

# Albert Watson HonFRPS: A Scotsman in New York

Simon James spoke to New York-based Albert Watson, while he was over in London to receive his Honorary Fellowship



Above: Uma Thurman, NYC, September 1993. Right: Catherine Zeta-Jones, Los Angeles, February 1999.



In the world of top end fashion and commercial photography, New York is often thought of as the crowning glory: the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Over the past 40 years, one or two of our best-known photographers have journeyed there and, as a result, moved from national recognition to become players on the world stage. And in New York, for the entirety of those past 40 years, seemingly unassailable at the top of the tree, have sat Richard Avedon and Irving Penn: working to produce the iconic images of the decades, and equally hard on the self-initiated projects that have so firmly established their myths.

And then there's the Scotsman. Described in a feature as far back as a 1978 as 'the least well known great photographer in the world', resident in New York since the 1970s, and with an intensity of working practise that, to those in the know, more than explains why he's devoted so little time to any notion of public recognition: Albert Watson is simply too busy working.

By contrast with his peers, he considers himself to be the last of the general practitioners which, in this instance, denotes Albert Watson Photography, the stills business, and Cyclops Productions, the film and

video company, so called on account of Watson being born with one eye.

Watson estimates that the business, with its staff of 42, is presently about 40% still image, with the rest being devoted to film and video. His famous work ethic springs to mind as he explains that, on his way to London for the RPS Awards, he'd already stopped off in Scotland to do a shoot for the Jockey account. On the evening of our interview, his wife Elizabeth Watson was upstairs in their hotel suite doing a casting for the next shoot and, immediately our interview ended, the two of them were meeting for supper with the director of the Milan Museum of Modern Art, who'd flown up specially to discuss the plans for Watson's forthcoming major retrospective.

Albert Watson was born in Edinburgh, and says photography was never a particular ambition. For a long time, he considered a scientific career, but fate sneaked up on him while he was working as a lab technician in an Edinburgh chocolate factory, and altered his plans.

"For some reason, while I was in that job", he says, "and I still don't know why, I started to take art classes

one night a week. It quickly became something I wanted to do more seriously, but I'd missed the Edinburgh entrance exam. So I went to Duncan of Jordanstone in Dundee for the next four years. Of course, in those days, things were very different from the student life of today. I mean, I was married at 18 and away from home. By the time I was 21, we had two kids.

"Elizabeth trained as a teacher. She did a year in Edinburgh, and then transferred to Dundee when I went to Jordanstone to do graphic design. We had student grants, but they were only small, and we had a family to keep, so I worked hard in the summers and took spare jobs when they came up. First contact with America came at the end of my graphics course, in the summer of 1966, when I got an IBM travelling fellowship and toured the USA. But I'd also got into the Royal College of Art to study film and television so, on my return from the States, we moved to London.

"Then, in 1970, Elizabeth was offered a teaching post in California, and we went back to America. I arrived in Los Angeles with a very minimal portfolio of work that I'd managed to squeeze out while at film school, and the name of one contact: an account executive at Max Factor. He'd been a friend of my next-door neighbour in London.

"He agreed to see me and, feeling my folio lacked fashion work, offered to pay for a model for an hour and provide some dresses, if I would cover my own film costs. I found a very pretty model through an agency, and explained that I had the money for an hour's shoot but that, if she'd stay for the whole day, I'd provide her with copies of the pictures for her portfolio, and she agreed.

"And that was how I started. She had a friend who was a professional male model, and he came along with some changes of shirt and jeans, and I shot them together, from nine in the morning to 11.30 at night, on a single camera and a couple of rented lenses. I must have shot 60 rolls of film, which cost about all the money I had in the world at that point. I had her in an evening dress, and he was in jeans, and it actually looked quite modern because of that, and I took them down to the edge of the Pacific Ocean. After several shots of them together, I decided to get them into the surf, and added a little bit of portable strobe, and it looked very cinematic.

"Two days later, I took the film in to show the guy at Max Factor, who I think was expecting two rolls of film; so when I slapped down 60, he was quite excited. He disappeared off with the film to see the head of advertising for Max Factor worldwide, and then I was called down to meet him. I

waited about half an hour, then they said they'd like to buy pictures for a new product called Clearly California.

"I was asked to return the following day for a purchase order for four shots, not at the time really knowing what a purchase order was. On collecting it, I clearly remember getting as far as the escalator before ripping it open, and reading the order for 'four shots at \$150 each'. And, you have to remember this was 1970, and I was like: 'wow! \$600!'

"I was ecstatic and, when Liz got back from school and we looked at the order again, it turned out I'd misread it: they were actually buying the pictures for \$1500 per shot. They then bought three more frames, paying \$2000 each. The total I made from my first day of shooting in California was \$12,000. To give you an idea of its value, Elizabeth's teacher's salary for the whole year was \$3200. She stayed teaching the year that she was committed to and then, in June 1971, by which time I was averaging about two days' shooting a week, we moved into Los Angeles, and she stopped teaching in order to become my agent.

