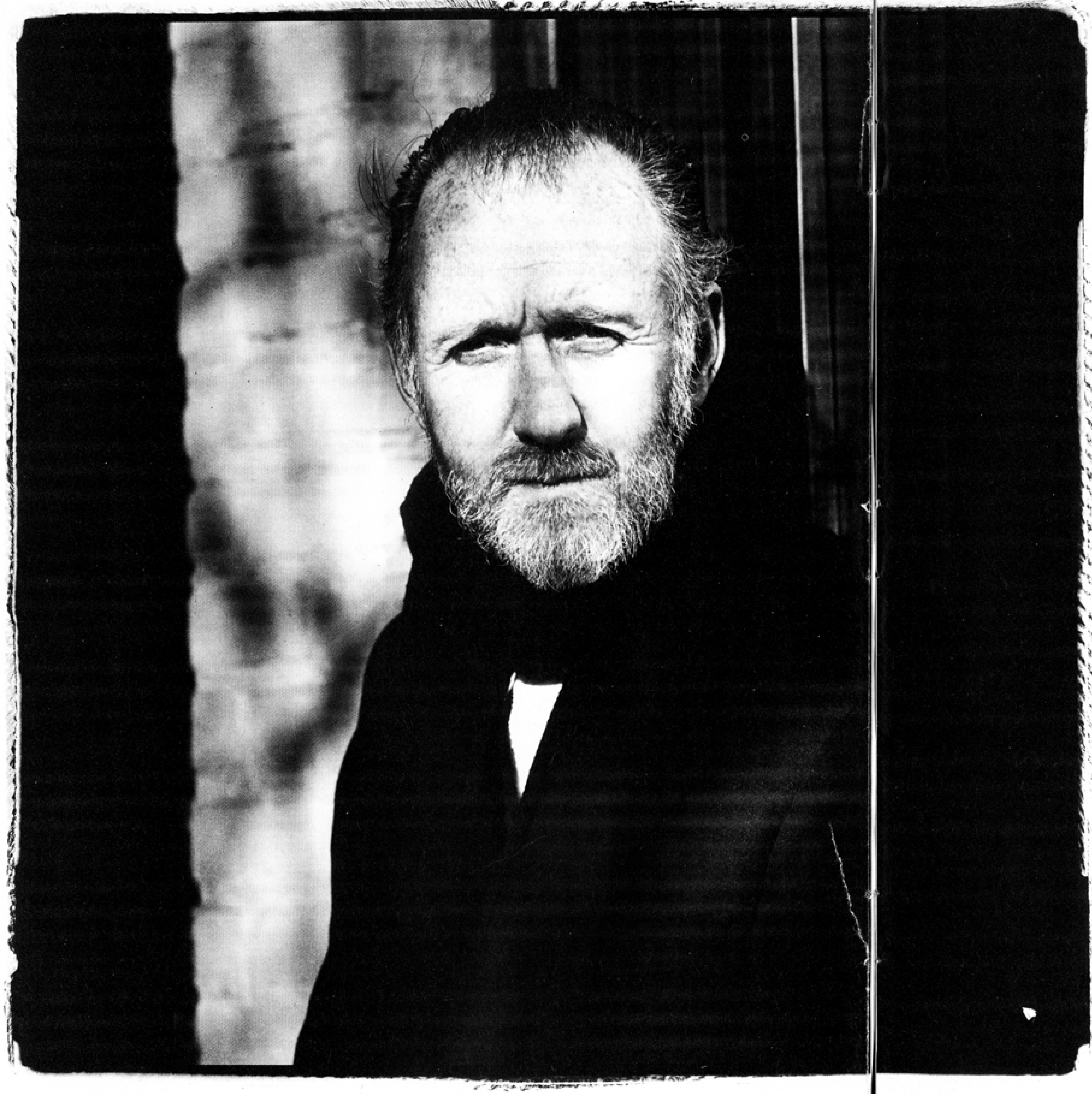


JOSEPH MONTEZINOS

Watson the inscrutable: You can view his work without knowing what he's like.

