



ICONS
OF PHOTOGRAPHY

THE ALL SEEING EYE

Albert Watson is one of the most successful photographers of the past 40 years. He has created many iconic images and his pioneering work has graced the covers of countless magazines across the world. Sean Samuels spoke with him to discuss his style, creative process and approach to the business.

Looking at your immense volume of work, the images we've chosen are very graphic and I'd like to know how and why you developed that style.

If you look at everything I do, it's really a combination of three things: It's graphics, it's film or a combination of the two things – the filmatic graphic, I call it. What I mean by that is sometimes the shots are very simple. If you look at my shot of *Tutankhamun's Glove*, I think that is very straightforward. If you had 10,000 photographers you could probably get as many as 9,500 or more of them who could take that picture. The thing that interested me was at that time nobody was doing anything like that, so it wasn't that the photograph was exceptional; it's not, in fact it's straightforward. It's a concept rather than being a wonderful photograph. It's a wonderful object and the concept behind it is more important than the photograph. *Monkey with a Gun* is also a graphic and an idea.

What was the idea for that?

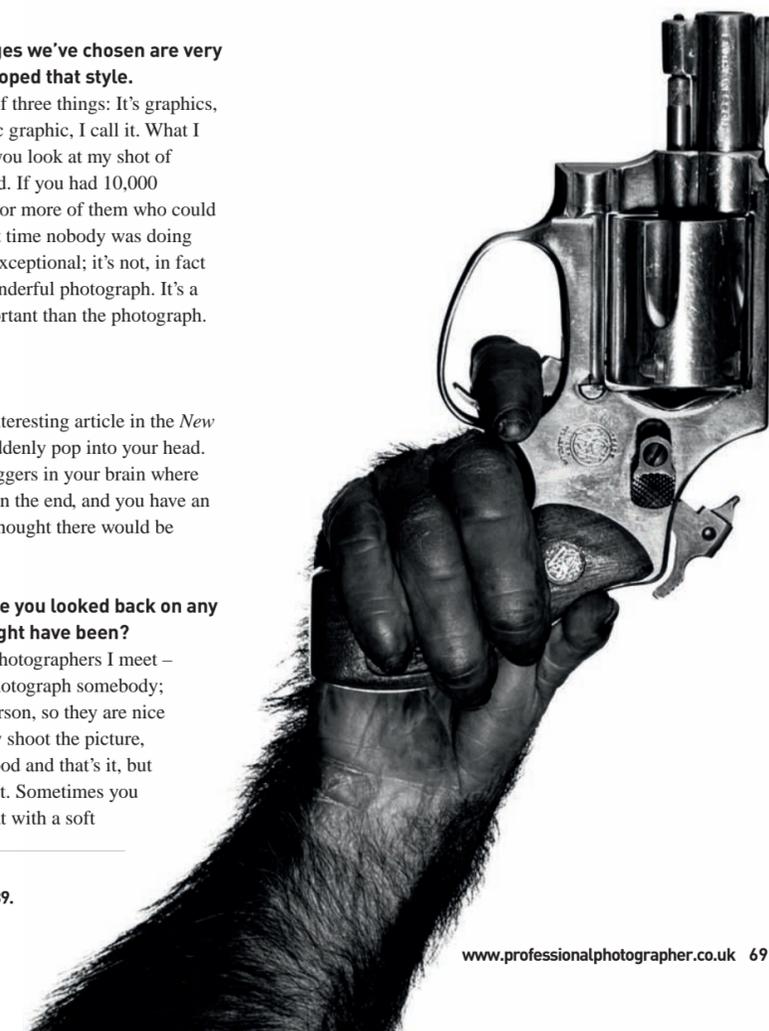
I have no idea. It just popped into my head. There's an interesting article in the *New York Times* today about where ideas come from; they suddenly pop into your head. The article says there is probably a complex series of triggers in your brain where one thing leads to another and they all line up perfectly in the end, and you have an idea. Once I saw the image, I worked on achieving it. I thought there would be something interesting in it.

Having read that article in the *New York Times*, have you looked back on any of your work and wondered what the influences might have been?

There is a process for photographers, for sure. A lot of photographers I meet – not all, but a lot – are very lazy. Say they are going to photograph somebody; the person turns up and the photographer chats to the person, so they are nice and relaxed, feeling comfortable and good, and then they shoot the picture, there's a soft box and it's done, the person looks quite good and that's it, but there's no concept, so there's not really a lot of depth to it. Sometimes you are lucky and you can do a straightforward thing like that with a soft

Right: *Monkey with a Gun*.
Opposite page: Fashion shoot for the cover of *Italian Vogue*, 1989.

