Herb Ritts
interview by François Quintin

There will be an exhibition of your work at the Fondation Cartier a few months from now. This is the first time your photographs are being shown in Paris, as far as I know.

Yes, as far as I know this is the first exhibition in Paris. There was a previous show in Cahors, France, for the *Printemps de la Photographie*.

Paris is a city where the culture of photography is quite strong, and you know the place quite well. How do you feel about showing your pictures there?

I'm very excited about it. I'm somewhat surprised it hasn't happened before. I've had many shows. But this is the right moment, the right time, the right venue. Generally, the French highly promote culture and the arts, and photography is in their blood. The Cartier Foundation is the kind of institution that invites the public to a different sort of show, not the standard museum outing. And what excites me most is the type of public, the fact that the Parisian people have a broader cultural understanding than many Americans do. The education, the cultural awareness, is different in Europe, especially in France, from that in the United States. So I think the public will be much more appreciative of many images. A Parisian wouldn't even think of asking, "Why is this person naked?" They understand the body. They're confronted with art, with painting, sculpture, and history, daily. Photography is obviously an extension of this.

You grew up in L.A., which is, in a sense, the first dream factory in the world. Were your parents close to the Hollywood milieu and to film?

Not really. We grew up in Brentwood, in West L.A. At the time, when I was a young boy in the fifties and sixties, it was a very low-key place to grow up. It was upper-middle-class; not suburban, but not Hollywood, either. I did grow up next door to Steve McQueen, who was a very famous movie star at the time, but as a kid it didn't impress me. We always had great fun with him. He would take us out on Sundays on his motorcycles, riding around in the desert; he was like a second father. My father was a furniture designer and manufacturer, and my mother worked with him in the sales and interior design side of the business. So they weren't in the film business at all—only through Steve McQueen and other people they knew. An Elvis Presley movie, *Blue Hawaii*, had a lot of the Ritts Company rattan furniture in it. It was very popular.

Did you go to the sets of films like *Blue Hawaii*?

No, I was too young. I remember no influence in that sense. McQueen was just our next-door neighbor. I never was on the set with him; I never knew that side of him.

But do you think it was helpful that when you were a kid, you had that kind of intimacy with a superstar like him?

I think it's possible that, from being around those sorts of people—though again, not in a business sense—I never was afraid of celebrity. I was never intimidated.

You took art history classes when you were at Bard College, on the East Coast. Did you have anything specific in mind at the time?

No. I was an economics major, which I enjoyed because I had a good business sense. Even though I didn't get a business degree, I enjoyed learning about economics. I dabbled in school. I always enjoyed art history because, growing up in California, my exposure was limited, and it was a new experience. To learn the history of art opened up certain things to me, made me see. It intrigued me.

Do you think that if you had studied photography at school you would have had the same career? Do you think that the fact that you were somehow ingenuous in photography turned out to be an asset?

I'm glad I didn't go to school for photography. Other photographers I know, Helmut Newton and Bruce Weber didn't either. Even Steven Meisel didn't, really—he went to fashion school. For me, the most important thing I learned was just honing my eye. I think I had a good eye. I'd go down to the end of my street, to a garage that had a certain feeling about it, or a particular light; I'd take a picture of a friend who needed a head shot. That's how I learned, instead of having school assignments and learning camera techniques. I think a lot of the time these days people are so concerned about having the right camera and the right film and the right lenses and all the special effects that go along with it, even the computer, that they're missing the key element. That element is developing a style that's yours and experimenting with it in until you eventually discover what makes sense to you especially. And I think in schools, sometimes that's possible. But I learned the technical aspects on my own. I shied away from strobes and lights at first. It's always more comforting to know that in any given corner of any room or any location you're on, you can make a photograph that you'll appreciate. What I particularly liked was that, coming from California and not being involved in the New York scene, I developed my personal way, in my own way, at my own pace. Looking back on it, I think it was terrific that I could do that. So I'm glad I didn't go to school for that reason. I was tutoring myself, I suppose. Many people who excel are self-taught.

It's now part of your legend that you started photography because of a flat tire. Is that right ?

Oh, this is the "Richard Gere" story. That was one of the first instances of doing something for no reason other than to just take a picture of a friend, and realizing that there was a "moment" there. Richard Gere was not an actor then; he had just shot his first movie that year.

Was he the only actor among your friends?

Pretty much. I knew Richard's girlfriend, Penny, who was an actress, and she introduced me to Richard. Actually, when I first started dabbling in photography, I was still working for my parents as a salesman. Penny was supposed to come to my house to take a head shot, but she never showed. Richard arrived; he was going to meet her there. I asked if I could take a picture of him, and he said no —he was very shy and had very long hair—but finally I did. A week or so later, we were driving around in Penny's car and got a flat tire and ended up in a desert gas station, where we took pictures. Later that year, Richard told his new publicist, "Oh, Herb took a couple of rolls of me." He had fairly well-known photographers shooting him already; it happened quickly for him. So I sent the negatives and forgot about it. What did I know? I wasn't a photographer. Three months later, the pictures appeared in American *Vogue*, *Esquire,* and *Mademoiselle*. Big spreads. One day soon thereafter, *Mademoiselle* tracked me down and asked me to do Brooke Shields, and I said sure. I didn't say I wasn't a photographer.