The Great Unknown

How good is Albert Watson? He's a master, yet nobody seems to realize it. That's how good.

By David Roberts

"Americans are not into fashion," says Albert Watson. "They never have been. They're into Ralph Lauren. What they like is tradition—1920s and 1930s aristocratic English clothes."

That pithy summation is all the more striking in view of its source—for Albert Watson is one of the best and most successful fashion photographers working in America. A Scot from Edinburgh (still a British citizen), he has lived in the United States for 18 years, in Manhattan for 12. His work is so reliably first-rate, his versatility so effortless, that Watson stands in a small elite of fashion photographers who are constantly and internationally sought after. Last year his billings added up to $1.5 million. He is in the process of moving into a stunning Greenwich Village studio of his own design—26,000 square feet, four stories, and, on a good night, simultaneous views of the Empire State Building, the World Trade Towers, and the rising moon.

Surrounded daily by beautiful women, many of them radically undressed, Watson remains serenely paired with the wife he married 27 years ago. He is a good-looking man, thin and fit at 45 (he neither smokes nor drinks), radiating calm and confidence. In a field dominated by photographers with rock-star egos, Watson preserves an old-fashioned civility and modesty.

The man looks, at first meeting, like an advertisement for self-fulfillment. Yet something seems to nag at this master photographer, tingeing his gentility with a verbal bite—the remnant, one suspects, of a lingering bitterness he has all but tamed. And if this faint malaise

Paradoxically, it is Watson's skill—his very versatility—that has made him less known than he ought to be.

hovers about any single cause, it may be the central paradox of his success: that his very versatility has rendered him less well known than he ought to be. Ironically, Watson's skill has made him one of the most underrated professional photographers in the world.

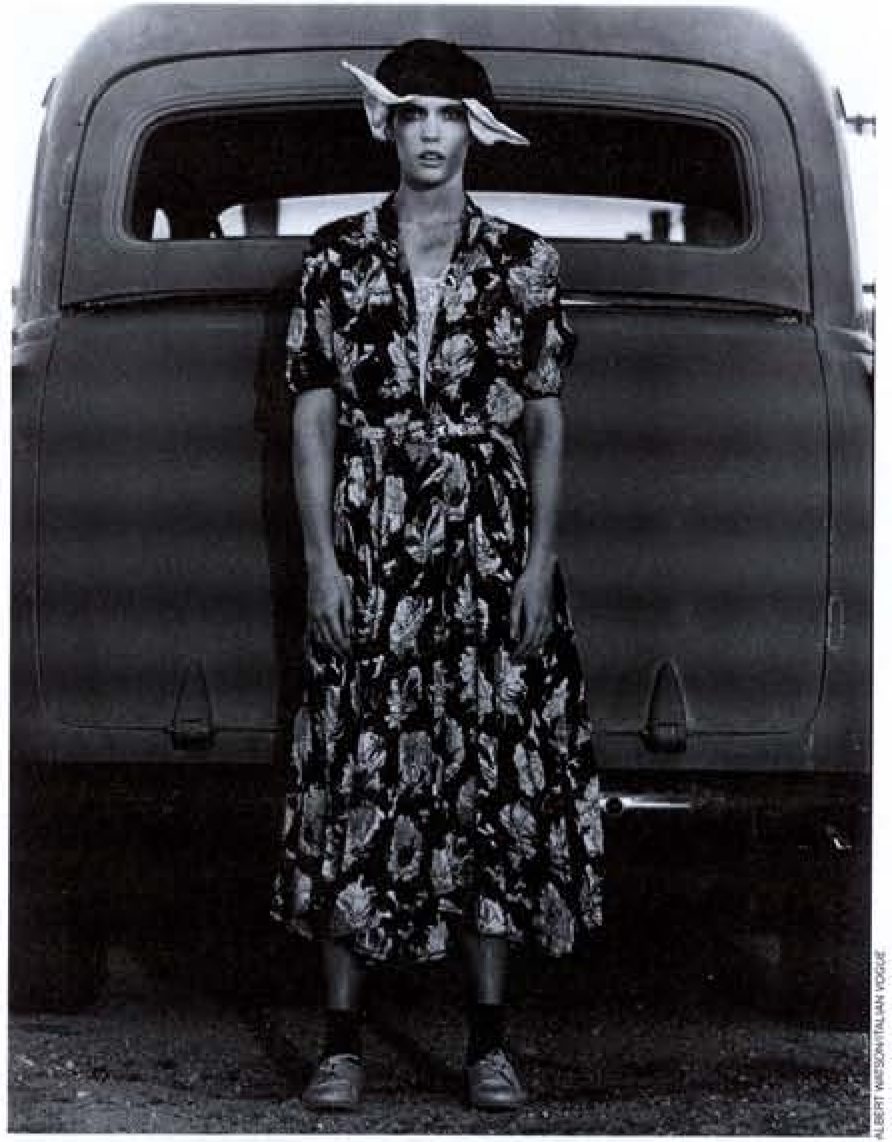
How hard is it to categorize Albert Watson's photography? Before I met him, I sat one afternoon in a room with four sophisticated photography buffs and asked them to define the Albert Watson look. Each had a clear idea of what the essence of that look amounted to, but there was such a divergence of opinion that the five of us were soon reduced to blithering.

