

PHOTO DISTRICT NEWS

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ALBERT WATSON

30 YEARS AT THE TOP



Albert

the Great

It's hard not to be caught up in the wave of excitement that is Albert Watson. Without even meeting him, you could easily surmise that he treasures his profession just from knowing the packed schedule he keeps. But upon stepping into the same room as the 63-year-old shooter, you realize that his love for photography goes well beyond anything you imagined. Gushing anecdotes and advice in volcanic bursts, Watson's body seems to fuel itself on the very thought of creating images. It's been ten years since the Scotland-born Watson sent ripples through the photography world with his revolutionary publication *Cyclops*. Today, he's moved further away from the fashion world he once ruled and focused his energy on moving images, celebrity portraits and the completion of a new book on Las Vegas. *PDN* caught up with Watson between a Ben Kingsley shoot and a trip back to another favorite subject of his—Morocco.

By Anthony LaSala



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PDN: Who were your biggest inspirations when you were starting out?

Albert Watson: A lot of people ask me that question. Some people inspire you but that doesn't mean that your work looks like theirs. I've never really settled down into one particular recognizable thing. But in the beginning, because I liked magazine stuff, there were the classic ones like Avedon and Penni. Earlier than that were Paul Strand, August Sander and Brassai. But then, as I got older, I broadened the whole vision of what I was interested in. Nowadays, I look at almost everything.

PDN: What new photographers have caught your eye?

Watson: I think there's dozens and dozens of fabulous photographers out there. I like Andreas Gursky

and Thomas Struth very much. I also like Richard Misrach very much. He's very good. I'm always impressed by them because they are very specialized. Even though they do some different things, in a weird way they are very rock solid in their approach. They get into a room and it's their room, and that room moves across the planet whether they're in the Far East or New York.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia is also an outstanding photographer. He was an art photographer who did fashion pictures that had an art drive in them. And in the end they weren't fashion pictures. They were art pictures that had fashion things in them.

PDN: How do you feel about fashion photography these days?

Watson: I don't shoot that much fashion any-

more. Basically, for 20 years I shot fashion, and as the work became a little bit stronger, fashion became a little bit trickier. It's very difficult with fashion magazines these days to pick out an image and say, 'If I had done that, that would go in to a retrospective show of mine.' It's very tricky. I remember a few years ago when they had the history of *Vogue* covers. From the illustrations in the beginning, into the Penn period and then into Avedon. There would be a cover from the 1930s that you could just put in a frame and sell at Sotheby's. It's tough to imagine taking an Angelina Jolie cover, which there is absolutely nothing wrong with, and say that's gonna go to Sotheby's. There is a major change in that. Alexander Lieberman, the head of Condé Nast for many years, once said to me around 1983 or 1984

that, "Things are changing. If you want to make art, make art. But this is a business now." So it wasn't the idea that you made an artistic image and it went into a magazine and then into a book and then into a gallery and then a museum. That road from a fashion magazine and into a museum is very tough now.

PDN: How do you get a subject to trust you?

Watson: There are many kinds of subjects. You can have the Queen of England, Bill Clinton, or it could be Clint Eastwood or Ben Kingsley. There are subjects like that. There are also subjects that you stop in the middle of the street and ask to take a photo of them. People who have never been photographed before. You have many subjects. People who know cameras inside out who are models and spend every day of

the week in front of a camera. And there are people who have never even seen a camera before. So there's no one set thing. But your best weapon as a photographer is always going to be your personality. And the backup to that is your confidence in using your personality. In other words, your ability to control the person. To manipulate the person without them realizing they are being manipulated. But the one thing that they have to feel from you is some sort of authority, some sort of control. They must feel confident with you—like you're holding them tightly in front of you with an invisible hand. Even if you're dealing with someone who's a big name, you're still trying to control them and make sure that if you feel they are doing the wrong thing you should be able to make a correction there.

