

# RICHARD AVEDON FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY MUST BE ABOUT SOMETHING

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“With Avedon the camera seems less a tool of presentation than a source of self-enlightenment,” writes New York art critic Harold Rosenberg of Richard Avedon, whose iconic fashion photographs for magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue*, along with his distinct portrait shots, had a defining impact on post-war photography.<sup>1</sup> Avedon’s unique style reflects intense emotion and captures the deep-seated personality of his subjects. In challenging the prevailing conventional sense of beauty, his images blur the line between commercial photography and art.

Avedon was born in New York in 1923 into a Jewish family with a well-documented fascination for art, fashion, and photography. He started photographing at a very early age with a Rolleiflex camera given to him by his father. One of the key motifs in these early days was his younger sister Louise (1925–1968), who would remain the ideal of beauty in his work throughout much of his career.

In 1944, after two years in the merchant marine, Avedon enrolled in Alexey Brodovitch’s (1898–1971) “Design Laboratory” class at the New York School for Social Research in New York. The New York School was the most influential school of photography at that time and it was the first time Avedon received a formal education in photography. The years under Brodovitch’s tutelage proved formative for Avedon’s approach to photography.

Brodovitch, who was the art director of *Harper’s Bazaar* from 1934 until 1958, asked his students to develop thematic concepts such as Broadway, Central Park, halloween or graffiti.<sup>2</sup> “Astonish me. Do something new,” was Brodovitch’s motto at the Design Laboratory. He discovered and promoted two generations of young, talented photographers whose image contributions were published as full-page illustrations in the fashion magazine.

Other students of Brodovitch’s at the Design Laboratory included Irving Penn (1917–2009), Hiro (\*1930), and Lillian Bassman (1917–2012). Diane Arbus (1923–1971), Robert Frank (1924–2019), William Klein (1928–2019), and Helen Levitt (1913–2009) were also studying at the New York School for Social Research. Among them, it was Lillian Bassman in particular who would become a major influence in Avedon’s career. Bassman gave him his first job as a professional photographer when she became art director of *Junior Bazaar*, *Harper’s Bazaar’s* sister magazine, in 1945, and involved him in editorial discussions alongside her husband Paul Himmel (1914–2009).<sup>3</sup> It was under Bassman that Avedon’s photographs were published for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

Avedon’s role hence transformed from student to professional, from executing to creating. He played with the effects of his photographs, and experimented with a wide range of formats as well as with montage techniques and movements.<sup>5</sup> The creative

work shaped new ideas and he developed his own black-and-white visual language.<sup>6</sup>

The work for *Junior Bazaar* with Bassman and Himmel had an essential impact on Avedon’s style of imagery. He adopted innovative elements from the magazine’s layout, such as photographing subjects in front of an all-white background, into his own work (*Danny Weil*, p. 13), and these elements became an essential characteristic of his images.

This close collaboration developed into a lasting friendship between the Avedons and Bassman/Himmel who shared a country house on Fire Island from 1948 until 1951 and traveled several times to Europe together. Crucially, his work for *Junior Bazaar* also served as a stepping stone to the main magazine *Harper’s Bazaar*.<sup>7</sup> As of 1947, *Harper’s Bazaar* sent Avedon to Paris on a regular basis to shoot the haute couture collections. Carmel Snow (1887–1961), then *Harper’s Bazaar’s* editor-in-chief, was known to be a devotee of French fashion and influential in bringing it from Paris to New York. The 1947 Dior collection’s name “New Look” came from her. When shown to her in Paris by the famous designer she marvelled: “It’s quite a revolution, dear Christian, your dresses have such a new look.”<sup>8</sup> “New Look” was the first fashion collection shot by Avedon.

The immediate post-war period in New York saw two predominant fashion magazines: *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue*. Snow, famously quoted as saying:

“Elegance is good taste plus a dash of daring,” was one of the most quintessential figures in the New York fashion industry at the time. Avedon said of her: “Carmel Snow taught me everything I know,” reflecting both, her status in the fashion world as well as her impact on him, his work, and his career as one of the preeminent fashion photographers.<sup>9</sup>

Avedon’s fashion imagery shifts the focus from the sober and unemotional depiction of fashion items to the creation of exciting images or series of images that tell a story and evoke a certain lifestyle with an inherent feeling of *savoir-vivre*.<sup>10</sup> Deborah Solomon summarized that Avedon, and fellow post-war fashion photographers Lillian Bassman and Irving Penn, “Americanized their field, switching the emphasis from documenting expensive buttons and bows to capturing the general feeling of being an energetic post-war woman on the go.”<sup>11</sup>

