

ALBERT WATSON

THE PHOTOGRAPHY MONTHLY INTERVIEW

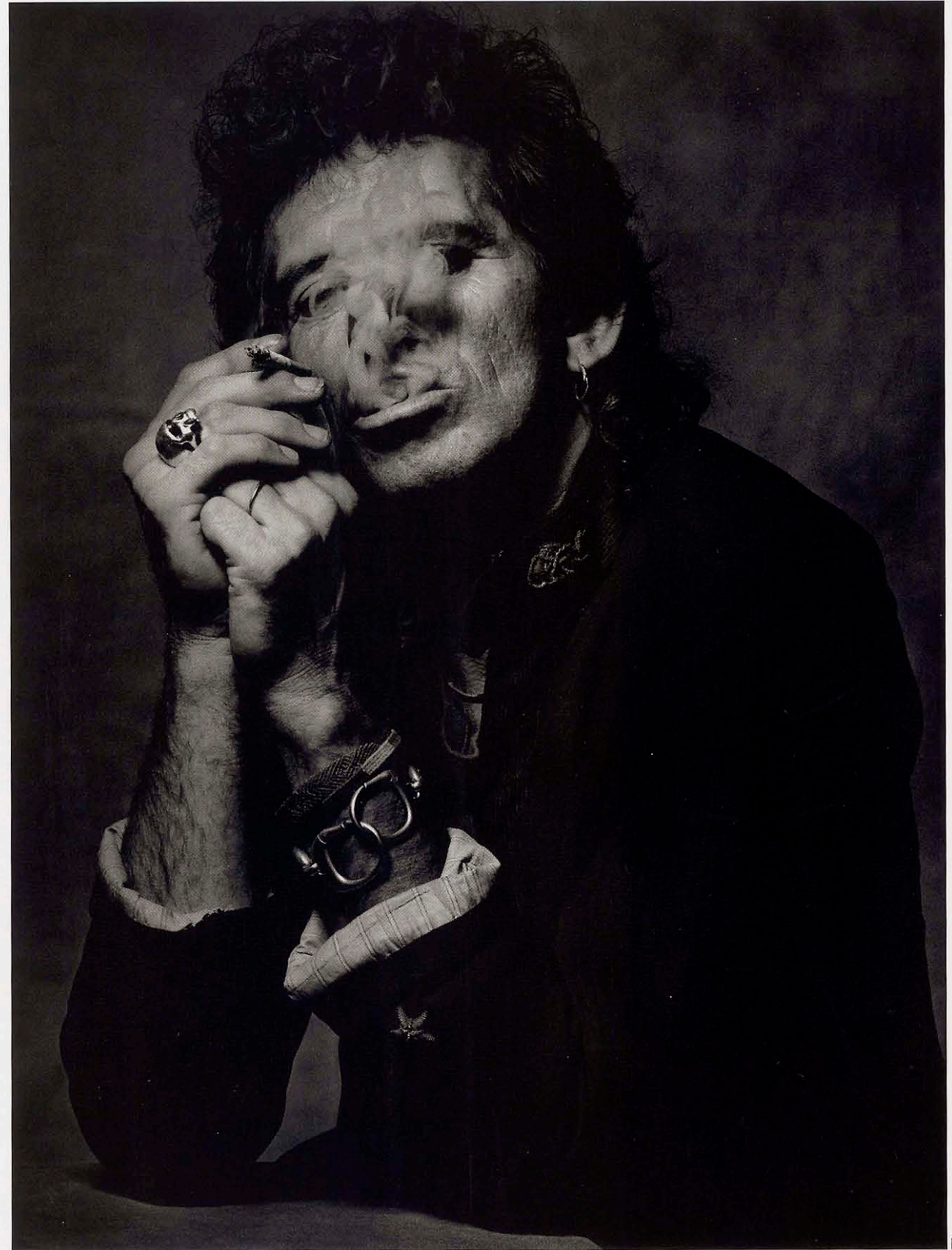
ALBERT WATSON

● Albert Watson is a multi-faceted photographer who has built a huge reputation in a number of different fields. Equally well respected as a fashion photographer, portraitist, film director and producer of books, he built his career in the US and now runs companies that employ 40 people. The intensity of his output and his legendary love of hard work shows no signs of abating, and alongside his commercial projects he still finds time for monumental book projects that satisfy his yearning to leave behind a tangible, and very personal, record of his considerable photographic talent.