Before *Mademoiselle* called you back for Brooke Shields, had you figured out that there would be something to exploit with this experience you had had with photography?

Well, I liked it—that was the main thing. I liked it, but I didn't think of it in terms of a career. I didn't really know; I didn't really think about it. One thing just led to another until finally I quit my job as a salesman and found myself working as a photographer. Not making money necessarily, but shooting editorials, enjoying what I was doing, getting by, learning. It was all in my own terms in Los Angeles. I was working for Gianfranco Ferre, Armani in Milan, magazines in New York. I didn't have a portfolio. Clients would call on the phone. I did it all myself, including the billing.

In this photograph there's a lot of vocabulary that consistently reappears in your work: the desert, the cigarette, the mechanical features, the hero—and Richard Gere was called the "New American hero."

I like form and shape and strength in pictures. I think that the interesting thing about this first picture of Richard is that it's on a real location. I realized instinctively, even then, you have to go for that moment you're in. There's something compositional about the place

where I was shooting Richard. This is an all-white background here;[1] I crouched down to shoot upward, which gave a little more impact and drama. I can't honestly say if I told Richard to put his hands behind his head, or if he just did it to stretch and I caught it. And he definitely would have been smoking a lot then anyway. A lot of this is really what he was: young, very handsome, sexy—one of those "rebel" actors, and it showed. At the same time, though, he had incredible vulnerability, and in some of the other pictures from that series he's very innocent, in his eyes. He's more a rebellious youth, but he's got an innate sensitivity that I think makes Richard what he is, and he's grown into a considerable man. There is definitely something compositionally created. I just snapped. Crouching down to get the sky behind his head is just an instant. It's all how you interpret the moment.

But there is a certain sense of light and desert that has always been part of your work, be it in photographs, ads, or music videos such as the Janet Jackson video.

Coming from California and growing up where I did, I've always had a fondness for and innate sensitivity to light, texture, and warmth. I abstract it in my photographs: I like large planes and spaces, areas of texture and light, like deserts or oceans or monumental places. That's why I felt so at home when I went to Africa. It didn't matter that I was halfway around the world in a foreign country, because all those elements are universal. And I think that's one thing about my work: It's universal. Regardless of whether you speak the language or are familiar with a culture, the picture should hold up. I've always said that if you didn't know Madonna necessarily, you'd still be curious about the woman in the photograph. There's a photograph that I've always loved, by August Sander, called "A German painter's wife".[2] She's all in white—white pants, white shirt, and a cigarette dangling out of her mouth—in a studio. It always struck me because it really had a strong attitude, almost like a Helmut Newton, and it looked as if it was definitely a caught moment. She could have been a very famous woman, or not a famous woman. Who cares? But there was an attitude in her face. I love a picture in which the reference of who is portrayed doesn't matter. And getting back to your original question, I think those universal elements are important to me.

That's what Steven Meisel says about your work: "The openness, the airiness, the cleanliness of Los Angeles . . . the feeling of openness, that feeling of freedom, and that feeling of light."[3] These are things that, according to him, were more than just influential for you. Do you think that the fact that you are from L.A. makes you create some kind of L.A. style, or fashion?

I don't think so. L.A., New York, Paris, are distinct cities that depend on history and geography. But culture is so connected these days through television and communication

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[1](Showing the white background.)

[2] August Sander, *The Wife of the Painter Peter Abelen*, Cologne, ca. 1927/28

[3] Steven Meisel, "Herb, by Meisel", in .....

that I think you could view a person's style and not know if they're influenced by Soho or Paris or L.A. I don't think I know what an L.A. style would be. But, although I've always worked for New York and European magazines, and advertising clients beyond that, I'm proud of where I'm from. Within two hours of where I live, you have mountains and desert as location. I like the natural elements that abstract into light, texture, shape and shadow. With everything depending on the subject in front of you, it's essential to have all these givens to create the image and the moment; and I feel that when I'm in that kind of environment. I feel trapped if it's a rainy, cold day inside a studio; that isn't me. I can still make a picture, but I know when I feel my best. Once you develop your own style, you know when you're able to give your best. Feeling at home is part of it, and I don't think that's an L.A. thing. It's a matter of the environment and of what affects you.

Your friendship with Matt Collins, who was a model, was decisive in your career at that time.

In '78 I bought a house in California, the same house where I live now. I decided to rent rooms out to help with the mortgage, and one of the renters was Matt Collins. He was one of the top male models at the time—very refined-looking. I remember several red trunks of Italian menswear arriving at my house from Italian *Bazaar* on behalf of a girl I didn't even know. Someone had shown her a few snapshots, and she took a chance because she really liked what she saw. She turned out to be the fashion director of Italian *Bazaar*. Matt and I went underneath the Santa Monica Pier and shot. He did his hair, he put on the clothes, I took the pictures, he held the meter. I shipped the photographs back with the clothes to Milan, and next thing I knew they were the lead story in Italian *Bazaar*, twenty pages. That's where Ferre, and Franca Sozzani from *Lei*, saw my pictures. Matt was influential in that he'd already been in the business. He was very good friends with Bruce Weber.