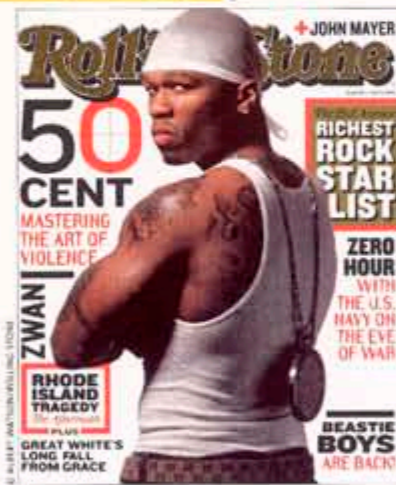
There's also a sense that you can't be negative. I



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Above: Recent magazine covers and the *Kill Bill* movie poster. Right: Watson. Opposite page, left: A shot for *Italian Vogue*, Paris, 1990. Opposite page, right: Bill Clinton, 1996.

Albert the Great

never shout at people. You always encourage people. You be quiet with people. Even if something's not working

PDN: Who was your most enjoyable subject?

Watson: The first famous person I ever photographed—Alfred Hitchcock. He was somebody I was very nervous around, and he almost took control of the shoot and directed me to photograph him. The way that he enjoyed the whole experience and was in control of it while I corrected things from my end—it was a great learning experience. And you could feel from him the charisma and his hold and his contribution to the shooting. Some people come in, even well-known people, and they say, "What do you want me to do?" Whereas Hitchcock was really giving you something.

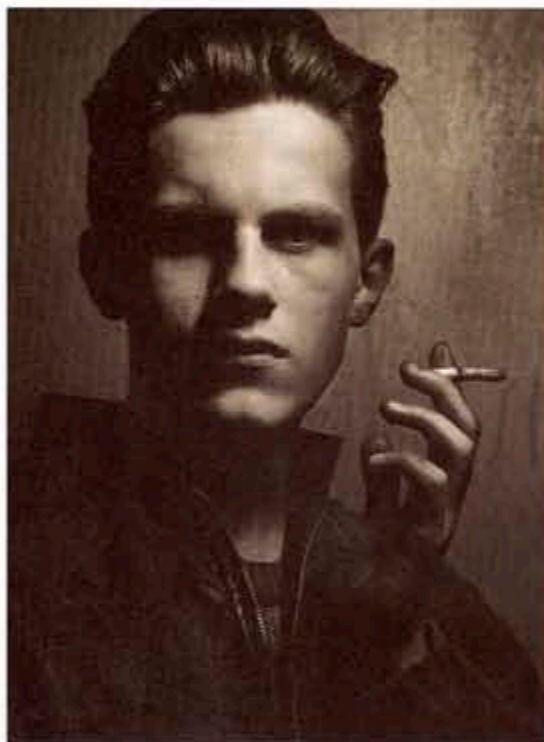
PDN: Who was your most difficult subject?

Watson: I've never really had problems. I think that's because I go in with the attitude that I have to try to do everything for them. The air temperature in the studio, the music, we know Al Pacino likes espresso coffee, and a twist of lemon, etc. You do research on the personality and research on who it is. If someone is difficult on top of all that, then take a Polaroid, four sheets of film and that's it—we got it.

I once had a difficult shoot right in the very

Left: Breauna in front of refrigerator, Las Vegas, Nevada, 2000.

Below: Monkeys with masks, 1994. From *Cyclops*.



Top, left: Also from *Cyclops*—Taxi Driver, Moscow, 1988. Top, right: Heels on Stovetop, Las Vegas, 2000. Above: Lunar suit worn by Alan Shepard, Apollo 14.

beginning with Nicole Kidman, who I've now photographed many times and get on very well with. But the very first shoot we did—she wasn't difficult—the way we set it up was wrong, it had good intentions, but we set up the shooting the wrong way. It was a mistake. But it wasn't a mistake that you could tell until you were there. You were already on the bus going in the wrong direction and you said, "Wait a minute." I'm going to Newark airport and we're in Brooklyn." It was a little bit of education. Sometimes these things happen. In that case it was a difficult situation, but she wasn't difficult. On some shoots I like 1 shot out of 100, on some I like 10 out of 100, on and on some I like 90 out of 100. But I'm usually on the scale of 1 to 100. That, I would say, was my only zero.