- 1942 Born in Edinburgh, the son of a boxer and a physical education teacher. He was brought up in Penicuik and educated at the Rudolph Steiner School in Edinburgh, followed by the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee and the Royal College of Art in London
- 1970 Settled in Los Angeles with his wife, who had been offered a job as a teacher there
- 1971 Decided to take up a photographic career. Opened a studio in Los Angeles
- 1974 Opened partner studio in New York to be more in touch with European magazine market
- 1975 Won a Grammy Award for the best design for an LP cover
- 1976 Closed Los Angeles studio. Began his long association with *Rolling Stone* magazine
- 1983 Won an ANDY Award as the best advertising photographer of the year
- 1986 Named the official photographer for the wedding of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson
- 1994 The self-published book *Cyclops* was launched to critical acclaim
- 1995 Awarded an honorary degree by the University of Dundee
- 1997 Undertook his first major campaign in the role of director of commercials (for International Paper)
- 1998 Published *Maroc*, the result of a commission from Sidi Mohammed, the Crown Prince of Morocco
- 2003 Published the book *Shot in Las Vegas*
- 2003 Made a special trip from New York to the UK to receive an honorary FRPS from the Royal Photographic Society

He's the photographer's photographer, a hugely respected master of his craft who is impossible to pigeonhole. Whether he's creating some of the most iconic celebrity portraits of his generation, embellishing his reputation as one of the world's top fashion photographers, shooting cars or directing commercials or pop videos, Albert Watson is right up there with the best, sticking to a schedule that would flatten far younger men and constantly travelling the world in search of a fresh challenge. In a major *Photography Monthly* exclusive, Terry Hope catches up with him on a fleeting visit to London, and pins him down long enough to find out about his career to date, his secrets of success and his plans for the future