Did you know Bruce Weber's work?

Before I met Matt I didn't know Bruce Weber. A year or two later I did, though. I would see his groundbreaking work in *GQ*.

How did you actually develop your own identity? Who were the photographers your were interested in?

When you start out, you're not really aware. I didn't have a sense of photographic history. I just thought, "Okay, here's what's in front of you today, let's see what happens." I started photographing assignments for *Lei* magazine, which was a training ground at that time. Franca Sozzani would encourage young photographers—Bruce, Steven, Peter Lindbergh, and myself. And that's where I first noticed who they were.

When did you start doing pictures for yourself?

Each time I did assignments or editorials, I realized that I wanted to do something more. I saw that it wasn't just about the clothes. Starting in '84, I had an assignment for Franca, for a magazine called *Per Lui,* which was the counterpart of *Lei*. *Lei* was the most forward magazine in the early eighties, and it was because Franca was so great in encouraging everyone. I did a story called "The Body Shop," which is where *Fred with Tires* emerged from. Franca had sent these really hideous raincoats, and I just hated them. I had hired an editor, a freelance named Michael Roberts, who now works at the *New Yorker*. We ended up going to Western Costumes and getting vintage jeans and overalls. We decided to do the body shop story at a greasy gas station. It was great fun. We turned in the pictures, and Franca almost had a heart attack. But she ran it, and it was a huge success. I realized something then. From then on I started to do things for myself on certain days. That's when I started to develop my own style. I exposed myself to museums. I suddenly saw, for instance, the vision of a Man Ray, discovered more and more the history of photography. It put things in perspective. But it was at least four years or more before I started feeling a sense of my own style.

Did you expect such tremendous success with *Fred with Tires*?

Not at all; I hadn't a clue. I still don't know why it happened. It was just one of those honest pictures. I remember when we were shooting it. Poor Fred, who was a student, had to swing these heavy tires around, and at one point he was so tired he just turned around and stood there. It was the last frame of the shoot.

I remember reading somewhere that you once said, back in the eighties, that your photographs were not erotic.

I think I said, with reference or in comparison to Robert Mapplethorpe, that mine was a different kind of photography. He really documented S&M and various elements he was into. As I see it, my style has something more sensual. My photographs are erotic in a more approachable way, rather than hard-edged. In some ways my pictures are erotic, but I would say, for me, there's more of a sensuality coexisting with eroticism.

***Vladimir* is one of those pictures you took for yourself; it's not commissioned. Who is Vladimir?**

I had seen him in one of the first Cirque du Soleil shows. Vladimir would fly out over the audience. He was very striking. I decided he'd be interesting to photograph. He's got that Russian charisma.

His hands are so—

—his hands, yes. Vladimir had invented his show three years before; he'd even had his brothers come to join him. They were very poor coal miners in Russia. That's why his

hands are huge; they were literally digging coal three years before. He was so earnest. At one point when we were getting ready to take pictures of him, he was putting a white powder on his body and smoking his cigarette. I snapped. It's refreshing to do pictures that are for yourself and the person you're working with, with no one over your shoulder. Not that I don't encourage that; sometimes working on editorials, or even in advertising, you have creative elements at hand, and they're encouraging you. But in cases such as Vladimir, you're a hundred percent sure that you can go for that moment with no interference. But someone as fantastic as Vladimir doesn't happen every day, and he made the day memorable. For me, the subject matter's key.

You're talking about subjects that are important to you. I wanted to talk about *Duo*. Is it your third book?

Yes, I believe so.

You did *Pictures*. Were there others?

Men, *Women, Notorious, Africa,* and *Work*.

***Duo* is also based on a theme. Did you know this couple?**

No, I didn't know them personally. I think I'd photographed Bob Paris once for *Interview* magazine. He came to me and said, "Look, I'd like to do a book about my boyfriend and myself; we're together and we're married. What do you think?" So I talked to my publisher at the time, Jack Woody of Twin Palms Press, who agreed. He's very open. First we worked over a period in my studio, then we went to Cabo San Lucas in Mexico, a very deserted spot, and did more pictures. I thought it was a fine tribute to create a book about two people of the same sex who were together. It was a strong project to come out when it did.

All the royalties from *Duo*, as well as from *Notorious*, went to the American Foundation for AIDS Research. Do you think the book contributed to fighting discrimination against gays and lesbians?

I remember being interviewed for a TV special with Maria Shriver,[4] a national show in the United States, and they were asking about the book. I said that more awareness is crucial; the more the public can see examples of people of the same sex together, the more the barriers will be broken. I think knowing people by first names, not by what they do sexually, is really what it's about. Not being afraid. Fear is the enemy. I've always been comfortable with being gay. I thought the book was one way of helping. People advised me that it wasn't a good idea for my career at the time, but I didn't even think about it.

