



AMERICAN  
**PHOTO**  
**ON CAMPUS**

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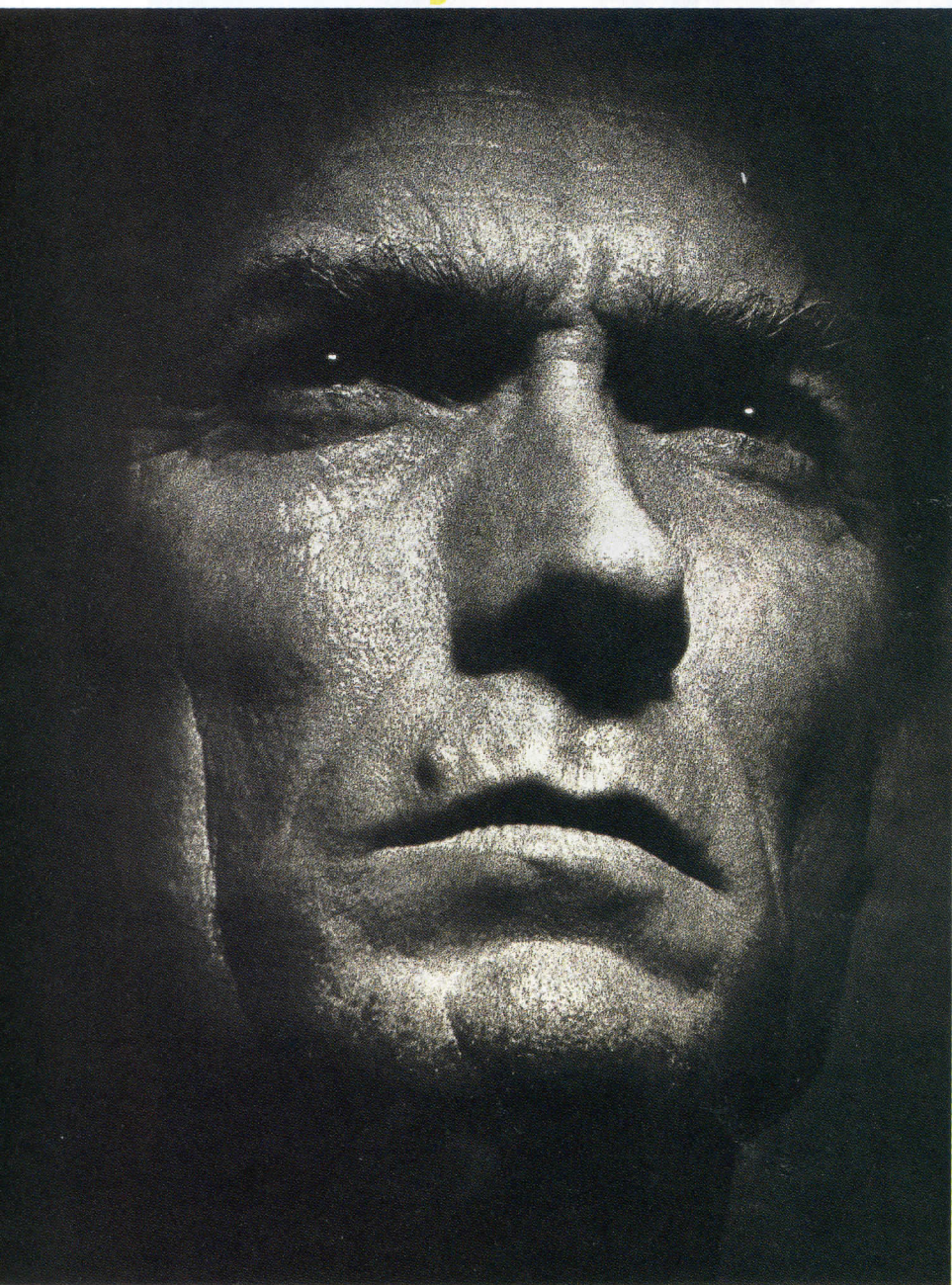
**SPECIAL  
STUDIO  
ISSUE**  
**ALBERT  
WATSON'S  
ARTFUL  
SECRETS**  
FROM  
LIGHTING  
TO MODELS,  
AND  
MORE

**STUDENT  
PORTFOLIOS  
THE WEB  
FOR CHEAP  
MENTORS  
TOP SCHOOL  
PROFILE**



# seeing the light

For Albert Watson,  
craft is the secret to vision.  
By Russell Hart



Above: "Clint Eastwood, NYC, May 1985," shot with a single "flagged" light. Opposite: image from a recent fashion shoot for Germany's Stern magazine.

