

Just Portraiture: A Legend at 100

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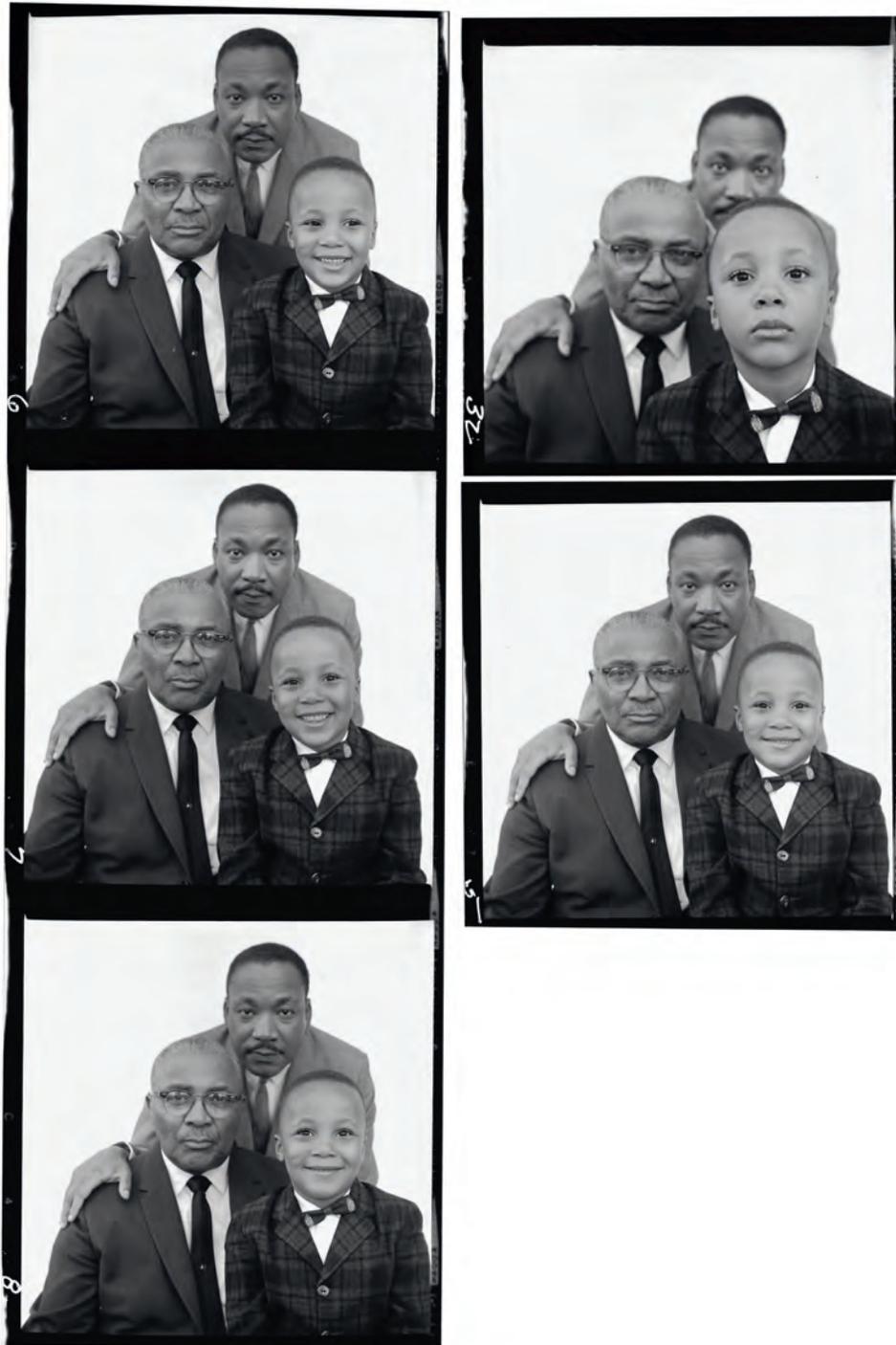


Fig. 1 (previous spread and above): Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights leader, with his father, Martin Luther King Sr., Baptist minister, and his son, Martin Luther King III, Atlanta, March 22, 1963

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A man seems to hover. He gazes intensely, straight through the camera, right at us. His body is hidden entirely by a seated, suited, older man and a young boy in a plaid blazer, wearing a bow tie. Together they cohere into an eternal architecture—the apex position held by one in their prime; an elder is seated as if a foundation; the young boy, chin raised at attention, seated closest to the camera, a reminder of our duty to the future. The hovering man, we know, is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The elder figure is his father. The young boy is his son Martin Luther King III. The photographer, we know, is Richard Avedon. The portrait is an emblem of an unflinching craftsman who could transform icons into parables, individuals into myth (fig. 1).