ALBERT WATSON



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“I might give a talk to photographers and they don’t want to talk about photographs, they want to talk about the kit. That’s one of the sad things. The equipment is important, but it’s not about the car, it’s where you take it.” Albert Watson

box or the light from just a window and you can sometimes create a strong image, but other times it’s not so easy. In a way you have to do some preparation. It’s really important. You can always be spontaneous after you begin that process. I planned the multiple mirror shot of Jack Nicholson, but when he arrived he had a cigar in his hand. I didn’t ask him to bring that. Then he said, “I can blow smoke rings.” I said okay and therefore the cigar became part of the shot. You don’t want to plan it to death. You should always be open and always looking. That’s the thing that a lot of photographers don’t do. The good ones are always looking.

Do you believe the extra thought that you give your work is the reason for your success?

I really try to follow it through that when someone gives me a job I have a responsibility not only to the people who have come to me, but also to myself. If somebody comes to you and pays you a lot of money to do a day or pays you nothing, the interesting thing is you never get that day back either way, so you might as well maximise that day and get something out of it beyond just doing the job, beyond just saying, “Well that’s not bad.” So why not be prepared and think beforehand about what you might do? Analyse it and go through some books to begin to get some inspiration. Look for things and get some ideas. I have had this discussion with photographers before and sometimes they argue against that. The planning is an important part, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have escape routes from that plan. You should always be thinking, switched on and looking the whole time. Once you have locked on to a persona for a portrait – it doesn’t have to be a famous person – that person can pull you towards them and demand your attention and you can’t say, “Excuse me I’m going to go off and think about an idea.” Unless you are truly a genius who can think on two tracks, you are thinking solely about the person, but not about what you are going to do with that person.

How do you reconcile your understanding of the subject when they are in front of you with your concept?

A certain process begins when you pick up a camera and begin to think seriously about photography, which I did in 1966. That’s 44 years ago. If you begin to think of a process something happens to your brain. There’s a pattern that you slip into that helps you begin to understand what the demands are. A lot of it is just experience and it’s not a simple thing to explain how you do it to someone who picked up a camera only yesterday. There’s not a 44-year short cut. I’m not saying you have to go on automatic, because with photography every day is different. The subject is different and so are the demands. There’s something about becoming fluent in what you’re doing. A lot of photographers get sucked into too much technical



Above and opposite page: Breaunna, a professional dominatrix in Las Vegas, from Albert Watson’s latest book project, *Strip Search*.

stuff, talking about equipment and lenses, and how many megapixels and so on. I might give a talk to photographers and they don’t want to talk about photographs, they want to talk about the kit. That’s one of the sad things. The equipment is important, but it’s not about the car, it’s where you take it. You need to learn to drive a car, get that out of the way and then you can take it somewhere, but don’t concentrate on the car. If you’re on a scenic route you don’t stop to look at the ash tray of the car because you polished it that day.

Do you think you know instinctively what a magazine is looking for?

It could be, although I think as the work I was doing in the 1980s and 1990s became stronger sometimes it was difficult for the magazines to accept that. When I say stronger I am not using the term to mean better. It means heavier, the photography had more weight to it, but magazines, in particular fashion magazines, demand lightness and approachability. Sometimes when your pictures become heavier they can be a tougher pill to swallow. It was a natural progression for me over a period of a few years to make the work more powerful, more graphic and more photographic. When I look back on the 1970s work, which was very successful for me, I find it too lightweight.

If that was the case how did you continue to match the expectations of clients?

One thing I was good at so far as clients were concerned was that part of me was a good communicator. I was always trying to protect the client. If I was working for somebody at a company I really felt I was working for the company, not necessarily for their representatives. Sometimes that was tough because people would ask me to do things that were just silly or inappropriate or not powerful and I felt it was better that the work be more iconic and memorable because I thought that made for better advertising. That’s why I had a lot of success shooting covers, because I shot them simply and iconically, and when you stuck those covers on a newsstand they stood out. That’s why I shot so many covers. I was always after simplicity and intensity. It was always the simplest picture, almost like a passport, but it was a matter of getting intensity into it.

How did you achieve this intensity?

One thing down the line I did learn to do was to light. I felt that was a basic necessity all photographers should do. I found it interesting that a lot of photographers were using the same equipment and doing the same things



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with light. It was all a bit anonymous. What I found interesting were the contrast ratios of a lot of lighting and how they could be manipulated. I once did a class for students with a series of portraits using an electric 250W light. The point was to show what wonderful things you could do just with a light bulb if you learned how to work with it. A soft box is fine for certain things, but it's not particularly flexible. It's fixed and cumbersome; everyone looks quite good in it, but you're not going to pull something out of the geography of someone's face with it.