No photographer has done more to blur the distinction between commercial and fine-art photography than Albert Watson. "I was never comfortable being dropped into any one category," explains Watson, whose six-story studio is a landmark in New York City's photographic scene. Though Watson shoots fashion and celebrities for a living—work that has appeared on hundreds of *Vogue* covers, in main-

stream magazines such as *Life* and *Newsweek*, and in ad campaigns for Levi's and The Gap—he does it with such inimitable artistry that there simply is no line between those photographs and his "personal" work, self-assigned imagery encompassing everything from landscapes of standing stones in his native Scotland to still lifes of the funereal artifacts of Egypt's King Tut. That's a line many lesser photographers feel compelled to draw.

What blurs that much-discussed line more than anything is Watson's extraordinary photographic craft, both in the studio and in the darkroom. He is at once a master of lighting (see page 20) and a masterful printer; in fact, unlike many successful photographers, he wouldn't dream of letting anyone else make the prints his collectors constantly demand. "People think I'm very technical," says Watson. That's probably because Watson is refreshingly forthright about how he makes pictures; many photographers (especially the famous ones) often deem technique too trivial to discuss with interviewers, and still others don't want to give away their trade secrets. Watson will have none of that. "To be honest, I find technique annoying," he says. "But it would be more annoying not to have it." For Watson, technique is just a means to an end. "I believe in it only as a way of getting where I want to go artistically," he says.

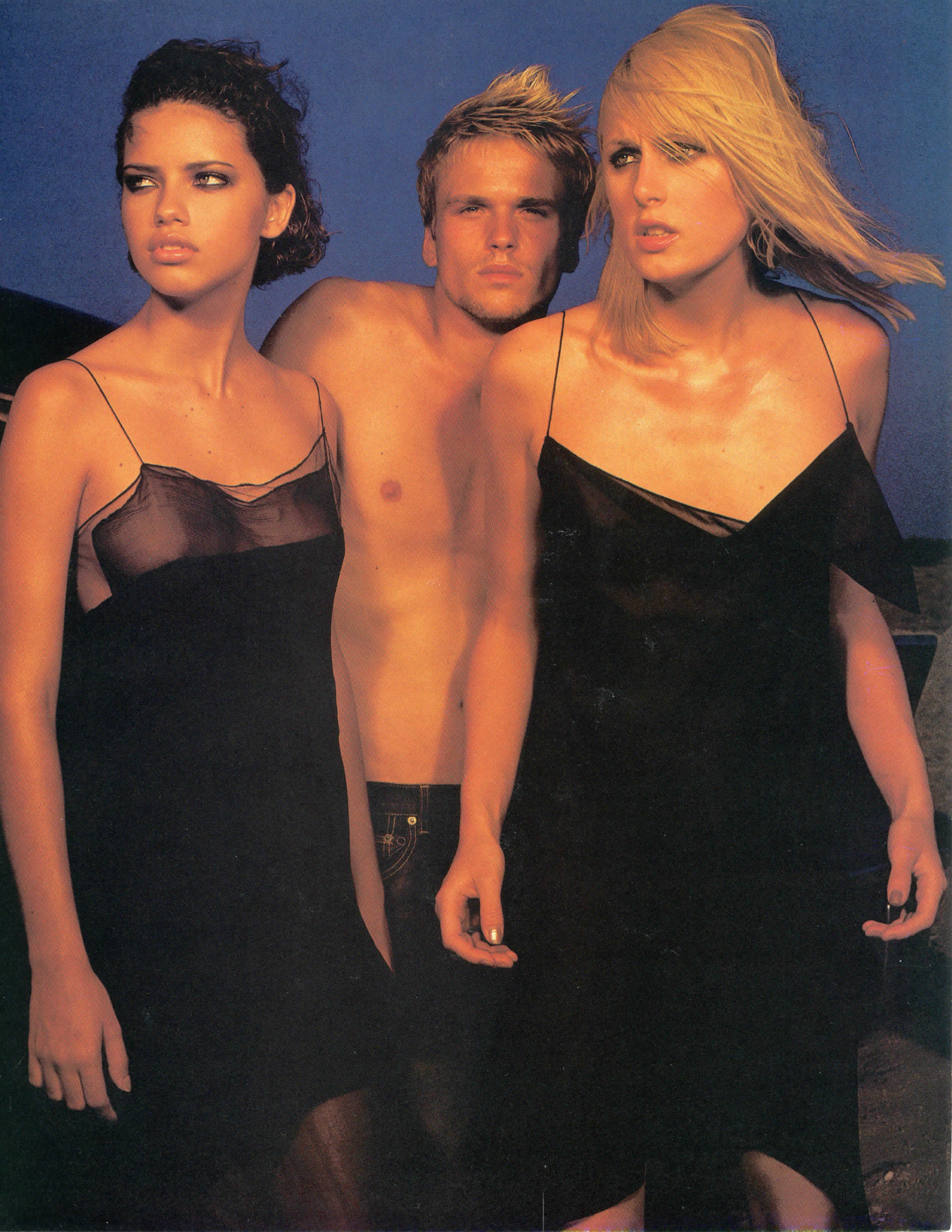
Visit Watson's vast Manhattan studio, however, and you can see that his is no ordinary lightbox-and-cyclorama technique. In a typical lighting setup, an amazing 30 to 50 feet separate camera and background; in between, hovering on booms, is a tight cluster of strobe heads, diffusion panels, and black cloth and cardboard "flags."