To view Avedon's work is to dwell in the stunning feat and costs of the human lineage. Avedon's composition places the King family emphatically in our sights. The photograph diagrams an exhortation. The King family is presented not only as theirs, but also insistently in line with our own.

I sat immobilized by Avedon's portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., father, and son one night in 2015. For months, I had been trying to find the right set of images for the cover of what would become the "Vision & Justice" issue of *Aperture*.¹ The issue was devoted to a central argument, that vision and the work of visual culture are indispensable for the work of justice in American life. It was emblemized by the three Kings' portrait. This historic period in our country offers near-daily reminders that rights in the United States have been secured not only by norms and laws but also by regard—by how we see and refuse to see each other. It is the blind spot of the Constitution, one that the Fourteenth Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause were meant to secure. The right to be recognized justly—the foundational right to representation in a democracy—has required the work of culture and visual representation to shift our vision of the world.

There were many portraits of these three Kings. The contact sheet shows King, the activist, minister, and public philosopher, crouching behind his father and son in one image; perhaps it was a response to direction, we cannot know. In nearly every frame his hand remains on his father's right shoulder as if a tribute, a signal to honor that life comes from life. From the sitting, Avedon chose an image with a unity of focus—each staring with command, self-possession, and directness, as if viewing us here, right now.

Today's era, to survive it, requires that we understand the ethos and consciousness behind Avedon's practice. The time is also always right to celebrate Avedon, and not simply because this year marks the centenary of his birth. What does it mean to fully see another? How do we solve our crisis of regard? These are the fundamental questions of our age. These were Avedon's foundational concerns.

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Avedon, in a sense, had to first become known as a fashion photographer; he had long been interested in artifice, the garments we can wear. As he became a legend, his choice of entry was perfect, as if part of a myth. The theatricality of his fashion shoots became a testing ground to see the performance of life. As would other photographers of the pantheon, such as Gordon Parks, Avedon imagined the world beyond his own through fashion and literary magazines. The strictures of fashion photography offered opportunities and productive confines. Despite knowing that he was expected not to photograph Black models, for example, he chose Donyale Luna (fig. 2)—a corporeal contradiction, as Richard Powell notes, both highly photographed and an embodied challenge to racial and gender norms—for a spread in his historic, guest-edited 1965 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*.²

Avedon was barred from doing so ever again. This response only pushed his consciousness and work in more probing directions, toward the extraordinary in the unsung. The norms reinforced through capitalism showed him what was worth the effort of his life.

Rarefied as the art world is, rarefied as fashion photography is, Avedon knew, it seems, that the fundamental value of the project of representation is to ensure that all count, a foundation critical for America's representational democracy. One could point to his time teaching members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) how to photograph as merely one demonstration of this understanding. SNCC saw photographs less as documentation, Leigh Raiford argues, than as an indispensable political tool to create, to build an integrated and free world (pp. 182–83).³ For Avedon, the ethos behind such moments was marrow deep.

That Avedon's first true professional assignment was, in fact, making identification cards for the Merchant Marine cannot be over-emphasized. Avedon had joined the organization, following his boss and mentor Mike Elliott. He had worked as a darkroom assistant in Elliott's West Fifty-Seventh Street photography studio in New York City while a senior in high school. His charge was now to photograph all incoming seamen. Each needed a mug shot—the formulaic convention: straight on, full frontal, stark white backdrop. He was also on the editorial staff of the organization's magazines, *The Mast* and *The Helm*. His experience in the Merchant Marine brought another experience, a reminder of the anti-Semitism that he confronted. He was assigned to cleaning duty for the crew while living on the base in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. As potentially the only Jewish merchant mariner on the base, Avedon felt he knew why. He found a swastika drawn in black above his bunk. The drive to overcome prejudice and to photograph the essence of a life on its rough waters would shape his entire oeuvre.