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[4] "The Gay 90's, Sex, Power and Influence," on NBC, January 26, 1993.

When was your first art exhibition? When was the first time you actually showed your pictures in an art context?

I think the first one was in Los Angeles, at the G. Ray Hawkins Gallery. Before the Fahey/Klein Gallery. It was a long time ago, around ’85.

You had to make a selection of what was art and what wasn’t.

Yes. I had to choose from among some nudes I’d done, pictures that didn’t involve fashion.

Did you use specific criteria for your selection?

I chose things that I had done for myself or that, if they were from editorials, really stood up on their own, beyond the context of the story. Just as Helmut Newton has always done, I take pictures for myself after a shoot, while the crew is still there. Because of this, I had quite a few images to select from.

Do you think your criteria have become stricter since then?

Yes—there’s obviously more work to choose from than fifteen years ago.

Do you select from the entire field of your work?

I’m pretty selective. I generally edit the contact sheets and then do work prints. Because I have my own lab and printers, I can afford the luxury of going through the contact sheets for black-and-white, making up work prints, seeing them big, and honing them down. I take the time to edit well. It’s important. I find that most of the time, if I go back, say, six or ten years and look through the same contact sheets, I’m still thinking in the same way. I don’t feel I’ve missed anything. I’ve always thought of editing as an essential part of the process.

Do you think the pictures you select have some kind of special quality that the others don’t?

You have to remember that the decisive moment is when you’re shooting. I’m not sure how it was in the past, but think, for example, of the moment when Cartier-Bresson captured that picture of the man bicycling in silhouette: That’s what he called the decisive moment, that’s the picture. With portraits, you know something is right from what your eye is telling you. If this bubble[5] was here, or if it was down here, or if his head was too low or too high, or if the shadows vary, or if the body was away from the wall—these are all elements

[5]In *Male nude with bubble*, 19..

you're pondering when you're working. There can be surprises, especially with movement, that you can't predict. I'm open to surprise.

You leave room.

I always leave room. I remember once working all afternoon on a beach with Naomi Campbell, during a beauty shoot for Italian *Vogue*. After the shoot, we were walking up the steps on a cliff. It was twilight, the sun had set. We'd shot all day. I turned around, and she looked so gorgeous that I just stopped, took a few shots, and that's what was printed. I'm glad I was open to seizing the moment.

I was very intrigued by the picture where she's seated on a zebra pillow in an old-style Hollywood jungle outfit—

It's an Azzedine Alaïa, actually.

It's really the typical American iconography of glamorous pinup girls. Still, black women have not often been photographed as traditional American pinups. Do you think this photograph belongs to the present, or is it typical of an iconography from the past?

I believe I have an open mind, and that I've never not photographed someone because of their color. I've always been open to people of color, and enjoyed it even more, because I think the skin tone is especially beautiful. And Naomi Campbell is probably one of the best models, if not the best model, I've ever worked with, because of the variety she offers. She can have the most dazzling smile, but also the strongest face. She can give you different moods and fantasies. And, she's a beauty. I think of how, twenty years ago, she wouldn't have had a chance, and of how the culture has changed. But obviously there's still discrimination; I know it, because I work in magazines. It's always a fight.

Really?

Oh, yes. I think Naomi broke down barriers in a lot of ways, and I was always supportive of her. Referring back to the photograph, I think it goes beyond the pinup, because there's such a striking beauty present. You could look at that picture fifty years from now and still feel the woman beyond the leopard print she is wearing. There's something in her gaze, her body, her position, that makes it modern in a strange way.

Christopher Reeve is a very important photograph for you. Did you suggest doing it?

I worked with Christopher Reeve when I first started, back in '82, on a movie. I saw him on an award show—I think it was the Academy Awards, actually—and realized what a struggle it was for him and how positive a man he was. I was finishing up *Work* and

thinking of doing a few more portraits. So I asked if he would sit, and he said yes and flew out from Connecticut. But I hadn't realized the amount of struggle involved for him each day. It took him an hour and a half to get up to the studio from the street. And then he had two nurses and oxygen support. What was so terrific was the optimism he brought to the session.

Did he want that photograph taken ?

I don't really think he had been photographed much since his accident. When he saw the pictures, he was a little taken aback, perhaps because the shock had finally hit. I think there's an almost stoic quality about this picture. The light's from a skylight in my studio; it's not artificially lit. I do admire people who, even in a dire situation—like Stephen Hawking, as well—exhibit an indomitable spirit.

There's also the mechanical aspect. In a lot of your photographs, mechanical things act like an extension of the body. I'm thinking, for instance, of Stephen Hawking, but also of Jack Nicholson holding a magnifying glass, which looks like an extension of his own body, or of a photograph of Cindy Crawford and k.d. lang on a barber chair.

With Nicholson, for instance, what the magnifying glass did, quite by accident, was make even more of a caricature of him. He's such a larger-than-life person, anyway, that if you magnify the one thing, his smile, his grin, it makes for even more of an impact. As to the mechanical aspect, with Stephen Hawking I photographed the back of his unique wheelchair; with Prince I photographed the stark mannequin he form-fits all of his clothes on. These objects speak about the person without them actually being present.