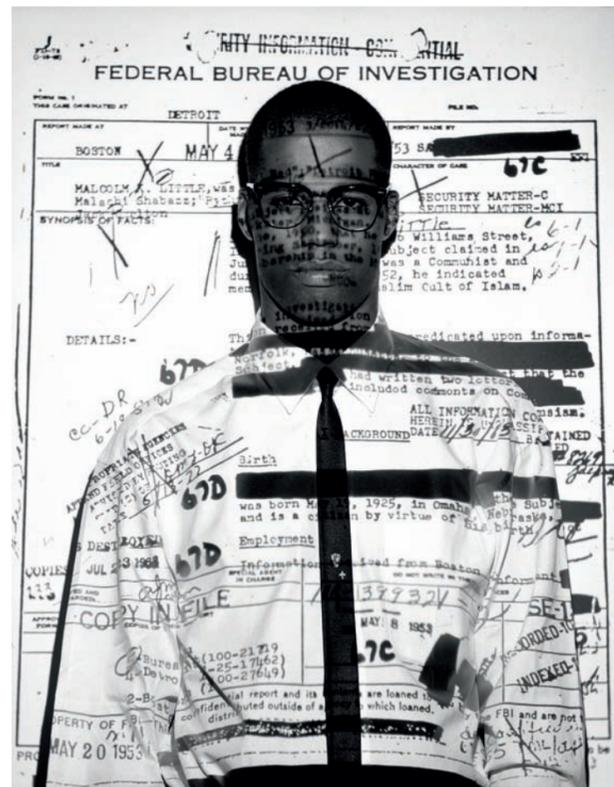
Would you say that by being open-minded and always wanting to experiment you have been able to work in any situation?

I think so, in the end. A lot of times you look at a young photographer's book and in a weird way it looks like my book *UFO*. You see it especially right at the start if he has a photograph of his girlfriend, a photograph of his grandfather, a photograph of a sunset, a photograph of the car on a beach, a still life. There's a little bit of everything and I think the weird thing with me was that I never really lost that love of a little bit of everything. One minute I was shooting car photography, the next minute I was directing TV commercials, the next minute I was doing a *Vogue* cover, still life or landscapes. The way I see it is I discover a road, it goes straight and then it takes a curve; then it's in a forest and then it's up a hill and you follow that road and at the end you finalise an image. I am working naturally. Once you get the technical thing out of the way, that does open a lot of doors for you. Everybody thinks I am a very technical person, but I am not at all. I just learned to do a lot of things; I didn't want to particularly, I found them very annoying, but they were necessary because I found they opened a lot of creative doors. You were able to get things out of the way that held you up. Some people might ask how I did that and I'll say I thought about it and worked hard on it.

One way of working that was crucial to me was the use of Polaroids, not so much to see how my use of light was, because I knew that, but how one shot linked to another in a story of 10 or 15 pages. I wanted to know that the first shot I was doing linked to the second, and the third linked to the first two, and how shot number seven related to shot number one. I was very locked in on that. That's the film training I've had, it's like putting together cuts. What we called Polaroid books, I always kept them in my pocket, I would stick them all together and a lot of these books look impressive now because they show the ways in which the ideas were finally resolved. It's probably fair to say I am a perfectionist. Mary Ellen Mark said to me: "Oh my god, you're such a techie, I wish I knew all that stuff," and I said: "Mary you're supposed to learn some of that stuff, it's kind of your job, you know." I'm not saying you need to know every single detail about photography, but you should know certain things.

I like the idea that getting those answers to certain problems out of the way enables you to go a much greater distance creatively.

Oh, absolutely, it frees you. Someone says, "I want you to take a picture of a girl nude on a bed in hotel room." I want to see the hotel room, size up the space and the first thing I am doing is looking at the light, I'm looking at the bedside table lamp, I'm looking at where the strobes might plug in, whether I need a 1K light or a 5K light, can I sling something outside? Can I mix light? I'm analysing all that very quickly in my head. It's not always easy, of course, sometimes it sounds as if I walk in and it takes me 14 seconds and I have the solution. But there are times when I walk in that room and head down that road and take a wrong turn, you're trying to get to the right place, but it's not always easy.



And on that journey how often have you found yourself abandoning your first idea?

All the time, but very often, although you have abandoned that first idea, as long as you get started, abandoning an idea puts you in a stronger position because it puts you in the right direction. Even when you make a mistake you learn something from it. To get to that final image there can be lots of twists and turns and bumps, failures, pitfalls and flooded roads, before you get to that final image; you try to think about it in a clear-cut way, but it's very tough. However, if you are well-equipped with knowledge, that can be a little bit easier.

