

# STEFF HERB ROUG H

“AVEDON’S AMERICA”  
BRINGS OVER FIFTY YEARS  
OF **RICHARD AVEDON’S**  
EXTENDED PORTRAITURE  
INTO FOCUS AT GUILD  
HALL MUSEUM.

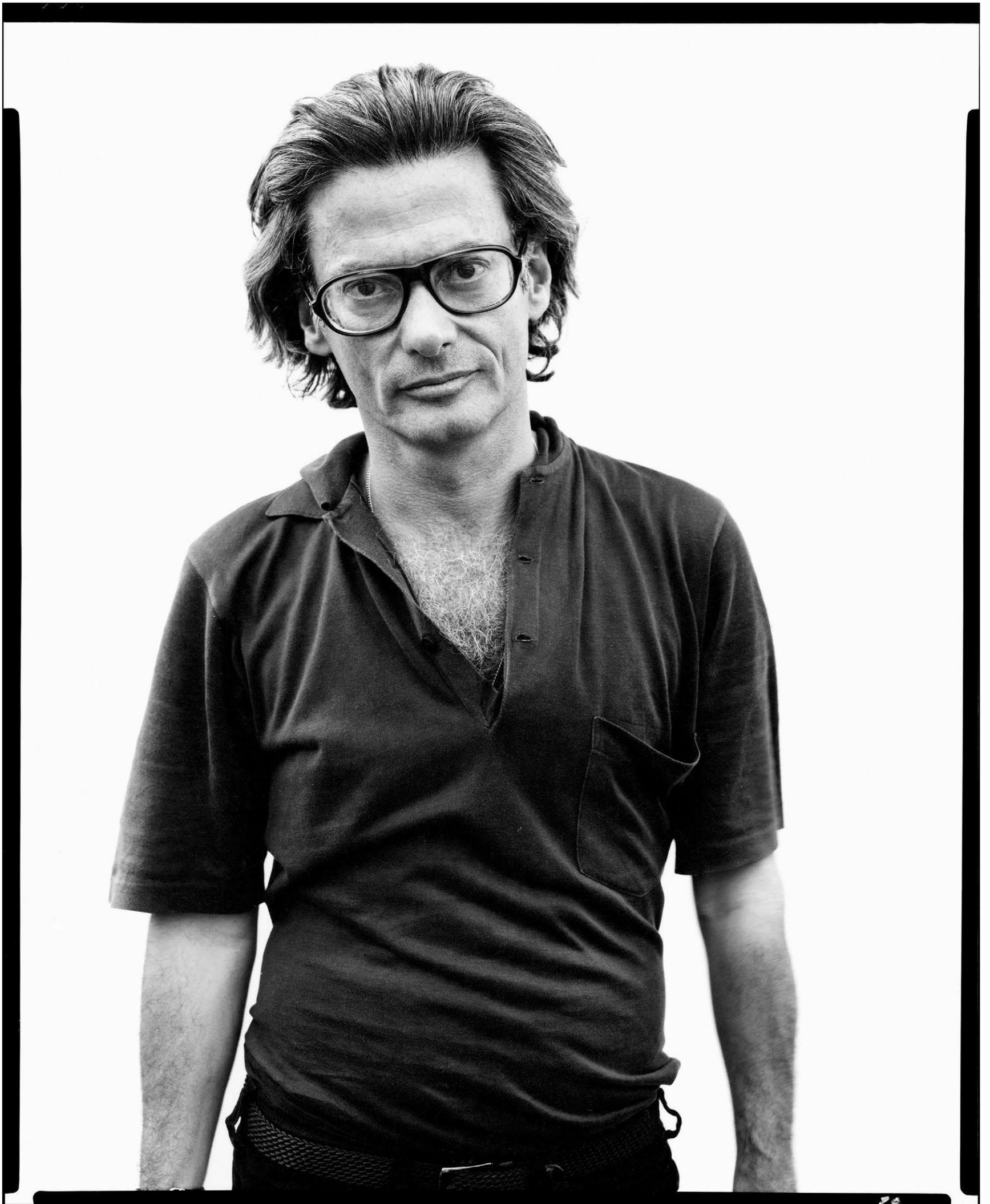
BY ALLISON BERG  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD AVEDON  
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RICHARD AVEDON,  
MABOU MINES, NOVA  
SCOTIA, JULY 17, 1975

Richard Avedon took this self-portrait during a visit to the home of acclaimed Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank. For Avedon, it was a rare moment unrelated to his commissions and other paid work. Frank, like Avedon, was a transformative artist whose images revealed the complexities of humanity. His celebrated 1958 book, *The Americans*, offered the quintessential look at American society, both high and low, in the middle of the last century.



