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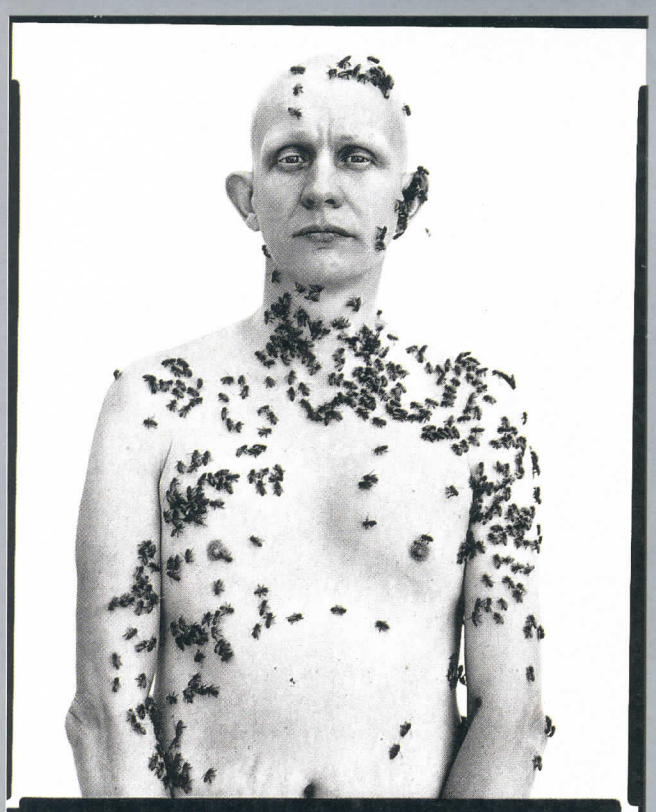
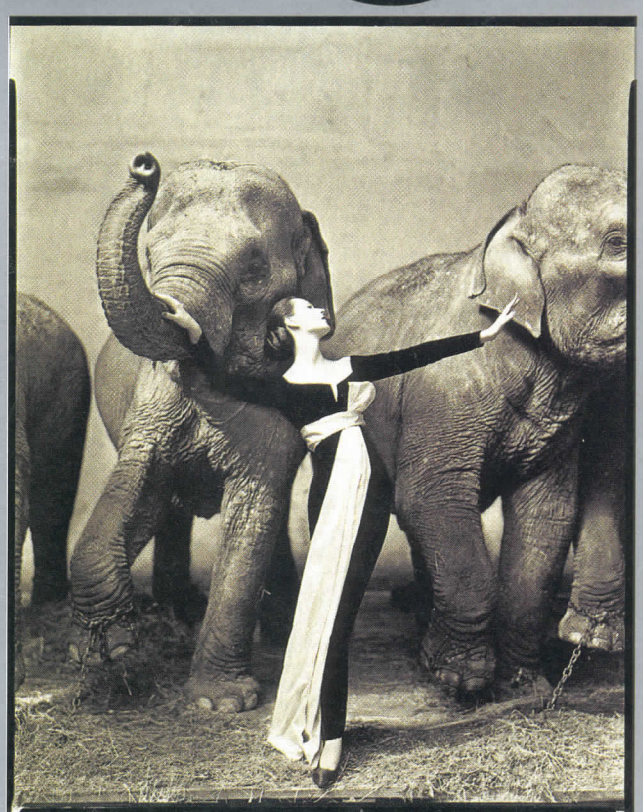
# AMERICAN PHOTO®

## THE SECRETS OF AMERICA'S MASTER PHOTOGRAPHE

# AVEDON





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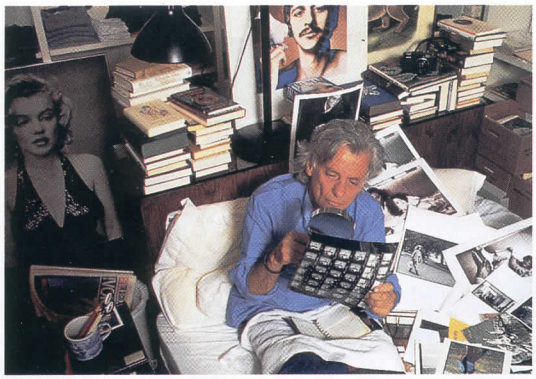