The Dalai Lama, too.

Again, I think the important element regarding the Dalai Lama portrait, or the Springsteen one we're using, is that a detail of the subject can be just as valid a portrait as the conventional face.

You obviously draw a sharp distinction between portrait and face. What is a portrait?

For me, a portrait is something from which you feel the person, their inner quality, what it is that makes them who they are. For instance, in the hand of the Dalai Lama donning his prayer beads in the window light; you feel his spirituality, his sense of presence. Frequently, the most interesting people to photograph are elderly. George Wallace, Bukowski, William Burroughs, Rauschenberg, Mandela. They've lived their lives. It's all in their face, and it shows.

But does *Batman* stand for Michael Keaton? It might as well be a dummy.

Not really. I like to abstract what's in front of me. Once the subject's lit in a certain way and abstracted from its context, you've made a stark sculptural element. It becomes mysterious. You don't have to know that it's from a film—it just makes for an unusual shape. One of the artists I appreciate most is Brancusi. I was immediately fascinated by him. I loved the sculptural shapes he would carve. That's the kind of thing I am drawn to.

Could you tell me about this portrait of Elizabeth Taylor?

That was another image I did for myself. A lot of these have never been seen previously. I've held them back.

When was this one taken?

It must have been taken two or three years ago, when she left the hospital after brain surgery. You can see the scar here; that's where her head was opened.

Was it you who asked her to do that photograph?

Yes. She's a friend of mine. I called her up after the operation to cheer her up and encourage her. I said, "Okay, I'm coming over to take your picture." She said she couldn't. I said, "Oh, yes, you can." I'd heard she had really short white hair; she didn't dye it, and it just went white. I sat her down outside her pool, put a jet-black tarp behind her, and used the natural light. She's in her black bathrobe.

What did she say about the photograph?

Actually, she really liked it because it was so different from the usual glamorous style. It felt timeless. I took other ones as well—her looking into the camera, smiling. More typical ones that she could use for her Foundation.[6] But my aim was to do something else; I wanted to show the scar, the hair, her gaze. I like photographing troupers, people who have been in the trenches, who have survived. Women like Elizabeth Taylor, Tina Turner—those types who've had careers in the business and are still going. Maybe Elizabeth isn't making movies, but she still has an aura and a presence, and Tina's still onstage at sixty. I enjoy working with people like that the most, by far. They're appreciative as well.

So who the person is, is more important than how she is.

Definitely. It's the inner beauty that counts. It's what's inside that you project outwardly. I'm always drawn to those actors who are more unusual—a De Niro or a Norton, both of

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[6] The "Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation", in which Herb Ritts has always been an active member.

whom are in the show. I love Gary Oldman; people who are offbeat, who have character. Take the Madonna pictures, for instance.

She's somebody with amazing character. All the pictures are different, although you did such a wide range on her.

I met Madonna in '83 or '84, when I was commissioned to do an ad for a movie called *Desperately Seeking Susan*. I remember that day. I was in New York City in an old factory loft with lots of windows. She arrived early and marched into the studio with all her "boy-toy" belts and black lace, very definite. She opened a cigar box with all of her jewelry, mainly little silver crosses. She said, "I've seen all your work in *Lei* magazine. You're good." Just like that. She knew who I was, though I'd only been shooting for a couple of years. We had some time to kill before everyone arrived, and I suggested doing some pictures. I said these were for ourselves; she agreed. She was a smart girl. And she loved the camera. We kept doing pictures over the years. There was *True Blue,*[7] which is in the show, and others. She's the subject that I've been in front of maybe more than anybody else, and it's interesting that, over the course of perhaps fifteen years, I've seen her consistently grow as a person. And I'm changing as well. For instance, this picture,[8] the *Cabaret* one, we wouldn't have done the first time out. But as we evolved, we were more open to experimenting in new ways. She's agreed to let me show a picture of her and her baby, taken several weeks after Lourdes's birth.

Was it you who suggested doing that picture?

After the baby was born, I said I'd like to come over and take some pictures, and she said that would be great. I remember it was a rainy day in her living room. Madonna was just so motherly, so into her child and I felt so comfortable with her. Because of the evolution we had known together, immediately I started cropping in with my eye and making it more interesting. There was no reason to do anything except for the pure joy of taking pictures. And Madonna had obviously evolved to the point where she could look at those pictures and say, "Wow, these are great, I love them." She understood the abstracted nature of the photographs.

She knows how to read photographs.

Yes, and she collects photographs. She has a great collection of Drtikols and various others. I'm glad, through these photos of Lourdes, I was able to give her such a memorable gift. You forget in a way what pictures are really about, what they're for at times. It's a kind of wake-up call. When you work as much as I do, you forget that certain personal pictures

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[7] *Madonna, Hollywood, 1986*. This photograph appeared on the cover of Madonna's record *True Blue*.
[8] *Madonna, San Pedro, 1990*, (portrait with cigaret).

mean a lot to people, especially when they're of children. And I do have a weakness for taking pictures of kids and families.