Keith Richards, NYC. August 1988

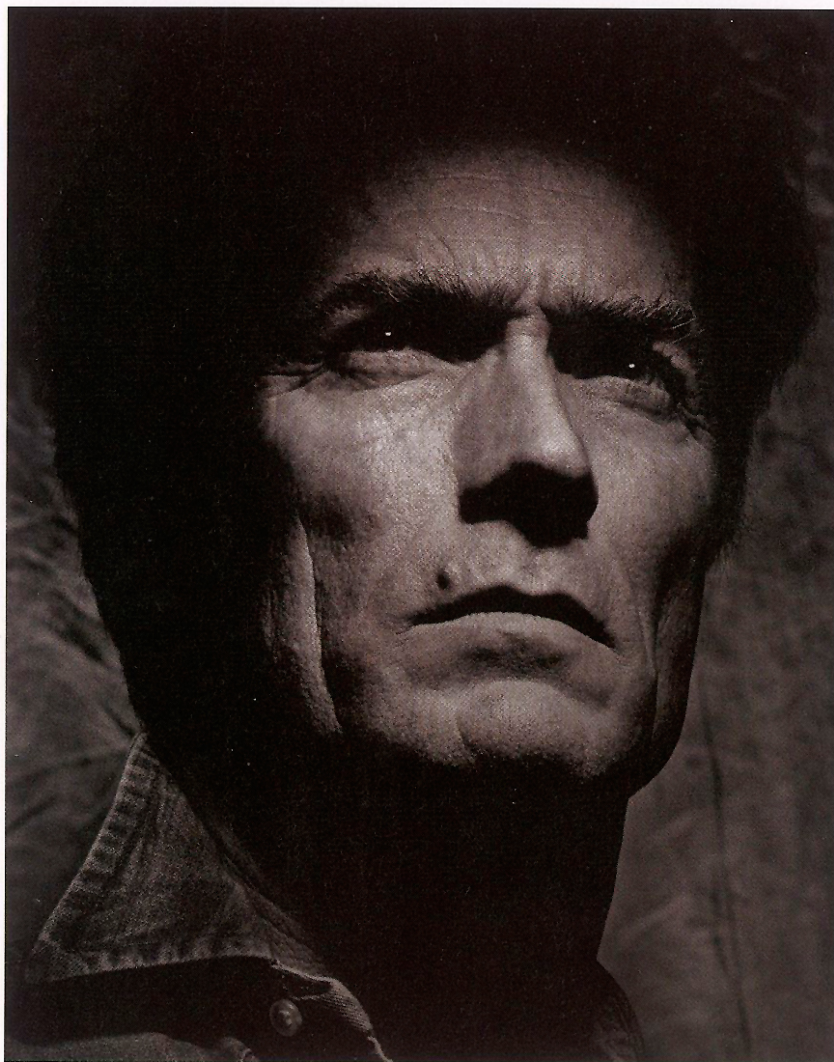


INTERVIEW ALBERT WATSON "It sounds terribly pretentious, but there

THE hotel is so exclusive you would hardly know it's there, tucked away on the edge of London's Covent Garden and serving as a sea of tranquillity amongst all the bustle outside. Albert Watson, legendary lover of punishing schedules and endless hard work, has earned the temporary relaxation that such a place can offer. True to form, he's arrived in town hotfoot from an assignment in Morocco, and is heading back there after a stay of barely a few days to work on some landscapes for a film project. He has a big lecture to deliver at the National Portrait Gallery before he goes, and a pile of work awaiting him at his studio when he finally makes it back to the Big Apple.

Despite the fact his body clock could be telling him it's any time of day or night, and that his schedule is already running late by the time I arrive, Watson exudes calm and a demeanour that belies his status as one of the world's most revered photographers. There's no hint of frustration at the thought of having to give yet another interview, nor a meanness with time: we start late and so we finish late, and Watson (his Scottish accent still clearly in evidence after more than 30 years of working in the United States) is happy to talk about every aspect of his work and his enduring love of photography.

To the important things first, however. Watson invites me to take a coffee with him, and only when this is poured and steaming happily away in the best hotel china can we get down to business.



Clint Eastwood, NYC. May 1985

● **TERRY HOPE:** Your career has been built in the US, and your reputation established there. What led you to go to that country in the first place?

● **ALBERT WATSON:** My wife Elizabeth, who had already been a teacher for six years, was offered an exchange post in Los Angeles in 1970. It wasn't my first taste of the US: between my studies at the Dundee College of Art and the Royal College of Art I won a scholarship from IBM for the summer of '66, and that involved me going to Aspen in Colorado for a design conference and travelling around America.

When I entered America the second time I was listed as my wife's dependant, which I was, because I didn't have a job. By the following year, however, I had

pretty much decided that the first part of my life should be as a photographer.

● **What led you to take up a career as a photographer?**

It sounds terribly pretentious – and I'd kill you if you quoted me as saying this without labelling it as being pretentious – but there was something about that first time I picked up a camera. It just felt totally natural, like an extension of the body – I was comfortable with it in the way that you might be with a car that you had been driving for 15 years.

And there was something in the whole concept of photography itself – the eye, the brain and the connection with seeing something, recording it and laying it down, the freezing and stopping of time. All these things that one says

about photography came true to me in a flash. Especially in the beginning, it was like I couldn't put the camera down.

In the early days, what frustrated me was the difference in what I saw and how it was recorded. I'd look at the film and think 'hang on a minute, that's not what I saw. And yet here it is on the film. How did that happen?' The thing to sort out in photography is exactly that, to visualise what you're going to get.

● **Did you just teach yourself photography through experience?**

I read books and looked at a lot of pictures, probably millions of them. I also shot a lot of film: I've got more than eight and a half million exposures on file at the moment, many of which are from my early days.

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Christy Turlington, NYC. 6 February 1990

I don't shoot anything like the number of exposures on a job now that I did then. I've just done a job for Sony, for example, that was a six-day shoot, and I exposed around 508 sheets of film in order to cover something like 40 situations. That works out to 12-14 sheets per shot – that's about one third of a 35mm roll of film, which is nothing.