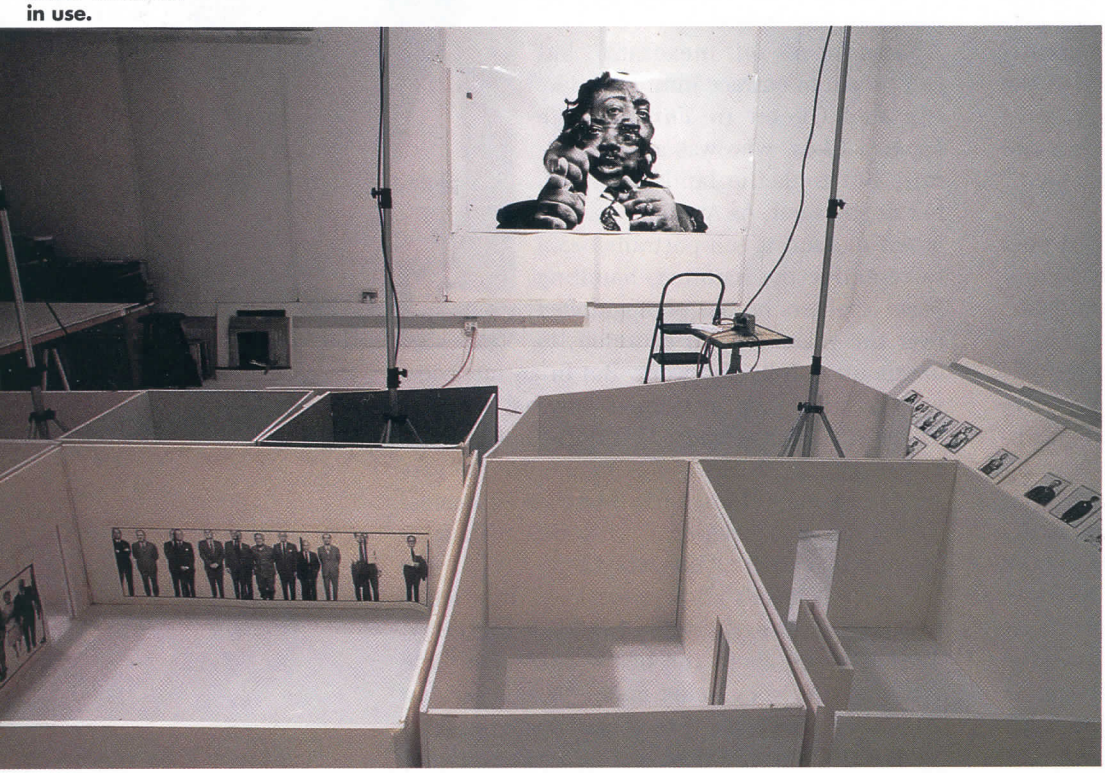
MAGGIE STEBER

# Evidence of Avedon: The Master's Craft

**Above: In his studio bedroom, Avedon scopes contact prints from a recent shoot. Below: An in-progress model of Avedon's Whitney show and a rare double-exposure exhibition print of Rev. Al Sharpton. Opposite page: Avedon's 8x10 and lighting gear inhabit a small closet when not in use.**

*While much has been written about Richard Avedon the artist, little has been noted about the extraordinary craftsmanship he brings to his photography. Behind the images we see in books and on museum walls lies an exacting technician and business manager—as all good photographers must be. This side of Avedon is evident in the unmistakable (though astonishingly simple) lighting techniques he has developed over the years—lighting that others imitate but never manage to duplicate. It is evident in the quality of an Avedon print, which has almost certainly been made by a particular artisan who knows the master's dictates intimately, and in the careful choice of tried and true equipment. It is evident in the remarkable workshop that Avedon has conducted with a group of handpicked students. And it is evident in the bustling Manhattan atelier he has built—a place where he is able to clear his mind to meet the creative and technical challenges of his vision.*