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Richard Avedon had a deep affinity for the Hamptons. He maintained a vacation home in Montauk for more than two decades and produced some of his best advertising, editorial, and fashion photography here. So it's only fitting that the exhibition "Avedon's America" should debut at East Hampton's Guild Hall Museum this month. The most diverse, comprehensive Avedon museum show to date presents over half a century of portraiture fit to inspire a greater understanding of American history, psychology, and celebrity.

Depicting a confluence of pioneering figures from the civil rights and women's movements, the Vietnam War, fashion, and the arts, the black-and-white images also show subjects from many walks of life. The intriguing characters range from William F. Buckley to John Cage, from Florence Kennedy to Donald Trump—a breadth that reflects Avedon's concern with the beauty of diversity.

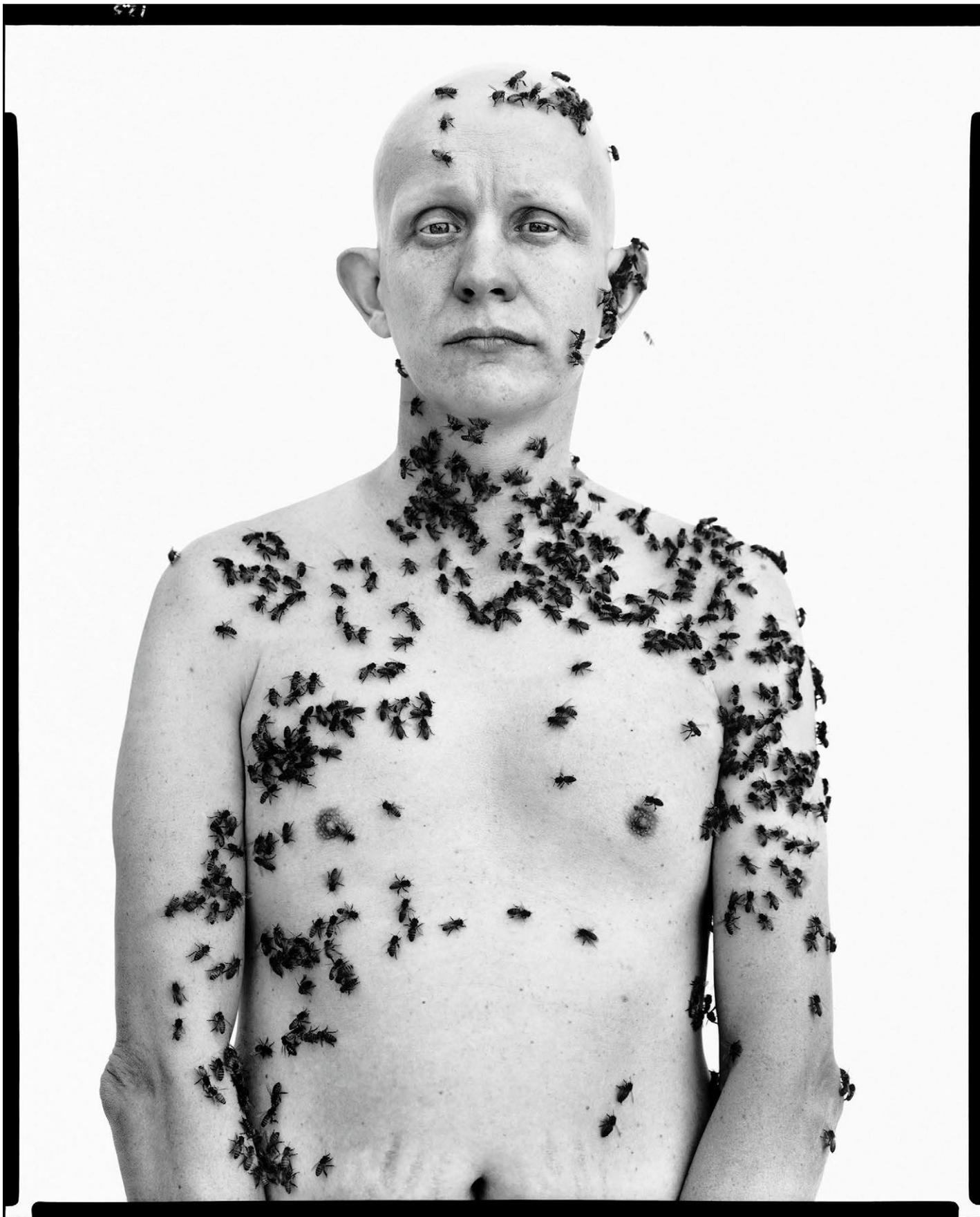
"We are so pleased with the variety," says Christina Mossaides Strassfield, museum director and chief curator of Guild Hall >



DONYALE LUNA,  
NEW YORK,  
DECEMBER 6, 1966

Groundbreaking model Donyale Luna was the first black woman to appear on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar*—in a 1965 sketch. And the following year, she was the first on the cover of *British Vogue*. Described as a living Giacometti sculpture, the slender, elongated Luna had a contract with Avedon at *Harper's Bazaar*, and together they brought women of color into mainstream high-end fashion. *Time* magazine named 1966 the Luna Year in recognition of her singular beauty.





