

spotlight



Watson, below, is working on a new book focusing on Las Vegas ... 'There's no disappointment but sometimes it's surprising.'

Pictures: Robert Perry; Albert Watson

Viva Las Vegas

Stars, cars or the state of Nevada ... where is Albert Watson coming from? The prolific Scottish photographer shares his vision with
ALASTAIR MCKAY

IN ALBERT WATSON'S PORTFOLIO, the least artistic shot was the most stressful. It was, says the Edinburgh-born, New York-based photographer in his Connery Bond accent, a nightmare. "Before the shooting my beard was quite red. After the shooting, my beard was white."

In a career defined by versatility – "I shot cars, I shot portraits, I shot fashion. I did hospital appliance catalogues" – there is just one wedding, the union of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson. The problems were various and mostly to do with protocol. But there was a surreal quality to the job. During a rehearsal, with chambermaids standing in for the royals, Watson was up a ladder when he heard a regal voice saying: "Which one's me?"

"The last place you want to be when you first meet the Queen is up an 18ft ladder," he says. At the end of the session, Her Majesty disappeared. "I rushed over just as my assistant was helping the Queen up the ladder. I said 'Ma'am – where are you going?' She said: 'I just wanted a quick look.' Nothing in my life approached the absurdity of that moment."

For much of his career, Watson's pre-eminence went unnoticed. A commercial photo-

grapher, he exists on the cover of magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, 280 *Vogue* covers). His advertising work includes the Elizabeth Hurley campaign for Estée Lauder. He did the movie posters for *Cold Mountain*, the *Hours*, and *Kill Bill*. He has made 600 TV commercials.

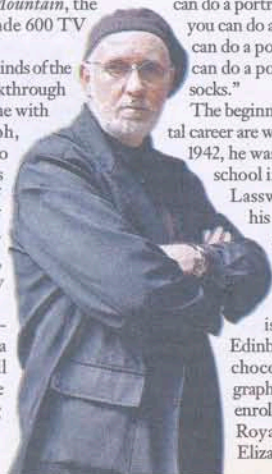
All of it is fine work, but in the minds of the public, authorless. Watson's breakthrough towards broader recognition came with the publication of his monograph, *Cyclops*, in 1994. It was possible to observe the unity in Watson's pictures: from the thick neck of Tyson to the gold thimble of Tutankhamen, it was a worldview concerned with iconography, whether ancient, or conferred by the new religion of celebrity.

In recent weeks the photographer has been working on a retrospective exhibition that will visit Scotland next year. He compares the experience to surfing television channels and catching fragments of news, sports and

showbiz. But, perhaps because he was about to address an audience at the National Portrait Gallery, he located a common approach.

"You can do a portrait of a fashion shot, you can do a portrait of Clint Eastwood and you can do a portrait of an object. You can do a portrait of a landscape. You can do a portrait of Tutankhamen's socks."

The beginnings of Watson's accidental career are well-documented. Born in 1942, he was educated at the Steiner school in Edinburgh and later at Lasswade High. At 18, he and his wife Elizabeth (who now runs his business) moved to London. Watson worked as a scientific assistant at the air ministry before returning to Edinburgh to work at Duncan's chocolate factory. He studied graphic design in Dundee, then enrolled in the film school at the Royal College of Art. When Elizabeth gave him a camera for



his 22nd birthday, he became "an overnight fanatic".

At the RCA, to make money, he photographed shop fronts. In 1969, Elizabeth won an exchange scholarship. The couple relocated to Los Angeles. He called the one person he knew, who called the one person they knew: the creative director at Max Factor. Watson blagged a model, spent all the money he had and shot 110 rolls of film. Max Factor bought five pictures at \$1,500 a shot. "My wife's annual salary was \$2,200."

He was a success. He had a house in the Hollywood Hills, but found himself drifting. "I wore Gucci shoes. I thought about surfing. I thought about jogging. I knew it was time to get out of Los Angeles."

He opened a studio in New York and built the business. In 1984 he acquired a 26,000 sq ft studio in the West Village and spent three and a half years remodelling it. He now runs three companies, with an advertising agency alongside his film and photography firms.

Over the years he has photographed almost everybody who aspires to be anybody. The Clintons, he recalls, were charismatic. Bill had seen *Cyclops*: "He said: 'Just make me look like Clint Eastwood.'"

Clint was less of a pushover. "A lot of actors have a problem with having their picture taken. They're more comfortable when they are in character. It gets even worse when you photograph them as who they are. You have Clint Eastwood arriving and he's wearing a peach tracksuit top, a golfing shirt, and you go, 'Can you change your shirt?' and he says, 'Well, this is really me.' Then you have to explain, 'Yeah, but the photograph's not for your piano. I'm shooting this for a magazine. A magazine's part of the media and it's part of the imaging process, so we need to change your shirt. That discussion took 25 minutes.'"

This explanation suggests that Watson's work plays on the heroic side of celebrity.

"I didn't feel like doing a heroic shot of Al Pacino when I shot him, but somehow with Clint Eastwood you did, because you have an image of him. Also, I've shot him different ways. But you certainly want to get one shot of him as a Mount Rushmore, because he's got that kind of face that's iconicographic and monumental. Al Pacino's a much better actor, but for some reason you wanted him with eye contact, you wanted him to be feeling the camera."

Watson photographed Michael Jackson for his last album sleeve. The set-up involved the performer dancing between 12 mirrors for 90 minutes. "It was remarkable to see him do that: so professionally and so fluid."

Jackson, says Watson, was "one of the oddest characters I've photographed, but he treated me with gigantic respect. He seemed to be a wonderful human being."