While Avedon's first professional photographs before his fashion work were for the Merchant Marine, he liked to say that he made his first photograph with his own skin and the sun—his “first photographic print.” Having just started taking photographs at the age of nine, he took to heart what he learned from his father about the principles of photography: light exposes the film's surface. He practiced the idea on himself, placing a negative of his sister on his arm, exposing it to the sun, finding two days later a print emerged when he peeled it off. Forever more, his images became not about the dynamism of the scene, the sitter, the body before him. He was interested in the interaction between himself and those subjects—what was exposed, developed, made visible in light.

Looking back, Avedon's improbable journey seems inevitable. He went to high school at DeWitt Clinton in New York City, where his schoolmates included James Baldwin, Stan Lee (then Lieber), and A. M. Rosenthal. The year that Avedon enrolled, Abel Meeropol would write the plaintive protest poem “Strange Fruit,” later performed by Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, while working as an English teacher at the high school. Meeropol's horror over seeing an image of a lynching had made him write about the practice of racial terror in the United States. Avedon would later photograph the children adopted by Meeropol and his wife Anne, Michael and Robert Rosenberg (later Meeropol; p. 191). Their parents, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, had been executed for conspiracy to commit espionage. As adults, Michael and Robert created the Rosenberg Fund for Children, a nonprofit that supports children of targeted activists. In the portrait he created of the brothers, Avedon seemed to have captured their “resolve,” as Michael Meeropol puts it. The DeWitt Clinton school embodied the ethos that the aim of life was to

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contribute to the creation of a more just world. Avedon would honor it down to his choice of subjects.

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Avedon kept his studio pristine, stark, and white, as if that were a way to confront the history not just of the portrait, but of the photographic studio. That space had begun not as a neutral terrain but as a site of declamation—a place where individuals were honored and, at times, deliberately denigrated. Racial science weaponized photography. Images taken at the behest of naturalists like Louis Agassiz were meant to prove polygenesis, to prove that African Americans were a subhuman species. It is why Frederick Douglass made such a point of writing about the medium in the midst of the American Civil War. This is the crucible at the foundation of the history of the medium. Work by a photographer such as Avedon functioned as counterweight to this past.

Avedon's portrait style has become so synonymous with our current portrait conventions—often-stark backdrops, a flash of energy and velocity—that one can easily not know his role in their origins. He used the full range of the vectors available to him with his chosen instrument: extreme close-ups, crystalline clarity, and deliberate blur—blur in the way Fred Moten would define it, to signal aliveness, arrested motion, statuesque stillness, sharp tonal contrasts in light and texture.⁴

Historic portraits—rarely achieved—are often doubles: presentations of what the subject may want to present and what the photographer glimpses instead. Avedon let another kind of double enter the studio—what society thought and what the individuals knew to be true about themselves. We see it in his portrait of Congressman John Lewis. In the chosen portrait from their session, Lewis's hands are not exactly touching, not fully at rest, as if suggestive of his ongoing, vital work. The year was 1993. There was still much ahead. We see it in his 1957 image of Marilyn Monroe—after hours of performing in his studio, she let the mask fall off her face as she sat slack, a glimpse of her rarely seen inner life laid out for show (p. 275). We see it in Avedon's 1963 portrait of a young Lew Alcindor, then the best high school basketball star in the country, leading New York City's Power Memorial Academy on a seventy-one-game winning streak (p. 151). Avedon photographed him at an angle such that the men behind him in the midground appear as dots, receding into the horizon. Alcindor, who would become known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, fills the entire frame, holding the basketball in the palm of his hand. A few years later, the star would loom large as the best in the sport around the world. He would also become a beacon for moral courage. He was willing to speak of “the beauty and the richness of the culture of his faith at a time in which it was not popular to do so,” as Harvard president Lawrence Bacow would cite in presenting him with the W. E. B. Du Bois Medal.⁵ In hindsight, it is easy to see—Avedon was also crafting portraits of what might yet be.

Avedon's virtuosity was, it now seems, a match for anyone put before his lens. It is what made people want to be photographed by him. “Richard Avedon was as great as the portraits he took of the greats,” Spike Lee says in his reflection in this volume, after admitting his frustration that, simply due to circumstance, he never sat before Avedon's lens. It is what made Avedon a “hero” to others, such as Edward Enninful. It is what makes Beverly Johnson consider her images by Avedon her most cherished and Brooke Shields call him the ultimate maestro who gave her unprecedented freedom under his architectural eye.