RONALD FISCHER,  
BEEKEEPER, DAVIS,  
CALIFORNIA, MAY 9, 1981

Ronald Fischer was president of the Illinois State Beekeepers Association when he responded to Avedon's national want ad

seeking a beekeeper—and Fischer soon had hundreds of bees crawling over his shirtless body. This photograph became one of the most recognizable works from *In the American West*, Avedon's series chronicling

uncelebrated hardworking Americans from nearly 200 communities. Said the photographer, "I'm looking for people who are surprising, heartbreaking, or beautiful in a terrifying way."

MARIAN ANDERSON,  
OPERA SINGER,  
NEW YORK,  
JUNE 30, 1955

Segregation limited world-class contralto Marian Anderson to performing in small recital venues during her prime in the 1930s and '40s. The Daughters of the American Revolution famously banned her from the "whites only" Constitution Hall stage, causing Eleanor Roosevelt to arrange a special concert for Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939. Avedon captured this powerful image in 1955, the year she was finally permitted to sing at the Metropolitan Opera.

Museum. For a show this important, balancing the images was crucial. The Richard Avedon Foundation focused primarily on issues such as how best to represent people of color, women, and subjects of various lifestyles and backgrounds. "We were trying to find the best cross-sections of Avedonia," says James Martin, the foundation's executive director, emphasizing the challenge involved given the icon's rich archives. The curators were also mindful not to create unintentional juxtapositions, as it was always important to Avedon that each image speak for itself. Nonetheless, the show's overall goal is to pair recognizable images with less familiar ones in order to frame a larger message. Scrutinizing each portrait individually while also contemplating its relationships with the others leads to a better appreciation of Avedon's many perspectives on America.

**A** New Yorker born and bred, Avedon became a staff photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1945 and remained there for 20 years before moving to *Vogue*. At the time, he divided his work into four categories: fashion, serious, portraiture, and reportage. In the 1990s, however, during his tenure as *The New Yorker's* first staff photographer, he had the epiphany that all of this work was serious. Around this time, he shot his groundbreaking fashion fable "In Memory of the Late Mr. and Mrs. Comfort" right here in Montauk. The epic 25-page *New Yorker* spread supports the idea that in all of his genres, he tells equally significant stories about the way we live. >







JOHN MARTIN, DANCER, LES BALLETS TROCKADERO DE MONTE CARLO, NEW YORK, MARCH 20, 1975

This image aligns with Avedon's desire to define the contemporary anxieties of his times. He photographed John Martin and other members of the all-male Les Ballets

Trockadero de Monte Carlo for *Vogue* in 1975. The portrait series refrains from caricaturing the performers as men in drag—Avedon refuses to let them be seen as clowns. The men hold their gaze seriously, without self-deprecation.

During his prolific career, Avedon's interest in the human condition in America fueled several photo series. He first explored US race relations when he published the book *Nothing Personal* with his friend the writer James Baldwin in 1964. When *Rolling Stone* asked that he photograph the 1976 presidential campaign, the assignment morphed into "The Family," 69 portraits of men and women Avedon believed represented the country's political, media, and corporate elite. Years later, he journeyed through 17 Western states to compile *In the American West*, a collection of drifters, cowboys, and working-class Westerners that reflects his views on Reagan's America. Avedon died while taking a look at the 2004 presidential campaign, only weeks before the election. Photos from all of these series are included in "Avedon's America," and iPads accompany the exhibition to explain the relevance of featured figures.

Avedon had considerable faith in the camera's ability to capture life and personality, and perhaps his greatest legacy lies in his uncanny capacity for interacting with his subjects. Whether working for magazines or with brands like Versace, Calvin Klein, and Revlon, he also blurred the line between art and commercial photography.

"You know an Avedon when you see an Avedon," asserts Martin. But the main takeaway from the exhibition may be that there are many Richard Avedons: He is the artist we know from glossy magazines, but he was also a master of visual storytelling about human endurance. *"Avedon's America" opens on August 12 at Guild Hall, 158 Main St., East Hampton, 631-324-2722; guildhall.org.* ■



HILLARY CLINTON, UNITED STATES SENATOR, NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 13, 2003

Perhaps the greatest criticism leveled against Hillary Clinton as a public figure and political candidate has been a lack of relatability. Taken as she was approaching her third year in the Senate, this portrait exemplifies Avedon's ability to provoke genuine, spontaneous emotion. He captured a warm, beaming Clinton for a 2003 *New Yorker* article, demonstrating his ability to convey the intimacy of a single moment.