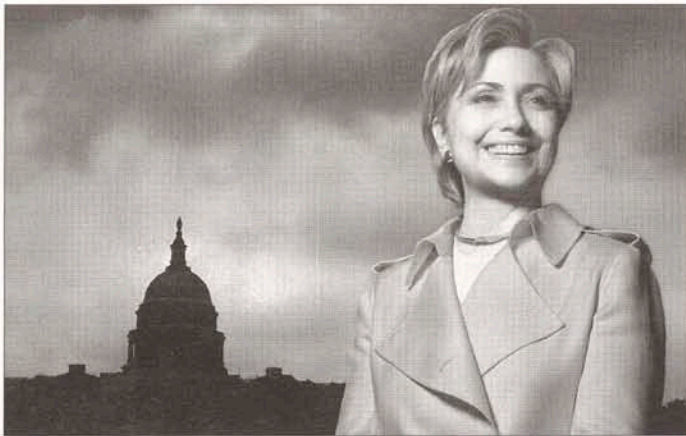
The approach is roughly the same, whether Watson is photographing a box of matches or a human face. He observes the object, considers its function, tries to analyse what it could do. To illustrate this he rearranged the objects on the coffee table in front of him. "You set fire to it if it's matches. If it's a bowl, you try and make it stand up. When you do a portrait you're always analysing things the same way."

He runs through the checklist. What chair are they sitting on? What's the background?

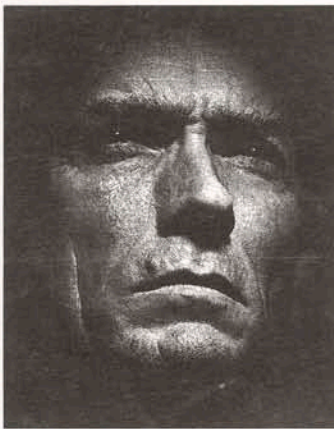
"How do you photograph Quentin Tarantino one week and Oliver Stone the next?"

The poster for *Kill Bill* - Uma Thurman with big sword - was dictated by the subject.

"In the film she's with a sword the whole time, so we shot it with a sword. You then have to figure



Hillary Clinton ... Watson found the Clintons 'charismatic'. Picture: Albert Watson/ Time



Clint Eastwood. Picture: Albert Watson

out, how am I going to shoot this person? You know the problems with the lighting on the face, what way the face looks better, also you know the angle and the correct lens for the body.

"But everybody's geography is different. Everybody's a different country."

"You always do your best, but there is some preparation. If you're setting off on your holidays in your car, you want to make sure you've got gas."

There was, he confesses, only one complete failure. The first time he photographed Nicole Kidman, to publicise the aquatic movie *Dead Calm*, he decided to spray her with water. The shoot was scheduled to last three hours. Make-up took two hours and 15 minutes.

"I spritzed the make-up. I put her in front of the camera without really looking at her face. I had her in a very good light and I looked into the camera. As I looked, I thought, 'Oh, she simply looks awful.' And this is a Nicole Kidman that would be 14 years younger than she is now. I thought: it can't be as bad as it looks. It can't be, because the light's perfect. It's one of these lights that makes everybody look good and she just looked terrible."

"She's beautiful, but I realised some of the shortcomings in the face. She doesn't have a great mouth, Nicole Kidman. She doesn't have a mouth like Angelina Jolie. And the eyes are not that big. And somehow, with the make-up, the eyes were black. She looked horrendous. And

when I peeled the Polaroid, it actually looked worse. So at that point we have a PR person saying she only has 15 minutes. And the art director - who went on to be a very famous art director - Fabien Baron, came into the room. He didn't say it, but you could tell he was thinking: 'My god, that looks awful.' He said: 'Let's do the pictures nude', and he turned and Nicole said: 'Nude? What do you mean, nude?'"

Kidman was gone. The pictures were never sent to *Interview* magazine.

"There's a famous photographer in New York called Hiro. He was very, very good, and very famous. Especially in the late 1960s, early 1970s, he did spectacular shots. I met him in 1971 when he was at his height and he said to me: 'If you don't like the picture, don't shoot it. Because they can call you a shitty guy, but they can't call you a shitty photographer.'"

"It's a good word of advice. It's a bit simplistic. Sometimes it's not like that. When you're in the Sahara shooting a job for Sony you can't say: 'Sorry, I don't like that, call me in New York.' But I know what he meant. He meant: be true to yourself."

Watson's next book, *Shot in Vegas*, was designed as a contrast to the classical elegance of his last title, *Maroc*, which celebrated his second home, Morocco. He says he wanted to do "something that was completely decadent, almost pop art, neon-y, coloury, exaggerated".

The Vegas pictures are full of glorious artifice: fuzzy neon sunsets, the yellow light of a motel car park, the sign in the desert boasting: "In God We Trust".

"You go to Vegas and there's no disappointment. It is Vegas. Lots of places you go to, they're not quite what you think they are. Monte Carlo wasn't what I thought it was. It was tacky, whereas I had an image of it being very chi-chi. And maybe it was, 70 years ago."

"Vegas presents everything. It's very open. It says: here it is, sex. Here it is, drink. Here it is, gambling. Everything's open, at you. But sometimes it's surprising. I've eaten some very good meals in Vegas."

You might, if you surfed the iconography and the boastful beauty of Watson's portfolio, begin to detect a sea-spray of irony. To do so would be a mistake. "I shoot what's there and you accept it as it is. I don't make any point about it."

And his style? "You gotta dig deep to find that there is a style there. To me most of the stuff I shoot looks pretty definite. My pictures are not wishy-washy."