

few photographers who shoot fashion and celebrities for a living, as Albert Watson does, have established themselves as first-rate artists. The inimitable Watson did so in one brilliant stroke with the 1994 publication of his book *Cyclops* (Callaway Editions), and his artistry has been vindicated by collectors' demand for prints, which Watson wouldn't dream of letting anyone else make. ("Golden Boy," right, is his best-selling image.) But until you see the photographer in action, you can't fully grasp the elegant simplicity of the craft behind his art. "People think I'm very technical," says Watson, who is refreshingly forthcoming about what others might regard as trade secrets. "Really, I believe in technique only as a way of getting where I want to go artistically."

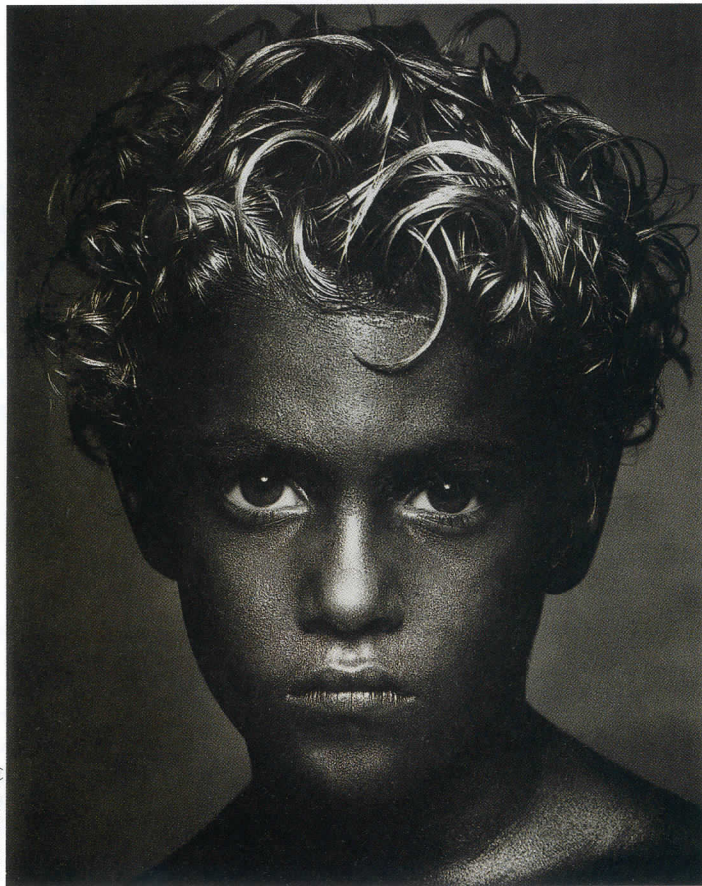
Visit Watson's vast Manhattan studio, however, and you can see that his is no ordinary light-box-and-cyclorama technique. An amazing 30 to 50 feet separate camera and background; in between, hovering on booms, is a tight cluster of strobe heads, Plexiglas diffusion panels, and black cloth and cardboard "flags." "Distance is everything," the photographer explains.

Watson maintains a startlingly long distance between subject and background so that he can "layer" his light—specifically, to keep background light from spilling forward and softening his subjects' deliciously crisp contours. "In a perfect world, I'd put the background 75 yards

away," he says. "But since my studio isn't big enough, I build a tunnel of black flags to protect the person from stray light." There's also the shockingly short distance between Watson's

lights and his subjects—as little as 18 inches for a tight shot such as his virtuoso portrait of film icon Clint Eastwood (opposite). "My whole system of lighting is based on contrast," Watson says,

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ALBERT WATSON (2)

"and the closer the light, the higher the contrast." That strong contrast is due to the light's natural falloff: "With a high source that close, a forehead can read f/22 and the chin f/11. Back the light away a few feet, and you can reduce that two-stop difference to a half stop."

When he really wants to soften his light, Watson is loath to use a softbox. Instead, he sticks with a single strobe head in a small reflector and moves in his trusty flags. "Flagging is more than just a way of preventing flare and light spill," he says. "By extending flags into the light path, you dramatically alter the light's quality. I can put a razor blade of raw, nasty light on you, and by moving a flag into the beam I can take it back to the softest light." Indeed, Watson may finagle as many as four or five small flags into a two-foot space between light and subject. They soften the beam and train it on parts of the subject he wants to highlight, making other areas a deep, dense, trademark black.

Yet Watson is as likely to swaddle his subjects in all-enveloping light as he is to plunge them into shadow. Either way, he manages both to flatter and reveal. So it's understandable that when Watson arrived at the White House for a *Newsweek* magazine preelection presidential portrait, Bill Clinton asked the photographer to make him look as good as he had Clint Eastwood. It was an executive order that only Watson's immense talent could fulfill. —RUSSELL HART

■ lighting

"Good lighting comes in many forms, but the differences boil down to contrast. If you understand that early on, you can solve a million problems and give your work more depth. Unfortunately, the light in today's fashion photography is mostly flattened out. It's rare that you see something and say, 'My God, that's wonderfully lit.' Photographers hit on a certain formula and then just drop in the current models and the hot hair and makeup. I'm not against simple; there's nothing wrong with ring flash, the most mindless of lighting. What's wrong is to use it over and over again."

■ testing

"Set aside a day, get a studio, and test your lighting. Start with a basic raw light; put it just two feet from the person's face, then take a shot. Move the light back a bit, correct the exposure, and take another. Then back again. Repeat the whole thing with one reflector, then two. Figure out at what point a white background flares, and at what point a black background really goes black. Record each variation on a card within the frame. It sounds boring, but on one roll you'll get an amazing amount of information. You'll conquer contrast. You'll conquer the entire mood of light."

■ models

"There's a delicate balance to photographing people. Fiddle with technique too much, and by the time you've got it right you've lost the subject. Try to work out your lighting before the person steps in. It's better to have a good shot of someone with the top right corner of the background a bit brighter than to have the top right perfect and the person not connecting. And if you're working in black and white, you can always tone that corner down in printing. I do a 'zone scan' before shooting; when I look through the finder I'm already seeing the things I'm likely to do in the darkroom."

■ printing

"There's a magic line that runs from the eye of the photographer as he takes the shot to the darkroom where he makes the print. If you leave the printing to someone else, every print will end up having the same pulse. Look at prints by Strand and Weston; they may not be perfect, but they look great. The photographer made a decision to accept them. By any technical standard, Tina Modotti's platinum prints are too dark—that's my natural inclination too—but they look great. So they're really not too dark after all. Ansel Adams's prints may be technically perfect, but they lack emotion."

