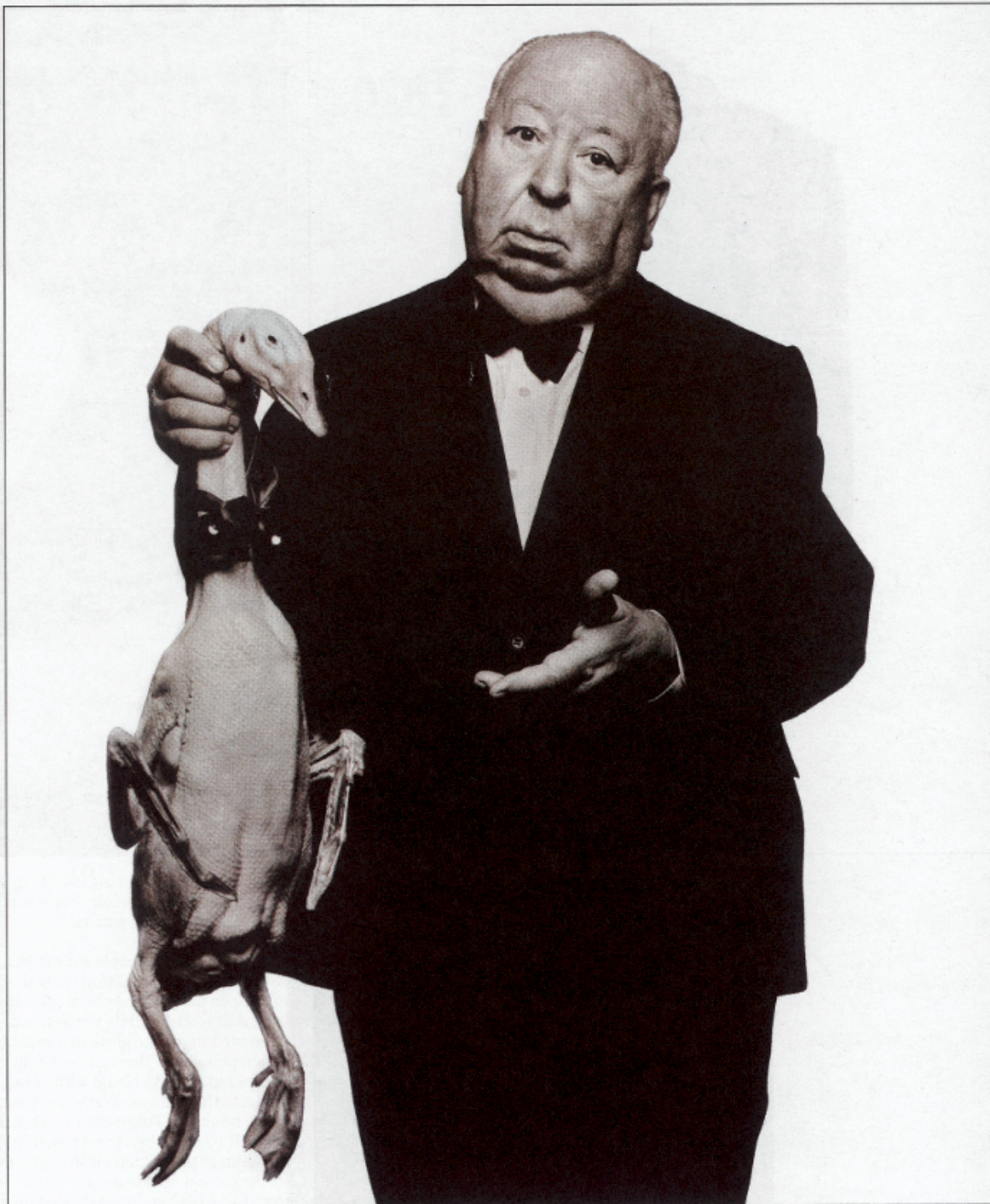
Watson is actually much more than that and by embarking on books and exhibitions he has at last been able to show off his versatility. His second book, *Maroc*, was a chance to strut his skill both at still-life photography and landscapes, as will be his next book, *Shot in Vegas*, due out in November.

"With the publication of *Cyclops*, finally people were able to see everything together," Watson explains. "The people I did still life for didn't know I did fashion and the fashion people didn't know I did still life."