The startlingly long distance between camera and background allows Watson to "layer" his light—specifically, to keep background light from spilling forward and softening his subjects' 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 main lights and his subjects—as little as 18 inches for a tight shot such as his virtuoso portrait of Clint Eastwood (left). "My whole system of lighting is based on contrast," Watson says, "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," he says.

When he really wants to soften his light,













Opposite: "Keith Richards, NYC, 1988." This page: Dennis Rodman, shot for a recent Rolling Stone cover on which his tongue was digitally lengthened.



**"To be honest, I find technique annoying," says Watson. "But it would be more annoying not to have it."**

Watson is loathe 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 explains. "By extending flags into the light path, you can 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 different five small flags into a two-foot space between light and subject. These will soften the beam and train it on parts of the subject he wants to highlight, making other areas a deep, dense, trademark black.

Still, Watson is as likely to swaddle his subjects in all-enveloping light as he is to plunge them into shadow. "Good lighting comes in many forms, but the differences boil down to contrast," he says. "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."



Despite his unique approach to lighting, Watson knows better than to agonize over it while a portrait subject is waiting to be shot. "There's a delicate balance to photographing people," he says. "Fiddle with technique too much, and by the time you've got it right the subject is looking bored and distracted. You should 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 a bit brighter than to have the top right corner perfect and the person not connecting with the camera. And if you're working in black and white, you can always tone that corner down in printing."

Indeed, for Watson, printing is as important to the final result as lighting—giving him a degree of control unavailable to nonprinting photographers. "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," he says. "If you let someone else do your printing, 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 conscious decision to accept them. By any technical standard, Tina Modotti's prints are too dark, 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."

Watson is the first to admit that his expertise comes from years of experimentation. After studying film in Great Britain, he took up photography and moved to Los Angeles, then decided he'd rather shoot fashion and moved to New York in 1976. It wasn't until 1994 that he felt ready for his first book, the now-classic monograph *Cyclops*—an outsize volume with quadratone reproductions and mix-and-match typography

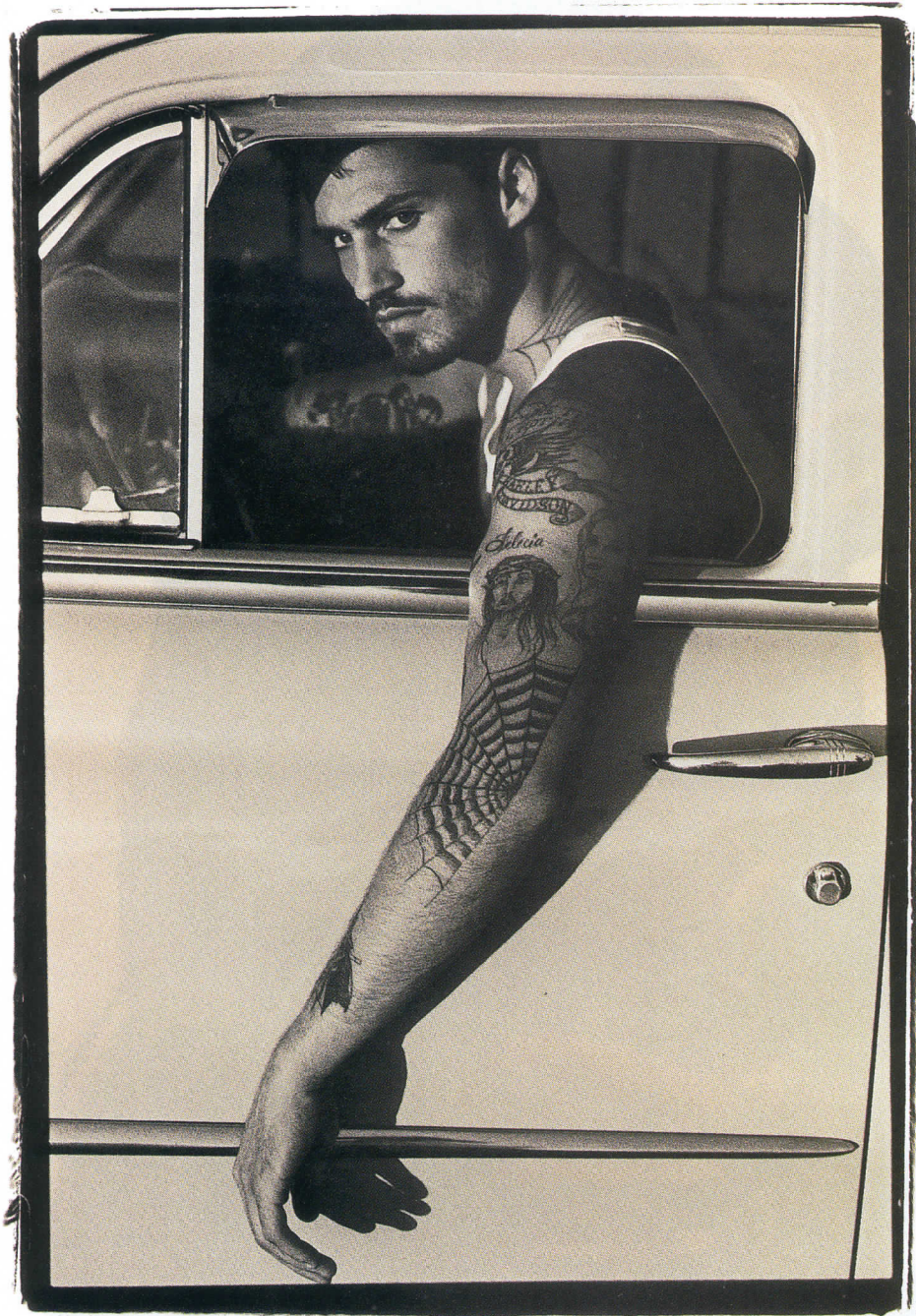
ALBERT WATSON (2)