PDN: Are there any places or people you've always wanted to photograph but never got a chance to?

Watson: Not really. I take every day as it comes, and if somebody books me to photograph someone like Ben Kingsley, then that's fine. And I was delighted to do it.

I also do a lot of rappers. I think I've done every rapper possible. And I get on very well with them for some weird reason because there's an age gap there to say the least. I think my studio sets the tone. But I think a lot of the gangsta rappers tend to be very well behaved in my studio. They are quite respectful.

PDN: Would you ever consider doing a book on Scotland? (Question submitted by PDN reader Jimi Hughes from England)

Watson: I think that it would be interesting because it's a beautiful country—a beautiful place. And you could do something there. But it would be a similar challenge in a way to doing Morocco. I'm not saying

you do them the same way, but I would try and modernize it so it's a modern landscape. Do something that's monumental. Try and force something so that it's not too classic, because it's a very picture-postcard country. It's very much lochs and 12th-century castles on a little island. It's like that. You get up at 4 A.M. and there's mist over a lake and some moonlight. You tend to get sucked into particular things like that there. It's not like Vegas. Vegas is raw.

PDN: You're known as a master of using light and shadow to create a dramatic portrait. Lately in magazines there's been a trend toward more undramatic, straightforward portraits. What do you think of the current trend in portraiture?

Watson: I think that the most important thing as a photographer is that when you go in you should have a vision before you take the picture. I was not a technical person. And a lot of people think of me as technical. You look at *Cyclops*, it's full of technique. But I'm not really that technical a person. My lighting became a little more complicated because I drove that and challenged what the lighting was because I got bored. But the technical aspect was a very arduous process for me because I didn't know that much of it when I came in—I wasn't a technician. And it frustrated me that when the film came back, it wasn't as I saw it.

I think today, and there are a lot of wonderful photographers, some photographers are lazy. They don't do anything and they go, "Okay, the trend is away from controlling things." And that's fine. There's a lot of stuff around that is what it is. But it's very nice to know how to drive the car. It's very nice to know you hit the accelerator and you go faster, you hit the brake and you stop. All of these devices around you—it's nice to know how to work

"...Your best weapon as a photographer is always going to be your personality," says Watson.



Above: From *Moroc*, Aicha Haddaoui, on the road from Meknes to Marrakech, 1997. Above, right: Another image from *Vegas*.



perfume, your "imagizing" their products. If you go to Vegas, then you are communicating selling Vegas in a way. We then changed it from Las Vegas to Vegas. But then I thought it sounds like a TV show. And then a funny thing happened. It's where semantics can actually help you when you do work. We changed the whole project to "Shot in Vegas." And the minute we changed it to that, it immediately let me off the hook as far as *National Geographic*izing Vegas. It meant I could go there and shoot anything. The title freed me up.

PDN: What advice would you give to younger photographers?

Watson: It's strange to think about this because I still feel I have a lot of pictures to take. I'm 27 years younger than Irving Penn. In 27 years I'll be Irving Penn's age, and in 27 years—with the way we work here—we should be pretty productive. But the thing I've said to a lot of younger photographers is, "If you love photography, learn it." I know it sounds boring. But struggle with that so that everything you do afterward is natural. You just automatically, when you work, do things naturally. Nowadays you can change a lot of things on the computer, but it's still very nice to know how to do things.

Also remember that a lot of great things can be basic things. Passport pictures. Just stick someone against the wall and there it is. I've done a lot of shots like that in Vegas. I didn't manipulate the people in any way. But I'm also still learning, and I think we always are. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's true. You're always still exploring things.

Watson will be the focus of a retrospective this September in Milan and will soon be releasing a DVD featuring his work in commercials as well as his still photography.

them. But of course I always say it's got nothing to do with being able to drive the car, but it's always where you take it.

