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**PHOTOGRAPHY**

DEDICATED TO THE MONOCHROME PHOTOGRAPHER





## INTERVIEW

## ALBERT WATSON

'Lighting has always played a very big part in my work. I was pretty much determined to be good in the studio and hopefully good outside, too. I've worked with raw sunlight in the middle of the day, with golden hour light, with strobes, with tungsten...'

WORDS Ailsa McWhinnie

ABOVE Jack Nicholson, New York City, 1998



WHERE TO BEGIN AND END with Albert Watson? Rather like the pictures on his website, he's on a constant loop, and it's impossible to know which version you're going to hit at any given time. Will it be the Albert Watson 'Las Vegas years', all highly saturated, tawdry and blatantly fetishistic? Or will it be the witty Watson – the one who incorporates a 15th century Aztec fan into a composition in somewhat unusual fashion. Or there's the landscape photographer, who captures the folds and shadows of a sand dune in exactly the same way he would a classic haute couture creation for one of the world's top designers. And, just as with the pictures on that website, the moment you think you've got him sussed, he's moving onto the next thing.

Even the word prolific doesn't do full justice to the vast output of this Edinburgh-born artist

– and I use the word 'artist' deliberately, because a thirst for all things visual is Watson's driving force. His educational training was in art, graphic design and film (latterly at the Royal College of Art, in London), and each of these elements still plays a part in his work today. As Watson himself says, on the phone from his studio in New York, 'I started working in 1971, and I've never stopped. I've shot millions of pieces of film over the years.'

Perhaps it's something to do with the Scots working ethic instilled in the man ('The way to god is through the work,' he says, with a definite smile in his voice), whose accent is still more Caledonia than Queens, despite having lived permanently in the USA for more than 35 years. And, in that time, he has shot more than 250 covers for *Vogue* magazine alone, not to mention his work for *Rolling Stone* and *Time*, or the innumerable advertising campaigns and

television commercials for the likes of Gap, Levi's, Chanel, Prada and Christian Dior. This is truly the output of someone obsessed by the act – and the art – of creating. As curator and publisher James Crump states in his introduction to the recent Phaidon publication, *Albert Watson*, 'Many Watson photographs are iconic, some even seem burned onto our collective memory: a nude portrait of supermodel Kate Moss, or the back of boxer Mike Tyson's head... All suggest the range of content in Watson's diverse oeuvre but, more importantly, show a forcefully minimal visual language informed by graphic design, filmmaking, the history of painting and sculpture, and an incredibly broad knowledge of culture.'

So how to distil such an extraordinary archive of work down to just one book? 'The selection process is always a bit difficult,'





Watson admits. 'We [Watson and Crump] kept digging things up. We held some back because we have a few other projects, but released some pictures that had never been seen before, and some very old ones. But it's difficult because I shoot so many different things.'

If there's one characteristic that flows through his entire catalogue, however, it's lighting – and the control of it. As skilled as any sculptor, he moulds the shadows cast by a harsh overhead sun to allow a model's face to fall into darkness while keeping her clothing lit, capitalises on a cloudy-bright sky to create a fully tonal result, or exploits the sickly neon cast of a motel car park at night. The fundamentals of light form the fundamentals of an Albert Watson photograph. He confirms this. 'Lighting has always played a very big part in my work. I was pretty much determined to be good in the studio and hopefully good outside, too. I've worked with raw sunlight in the middle of the day, with golden hour light,

with strobes, with tungsten... In fact, we were just making a print – a shot of Uma Thurman – that was lit by an old-fashioned table lamp that was in a hotel.'

And if you're going to be so versatile as to work in every genre of photography, with

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every method of lighting, it naturally follows that you should have the mastery of every type of camera in your technical armoury. And so Watson does. 'I've used all cameras from half frame to 8x10in. I was just old-fashioned in that way – I figured that if you were a photographer you should be able to do that.'