*As we prepared the preceding portfolio of Avedon's art,* American Photo *contributing editor Russell Hart was camped out in the photographer's studio taking notes. On these pages he gives us a rare glimpse behind the scenes, showing a master craftsman at work.*



RUSSELL HART

## THE ATELIER: Avedon Inc.

Richard Avedon's Upper East Side townhouse is a far cry from the fussy minimalism of many Manhattan photo studios. Its spaces are small and labyrinthine, and each turn seems to take the visitor into another part of the master's mind and experience. In the studio, which also serves as a viewing area for Avedon's enormous exhibition prints, a double-exposure portrait of the black leader Rev. Al Sharpton done for *The New Yorker* runs across ten feet of wall, while a foam-core mock-up of Avedon's Whitney show, complete with HO-scale photographs, awaits further planning. Downstairs in the darkroom, prints of model Nadja Auermann (from a recent Neiman Marcus shoot) float in circles in the wash tray. Upstairs in the art director's office, an entire wall is pushpinned with small photocopies of Avedon's greatest hits, arranged in sequence for his new book, *Evidence*. In small adjacent rooms, countless boxes of chromes, prints, and contact sheets have labels that read like a roster of 20th-century America's most celebrated people. Open one box and out spill Avedon's black-and-white proof sheets from his 1967 Beatles shoot for *Look* magazine, minus the psychedelic colors that were added for publication. Open another and you find prints of Suzy Parker modeling the Paris collections of 1956.

Avedon's own living quarters on the second floor (where he resides when not at his Montauk, Long Island, home) seem just an extension of the building's working areas. Indeed, one long wall is a bulletin board layered with old pictures, family snapshots, newspaper clippings, postcards, and

miscellaneous scraps that have caught his inquiring eye.

Turning this rambling environment into a virtual beehive of activity are Avedon's 11 full-time employees, plus assorted freelancers. Some of their roles are familiar—a receptionist (Bill Bachmann), a manager (executive director Norma Stevens), and four assistants (Marc Royce, Kara Glynn, Steve Wiley, and John Mannion). But some play parts that few other photographers could afford, such as in-house archivist (Molly Logan), full-time art director (Mary Shanahan), and sales and usage manager (Andrew Thomas), not to mention a full-time accountant and housekeeper. (Also on hand are two freelance print spotters who worked full-time on the Whitney show, three art assistants, and sundry other help.) By the way, Avedon Incorporated provides staffers with health insurance, paid vacation, and even a pension fund.

## CAMERA CLOSET: A Case Study

What camera becomes a legend most? It depends. Richard Avedon's immense talent can't be reduced to hardware, but most of his current work is done with two film formats: 2¼ square and 8x10.

Medium format's mobility seems to lend itself to Avedon's fashion work. A foursome of Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex cameras with standard 80mm f/2.8 lenses are the photographer's front line, quickly loaded and reloaded by assistants during a shoot. "The Rollei is Dick's true love," says Marc Royce, Avedon's first assistant. "He feels totally comfortable with it." When Avedon wants a tighter shot (head or head and shoulders), he slips a supplementary closeup diopter on the Rollei or switches to a Hasselblad 500CM with a longer 150mm f/4 lens.

Portraiture is more or less the domain of Avedon's 8x10—though he alternates his preferred formats freely, according to his assistants. ("It's partly a matter of how fast he needs to work," says Royce. "The 8x10 slows him down, and sometimes that's good.") For 8x10 work, which is done with either a 360mm f/6.8 Schneider Symmar-S or a 360mm f/6.3 Fujinon-W lens, Avedon relies on an aging Sinar p1; on location, a collapsible


RUSSELL HART

Deardorff wooden field camera fills in for the Sinar. Lighting—if not daylight—is always strobe, powered by 2,000-watt-second Elinchrom packs.

