

THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Magazine

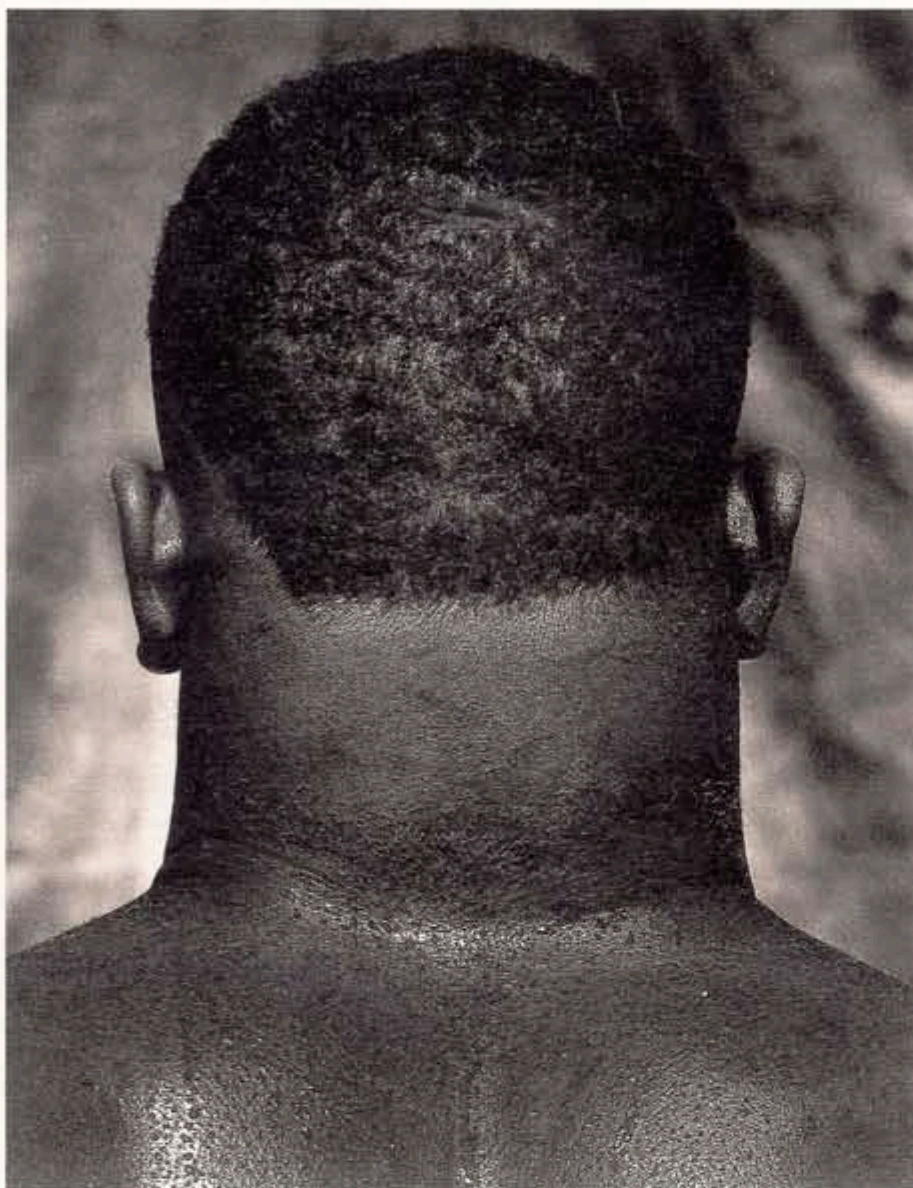
HOT SHOT

The wicked charm
of photographer
Albert Watson
by James Truman

C

ontemporary magazine photography is an unruly marriage between ideas and process. On one hand there is the photographer's vision. On the other is the army of editors, stylists, models, celebrities, publicists, technicians, assistants and hairdressers he must assemble, pacify and seduce to achieve the picture. It goes without saying that a great deal of magazine photography leaves a more powerful impression of the process than of the idea that launched it; photography is now largely and visibly the product of collaboration. While this should not diminish the artistry of the photographer – it is, after all, how movie-makers have always done business – it can complicate the issue of authorship. How does the photographer identify himself within the collaboration? Is his signature legible? Is it necessary?

