



MASTERS

digitalevolution

for Douglas Kirkland, the computer is just another creative step in a storied career



"An explosion" is how Douglas Kirkland describes his career's 40th year. The acclaimed portraitist has been shooting pictures for a July book on the making of *Titanic*, the movie with the famously titanic budget; documenting "Wake Up," a Red Cross program to promote peace through music in strife-torn Africa; and finishing work for the October publication of *Body Stories* (Mondadori/Electa), a book that is sure to testify to Kirkland's sharp eye for the human form. He's also preparing a major retrospective of his photographs that will be held this October in Verona, Italy, which coincides with yet another book—a monograph that will trace Kirkland's life in photography. Naturally, the latter will include Kirkland's intimate early-1960s portraits of Marilyn Monroe. But it will also showcase the stylish and sensitive celebrity portraits that Kirkland has been shooting all along for magazines like *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Premiere*.

Kirkland has seen stars come

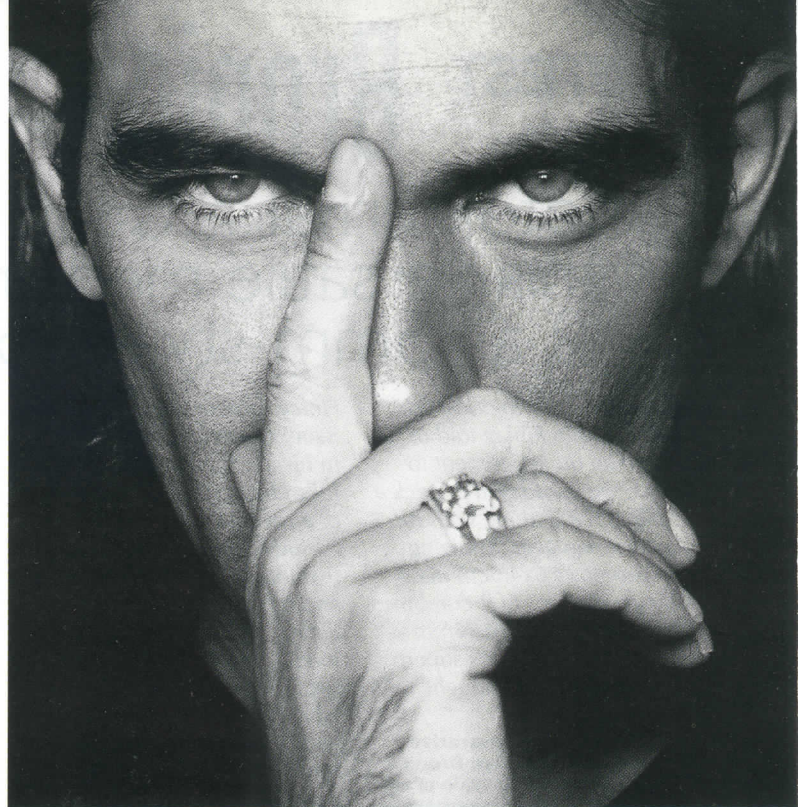
and go. But there's one newcomer to the photographic firmament that he's sure is here to stay: digital imaging. Kirkland started using the computer in his photography in 1991, when he was invited to the first Photoshop sessions at the Center for Creative Imaging in Camden, Maine. His first two years of digital imaging were spent trying out every special effect the technology could deliver. He reinterpreted his existing photographs, including the famous shots of Marilyn, and his efforts were collected in the 1993 book *Icons*. "When I look back at *Icons*, many of the images seem crude to me," says Kirkland, always refreshingly honest about his work. "I was seduced and dazzled by all the colors, the filters, the tools. It was a period of experimentation."

But like many photographers who began by making pictures with "computer" written all over them, Kirkland has since discovered the subtler possibilities of digital imaging. *Body Stories* is the outcome of that learning experience. "The project helped me arrive at a greater level of sophistication, not only technically but aesthetically," he says. "The computer lets you do things so fast and easily that you have to

Top left: Kirkland used several different digital effects for his 1992 portrait of actor Robert De Niro, then decided to composite them for the final image, which was included in his book *Icons*.

Left: A manipulated 1994 portrait of actress Jessica Lange.

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know when to stop. You have to be able to walk away and come back and see if something works, and to learn to throw it away if it doesn't." In *Body Stories*, that sometimes meant Kirkland would take an image through a range of effects—then finally settle on something so invisibly manip-

“Digital imaging is just one of my tools,” says Kirkland.

ulated you'd never know it was once a computer file. Says the photographer, “Digital imaging is just one of my tools, like the softbox.”

For Kirkland, who still captures his images on real film (Kodak T-Max films for black and white and Ektachrome 100 Plus for color) with real cameras (the Canon EOS-1N for 35mm

work), the computer has simply become a “wondrous darkroom.” Can it do everything the old-fashioned, fixer-scented darkroom can do? “It may be an unpopular answer,” he says, “but I think it can. The computer eats up the traditional darkroom.” Kirkland thinks this is true even of the most manipulative techniques. “Take cross-processing,” he says. “You can’t guarantee the effect, and that’s unacceptable to me if I’m working on a job. I can do the same thing better and more reliably on the computer.”

Kirkland’s openness to new ideas, technologies, and subjects has always kept him working. The photographer laughs about a recent lecture in which he discussed the way digital imaging has affected his work, only to have a young member of the audience express blunt amazement at his forward thinking. “How come you’re so old,” he asked Kirkland, “but you’re so into all this cool stuff?” Answered Kirkland, “Because I’m still growing.” —RUSSELL HART

Top right: Kirkland shot this 1996 portrait of actor Antonio Banderas in color, then decided to convert it to black and white—digitally, of course.

Top left: Kirkland pixellated movie special effects maven Richard Edlund for a Kodak ad campaign. Right: Eyes were lightened for a more penetrating portrait.