Certainly, the celebrity shots will take a large share of the exhibition in Edinburgh, if only because they are the ones that draw the most punters. It hardly surprised him that the Arts Centre insisted, against his wishes in fact, on using an iconic 1992 photograph of Mick Jagger, his face disguised by the superimposition over his face of the face of a leopard, for the massive banner it plans to hang outside its building. Look out too for Watson's portraits of Kate Moss, posing naked almost like a mermaid, and the back of boxer Mike Tyson's neck, and for the cut-up series of images of Jack Nicholson smoking. You may also recognise the famous shot of Alfred Hitchcock holding a dead goose, taken all the way back in 1973.

Another side benefit of the books and exhibitions has been the opportunity for Watson to show off images he considers important that were commissioned by magazines but actually never saw the light of day. That was the case, for instance, with the Nicholson piece, originally commissioned by *Rolling Stone* but never used. "There is a lot of the material that came out that way that had never been seen and was just sitting in massive files that we still have," says Watson.

A quite different story lies behind the Jagger portrait, a double exposure achieved when Watson simply drew the outline of the leopard's face on his lens before fitting the face of the rock star within it. One day after he submitted it to a delighted Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone*, Jagger called and asked that he get it back because he wanted to use it for an album cover. Watson replied that it was too late, although he did briefly try to persuade Wenner to use an alternative shot of Jagger sitting in a Corvette →



'Jagger was very angry with me for a while over the leopard shot, but it was OK - we made up'



Clockwise from top left: Elvis Presley's gold lamé suit, 1993; Kate Moss, 1993; Tupac Shakur, 1991

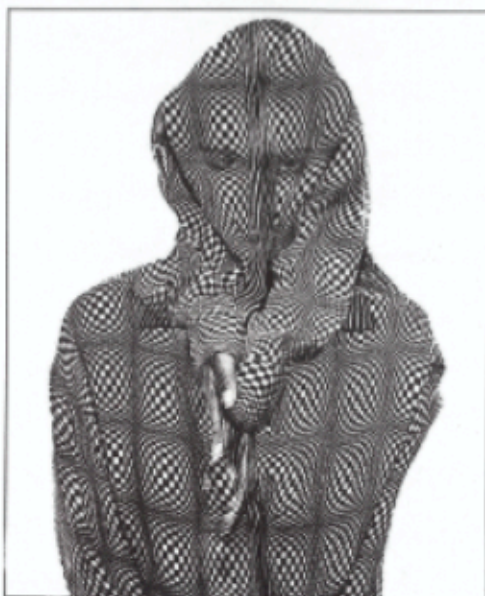
in the company of the big cat. "Jagger was very angry with me for a while, but it was OK, we kind of made up," he recalls.

Aide from famous people and models, Watson also had a long fascination with artifacts tied to famous people. They have included the gold lamé suit worn by Elvis Presley, and, perhaps most strikingly, the glove of Tutankhamun. When people see these, it is not the photographs they should admire but the artifacts themselves, Watson insists. "None of the books on Tutankhamun shows that glove. It took me two years to get into the museum to photograph it in Cairo. I was driven by the person who wore that glove — the fact that it was his hand that slipped into it. In all these, it's the people behind the clothing who are interesting."

Ask Watson to what he attributes his success (the photography industry's bible *Photo District News* magazine named him one of the 20 most influential photographers of all time) and he →

'It took me two years to get into the museum in Cairo to photograph Tutankhamun's glove'

ALBERT WATSON



Clockwise from top left: David Bowie, 1996; Tutankhamun's glove, 1990; model Gabrielle Reece, 1989

instantly looks back to his Scottish roots. He learned patience from his father, while his mother imbued him with the social skills to interact with his subjects, including offering everyone who walks in the door "a cup of tea, whether they are a reporter or Clint Eastwood". He also cites the strict discipline of his art courses, first in graphic design in Dundee and then film at the Royal College of Art.

"Discipline was one of the main things. They were heavy on craft and technique in what you did and the creative would follow. It wasn't like it is nowadays, none of this 'go find yourself'."

It took Watson so long to focus on books and museum shows – after Edinburgh his exhibition will also travel to Antwerp and then Tokyo and Berlin – for the simple reason that before he was just too busy. "We worked the whole time," he says. "I was somebody that was passionate about the work and about producing images. Once the images were produced it was a *fait accompli* for me, it was done. And people would say, 'Well, don't you want to show it all?' and I would say, 'Oh yeah, sometime.'"

With the Edinburgh show just around the corner, it would seem that "sometime" has finally arrived.

Frozen is at City Art Centre, Market Street, Edinburgh, from 29 July to 22 October (0131-529 399; www.cac.org.uk)