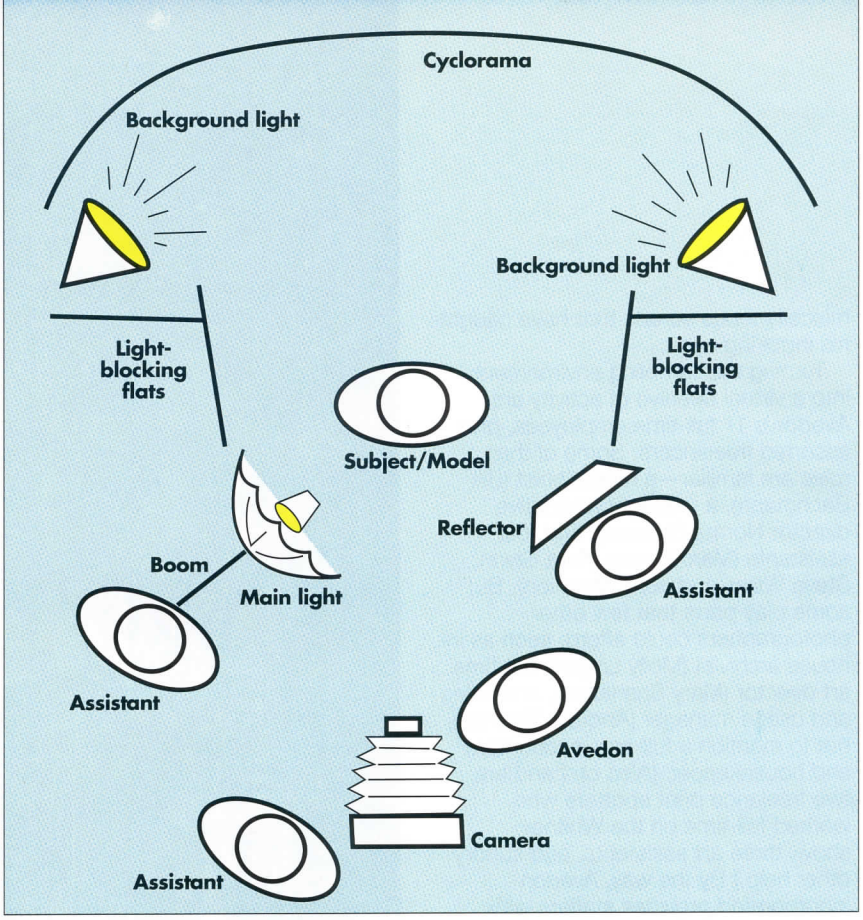
Film is just as basic. For 2¼, Plus-X (rated at E.I. 80) is Avedon's choice, though with daylight he switches to Tri-X—the amateur (ISO 400) version, because it pushes better. Professional Tri-X (rated at E.I. 200) is the standard for Avedon's 8x10 work, in any light. Avedon negatives are dense, due in no small part to his disregard for recommended development times. Even with normal exposure, Tri-X may get as much as 15 minutes of development in a deep tank of D-76—over half again the usual amount.

All that said, film and equipment are the furthest things from Avedon's mind during a shoot. "It's more about a feeling for him," says Marc Royce. "He doesn't care what he's using as long as he's getting what he wants out of it." And what about the all-important relationship between photographer and sitter? Does Avedon coach or coax his subjects? His strategy seems to be to make them feel at home, then single out the gestures or features that most intrigue him. "Dick stands in the same position, oftentimes, as the person he's about to photograph," observes a former assistant from the *In the American West* project. "It's something I do unconsciously," says Avedon. "I want to know how it feels. I think I want to encourage the thing I like about the way he stands. I want to encourage without words."

As an exception that proves the rule, Avedon recounts a White House sitting with Gerald Ford in which the president's most telling feature was his hands. "His face was impassive, but his hands were twisted and tense. And I thought, that's it, that's the contradiction in the photograph that will tell what it's like to be who he is at this moment. And I made the mistake of telling him. I said, 'President Ford, your hands are beautiful. Just don't move.' And as I went back to lower the camera to include them, his hands became benign and perfect and boring and revealing of nothing."