PDN: How do you continue to challenge yourself? (Question submitted by PDN reader Robert Jensen from Los Angeles)

Watson: I think because of the nature of who I am as a photographer it was always a challenge. It wasn't like I said, "Okay you haven't done any landscapes, let's go do one." I was drawn to the landscape or to the still life. And I was always going to be doing different things. But not so much as a challenge. If there was a landscape, I just shot it; if there was a beautiful woman in a dress, I photographed her. I came into photography because I loved it and I stayed there.

As far as challenges are concerned—if you are driven to take pictures, it's not so much that you have to challenge yourself, it's more of a natural thing. You just go out and work. I think the Vegas thing took me by surprise—it turned out to be much more difficult than I thought it would be.

PDN: How so?

Watson: I did the book *Moroc* and it was like, "Here are things I saw in Morocco." So I went into Vegas with a view like, "Okay, now I'm going to look at Vegas." I think when I first started I felt an initial commitment and a pressure to communicate Vegas to people. And that was a mistake. When you are in the communication business for years and years, you're always communicating. If you do an ad for Estée Lauder, then your communicating their new

Albert the Great

PHOTO ALBUM

WITH ALBERT WATSON

Through the years, ALBERT WATSON has had a number of publications and images that have defined his career. Here's a quick look back by Watson himself at a few of these moments.

Alfred Hitchcock (Los Angeles, 1973) The shot I did of him holding that goose, at that point in my career, was a great learning experience for me. For instance, he looked at the goose and he started to cry, 'cause it was a dead goose he was holding. He kind of wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. That was one of the things he did for me. And then he covered his eyes like he couldn't bear to look at the goose. Also, when he was holding the goose and I said, "Can you look at the goose?" he turned his head in profile to look but as he did that, he turned the goose's head so the goose was looking at him. So they were both looking at each other. I didn't ask him to do it. He said, "Do you prefer this?" It was great because he was helping and contributing.

Cyclops (1994) I was surprised at how successful it was. I hoped people would like it. The nice thing was that photographers really liked it. That was the best. I didn't care if the fashion crowd like it—and they probably didn't because there was certainly not enough fashion in it for them. But photographers loved it worldwide. That was a good thing.

The thing I liked about *Cyclops*, and it wasn't easy to get that book published, was that in the end, in its two forms, it sold nearly 100,000 copies, which is quite an impressive amount (24,000 large format and 68,000 small). Also, the thing that *Cyclops* demonstrated in the end was that I was a photographer. It didn't matter that someone couldn't categorize me as an art photographer or a gallery photographer or a classic photographer.