Madonna urged you to make videos, although it was an area in which you had no experience.

Right. She kept asking me, and I said I really didn't know the first thing about moving imagery. Finally, I practiced with a little super 8 camera when I was on a job in Hawaii, and came back and said I could do it. Two weeks later, I was filming *Cherish*. I directed it and did the camera work as well. It was invigorating. I realized I could put my stamp on moving imagery, which some people have a hard time doing. The more you experience, the better you become, and the mix of working with varied visual mediums hones your eye even more so.

Madonna seems very much in control of her own image in all the photographs you've taken of her, even at her wedding. It seems that any images you do of her are amazingly strong. Do you think that the freedom she expresses is due to the special relationship you have together, is a matter of confidence?

I think that with her, and with other people as well, the big word is *trust*. A person feels they can trust you because they know your reputation and what you're about. Or they can feel it because over the years a tight relationship develops, as it did with Madonna. You work together and it clicks; you evolve.

Tell me about the picture you did of Michelle Pfeiffer. Although she is one of the most beautiful actresses in Hollywood, she appears as a man in your photographs. Was the idea yours?

Yes. I knew Michelle a long time before I took that picture, and the one thing I knew about her was that she did not like to be Michelle Pfeiffer —at least at that point in her life, over ten years ago. She wasn't comfortable with being herself and doing pictures in front of a still camera. I think she wanted to break the stigma of being so beautiful, and the idea that being beautiful was all she was about. This was a shoot for American *Vogue*, and I decided to do her playing different roles, thinking this was a way of taking her out of herself. The photograph we're speaking of is actually a character from a Noel Coward[9] play; it's the last picture we did because she was very hesitant. We'd done her in various female theatrical roles throughout history, and I suggested that it would be interesting if she played a man. She had read the play and had the idea of the Noel Coward character, Laurence. We put her in an Armani men's tux. I didn't want to do anything with her face. We literally wet her hair and parted it and drew on a little mustache. Now, that's a tough role to pull off in the two-dimensional facade of a photograph. You're going to be a man, you're going to be

[9] Noel Coward: "Laurence' in *Private Lives*.

a Noel Coward character, and all the guise you have is a little mustache, your hair back, and a tuxedo. And to top it off you're known for being a gorgeous actress. She walked down the steps and sat down, and she was suddenly Clark Gable. She was in the twenties mode, down to the hand gestures and all. And I didn't tell her what to do. When I say Clark Gable, she reminded me of him, but she became somebody else, she became a character. I love the unexpected nature of this photograph. You don't get those moments every day, but when you do it's very rewarding.

One of your latest portraits is of Danny DeVito acting like Alfred Hitchcock.

Yes, it was perfect. In recent years I've done many pictures for the Hollywood issue of *Vanity Fair*. I like to push it a little, to think up characters for these very familiar faces to play. DeVito was a remarkable Alfred Hitchcock. We at times shot with a real crow, which bit his cheek—a foam cheek, luckily. It's interesting to take a character actor like Danny DeVito and add a little humor. I like whimsy in a picture. Because I'm based in Los Angeles, some people assume that I'm a "celebrity" photographer. On the one hand that can connote great talents from the past, like George Hurrell; but it can be very one-dimensional. Over the years, if you really look through my body of work, you'll see that its range goes well beyond mere celebrity.

You seem to very much enjoy photographing bodies; for example, dance. *Pierre and Yuri,* one of your latest works, seems to be about this.

What I find wonderful in this case is that those bodies are there for a reason. It's not about the gym, it's not obsessing about your body. These are dancers whose bodies are developed because of what they do every day, because of what their performance and their art is about. Their bodies intertwine with their minds. They were really open about coming up with positions, comfortable about trying different things, even in the nude. That afternoon I was working with people who are talented at what they do and I was given these moments.

You have experimented much photographically with Cindy Crawford . . .

Yes—most recently this photograph from a *Playboy* shoot in Mexico. For someone who enjoys a great deal of commercial success, it was fun for Cindy to do this for *Playboy*. After working for so many years together, it was terrific to collaborate on these nude images. She's very athletic here. It's not modelly, it's a strange shape; she found it herself, I didn't direct her. She knew I wanted something different—I didn't want her just standing there, I didn't want her looking pretty, I didn't want her modelly. She lay down and started feeling her own self, feeling the sun. It's also about the environment you put someone in, and what possibilities may happen. It's a beautiful image, but a little strange, a little off, especially for a girl like that. It meant taking another step for her.

The athletic image of Cindy Crawford brings me to Jacqui Agyepong. She's part of a whole series you did recently of nude sports personalities.

Jacqui was one of the people I most liked photographing. She's a sprint hurdler, she runs quick distances. This was in Miami, in a studio that was outdoors mainly, on a roof, with the blinding white light of Miami at midday. Sunglasses were of no help. It was that bright. Jacqui was a little shy at first. She had such presence when she arrived—very sweet, with a beaming smile. She stood there, and we worked through the pictures in the extreme heat. We'd go as far as we could, but I didn't want her to faint. It was a fantastic day. To me this picture is like something you'd sculpt out of marble. But it's more than that because of her stellar humanity.