**Above right: A bird's-eye view of a typical Avedon portrait-lighting scheme. Below: A bevy of TLRs stare out from Avedon's camera closet.**


RUSSELL HART




MARK GARTLAND

## LIGHT SCHEME: Artistry Illuminated

The secret to Richard Avedon's studio lighting should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the freewheeling, energetic style of the photographer's fashion work. Instead of mounting his main light on a stand—the usual practice, and one that limits the subject's movement—he has first assistant Marc Royce hold it at the end of a telescoping boom. Once the light's angle and position are to Avedon's liking and a strobe reading is taken, Royce follows the model with the light the way a sound technician on a movie set would track an actor with a boom microphone. As Avedon fires away, his subject is free to move around. "It's motion that gives life to the picture," says Royce, no doubt speaking for the master.

For consistent exposures, Royce has to keep the light at a steady distance from the subject—though black and white, the bulk of Avedon's current work, is more forgiving of variations than color transparency film. (When Avedon shoots color, or works with 8x10 rather than 2¼, his light is more likely to be fixed in position.) Even so, there's a calculated margin for creative error in that approach. "Avedon likes the subtle, unexpected changes that happen when you work this way," says Royce.

Avedon's moving light is usually bounced into an umbrella or a small, mylar-covered parabolic dome to soften it, while his second and third assistants (Kara Glynn and Steve Wiley, respectively) angle small squares of metallized cardboard to reflect light into the subject's eyes. A fourth assistant handles film changes. The background—always the same white-painted cyclorama, dubbed "the cove" for its smooth, enclosing curves—is lighted by two strobe heads on adjustable poles held in place with floor-to-ceiling tension. If Avedon wants a gray background behind his subject, his assistants power down the lights so that they're two stops less bright than the main source. (A typical incident reading at the subject is f/16.5, for which gray would require a reading of f/8.5.) If Avedon wants a white background, the lights are powered up to within a half-stop of the main light (f/16) to insure just a hint of tone. ("He doesn't like a pure, pure white," says Royce.) Adjustable flats are placed to either side of the subject to keep unwanted background light from filling shadows or causing flare.

For larger subjects (elephants included), Avedon rents more spacious quarters downtown, lately favoring a daylight studio. Or he goes on location. "He hates the studio these days," says Marc Royce. "He's looking for something new and better."

## DARKROOM DRAMA: The Printer's Art

Avedon's driven lifestyle doesn't afford him the luxury of printing his own work. But while others may get their hands wet on his behalf, he is involved in every step of the process. "Dick is extremely specific about an emotional quality that he wants in the print," says Ruedi Hofmann, a former Avedon assistant who now makes the photographer's large-scale exhibition prints. "He'll talk about making a print angry or fiery or romantic or kind." By Avedon's own account, Hofmann has been roundly successful at translating that feeling into the language of darkroom technique. Says the photographer, "When it comes to printing, Ruedi and I are one person."

Marc Royce, who with Avedon second assistant Kara Glynn makes prints up to 20x24 inches in the photographer's surprisingly spartan basement darkroom, remembers vividly his first experience with Avedon's demanding approach to printing. "I arrived thinking I was a pretty good printer," he says. Royce's darkroom self-esteem quickly plummeted, though, when Avedon handed him a negative and asked him to make a series of prints from it with a wide range of exposures and contrast levels. "When I gave him the prints, he took a pair of scissors and cut the head from one contrast and put it on the body from another contrast, then cut out a portion of a building that had the lightness he wanted and put it with another building that was darker," says Royce, who ended up making most of the prints for Avedon's recent *An Autobiography.*

Hofmann's experience is much the same. "When I show Dick test prints, he'll choose one with the best eyes, and if that print isn't the best for him overall, he'll cut out a nose or a mouth from another print and paste it on," he says. "The final print is often a composite of all the test prints I've made. But you have to be careful when you give Dick a final print, because he's likely to grab a grease pencil and start marking it up all over again. For him, printing is always a *process."*