To understand Watson and his photography, one must understand that chameleon quality. Watson is the quintessential craftsman, a photographer who manages to meet his own visual demands while also satisfying his clients. But what emerges from his work is not an idiosyncratic persona—you cannot look at a Watson fashion shot, as you could a Bruce Weber or an Arthur Elgort shot, and come away with a well-defined notion of what the man behind the camera is like.

One senses that Watson has a clearer idea of his identity than his public does. Yet he also takes pride in that chameleon versatility, which derives in part from the intense energy he brings to everything he does. "If I have a problem," he admits, "it's being a workaholic. It's not so healthy. In the end, the ability to relax helps your work immensely." Has he learned that ability yet? His answer is a telltale oxymoron: "I'm working on it all the time."

Recently I watched Watson in action as he shot a magazine ad for Clairol. The product being celebrated was Frost & Tip, a highlighting kit for women. There was a typical sense of urgency about the scene—and with good reason: Some $85,000 to $100,000 was changing hands just to ensure that a persuasive image of Frost & Tip's glories might enter the consciousness of America's legions of mall-crawling consumers.

Milling about Watson's roomy studio, under the nonstop blare of tapes ranging from reggae to Bach, were an executive quartet from Clairol; a five-person "creative team" from D.D.B. Needham, the agency that had designed the ad; two models to be featured in the photo; stylists for makeup, hair, and wardrobe (the last equipped with at least one assistant); a freelance stylist; Watson's two assistants; and the photographer himself, squinting into the viewfinder of his tripod-mounted Hasselblad.



ALBERT WATSON/ITALIAN VOGUE

The long and short of it: Watson shot two different looks with like-minded attention to detail. His FSA-esque story on flea-market fashion (left) was shot near Barstow, California, in 1985; his take on more modern girls (right) was done last year in Naples, Italy. Overleaf, left: On Crete to do a story about satin clothes, Watson made a wonderfully textured black-and-white shot by carefully combining sun, strobe, and luminescent clouds. Overleaf, right: He decided that a feature on men's watches would "communicate better" if the watches were worn by women.

In Watson's portrait of Andy Warhol, the artist wears weird glasses that mirror his fragmented genius.

The shot called for a woman's face in profile, her lusciously frosted tresses being caressed by a lover's hand. (The latter role belonged to a 38-year-old hand model named Laurence White.) For hours, Watson "covered" the shot that the Needham gang wanted—he photographed it the way they'd designed it. But then he began to fool around with the pose. He put White's other hand around the neck of his striking partner, Ford model Debra Chevalier; he plopped her hand on White's shoulder; at last he brought White's own rugged profile into the picture, promoting the hand model to the privilege of an on-camera kiss of Chevalier's brow.

Despite a constant friendly badinage among the experts on hand, the tension was palpable. The hair stylist fussed with his comb while the wardrobe stylist tugged at White's sleeve, and I eavesdropped on a disembodied litany of worries:

"It's just that I don't know what those sausages are doing in her hair."