● **Could you have had such a successful photographic career if you had stayed in the UK?**

There are glowing exceptions in this country, people who have made it as top photographers. Who is more famous, for example, than David Bailey, who is better known in his own country than any other photographer ever has been in the history of photography? You ask a cab

driver in London who David Bailey is and he will know. Ask a cab driver in New York who Richard Avedon or Irving Penn is, and the chances are that he wouldn't have a clue.

In my situation I found America interesting and challenging and kind of glamorous. The fact that the people who work there are so hyper-professional has rubbed off on me in some respects. That doesn't imply that British photographers aren't professional, it's just that America puts a weight on you, a pressure, to be hyper. The work takes on a weight and a polish and a grit that is harder to find in other places.

My oldest son Norman, who's also a photographer, will sometimes say when he views my work that it looks as though I'm not having fun any more – that it's

so 'brute': meaning brute force, brute professionalism. It's set it up the day before and everything, including equipment, is constantly checked. If we're on location and we're unlucky enough to have three sync cords break down on us, you know what, it doesn't matter, because we travel with eight. We even carry spare bellows for the camera. America makes you a little bit like that.

● **Your first book *Cyclops* was a very big turning point for you, a time when a lot of people first discovered your work. Did this change the perception that people had of you?**

I remember a journalist at the time saying that the thing that surprised him about *Cyclops* was that it was unusual to see a fashion photographer with this kind of book. And of course at this point in time I was absolutely known as a fashion photographer, not as a portrait photographer or filmmaker or still-life photographer. In a weird way I fought it, I must have been finding it personal. It's the same kind of demons that somebody like Richard Avedon has fought, this whole perception that he is a fashion photographer, whereas really, with him, it's always been portraiture.

I love the business of fashion photography, and I'll probably go back into doing that at some point. But it was fascinating to me that a lot of people that I did fashion for had no idea that I shot covers for *Rolling Stone*. And the people at *Rolling Stone* didn't know that I did movie posters. And the movie poster people didn't know that I did film. And it was a weird kind of thing.

In some ways *Cyclops* changed all that, but, because it was exclusively black & white, and because my next book *Maroc* was predominantly black & white as well, it started people thinking that I didn't shoot colour – whereas around 85 per cent or more of everything I shoot is in colour. I felt at the time that if I put colour into *Cyclops* that there was a danger it would overload, although looking back on it now it probably would have worked.

● **How did you become involved in so many different areas of photography?**

I was four years training to be a graphic designer and then four years at film school, and when you put graphic design and film together and throw in photography as the main ingredient, then everything that I do starts to make

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Danny Hall, Louisiana State Penitentiary Body Shop.
November 1991



Aicha Haddaoui, Berber family in the Middle Atlas: On the road from Meknes to Marrakech. 17 October 1997

more sense, and it's easier to understand the broadness of what I do.

I don't mean broad in an egotistical sense: it's just that I've never settled down to be one thing. It was quite interesting to see recently that in Times Square in New York I had a fashion picture at one end, a portrait in one corner and at the top end there were six billboards of car photography that I had shot. You wouldn't really have connected the portraiture with the fashion or the car photography. I think it's quite unusual that I've touched on all these things, and I don't know many photographers who work in this way, who do still-life, and who go from *Rolling Stone* to *Vogue*, and from there to movie posters and so on.

● **Your portraiture includes a number of people who are absolute icons of their time. How do you approach such well known subjects?**

Taking pictures of this kind is completely different to something like fashion

photography, because models do what they're told. You say stand up or sit down and they do it. But if you're photographing someone like Johnny Depp, for example, he'll ask you: 'Why are we sitting down,' or 'Why are we standing up?' which is fair enough, and so you have to approach it differently.