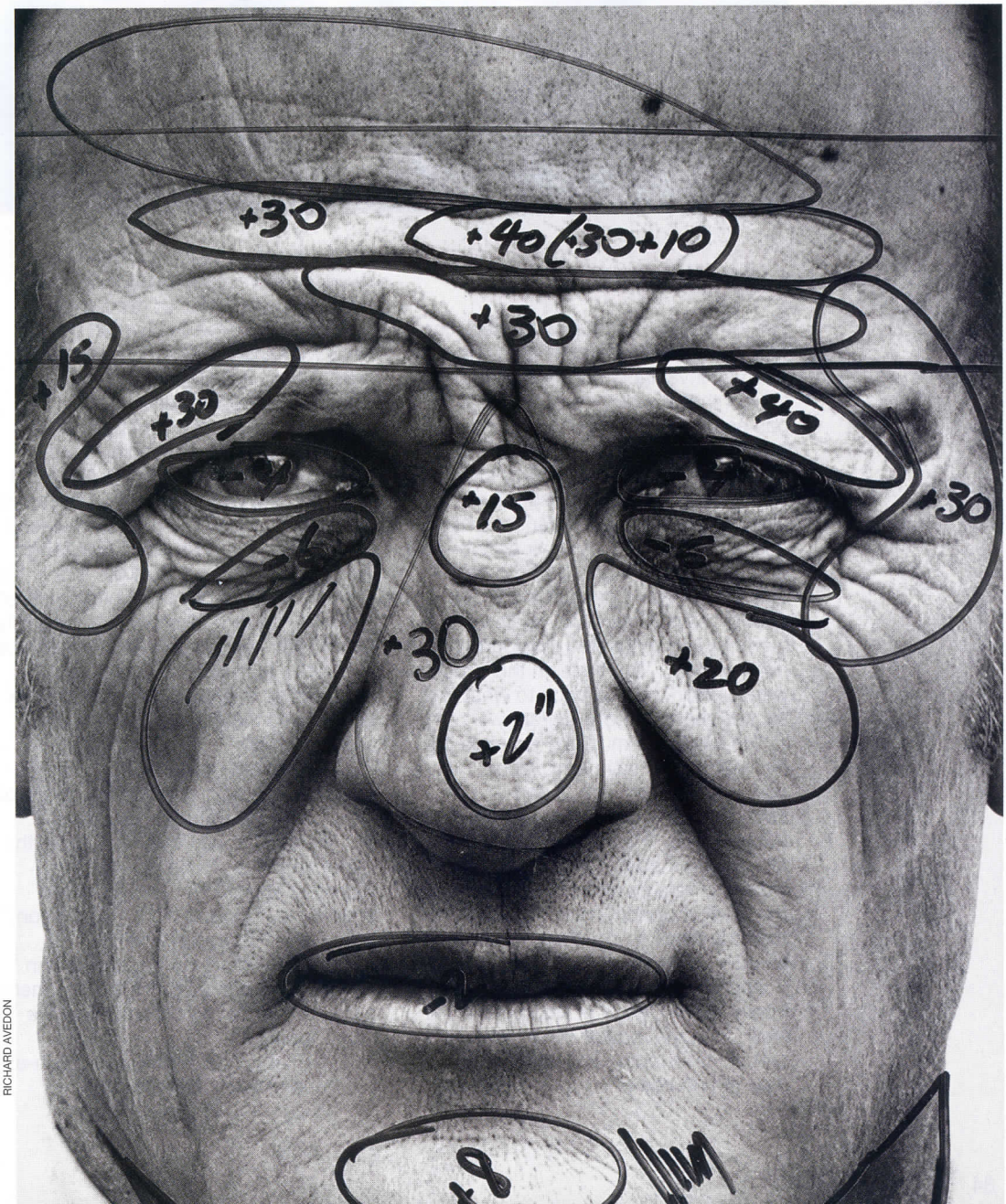
Eight by ten feet and beyond in scale, Avedon's biggest exhibition prints are exposed with a modified horizontal enlarger outfitted with a superbright pulsed-xenon light source, then developed with a 30-year-old chain-drive trough processor. (Their size requires that they be created in sections cut from 50-inch rolls.) Making them presents a physical challenge even greater than the darkroom's usual demands, according to Hofmann. Yet curiously, their proportion offers a degree of creative control not possible with smaller prints.