"Going in, Albert ... Sixteen point seven [a spotmeter reading]."

"I don't think you need a release for hands."

"There's still a hole there as big as the Holland Tunnel."

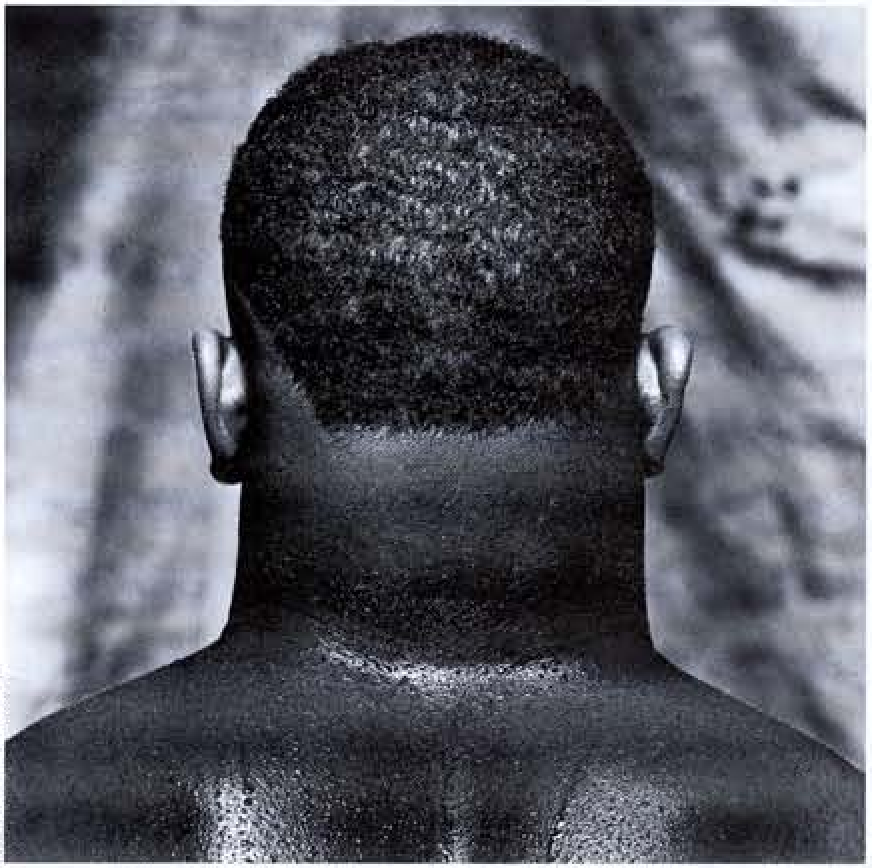
"That nose is getting awfully shiny."

"Albert, when we present it to management, will you be there?"

At the still center of this vortex of anxiety, Watson was the portrait of calm, dressed, as is his habit, in a white shirt, buttoned to the neck with no tie, black trousers, and black shoes. His assistants had on identical costumes, prompting me to wonder whether it was the Watson Inc. uniform of the day or a mute testimonial to the power of the man's sartorial example. As he shot, pondered, and molded the models, Watson delivered a soothing patter: "Smile. A little bit of energy in the lips. Laurence, it's nice when your lips go in there and you're smiling. Debbie, more profile—head up a little. Stay there. You're almost finished."

Later, after the mob had dispersed, I was struck by Watson's sublime assurance that he had produced not only an exceptional photo, but one that would please all factions. He hadn't been much impressed by the design sketch, but, as he put it, "I shoot to the layout and get it over with, rather than argue about the validity of the drawing. Then once I've covered it as well as I possibly can, I can go to what I consider the right way to solve their problem."