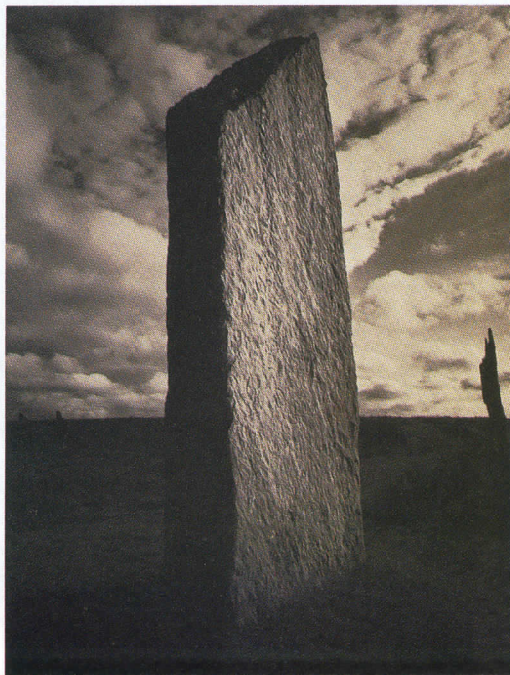


Left: "Danny Hall, prisoner of Louisiana State Penitentiary, body shop, November 1991," shot with the Canon EOS-1. Below left: a strobe-lit monolith in Scotland's Orkney Islands.



ALBERT WATSON ©

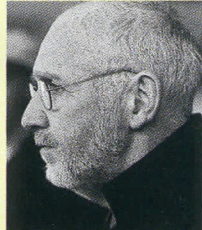
**"Good lighting comes in many forms," says Watson. "but the differences boil down to contrast."**



by star graphic designer David Carson. A sequel, called *Road Kill*, is in the works, and will be very different. "I want it to be the opposite of a coffee-table book," says Watson. The book's dummy was just that: comfortably small in size, with more than 800 parchment-thin pages, gold inset lettering on a black leather cover, and a red-cord place marker. If that sounds like a Bible, you're on the right track. The book will be religion to Watson's devoted following.

## lessonplan Watson on lighting

**"Set aside a day, get a studio, and test your lighting. Use a friend, not a model, or you'll spend too much time trying to make a good picture. 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, not on a separate piece of paper. It sounds boring, but on one roll you'll get an amazing amount of information. You'll conquer contrast.**



**"Contrast can be totally controlled with black flags. Want soft light? Just extend flags into the light beam, and you can make it as soft as a softbox. Your studio floor should also be black, no question, to keep light from bouncing back up. If you want light coming from below, then just put white boards on the floor. Basically, you can build the light around the subject by adding and subtracting it. This is a much more flexible kind of lighting system than softboxes and other light-modifying hardware. You can create a multitude of effects with it."** —ALBERT WATSON