The January 1965 cover mock-up for *Harper’s Bazaar* (*Jean Shrimpton*, p. 4) is an example of the artistic emphasis of Avedon’s fashion images. It also reflects the lasting impact Brodovitch had on Avedon with his motto: “Don’t be satisfied with your first answer, work on it and find something, some new way to say something that has been said a thousand times.”<sup>12</sup> The iconic image of Dovima in a Dior dress with elephants reflects the move from the dry display of fashion items to the dynamic expression of grandeur (pp. 11 & 15). Avedon himself put it this way: “Fashion Photography must be about Something.”<sup>13</sup>

Even though Avedon’s fashion photographs depict characteristics like elegance and *joie de vivre*, his works differ from those of other fashion photographers at the time. He abandoned the

typical soft-focus element, and instead followed the “Straight Photography” movement and championed a more direct style.

The use of animals, such as dogs or elephants for instance, and their interaction with the models is another important trait of his fashion photographic oeuvre. Their inclusion served multiple purposes. The animals, often in combination with carefully chosen rural settings, such as the desert (*Dovima*, Egypt, p. 9) or the sea (*Liz Pringle*, Jamaica, p. 16), introduced a story line in the photographs and invited the viewer to daydream. It also helped in attributing certain features like quality and adaptiveness to the products displayed. Certainly, the animals in the images created a dramatic and bodacious effect.

Avedon’s enormous recognition in fashion photography was in part rooted in the many portraits of famous personalities, such as Coco Chanel (1883–1971; *Gabrielle Chanel and Suzy Parker*, p. 16) and Marella Agnelli (1927–2019; p. 8), and the fact that he worked with the most popular models of the time such as Suzy Parker (1932–2003; *Suzy Parker and Mike Nichols*, Paris, p. 12–13), Twiggy (\*1949; p. 18), and Barbara Streisand (\*1942; *Barbara Streisand with Madame Grès*, p. 13). Interestingly, he rarely photographed men in his fashion shots. In many instances, his shots served as a stepping stone or launch pad for the model’s career. The shooting with Isabella Rossellini (\*1952) was one such example. The interaction with the models, the subjects of his photographs, and deep-rooted passion for photography—Lizzie Himmel, Lillian Bassman and Paul Himmel’s daughter, once quipped: “Dick’s life revolved around the studio”<sup>14</sup>—created an emotional intensity in his images that runs through

his oeuvre like a thread and distinguishes Avedon from other photographers.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from commercial photography, Avedon also explored socio-critical issues with his camera. He documented the civil rights campaign in the Southern United States in the late 1960s, and later the war in Vietnam and anti-war protests in the United States.

Avedon was married twice. The movie *Funny Face* from 1957 is based on the relationship of Avedon and his first wife Dorcas Marie Nowell (1925–2011), later known as the model and actress Doe Avedon. The protagonists were Fred Astaire (1899–1987) and Audrey Hepburn (1929–1993).<sup>16</sup> He later married Evelyn Franklin (1925–2004) and the two had a son, John. Avedon died in San Antonio, Texas, in 2004 while on assignment for *The New Yorker* to document an election campaign. He lived all his life in New York.

According to Cecil Beaton (1904–1980) there are two kinds of fashion photographers. The ones who are looking to snatch a transient snapshot, and the others who wish to create a lasting image and capture the moment for eternity.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, Avedon falls into the latter category thanks to his timeless photographs. It is with good reason that his oeuvre has redefined fashion and portrait photography for generations of photographers, transcending the genre of commercial photography.