The photographs in Albert Watson's book *Cyclops* (published by Pavilion Books on October 27, price £40), some of which are reproduced here, arrive from several different sources. Some began as commercial commissions, like the album cover for Sade. Many more were magazine assignments: celebrity portraits, fashion portfolios, reportage, the cultural beat. Others originated in the photographer's private whims – snapshots from the road, a hobbyist's excursion, a personal obsession. They share a singular quality: each is identifiably a Watson photograph. There is, first of all, the technique – a virtuosity that elevates technical precision into an



'I wanted to photograph someone who was instantly recognisable from the back. Tyson wasn't then, but he certainly is now'

Mike Tyson, Catskills, New York state, March 15, 1986

aesthetic property. Even when working within familiar conventions – the studio still-life, the film-noir portrait – Watson is able to dazzle the eye with the sheer high-definition physicality of his images. Without claiming any one particular subject as his franchise, he brings to each the sensation of personal investment.

The investment is curiosity, but it is curiosity pushed to an almost unnatural degree. At first glance, some of these photographs might appear hostile, alienated; their taut surfaces bristle with an unrelieved tension. This is not just technical effect – or, rather, it is technical effect in the service of something more profound. What makes these pictures resonate falls more properly into the realm of possession: the photographer becoming possessed by his subject, the subject being possessed by the photographer.

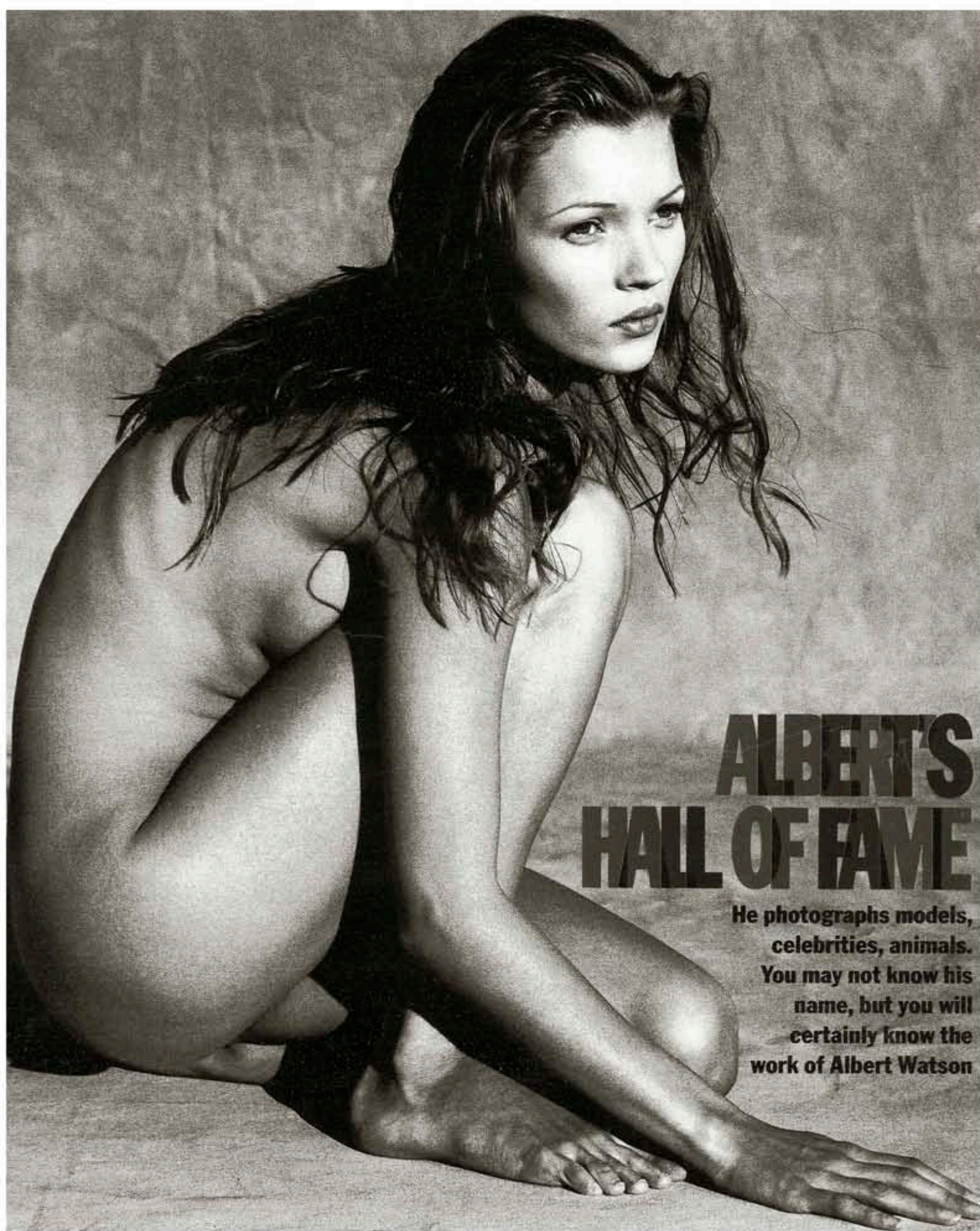
An alternative title for this collection might have been *Fetishes*. In the literal, non-pejorative sense, Watson's work is brazenly fetishistic. When he is examining the personal effects of, respectively, Tutankhamen, the Apollo astronauts, and Elvis Presley – a collection of unassuming artefacts that we have repossessed and given life to as historical and cultural totems – his photographs are wilfully uncomplicated. There is no attempt to explain the material presence of the items; they are photographed as specimens, as passive witnesses to an alchemical process that begins and ends with our own fascination with them. These are primarily photographs about the