"Of course, I was shooting absolutely anything I was asked to, including catalogues for surgical appliances and bathroom faucets. If I'd done still life all the time, it would have driven me crazy, and it would be exactly the same for fashion. But, over the course of my career, I've never not done still life. Last year, for example, I shot the new generation of perfume bottles for Estée Lauder.

"Anyway, I rented a small studio up in Hollywood, by the day when I needed it, and became very good friends with Paul Williams, the owner. He was assistant to John Engstead: one of the great Hollywood glamour photographers, who'd shot everyone from Clark Gable to Katharine Hepburn.

"Paul had worked as his assistant for 10 years at the point I connected with him. He was a very honest guy, and he saw me do a couple of jobs and said, 'I'll never make a real photographer, but you could! We agreed I could use the studio for tests and that, when I got real advertising jobs, I'd pay him and he'd assist me. With this guy teaching me, I began a steep learning curve. I





Above: Danny Hall, prisoner of Louisiana State Penitentiary, Body Shop, November 1991. Right: Leslie Weiner, Yohji Yamamoto, London, September 1989.

already had a sense of light from seven years in art college, but he was very generous with his knowledge and taught me the specifics. Bit by bit, I picked up a style of my own.

"For about 25 years, until 1997, I was essentially a fashion photographer, in that time shooting close to 300 covers for *Vogue*. Today we do much less fashion, although we still do spreads here and there. I just did 10 fashion pages for *Arena* magazine with Uma Thurman, because I've known her for a long time, but I wouldn't consider the hardcore fashion I used to do. I slowed that down as I began to start up other companies.

"We started going into film, and concentrating on portraiture and film posters on the side. We shot the posters for *The Hours*, *Chicago*, *Shanghai Noon*, *Veronica Guerin*, *Kill Bill*, and we just shot the *Cold Mountain* poster.

"For me, portraiture has everything to do with my connection with the sitter, and it accommodates a lot of flexibility. I know that's really obvious, but a lot of photographers get very sidetracked with technique

which is, of course, really important but, to be quite honest, it's a bit like driving a car. You learn to drive very early on: how to turn the wheel and adjust your mirror, which pedal makes it go faster and which is the brake. All of these things are important, but they become second nature to the point where it's not the driving of the car, but where you want to go that's crucial. The important thing is how you connect, and how you use your biggest weapon: your own personality."

As well as his commercial practice, Watson continues to work on more personal projects. His books, *Cyclops* and *Maroc*, were critically well received, and his present project concentrates upon Las Vegas, which he is shooting in a variety of formats, including 10x8. "I wanted to do a project that was far more aggressive", he says, "almost pop. Also, I was looking for something quite decadent: that's where Vegas came from. So we began three years ago and, altogether in Vegas, we shot 26 weeks over a period of three years.

"We began the series for the planned Guggenheim Museum in Vegas, but then Guggenheim hit the



financial skids and a lot of its projects were cancelled. But we continued with the project anyway, and its first showing will now be as a part of a major retrospective at the Milan Museum of Modern Art. From there, it will go to Berlin and then the Edinburgh Festival in 2006." Looking, in conclusion, at the breadth of Watson's career, the inevitable question arises. For the

photographer who's shot everything from *Vogue* covers to the wedding of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, who's produced a book personally for the King of Morocco, who's shot delicate still lifes of the socks of Tutankhamun and portraiture of celebrities from David Bowie to Mike Tyson, what challenges remain?



Top left: *Hinson Street*, Las Vegas, Nevada, November 2001, from the *Las Vegas Series*. Above: Tutankhamun's linen sock with tie, Cairo Museum, January 1990.

While his love of the still image and the adaptations now made possible by digital continue to fascinate him, it seems that moving pictures are where he feels he has yet to firmly establish his mark.

Cyclops Productions, perhaps naturally for a Watson company, is working full tilt. "Right now", he says, "we have 18 commercials running on national TV in America: from Nasdaq to Nissan to Toyota and, when I get back on Monday, we begin a huge campaign of 18 commercials for Sears. I'll be doing that for nearly four weeks. Sears are putting \$10 million into that project."

But it seems to be in the arena of narrative cinema that his ambitions lie. Three feature film projects, sadly all too tightly restricted by confidentiality agreements to discuss, are presently in the pipeline, one of which looks like it will get the whole way to production. A little light glows in Watson's eye as he considers the challenges ahead.

#### Simon James

Right: Jude Law, London, December 1995.

Albert Watson *HonFRPS* will be giving a talk at the National Portrait Gallery, in association with the RPS, at 19.00 on 2 April. Admission Free, but booking essential through the National Portrait Gallery Ticket Office. 020-7306-0055.