A gig like the Clairol shoot represents Watson's work at its most rigid and prescribed. On the other end of the spectrum lie some of the startling images he has produced for European magazines. (Watson tends to shoot advertising work for American clients while focusing his editorial efforts on European magazines, which, he believes, allow photographers greater creativity than do their American counterparts.) For Italian *Vogue* he followed a pair of slinky models around Vanessa Bell's English country house, scripting a lyrical essay in Bloomsbury style and sensuality. For the same magazine, he limned "Cinderella" with candlelight, strobes, and daylight in a Re-



ALBERT WATSON/ROLLING STONE

ALBERT WATSON/MANNEN VOGUE

Left: Andy Warhol looking tough. Above right: Boxer Mike Tyson. Overleaf: For a story on American fashion, Watson took four models on a drive across Texas. Shooting in a motel room, he made this intricately composed picture look haphazard by using a Nikon F2 with a 35mm lens in natural light.

naissance villa. Watson, in fact, is a virtuoso of color who can talk for hours about the technical subtleties of rendering distinctly the seven shades of purple in a single dress. As he bluntly puts it, "Color is harder than black and white."

Some of his best work has been wrung from assignments in which he must "sell" objects—jewelry, watches, toiletries, and the like. A series for Italian *Harper's Bazaar,* meant to illustrate men's accessories, dazzles with wit and subliminal shock: A beautiful woman's cheeks and chin are lathered up, as she holds her razor poised; a model's painted lips, laid sideways, leap out in surreal magnification through a bottle of eau de toilette. In another series, snakes writhe amid snakeskin shoes and snakelike fabrics. For German *Vogue,* seminudes in sepia tones lounge asleep with watches binding their wrists.

In all these images the technical excellence is so routine that the viewer forgets to notice it; what one feels instead is a happy mixture of amusement and desire. Watson's editorial work teases constantly at the borders of fetishism and S & M (a woman holds an open safety pin in her teeth; an ear, painted silver, is pierced with 11 silver rings; a topless nymphet reclines, shiny black boots held before her breasts). The freedom Watson finds in European markets is salient: There has not been much work this daring in recent American magazines.

In many of Watson's photographs a lively humor comes to the fore. Models demonstrating the Valentino collection stroll in evening gowns through a pastoral bric-a-brac of fallen Greek columns, or linger beside 30-foot-tall bowling pins. Andy Warhol wears weird spectacles that mirror his fragmented genius. There are times when you could swear that Watson, in his versatility, is parodying other photographers. A portfolio for *Stern—louche* black and whites of tough teens making out in gangster autos—appears to be a takeoff on Bruce Weber. Watson denies such an idea with mild irritation. In fact, he insists he doesn't know what I mean when I talk about irony in his pictures.

Previous pages: A master manipulator of color, Watson considers pastels hardest to capture. He tested himself to the limit with these shots for Italian Vogue, *which show the range of his palette. Left: For British* Vogue, *Watson created this 1985 beauty shot with warming filters and a Hasselblad with a 250mm lens.*

ALBERT WATSON/ITALIAN VOGUE

Watson is unimpressed by reputations based on a specialized look—from Deborah Turbeville's to Ansel Adams's.

The man's pride in his formal skill is plain, however. It's as if he could look at another master's work, size up the "tricks" that give it its identity, and say (to himself, never aloud), "Oh, I could do that if I wanted." He seems unimpressed by reputations based on a specialized look. Of Deborah Turbeville, for instance, he remarks, "It's graininess that gives her her stamp"; he can number on two fingers the photos by Ansel Adams he finds outstanding.

Watson originally wanted to be an art teacher. That was back in Edinburgh, where he grew up, and where he met his wife, Elizabeth, in kindergarten. They were married when he was 18, and today they are very much the close, long-married couple, the sort who finish each other's sentences and share opinions of movies they've seen. (Elizabeth now runs her own agency for hair and makeup stylists, some of whom work for her husband.)

Despite his inclinations toward art, Watson's first jobs were scientific: He did computer work in the British Air Ministry. Later he spent a year as a taster and chemical tester in a chocolate factory. The couple moved to the United States in 1970 not to pursue his ambitions, but because Elizabeth got a primary-school teaching job in Los Angeles. By then Albert had gone to an art college in Dundee, where he specialized in graphic design. One day a week he studied photography in a course in which all the students shared a single Pentax Spotmatic ("We treated it with awe," Watson recalls). Subsequently, at the Royal College of Art in London, he studied film and television, with photography a very ancillary third subject.