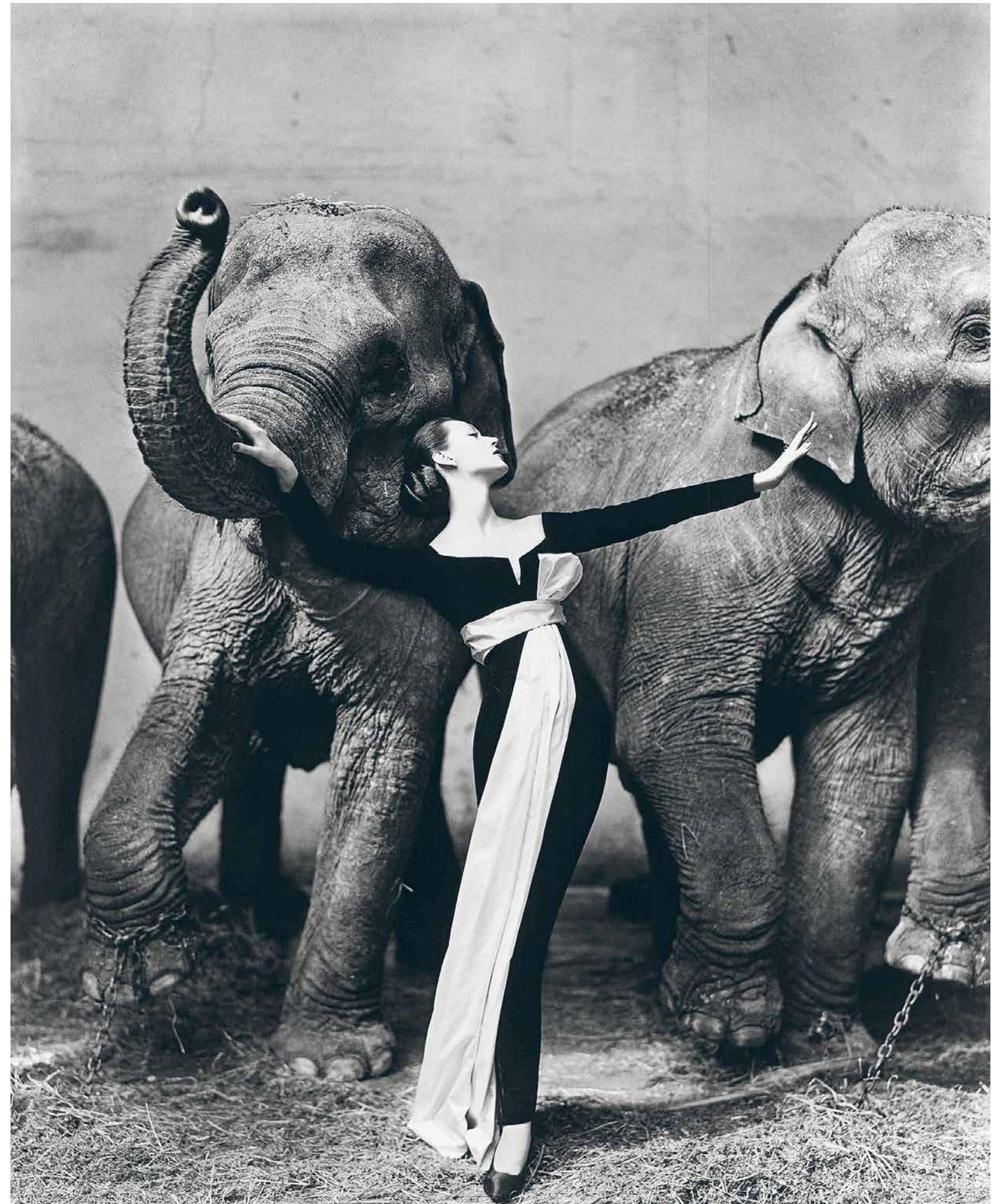


*Marella Agnelli*, for *Harper's Bazaar*, New York, 1953  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 45 x 35.5 cm



*Dovima* (Dress by Claire McCardell), for *Harper's Bazaar*, Egypt, 1951  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 35 x 27 cm

*Dovima with Elephants* (Evening dress by Dior), for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1955  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 216 x 165 cm





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)  
*Suzy Parker and Mike Nichols* (Skirt and top by Simonetta Fabiani), for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1962  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 40 x 40 cm

*Suzy Parker and Mike Nichols* (Evening dress by Dior), for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1962  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 38 x 46 cm

*Margot McKendry and China Machado with members of the French Press*  
(Dresses by Lanvin-Castillo and Heim), for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1961  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 92.5 x 116.5 cm

(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT)  
*Suzy Parker and Mike Nichols* (Dress by Lanvin-Castillo), for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1962  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 50 x 40 cm

*Danny Weil* (Dress by Abe Schrader), for *Harper's Bazaar*, New York, 1962  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 43 x 40 cm

*Barbara Streisand with Madame Grès*, for *Vogue*, Paris, 1966  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 42 x 40 cm



*Veronica Compton and Bruno (Scarf by John-Frederics),  
for Harper's Bazaar, New York, 1949*  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 40 x 50 cm

*Elise Daniels (Hat by Paulette),  
for Harper's Bazaar, Paris, 1948*  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 50 x 40 cm



*Dovima with Elephants (Evening dress by Dior),  
for Harper's Bazaar, Paris, 1955*  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 40 x 47 cm





*Liz Pringle* (Bracelet by Schlumberger),  
for *Harper's Bazaar*, Jamaica, 1959  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 48 x 40 cm