Take the example here, a portrait of three Mormon men from Avedon's *In the American West* project. The print's larger-than-life size means that dodging and burning-in can be used actually to modulate the tones of the individual faces. (Specific times are indicated on the detail by Hofmann's grease-pencil markings.) That manipulation, next to impossible in a print of conventional size, gives the face a dimensionality it wouldn't otherwise have. "Big prints require a very different approach," says Hofmann. They also change the viewing experience in a qualitative way. As Avedon himself once said of an outsized portrait, "I saw things in his eyes... that aren't revealed in a 16x20." The print's size, he remarked, "shifts the meaning of the picture."

The printing for Avedon's blockbuster Whitney show has consumed three years, off and on. "When we first started, it took as long as a week to finish one image," says Hofmann, who makes an edition of from two to eight prints once Avedon gives the final go-ahead. "Now we're down to about one a day."

RICHARD AVEDON

**Below: A detail from a 5½ x 6½-foot Avedon exhibition print of a Morman father and his sons (above) shows printer Ruedi Hofmann's precise dodging and burning-in directions.**




RICHARD AVEDON


MAGGIE STEBER

**Avedon meets with members of his class. Standing from left to right: Julie Genser, Mark Lyon, Barry Munger, Kevin Funabashi. Seated: Susan Oken, Avedon, Nina Drapacz, Billy Cunningham, Jill Graham, Eileen Travell, Maxine Henryson, Nelson Bakerman.**

## THE MASTER CLASS: Inspired Instruction

For the lucky 16 people who made the final cut, Avedon's master class has been an invaluable photographic boost. It's not that the photographer's cachet has netted them bigger and better assignments, though many have been doing extracurricular shooting for *The New Yorker* magazine under his direction. Rather, the experience has changed the way they think about—and go about—their work. "I felt I'd hit a wall with what I'd been doing in the 1980s," says Chris Callis, a class member and respected photographer in his own right. "But through this process with Avedon, I came back to what first excited me about photography."

"He taught as much by example as by instruction," says Amy Arbus, daughter of Diane Arbus and contributor to publications such as *The Village Voice.* "He's just amazing to be around. He's absolutely tireless. And whatever he's doing at the moment is the most important thing in his life. He took the class so seriously, it made us all want to do the same thing."

Sponsored last year by the International Center of Photography in New York, the master class revolved around six Avedon assignments given over the course of six long weekends, once a month. (Avedon chose his students from several hundred portfolios submitted for admission.)

Perhaps inspired by Avedon's own 1945 workshop experience with the great Alexey Brodovitch, the class's teaching method centered on critiques—by Avedon and by fellow students. "I worked incredibly hard on the first assignment," says Callis. "I did four pictures, with big constructions that each took a week to make. And when I brought them in, instead of criticizing them directly, Avedon told me that in his experience the more production a shoot requires, the more the photograph really takes itself—and makes him feel left out, in creative terms. Other people were more direct; they said the images were boring, and that I should have a drink and loosen up."

Callis himself was unhappy with the results of the next assignment, to shoot New York's St. Patrick's Day parade. But Avedon's third assignment was the perfect antidote to Callis's studied, technical approach: to make family snapshots. "It was a sort of revelation," says Callis. "It brought me back to photos I'd shot of my frat brothers in 1963. Those pictures had a life to them, a joy, and these new images had the same feeling."

Callis has since returned to catch-as-catch-can street shooting, and Avedon's injunction to get loose has had an effect on other class members as well. "The trick is to be able to let it go," says Amy Arbus. "You should know what you want going into a photograph, but sometimes you become so stuck on getting what you want that you miss what's there."

Since the last assignment—an Avedon-dubbed "portrait hootenanny" held at the photographer's Montauk home, in which participants photographed each other—the class has continued to meet informally, with and without its famous teacher. Members now call on one another freely for advice. But what remains with them, above all, is the example of the master. "What you go away with is that he's an extremely brave guy," says Chris Callis. "A lot of photographers are stopped by their fears, but nothing will hold Avedon back from making a photograph. He'll do whatever it takes to fulfill his vision." Says Amy Arbus, "Avedon made us realize that you can't dilly-dally with this thing you love. You have to push it to a new level. He made every one of us feel we had a responsibility to be not just a good photographer, but a great one."

Alas, the class was a one-time affair. The good news: One of Avedon's upcoming books will be based on his teachings. That's how-to knowledge from the top. ■