In Los Angeles Albert was unabashedly Elizabeth's dependent. Those years of scraping by in the 1960s and early 1970s make Watson's present affluence all the more delightful to him. As he puts it, "I still think it's luxurious to go out to a diner and have breakfast."

For about a decade, photography was, in effect, Watson's hobby, albeit a serious one. One day in 1974 a friend in L.A. wangled him an introduction to an assistant art director at Max Factor. The man looked at Watson's photos, only one or two of which were pictures of women, and made an interesting offer. He would book a model for two hours and take a look at what Watson could produce from the session.

Watson met the model and renegotiated her two hours into a full day, with the promise of free chromes for her portfolio. She had to do her own makeup

ALBERT WATSON/FRENCH VOGUE

Obvious ideas, obviously well done: Watson used a live prairie snake for a feature on snakeskin shoes (left) and a miniature fishbowl and goldfish to give scale to a take on waterproof watches (right).

"Technique is everything, and it's nothing. Graphics can override the human element in a photograph."

ALBERT WATSON

Shooting for himself at the Calgary Stampede, Watson's viewpoint was personal, reportorial, and original.

day-to-day work. His black-and-white photos from the 1978 Calgary Stampede (one of the big-time rodeos) have a brooding power: sunlight, dust, leather, and sweat conspiring in a somber lyricism. These pictures often frame Indians or cowboys from the back, heightening their mysterious anonymity; closeup shots sacrifice literal coherence to a piquancy of texture. A kindred marriage of elegance and mystification dignifies Watson's pictures of padlocks in the Forbidden City of Beijing, shot in 1979.

Both projects forced Watson to confront technical problems he was unused to. In fashion, he shoots almost everything with a tripod, whereas the Calgary photos were done with a handheld Hasselblad. In Beijing, where he had gone to do a job for Bloomingdale's, Watson stayed on, working long hours without a guide, to shoot the padlocks. He photographed 88 different locks in two days—"every one I could find," he says. Such noncommercial work—Canadian rodeo, Chinese padlocks, American nudes—will loom large in a comprehensive book Watson is putting together, to be finished by the end of 1988. Strong as they are, however, these images are unlikely to shift the prevailing notion of what kind of thing it is that Albert Watson does best.

The photographer is not simply proud of the technical proficiency of his work; he sees such craftsmanship as a sine qua non linking art as diverse as Avedon's portraits from the American West, Penn's platinum prints, Van Gogh's brushstrokes, and even the finish in a Warhol silkscreen. Having seen too many avant-garde photo shows full of sloppily printed pictures, he seethes: "If a photo is scratched to pieces, and that's part of the art statement, that's fine. But if there's a hair in the picture that looks like it's been retouched by a three-year-old child—I'm not quite sure what the justification is."

Watson's four years of graduate study gave him the firmest possible schooling in graphic design. The department-store catalogs were, he thinks, superb "on-the-job training" in the basics of fabric and clothing design—and, he adds, "most fashion photographers don't know anything about fashion."

Yet Watson can say, "Technique is everything, and it's nothing. If I get really tired, I always fall back on compositional tricks to solve a problem. You can use the rectangle of the camera as a basis for an overly structured photograph. The graphics can override the human element."

In terms of mere worldly success, it would be hard for life to get much better than it currently is for Albert Watson. In terms of the permanence of his work, all the man's formidable drive and ambition seem bent toward clearing a space for himself in the wilderness of lasting art. Already famous in fashion and photography circles, he may soon become a household name in the larger world, along with Avedon and Penn.

As he refines his vision, Watson strives to liberate himself from his own instincts toward control (the canon of Avedon) and perfectionism (Penn's singular pursuit). The effort, he senses, entails a battle against the very strengths of his graphic and scientific training, a deliberate search for the spontaneous and playful.

While I was in his studio, a visiting magazine editor leafed through Watson's "books"—bound portfolios of tear sheets and cover shots. Looking up, he asked, "Do you allow for accidents?"

"Of course," answered Watson, "although sometimes it's hard to make them happen." ■