*Gabrielle Chanel and Suzy Parker* (Suits by Chanel),  
for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1959  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 46.5 x 41 cm

*Suzy Parker and Robin Tattersall* (Coat by Dior),  
for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1956  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 33.5 x 27 cm

*China Machado* (Suit and hat by Dior),  
for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1959  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 26.5 x 26.5 cm

*Dovima and Betsy Pickering* (Dresses by Lanvin-Castillo),  
for *Harper's Bazaar*, Paris, 1958  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 49.5 x 40 cm

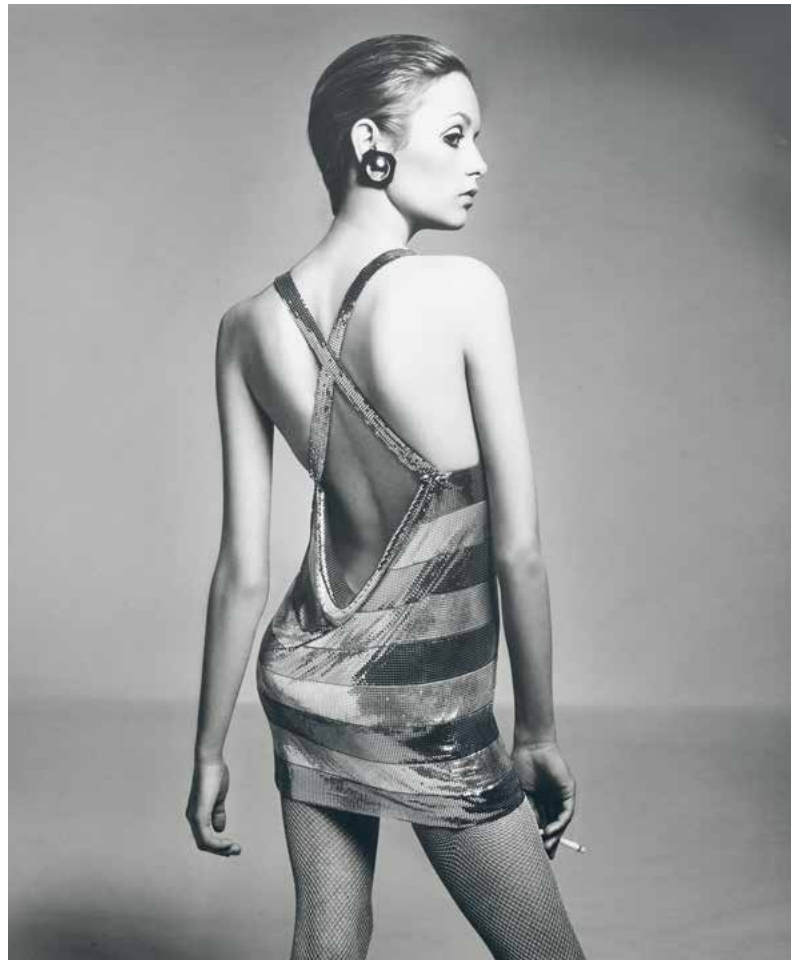
*Naty Abascal and Ana-Maria Abascal with Helio Guerreiro*  
(Bathing suit by Brigance for Sinclair, terry cloth robe by Dorian),  
for *Harper's Bazaar*, Ibiza, 1964  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 40 x 50 cm