Ever the master, interested in the pursuit, not the arrival, perhaps we should not be surprised that his final published series trained his gaze on the deliberately incomplete—the inevitably unfinished project

of democracy and of offering aid. In 2004, *The New Yorker* published the portfolio in which he offered space to the full range of the political spectrum. His last unpublished works are from a session with the doctors who granted him access to photograph inside the military base in Fort Hood, Texas. They were meant as a gift. He passed away before printing them.

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I first saw Avedon's work in *Nothing Personal*, the photographer's landmark collaboration with James Baldwin. The photograph of the King family was part of this larger project. David Baldwin, brother of James Baldwin, who was Avedon's friend from high school, traveled with Avedon on some of the journeys to create *Nothing Personal*. Through the process of finalizing the book, Avedon again modeled the power of artistic partnership in the civil rights movement, as Deborah Willis observes in her commentary in this catalogue.

Avedon and Baldwin shared an elastic trust in the fiber of life—the connective tissue that, despite it all, can bind us. That faith in life was a hard-won battle for Baldwin, one that kept us glued to his page as he chronicled the near defeats of that belief and his insistence that it should prevail. Perhaps it is what made me tear up when I first read *Nothing Personal*, looking at Avedon's images, reading Baldwin's words, and then again, nearly at the same point in the photo-essay, when I revisited it years later. Just when Baldwin has nearly broken your heart with potential despair, he reminds us of the eternal truth—life, the essence of it, is all there is to trust. Just when you can barely look, Avedon reminds you of the endless summer of life itself.

For Avedon, trust in life comes across with muscularity in his photographic prints. Each session is an act of fidelity, of trust that his interaction with that sitter—from Monroe to a young Abdul-Jabbar—will yield a truth about more than what it meant to be alive in that moment. Like Baldwin, Avedon's compositions pushed his subjects to the edge of the capacity of the heart to bear what they had endured, what they had summoned, pursued, and achieved, just to the edge and not further.

Avedon once wrote that his work was structured around the idea of illusion—the illusion of the line between laughter and panic, of power, and ultimately the loss of illusion itself. Extraordinarily self-aware, he defined his own trajectory of growth this way: first as “a passion for high-definition performance,” then a focus on his “social conscience,” and then a kind of “perceptual acceleration”—the speed at which perception can, perhaps even must work.⁶

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When the Metropolitan Museum first dedicated a show to Avedon's work in 1978, his name unfurled down the façade of the iconic building, he had done what few if any photographers had at that time—declared the photograph to be an object of art. Whether that equation was possible was the question at that time. The groundbreaking nature of the show signaled it. Avedon's assertion was not granted assent by all. For the lover of photography—the scholar, the curator, the person who enjoys taking pictures as part of their daily life—part of what makes Avedon's photographs so rich to examine is that his work, and the journey of his career, anticipated how we would narrate the history of photography and of art at large. To view Avedon at 100 could be an opportunity to ask questions about the photographic field. What would have been lost without his engagement with the genre of the portrait?

Yet today, to understand Avedon through questions about the history of photography alone is not sufficient, and this is perhaps the greatest testament to his craft. His work forces questions about not only the form—the photograph—but also the nature of what it is to have an exchange, the kind, as Avedon put it, “that could seldom be made with impunity in ordinary life.”⁷ What is needed today is an attempt—collective, urgent, now—to let these exchanges be more common. What is it to live and capture it? Within these pages are only some of his many examples of this pursuit—guidance and gifts from the model he offered us all.

In Avedon's penultimate image in *Nothing Personal*, a child hovers above a vast ocean. He stands, held by his feet by his father, one imagines (p. 74). This precarity, this love, this declamation of life—what supports and what can wrest it asunder—are at the heart of Avedon's process. Avedon would do what Baldwin admonishes that we must—say yes to life where it is found and document the attempt.

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- 1 “Vision & Justice,” ed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, special issue, *Aperture* 223 (Summer 2016).
- 2 Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 80–123.
- 3 Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
- 4 Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: Consent Not to Be a Single Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- 5 Lawrence Bacow, W. E. B. Du Bois Medal ceremony, Sanders Theater, Harvard University, October 6, 2022.
- 6 John Lahr, “Hide-and-Seek,” in *Performance: Richard Avedon* (New York: Abrams, 2008), p. 40.
- 7 Richard Avedon, foreword to *In the American West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), unpaginated.

Fig. 2:
Donyale Luna, dress by
Pauline Trigère, New York,
February 8, 1965