After all these years, do you still have to submit a portfolio for jobs?

Oh I haven't done a portfolio in 20 years. That said, there have been jobs for which a portfolio has been sent in because the client is looking for something particular and they may not be totally familiar with everything you do. The portfolio is there to help show what you are thinking of, what the work might be or, more importantly, to determine if it is work they are looking for. I can show them a portfolio of 50 images and the client might want something that is in there or something completely different.

Do you do a lot of personal projects?

Not a lot, no. In fact I don't do nearly enough personal projects, but when I do they take a lot of time, for example, the new book *Strip Search*, which is about Las Vegas. Other projects would come in and block it, which meant I wasn't able to finish it.

What drives you to do personal projects?

Freedom, but in a weird way you are never 100% free. You can get close to 99.9% free, but I think there is always a slight compromise. Sometimes you set out to do something like the Vegas book, and it was a big undertaking to do a project of that size. It's not like photographing fire hydrants of New York; it's a much broader look at something. I went out there to see

what I could find and what I found I put in the book, as opposed to doing a book on Paris, for example, where you do the Eiffel Tower, the Place de la Concorde and the Champs-Élysées and so on. In other words it was about what I found interesting in Vegas.

You say you went there to find the subject. Once you got there, what were you doing every day?

Looking, I was always looking. I had some plan, I said I wanted to do a certain amount of desert and it was a matter of beginning to circle from the centre of Vegas and going to the outside. I didn't just shoot somebody and then say, "Let's go and do a landscape." I tended to go on a real mission of exploring and finding. I was never going to go there to do a book on Vegas à la *National Geographic*. I was never going to analyse and say here's a Cirque du Soleil performer, here's gambling, here's architecture, here's the Strip and so on, I was going to find things I felt were unusual. What I found were funny, eccentric people living there, including Breanna, working as a professional dominatrix. She was absolutely fantastic to photograph.

Why was that?

Because she was so charismatic, she understood the camera very quickly and had never been photographed before. When you go through the contact sheets you couldn't miss her, she has a natural instinct for the camera, which is a very unusual thing. Very good models have that. Christy Turlington has it, but it's very rare to find it in someone who hasn't gone through that process. Christy Turlington developed into a very good model, to say the least, but at the beginning she wasn't as good as she became, whereas this girl Breanna seemed to be good right from the get-go.

Can you put that quality into words?

Charisma and a natural instinct for a camera, and she also had good facial geography and body language. She was short, she was about 5ft 2in, but the proportion of her face and her attitude were perfect. She was far enough removed from being a model. There's sometimes a danger that models can become anonymous, but she had enough persona and almost felt like a young actress.

How long did you spend on the Las Vegas project?

We spent about 16 weeks over three years, off and on. The longest time I spent in one stretch was 10 days. When I went out there to photograph, I shot very intensely because it was so expensive to do. I was out with three assistants and a truck full of equipment. I had the same routine almost every day. We would start at 9 o'clock in the morning, have breakfast and be on the road by about 9.45. Then I shot until 1 o'clock in the morning and I was averaging 13-hour days.

That's a long day. Is there a period of your career you would describe as your busiest time?

I've always been busy. I've done some incredible runs and nobody knows how many things were done at the time. Sometimes there was a project and behind it 600 TV commercials, so never mind all the photography, there was all that jammed in there as well. I've done a vast amount of commercial work, which helped the creative work because it focuses you. When you get some time off you make damn sure you use it well.

Right: Film director Alfred Hitchcock with a goose, for the Christmas issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, 1973. Opposite page: 'Malcolm X' fashion story for *The Face*, 1992.

CONS
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"One thing down the line I did learn to do was to light. I felt that was a basic necessity all photographers should do. I found it interesting that a lot of photographers were using the same equipment and doing the same things with light. It was all a bit anonymous."

Albert Watson

Is there a time when you felt the pace was too much?

Not really, I don't have a problem working. When I do get time off I'm very private and enjoy my time immensely. I was always lucky I never had a problem with stress; that isn't to say I didn't feel it or I didn't feel the pressure of stress, but I always believed I could deal with it and that it made me better. I was just lucky that it was in my personality. A lot of people are not equipped to deal with stress. I have seen a lot of people buckle, they get worried and it confuses them and they make mistakes. That's another benefit of preparation; it can help to lift some of the stress.

What helped you get through that stress? Was it a love for making images?

Yes, there you go in a nice simple sentence. I found something I was good at, which I was made to do.

Well on that perfect note Albert, I think we'll end there, thank you.

Okay, well many thanks for calling on time. It's been nice chatting with you. ☺

www.albertwatson.net