It's at this point that Watson, with all the assuredness of someone who's been at the pinnacle of his chosen career for so long, becomes critical. 'That's a thing of the past, I'm afraid. Back in the '70s and '80s, if you shot in a studio with a white background, your white

background had to be immaculate. Now you can touch a button on a computer and it's immaculate. But technical pressures help you to become a better photographer in the long run, of course, because,' he says, citing his dramatic image of Jack Nicholson, 'it allows you to go into a mirrored room and light it.'

While we're still on the subject of versatility, it's worth pointing out that rarely does one come across a photographer so equally at home with both colour and black & white. And it's not even as if his colour work has that monochromatic feel employed by photographers who really would rather be shooting in black & white. Quite the reverse, in fact. It's as if the two approaches fulfil opposing creative desires in him. His book, *Maroc* (1998, Rizzoli International Publications), afforded him the opportunity (at the request of the now king of Morocco, no less) to create something he describes as 'fairly classic... quite straightforward.' From there, almost as if being catapulted to the opposite end of the spectrum, he concentrated on his Las Vegas project. 'Vegas is very different,' he says, understatedly. 'It's very highly saturated.'

But then, as if to deliberately contradict himself, he continues, 'I did photograph a lot of the motels in Vegas in black & white because I found them for some reason more romantic, more interesting than in the obviousness of colour.'

This choice between mediums is something Watson feels strongly about. 'You should have a philosophy about black & white – you should have a reason to do it in black & white. If you approach a brilliantly coloured neon hotel, you will probably think it has to be in colour. But at



**OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE** Motel room, Abilene, Texas, 1987

**ABOVE** Alfred Hitchcock, Los Angeles, 1973

**LEFT** Tupac Shakur, New York, 1991

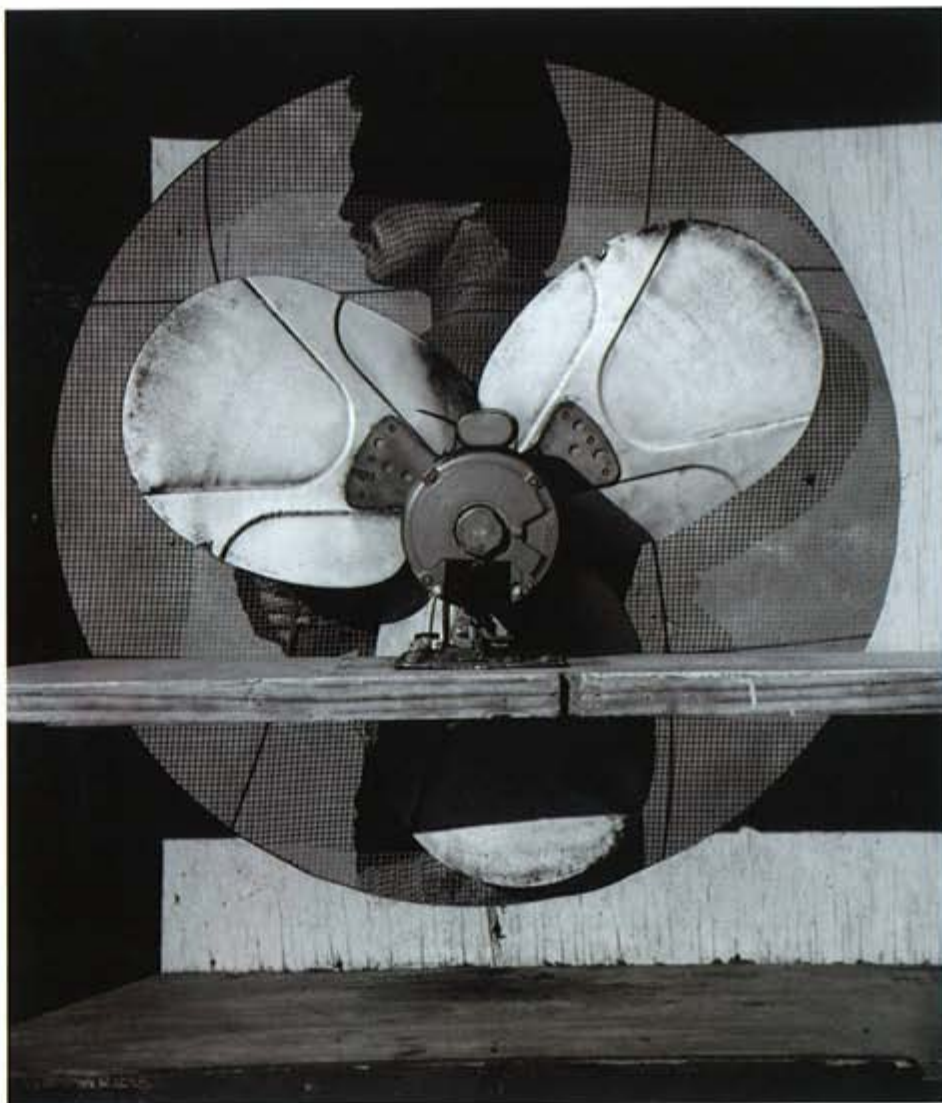


the same time, if you do it in black & white it suddenly becomes – for me, anyway – a 1947 film noir. Black & white I like because it's surreal. Because we see in colour.'

To explain his point, he goes on to describe what he can see from the window of his studio while we're talking. There is blue sky, red brick buildings, a girl in a blue sweater... The image builds just like one of his photographs. 'Now, if you were to see that scene in black & white, it would be removed a little bit from reality, and that makes it more artistic in a way – so therefore sometimes black & white has that artistic buzz to it.'

If you needed further evidence of what Watson means by surreal, you need only take a look at his 1996 portrait of David Bowie, apparently bodiless, his head nestling in a crate, and eyes closed. Alternatively, the baldly graphic representation of a monkey's hand, holding a gun, invites numerous interpretations, as do his apparently straight depictions of the standing stones for which the Orkney Islands are famed.

As we draw our conversation to a close, I have to ask what seems like an obvious question. Does Albert derive as much pleasure from photography as he always did? His joyful and – some might say – uncharacteristically spontaneous snap of three dogs, sitting in the back of a car, keenly awaiting the return of



**ABOVE** James West, Louisiana State Penitentiary, 1991

**LEFT** Dogs in car, Las Vegas, 2000



their owner, would certainly suggest so. 'More,' he agrees, 'because I have a greater ability now. You can see problems and know how to solve them, so you get more pleasure out of them because when you make a mistake you know what you've done wrong.'

And, increasingly, the outside world – and by that I mean those of us who don't work among the top flight advertising agencies and creatives who dominate so much of Watson's time – is beginning to recognise the worth of the man who for so long has been known as the photographers' photographer. The recent sale of his 1993 print of Kate Moss at Christie's for the sum of £54,000 (it was estimated at £15,000) only confirms this. 'We're selling a lot right now,' he reveals. 'It's across the board. Someone will buy a Kate Moss, of course, but they might also buy a [colour] triptych of jellyfish that I shot in Vegas.' Thankfully, it would appear that Watson's fans are every bit as eclectic in their tastes as the photographer himself. **B&W**

**ABOVE LEFT** Leslie Weiner, Yohji Yamamoto, London, 1989

**ABOVE RIGHT** Charlotte, Charleston Farmhouse, 1987



## Book offer

*Albert Watson*, with an introduction by James Crump, is published by Phaidon, price £19.95. Readers of *Black & White Photography* can purchase copies at a special discount price of £15.95 (including free P&P in the UK) by ringing 020 7843 1234 and quoting BWAW01. This offer remains open until 9 November 2007.



▶ See more of Albert Watson's photography at [www.albertwatson.net](http://www.albertwatson.net)