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January 10, 2017
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Avedon, the genius of the thousand cameras
An exhibition in a gallery in New York shows the photographs that Richard Avedon took for *Nothing personal*, his work with writer James Baldwin.



View of Richard Avedon's exhibition hall at the Pace gallery in New York

"All the photographs are accurate, none of them is the truth." Richard Avedon

The Chelsea is the case of a neighborhood that moves to the rhythm of art galleries. There are other districts in cities around the world where the galleries reign and shine, but in Chelsea it's different. They are blocks and blocks of galleries where before there were workshops and warehouses and today is shown and traded with the most important contemporary art in the world.

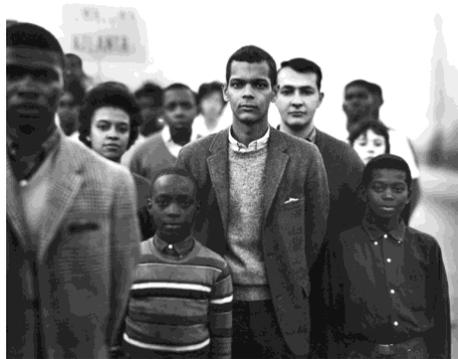
With just crossing the door of the Pace gallery, located on the 24th between 10th and 11th, and specialized in contemporary photography, the viewer will be confronted with a documentary, aesthetic and political treasure. *Nothing Personal* is a project that photographer Richard Avedon and writer James Baldwin devised in 1964, in the form of a book of warning and denunciation.



Marilyn Monroe, actress, New York, May 6, 1957. Copy in silver gelatin. © The Richard Avedon Foundation

The current dialect would call it a photobook, or object book, but these nominations do not do it justice. It is a book of indisputable pop beauty and an overwhelming social power that combined artistic sophistication with political clarity without over ideologizing in ideal proportions.

The texts of Baldwin, a black writer brought up in the hard Harlem of the 1930s that time elevated to the rank of prophet, corresponded to the severe images of the photos that Avedon took during the first part of the 1960s. as an objective to stand in the middle of what was called "the black problem" and to show, in letter and image, the different American realities at the time of the enactment of the civil rights law.



Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Atlanta, Georgia, 1963. Copy in silver gelatin. © The Richard Avedon Foundation

The photos show the plasticity and coherence of Avedon. His creative freedom was such that he never needed the labels or exaggerated exaggerations of protest artists. What distinguishes his photography is the humanist spirit. The same thing happens if you take a celebrity or a leader of the black resistance. There is a human intimacy that keeps him away from any levity and places the protagonists in a conversation with the photographer that is only completed by the viewer's later look.

In the exhibition there are some famous shots. The nakedness of the poet Allen Ginsberg, activist for the rights of homosexuals, making the Buddhist gesture of abhaya mudra, which indicates tranquility and calmness and the small portraits of a downcast Marilyn Monroe and full of a melancholic grace may be the most famous. Both deserved a saga through time and show Avedon with a wide sensitivity for individual and social conflicts.



Patients in a Mental Institution, February 1963. Copy in silver gelatin. © The Richard Avedon Foundation

Less obvious, there are two particularly moving photos. In "William Casby, born slave" Avedon portrays a black man of almost 100 years, with his face elongated by the deformity of his jaw and dry eyes, indistinguishable almost from the face, far in time. With his shoulders loaded and strong despite age,

Casby, born slave in Algiers, Louisiana, was the literary representation of the slavery past of the United States thanks to the analysis made years later by Roland Barthes. In *The Lucid Chamber*, Barthes took the photograph of Avedon to place the memory in the realm of experience and remove it from the historical domain. The photo acts as a certification of the existence of slavery. Baldwin wrote in *Nothing Personal*: "It is necessary, in the darkness, to know that there is light somewhere, to know that in oneself, waiting to be found, there is a light. What light reveals is danger, and what it demands is faith. "

The other photo shows the leader of the American Nazi party, George Lincoln Rockwell, participating in the greeting by a group of followers. All are dressed in military uniforms and have the bracelet with the swastika on the left arm. The martial posture of the shot, strategically placed in the book in mirror with that of Ginsberg, shows one of the realities of the time that resonates today with some concern. In 1963, the year Avedon made this takeover, white supremacists ruled Alabama.



William Casby, Born in Slavery, Algiers, Louisiana, March 24, 1963. Copy in silver gelatin. © The Richard Avedon Foundation

A special attention deserves the series of eleven photographs that the artist made in the state psychiatric hospital of Jackson, Louisiana. The images intermingle mental illness and poverty with a devastating result. They are portraits of a huge depth and aesthetic impact where the protagonism lies in the emptiness of the faces marked by that particular lack of life that only gives the systematic exposure to drugs and confinement. Only the artistic genius of Avedon can explain that the same person behind the camera knows how to capture those dramatic shots and also the cool portraits of John Lennon, Audrey Hepburn and Arnold Schwarzenegger or the graceful images of models posing among African elephants.

Avedon's photography is modern and contemporary, transitional between modern portrait, pop and video art. This exhibition in Pace reinforces this idea by placing its production in a relevant place. The reprinting in 2017 of *Nothing Personal* by Taschen confirms that the artistic freedom of Avedon and Baldwin, as well as the problems related to social and political injustices, are still on the agenda.

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