power of fetish, but they also testify to the photographer's enthusiastic complicity in the process – apparent not least in his tireless pursuit of his subject.

The actual title of his book, *Cyclops*, refers to the little-known fact that, since birth, Albert Watson has had sight in only one eye. It refers equally to the better-known fact that Watson is almost obsessively single-minded. Watching him prepare for a shoot, focusing himself and his crew, spinning detailed monologues that last for days and engulf entire continents, one senses the romantic sense of mission that goes into the work.

If there is something of the Victorian dandy in Watson's personal demeanour, there is something more of the Victorian anthropologist and explorer in his work. Even the most stylised of his photographs possess a quality of being snapshots from a journey, an adventure, a quest. And not the usual kind of snapshot – more like the single, searing image that is memorised at the moment one wakes from a particularly intense dream.

Cyclops is a book of explorations, and the photographs represent the apotheosis of each journey. There is a kind of fetish in that, too. It is the ritualistic collaboration between a compulsive, controlling perfectionist and a romantic dreamer who still believes in the luxurious power of photography to seduce, shake, rattle and roll. **James Truman**



ALBERT'S HALL OF FAME

He photographs models,
celebrities, animals.
You may not know his
name, but you will
certainly know the
work of Albert Watson

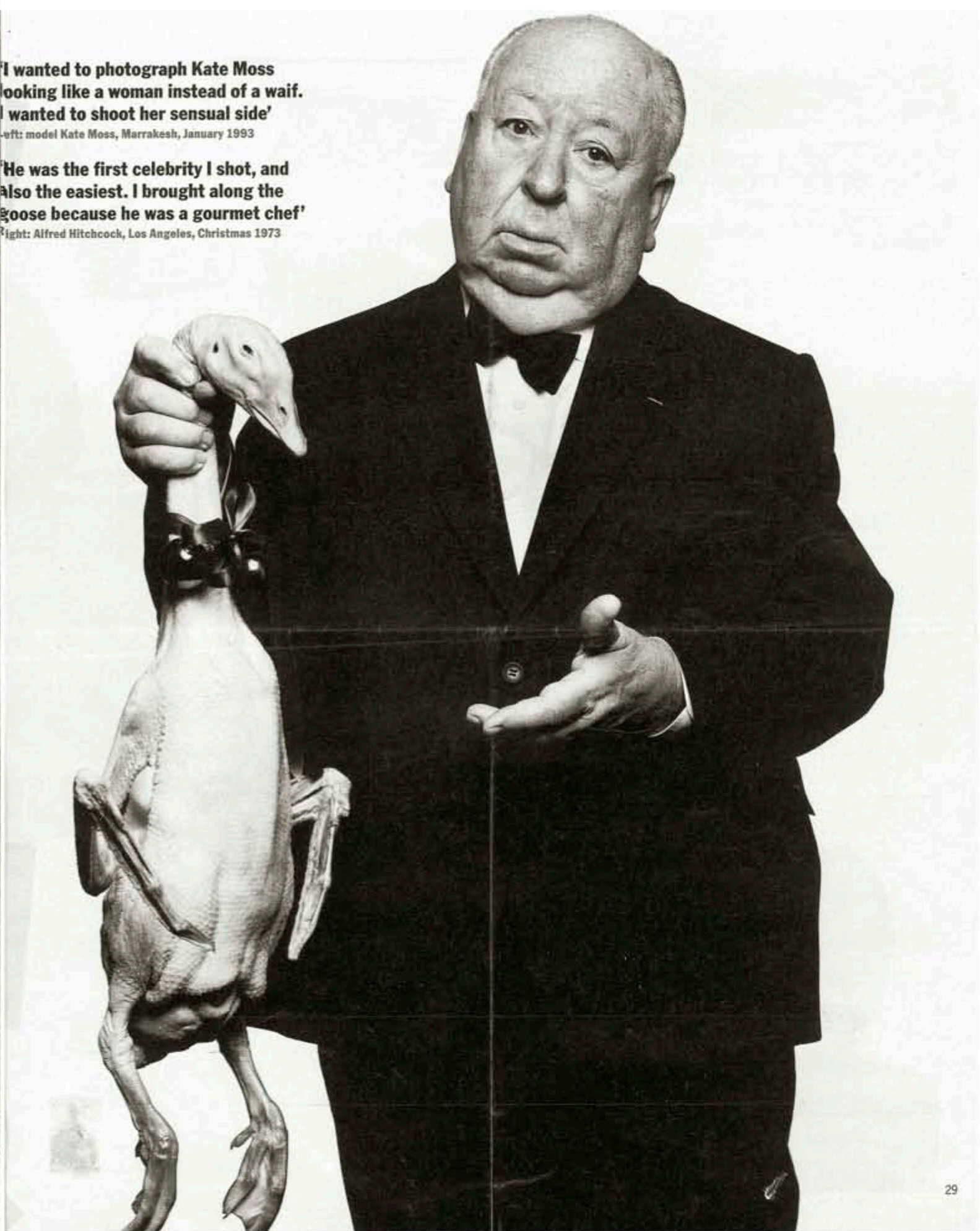
**'I wanted to photograph Kate Moss
looking like a woman instead of a waif.**

'I wanted to shoot her sensual side'