It's somehow hypertrophic, more than muscular; it's like a meeting between beauty and freakishness.

Freakish, no. What's interesting to me, more than, say, the body builders from *Duo*—and this connects with what I was saying earlier about the ballet dancers—is that Jacqui's body is in top condition, but it's because of what she does: She's a runner and a hurdler. In such cases, first you're born with certain genetics, then, with determination, you develop. And what power she has.

Do you see any correlation between this picture and *Dizzy Gillespie*, between her thigh and his cheek?

To me they're completely different images. *Dizzy* is more of an emotional shot. A face is so different from a torso. They feel different both emotionally and in terms of shape. *Batman,* for instance, is a more strictly graphic element, and *Jacqui* is a little more like *Batman* than *Dizzy*, because of the starkness, the impact.

But there is something about the idea of having a body express so much that it seems to grow beyond its limits.

With *Dizzy*?

With *Dizzy*, with *Jacqui*, even with *Male Nude with Bubble*.

Yes. Even the man with the bubble, big as he is, has a certain kind of mystery—especially, for instance, in the shadow. His head is bowed, his hands are extended, his foot's slightly raised. Despite the strong details, there's a certain grace to it, a suspended poise.

In a book called *The Nude*, the art historian Kenneth Clark says that most bodies are all the stronger for expressing the weakness of the human before the divine. Looking

at your photographs, I wondered if there is something that goes beyond the physical presence of the bodies, something more mental or spiritual.

I think yes, there is an optimism, a spiritual feeling coupled with a tactile quality. I don't think they're cold—say, like a Mapplethorpe sometimes can be in order to shock. His details are shocking because of the strobe and the studio; they're graphic, caught in time. I actually love them, yet there's a difference present along those lines.

This is also a photograph I'm very interested in: *Tony and Mimi*. Who are they?

This was one of the first sessions I did for myself. Tony Ward was a model I used a lot when I first started. Mimi is a body builder, a woman who has the physique of a man. The question of sexual ambiguity was raised about that profile shot of the two of them. It looks like two men together, although it's really a man and a woman. The twist was intended

On this question of ambiguity, I'm also very interested in *Cordula and Paul*. They seem literally to have exchanged their masculinity and femininity.

This was a fashion picture, done for British *Vogue*. Cordula was a model I used quite a bit. She had a very strong face that many people in the modeling world thought was too severe. But it appealed to me. My favorite face is probably that of the model Tatjana Patiz, who appears in this show in a veiled portrait.[10] I've photographed her extensively. She has the most unusual face: strong, oval, almond eyes, and those strong lips—and it's her gaze, her inner self, that always comes through so powerfully. Very me. Cordula is in that same vein, but she's more masculine. So you're right; She's the strong one in this photograph, even in terms of body language. She's the one facing forward, he's holding on to her; she's more the guy, in a sense.

Actually, this is something I see in a lot of your pictures, for instance in your book *Men and Woman*. It seems that being a man or being a woman is also a matter of one's image of oneself.

I think what you're saying is true. Still, I enjoy shooting women as feminine objects. There's a sensitivity to the photographs. Many times they're stripped down to the elements, as in the picture of the five models together. They're not like what Lindbergh or Bruce Weber does. I enjoy women being women in my way, and they're still feminine. Like the tight portrait of Christy Turlington with no makeup on. They're very much themselves. But then again, there are exceptions. The Cindy Crawford photos of her as a man.

You like that kind of mystery and confusion.

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[10] *Tatjana Veiled Head, Tight View, Joshua Tree, 1988*

Yes.

It's even more confusing in the picture of Demi Moore.

Yes, I agree. I had run into her and knew she had shaved her head. I thought she looked so strong. I've known her a long time. I asked her if she would do nudes, and she agreed. She was terrific. The picture is not androgynous; the nude itself is very womanly and sculptural, with the weighty quality of a Renoir body.

There's more than that: The face is not expressive. I was struck by the similarity between the navel and the left eye. It seems that she's acting both masculine and feminine at the same time.

That's exactly true.

The left hand is very much feminine, whereas the right hand seems to stand in for a man's genitals.

But there's a feminine gesture in that hand, too.

Which adds to the confusion.

But to me, the overall attitude is even more masculine. The manner in which the hand is placed on the hip, for instance.

Did you direct that? I mean did you ask her to act that way?

Not really. I let her be herself. I wouldn't direct her to put her hand on her hip. If I asked her to do something, it wouldn't be anything like "Be a masculine woman." There were various shots, some very sensitive. Her gaze was odd. I like when it's off. It can never be forced.

We were thinking of using the photograph of Alek Wek for the cover of the catalogue, or for the poster of the exhibition.

Great. That picture speaks for me, in terms of the light, the modern feel, the starkness. It's a very strong graphic.

It reminded me of a picture by Joel Peter Witkin, a direct allusion to a famous Charles Nègre photograph of a nude woman lying on a bed. In Witkin's picture she has some kind of bizarre natural high heels, and Alek Wek's feet reminded me very much of this. You've also made a portrait of Witkin. Do you feel an affinity with his hesitation between beauty and freakishness?