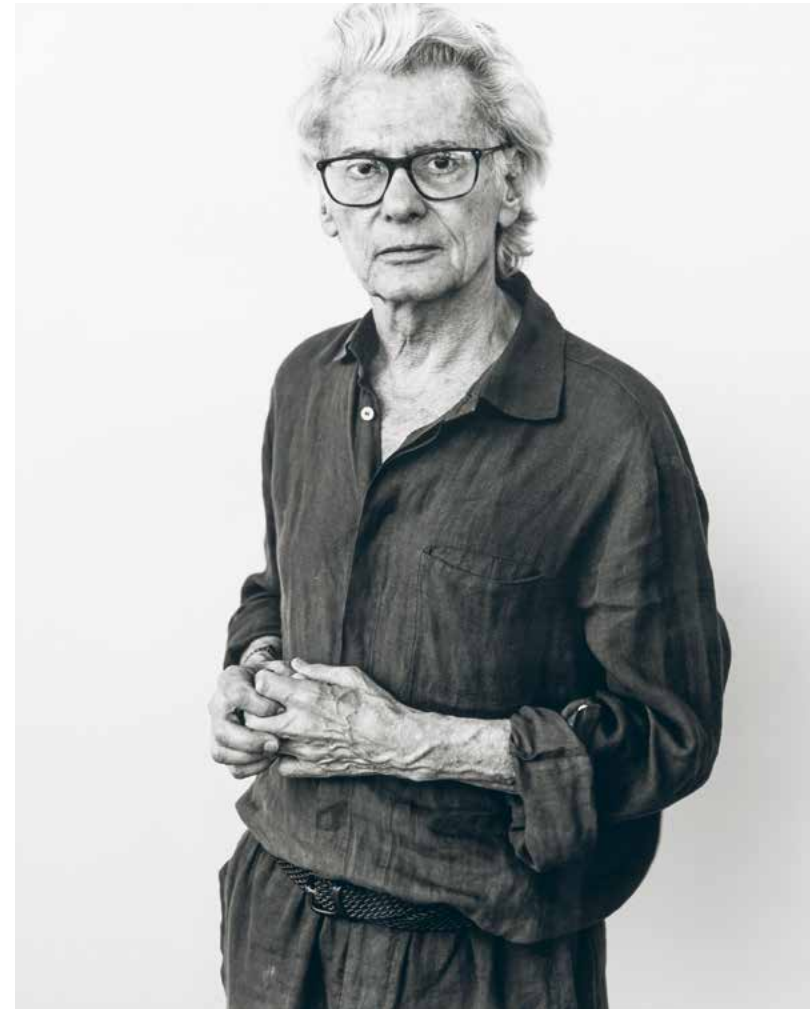
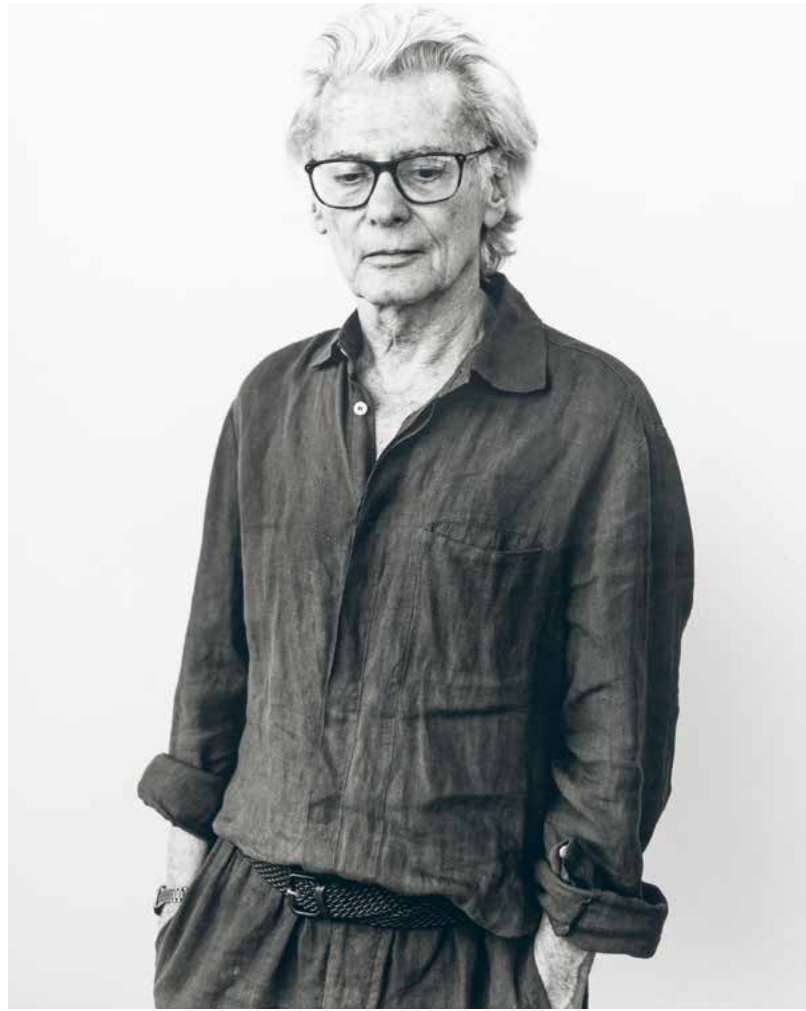


*Twiggy* (Dress by Roberto Rojas),  
for *Vogue*, New York, 1967  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 48 x 40 cm

*Donyale Luna* (Dress and sandals by Paco Rabanne),  
for *Vogue*, New York, 1966  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 39 x 38 cm

*Bianca Jagger*, Hollywood, 1972  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 159.5 x 130.5 cm





*Richard Avedon* (Self-Portrait), New York, 2002  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 76 x 181.5 cm