Left: model Kate Moss, Marrakesh, January 1993

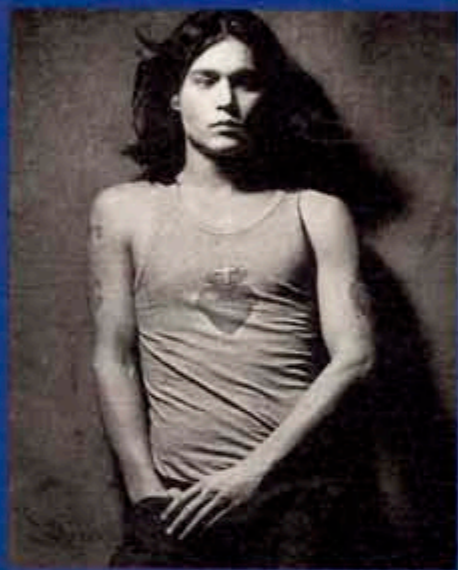
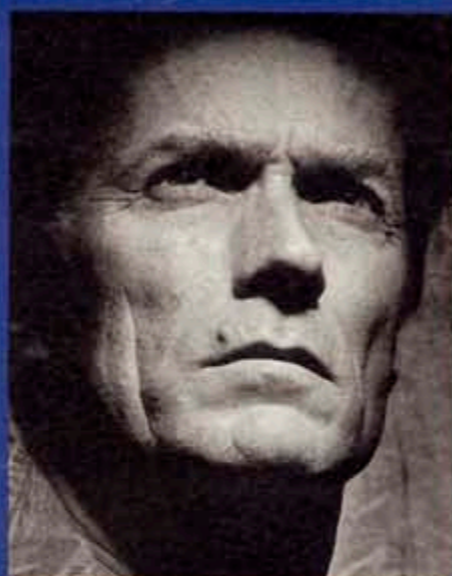
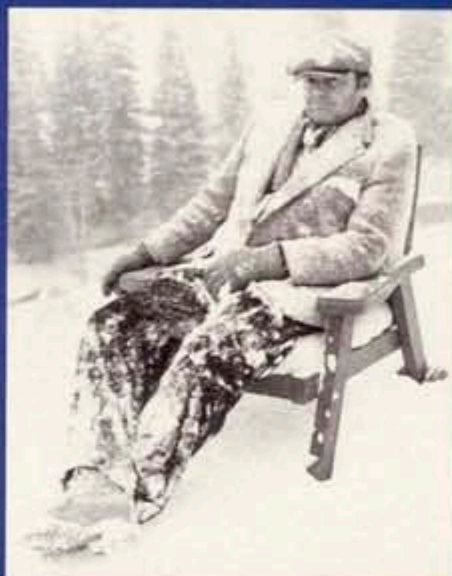
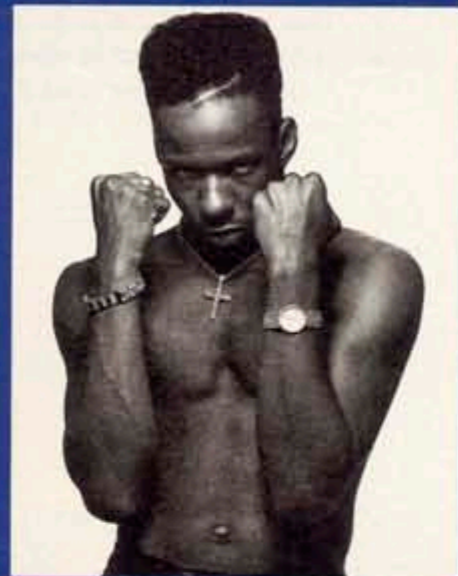
**'He was the first celebrity I shot, and
also the easiest. I brought along the
goose because he was a gourmet chef'**

Right: Alfred Hitchcock, Los Angeles, Christmas 1973



**'This was hell. I had to have
incredible patience – I had to show
the monkey how to do it'**
Monkey with gun, March 1992





'This was for Sade's Love Deluxe LP, so I covered her in gold. It's luxuriously sexy'

Right: Sade, London, July 31, 1992.
 Opposite: top row, soul singer Bobby Brown, New York, February 9, 1990; Jack Nicholson in his back garden in Aspen, February 1981; Clint Eastwood, New York, May 1985. Centre row: actor Johnny Depp, New York, February 19, 1993; Sinead O'Connor, New York, September 1992; photographer Cindy Sherman, New York, January 11, 1994. Bottom row: rapper Grooves B Chill, New York, February 14, 1990; gold lamé suit made for Elvis Presley in 1957, photographed at Graceland, Memphis, February 27, 1991; actor Gary Oldman, Hollywood Hills, September 29, 1991