I love Joel's pictures; I've collected them. For most people, obviously, they're a little strong to put on the wall. But when you listen to him explain his process, how he goes from the beginning to the end, the photographs become powerful paintings in a sense. I am drawn to that sort of a strangeness. But in *Alek Wek*, the elements I enjoy are a great subject, hard sunlight, a stark background.

Did you use a computer?

I did a bit on this, on the feet. The photo was meant to be about the future, and I didn't want to show conventional shoes because I thought they'd look too dated. These shoes were made for her; all we did was make the line blend into her skin. The objects on her head are actually thorns from a tree in Mexico that the makeup girl had found a month before and saved. She just affixed them to Alek's head, and something organic took shape. Everything else is real. That's her body; I didn't retouch it.

This is the last picture of *Women Through the Decade*, the latest Pirelli calendar. It's meant to represent a woman for the future. Is any irony intended, or is it optimistic?

Well, I'm not a predictor of the future. I immediately thought of Alek Wek because she's an untypical model—again, someone who's broken a barrier, not the usual beauty you're used to seeing. She has incredible character, and is a sweet girl. These women are so young, you wonder how they have such a sense of self and presence despite the responsibility and weight on their shoulders, making money and so on. Many of them don't manage, but there are others, like Alek, who are grounded, responsible, bright, and have a sense of humor. Besides what the portrait looks like, its important to feel the person's inner self. So for me, the future is about someone bright, optimistic, with a sense of themselves and a good sense of humor. She felt the light, she felt where she's from, she felt a sense of herself, and she got it. She was very proud. I admire that kind of confidence. I love to photograph certain people when I know there's going to be an energy between us, when I know they have something to give me. That's the importance of the subject. I remember Helmut Newton telling me whom you're shooting is ninety-five percent of the picture. Alek is a symbol of optimism for the future.

When I was preparing this interview with you, I came across some very harsh reviews. Critics have often been suspicious about your work: They said that it was superficial; that you mixed different kinds of photography; even comparisons of your work with official art under the Third Reich. What's your position on that?

As I said earlier, when people say that my work is just about bodies, or that it's superficial, I don't think they're looking at the range or body of work accomplished. They haven't done their homework, really. On the walls of this exhibition hangs a wide variance of humanity. People see an image like *Fred with tires,* for instance, and they assume it's male

homoeroticism and that's all you're about. Or they like to typecast you, to peg you. I like to mix experiences. I don't just do fashion, I don't just shoot people, and I go off and do my own projects. I have a range and I enjoy that. For me there's nothing wrong with doing magazines or commercial work. It's given me the opportunity to photograph people like a Rauschenberg, for instance. I might otherwise never have run into him; *Vanity Fair* affords me the opening. When you look back at Man Ray, or Outerbridge, or others, they did the same thing. And they're not lesser photographers for it. Sometimes people have trouble with the context of why a picture is taken. Whether you take it for *Vogue* or for the Gap (like *Dizzy Gillespie*) or for yourself matters little to me. There's room for all sorts of photography. I love Cindy Sherman, for instance; I love the fact that she has made a world that is basically her own, rather than about magazines or advertising. But there are also people who enjoy that end as well, like myself. No matter the reason why you are there in front of a subject, you are still given the opportunity at that moment to create an image that will affect people. I'm recording people. Often you forget that your photographs are actually records of people in this part of the century who have had an impact politically, aesthetically, or socially. That's what photography does. When you look back at photographs from the twenties or thirties, for instance, you're reminded that, even as you're clicking away, doing hundreds of rolls of film a month, what you're really doing each time you shoot is recording something.You're trying to get to one moment with one frame that eventually may speak for your generation.

Is there any particular photographic project that you want to do today? Or do you have anything else in mind, besides photography? I keep hearing about a film project.

I was toying with the idea of doing film. But I've also realized just how much I enjoy photography, and from being in the business as long as I have, I know what a commitment making a film involves: years of work just on that one project, at least two to three years from start to finish. Right now I enjoy what I do so much that I've decided to wait. Maybe down the way it's something I will do.

And in terms of photography?

I loved doing the Africa book. It was a place I had always wanted to venture to. I was so taken that I went back six months later and just took pictures. I loved working with only what was in front of me, as it came along. It's a matter of composing with your eye what's going on in front of you, bringing what you've learned into the moment you're in.

Would you go back to another project like *Africa*?

That's something I would do. I want to put myself in front of a subject I find interesting, that I get energy from in terms of visual stimulation. It's a healthy thing to do, to regenerate yourself.

Are you ever surprised by your photographs, surprised by your subconscious? In *Africa,* for instance, it happened quite a lot that you took a photograph you were not expecting. Did you project things you weren't planning to?

Sometimes you have an innate sense of what's in front of you. You can feel you have wandered upon a person with a special energy, or a place somehow charged, even a particular rock that's strange or graphic. So sometimes I am surprised, but I think the surprise in the moment is the true magic of the medium.