My personal background has probably a lot to do with the success that I've had in this area. Coming from a relatively small village in Scotland it didn't matter if it was the Queen of England or Clint Eastwood that I was photographing, I'm always the same person to them. I give the same attention to a model just starting out as I would to Bill Clinton. I really do. Sometimes the aura that comes with a personality can put a pressure and a tension into the situation, but I've always faced that by being open, direct and – most important of all – honest with them. For example, I'd never say when they arrive that I think they're a beautiful, fabulous, wonderful person. Instead I would simply say the same

thing I said to you when you arrived: would you like a cup of coffee? You just try to be very straightforward with them, and invariably they warm to that.

A lot of these people who are so well known are actually very likeable when you meet them. Quentin Tarantino, for example, is just a fabulous guy: I love him! He drives everybody around him crazy because he really is a maniac. But it takes a maniac to spot a maniac.

I've done shoots with him where we have scheduled three hours to do a particular portrait and we've done the portrait in five minutes and just talked for two hours and fifty-five minutes about film. Every so often you bond very well with these people: in fact I would say that I like pretty much everyone that I photograph. There are very few people who I would say have been difficult or a pain in the neck.

Bill Clinton, Washington D.C.
August 1996

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INTERVIEW ALBERT WATSON "The PR people who come with a celebrity

● What about the entourage that surrounds celebrity these days, where you might be asked to photograph a star from a particular angle or have your time restricted?

The PR people who come to the studio along with a celebrity can sometimes be a problem. You might have a well-known movie star who comes out looking sensational in a dress that they want to wear for the shot, and you think 'wow'. Then the actress says: 'I love this dress, it just looks great' to which the PR person might say: 'Well, I wouldn't wear it.' It's so annoying, because it brings an insecurity into the situation.

I've sometimes been very rough with PR people who say things like that – I'd pull them aside and tell them exactly what I thought of them. I'm pretty good at that because over the years I've worked with a lot of sharp hairdressers with sharp tongues and I've learned a lot from them. I now have cupboards filled with the bodies of PR people that we have to get rid of periodically!

● And of course you did what is probably the ultimate celebrity shoot, the royal wedding of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson.

Well, I think on a pressure front it's probably one of the toughest jobs a photographer could ever undertake, although creatively, the shoot was an absolute zero, because it's was really just a record of a lot of people standing in front of the camera. Technically, it needed to be set up and well lit in advance, because we only had 35 minutes in which to shoot eleven situations. The first had 58 people in it, the last one just had Fergie.

Halfway through the shoot I felt close to suicide. There were so many stories that happened in just 35 minutes of shooting. Every second seemed to be a minute and every minute seemed to be an hour: it was just a high-pressure situation where the only people who were really concentrating properly were the immediate royal family, who of course are superbly professional. They are like a rock, and while everyone else seemed to be looking around and talking they gave me everything that I needed.

Today, if one person out of 58 does not look great you can replace their face with a shot from another frame, but at that time it wasn't possible. So you had to somehow hit 58 people perfectly. After I did the shoot I had great respect



Above: Monkey with Gun. March 1992
Opposite: Monkey with masks. March 1994

for wedding photographers who handle that on a weekly basis. When it was all over I received what I consider to be one of the best compliments paid to me. It was from the press secretary, who came up to me and said 'I've seen a lot of shoots, but never one as well organised as that.' I thought 'okay I'll take that' and it's stuck in my head ever since.

● I understand that the book *Maroc* was also a royal commission.

It was commissioned by the then Crown Prince of Morocco [Sidi Mohammed], who's now the King.

The brief for the book was one hundred per cent open, and the only restrictions were my personal ones. I'm a fan of Morocco, and the idea was to do

something nice for them, something that captured the real texture of the people and a little bit of the texture of the country itself. It was a journey of discovery for me as well, because I was travelling to places that I had never seen before. I went to the south, I went deeper into the desert than I had been before, going more into the eastern parts of Morocco, which is more into the Sahara, and then the coastal regions and also covering Tanger, Rabat, Casablanca and Marrakech.

The book was made up of hand-made prints – a lot of platinum prints on ancient papers. And the book had to be created: I didn't want one full of bleed pictures, I wanted a book that had different scale, that contained surprises.

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