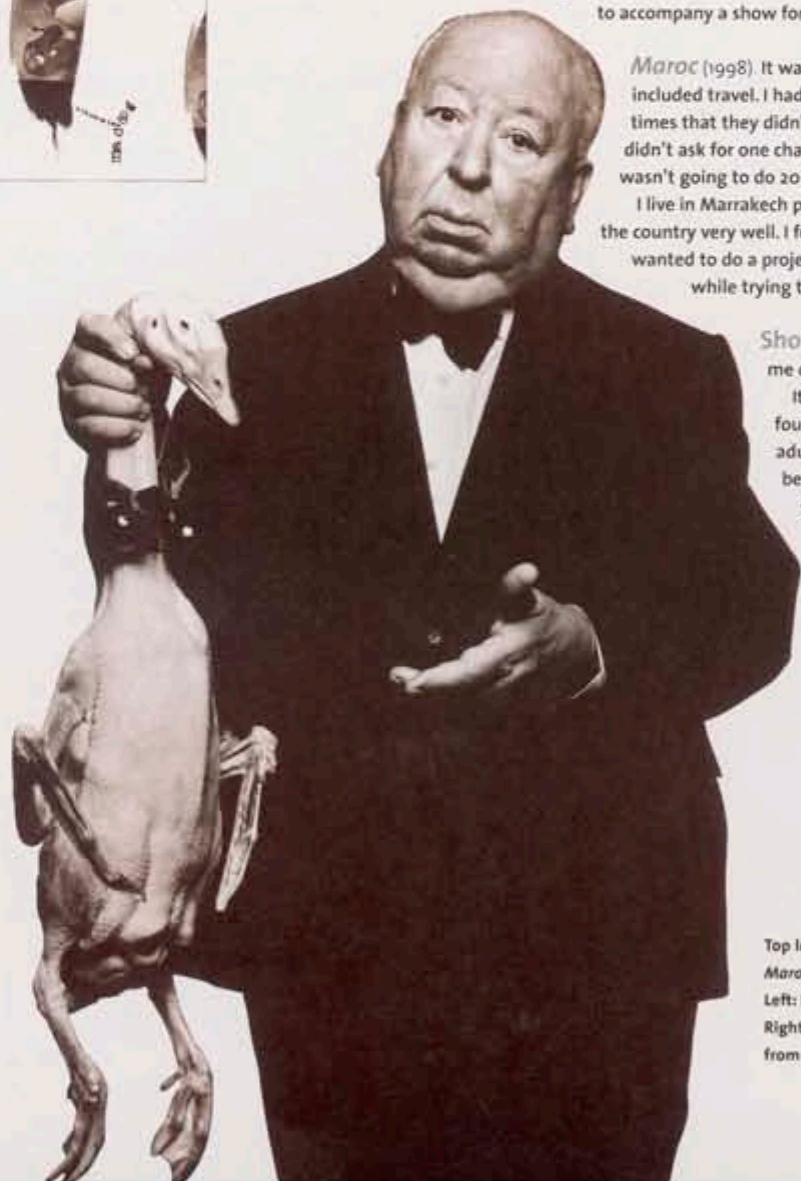
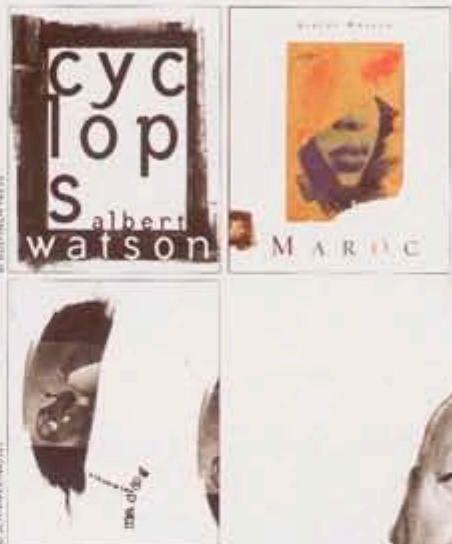
Mad Dog (1996) This was basically a catalogue, but it had a little more in it because Tomato, these kind of rock-and-roll graphic designers from London, did it. And I knew that because David Carson had done *Cyclops* and this book was to accompany a show for *Cyclops* that there was a connection there. But it was really *Cyclops* plus 22 images.

Maroc (1998) It was a commissioned book from the Moroccan government. I shot it in 39 days and that included travel. I had great freedom on it. Although they commissioned it, they emphasized a thousand times that they didn't want any control. They just wanted me to do it, and that was the end of it. They didn't ask for one change when I showed them the final project. But I kept in mind who I was doing it for. I wasn't going to do 20 pages of drug addicts and Tangiers.

I live in Marrakech part of the year. I work there. I'm just about to go do a big job for Sony there. I knew the country very well. I felt that there was a certain tradition in the country, and I did it in a certain way. And I wanted to do a project that looked like that, something that had an ancient paper platinum thing to it while trying to modernize my presentation and my way of showing something classic.

Shot in Vegas (unpublished). I think it will surprise some people. You still see that it's me doing it, but it's certainly different. And this time it's 85 percent in color.

It's the kind of place you can easily get lost in. The more I worked there, the more I found: people, weird objects. We went into a women's prison. We started shooting the adult motels. I began to get inside Vegas as a project. We shot 20 weeks there, shooting between 12 and 15 hours a day. Beyond 15 hours you burn your crew out. On average, I shot from 9:30 A.M. to 11:30 P.M., a 14-hour day.



Top left: The covers of *Cyclops*, *Maroc* and *Mad Dog*.
Left: Hitchcock and a goose.
Right: A Las Vegas landscape from the upcoming book.