

'Annie Leibovitz' exhibit mixes photos both public and personal

by Robert L. Pincus

In the 18th century, portraits had flash. Just look at Thomas Gainsborough's popular "The Blue Boy" (circa 1770), not just for the suit, which is conspicuous enough. But there's the dramatic pose, with the haughty hand on hip and the big hat with feather in his other hand.

Jump forward a couple of centuries. Annie Leibovitz is photographing Steve Martin, in a suit painted with swatches of black paint that match the Franz Kline painting behind him. Even his pose has some sort of mock antique grandeur to it, as if he were trying to look like a sculpture himself.

ANNIE IN PARIS - Martin Schoeller, an accomplished photographer in his own right, shot this 1997 portrait of Annie Leibovitz in a Paris cafe. CNS Photo courtesy of Martin Schoeller. ANCIENT JORDAN - A slice of the ancient Jordanian city of Petra is framed by hills and the tiny figure at the bottom of the image is Susan Sontag, Leibovitz's partner for 15 years or so until Sontag's death in 2004. CNS Photo courtesy of Annie Leibovitz/San Diego Museum of Art. GLASS HOUSE - Annie Leibovitz pictures Philip Johnson in his landmark Glass House, which was completed in 1949 and left to the national Trust following the architect's death in 2005. CNS Photo courtesy of Annie Leibovitz/San Diego Museum of Art. PATTI SMITH - Patti Smith pays no attention to the camera in a 1996 image of the musician, songwriter and writer with her children Jackson and Jesse, at Saint Clair Shores, Mich. CNS Photo courtesy of Annie Leibovitz/San Diego Museum of Art. "Grand manner" portraitists like Gainsborough would have understood exactly what Leibovitz was doing. Probably more than anyone in recent history, she has brought theatricality back into portraits. Performers and others perform for her camera, sometimes subtly and sometimes with flair. Iconic photographers who came before her - Henri Cartier-Bresson, Irving Penn and Richard Avedon - favored restraint, subtlety and even visual starkness in their pictures. Not Leibovitz - even if Avedon was an influence.

She displayed a flair for visual drama from her earliest days at Rolling Stone magazine. Just look at her 1971 shot of Louis Armstrong, wearing a Budweiser hat, shorts and slippers and sitting in a leopard pattern chair as he puts the trumpet to his lips. Or Lily Tomlin in 1973, dressed in a yellow robe, her head hidden behind a television screen on which her face appears. And she's applying lipstick to her on-screen lips.

You won't see any of Leibovitz's now iconic earlier portraits in the touring exhibition at the San Diego Museum of Art through April 22 - pictures like Bette Midler lounging in a bed of roses; Whoopi Goldberg, with legs protruding from a bathtub filled with milk; or John Lennon in the nude embracing Yoko, hours before he was murdered. Like her new book, with which it shares a title, "Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life," the show only spans the years 1990 to 2005.

Some of the chosen pictures demonstrate that she hasn't lost any of her gift for getting subjects to perform for her camera. Dancer Bill T. Jones, minus his clothes, has turned his back to the camera before springing high in the air. Jim Carrey, seated, is sounding a comically manic scream, or least pretending to, in a gesture that encapsulates his loopy temperament.

In 1983, she became a portrait photographer for *Vanity Fair* and by that point she had become something of a celebrity herself. Tom Wolfe, who wrote the introduction to a book of her pictures published in 1983, recalled, "In the 10 years since I met her, Annie has changed from a shy girl to a woman with a personality like a weather front."

And through the years, this front has only gathered force in the arena of pop culture, with her many images for *Vanity Fair* and ad campaigns for the Gap and American Express, including new portraits of Penelope Cruz, Steven Spielberg and several others for the Gap (Product) Red campaign.

Many of the pictures in the exhibition will be familiar to Leibovitz devotees: Demi Moore, in the nude and with pregnant belly (1991); Nicole Kidman, in diffuse light on a stage, wearing an evening dress for which the words "lavish" and "regal" don't quite cut it (2003); Jamie Foxx, looking both formal and hip in a black suit with white pinstripes, a gray tweed overcoat and two-tone shoes (2004).

Other examples may not create as much *deja vu* for the viewer, but sometimes showcase her versatility. She displays an ability to step away from her theatrical mode, if the occasion calls for it, which the moment clearly did with her pensive portrait of the pivotal American modernist architect Philip Johnson taken in 2000, gazing through the panels of his Glass House.

Politicians and political leaders aren't her forte, it would seem, because they want to pose, not perform. They want to maintain their public mask, their look of gravitas, and such pictures cut against Leibovitz's flair for drama. As a result, there's nothing particularly distinguished or compelling about her December 2001 picture of President Bush and the key members of his first-term administration: Secretary of State Colin Powell, Vice

President Richard Cheney, etc.

Still, it's hard not to admire the deft sequencing in the book that leads from a portrait of Michael Moore with a film crew at a fairground (2004) to this group portrait with Bush, with one flip of the page.

Leibovitz's own words offer a clue as to why her political portraits lack life: "When I say I want to photograph someone, what it really means is that I'd like to know them. Anyone I know, I photograph."

Some of those she knows the best get a much bigger role in this exhibition (and book) than in any of her previous shows: her parents, her siblings and their families and her romantic partner of 15 years, writer, critic and filmmaker Susan Sontag, who died in 2004. There are also some charming baby pictures - of Leibovitz's daughter Sarah, delivered in October 2001 when she was 52, and her twins Susan and Samuelle, born to a surrogate mother in May 2005.

These pictures have the personality of snapshots, some intriguing, some charming and some forgettable. A smattering of images of Sontag and of her parents showcase her talent for the portrait.

It seems uncanny that Leibovitz, given her prominence as a photographer, would ultimately fall in love with Sontag, who wrote one of the most important books of commentary on the art form, "On Photography." Leibovitz, 16 years younger than Sontag, mentions that she read the book during her student years at the San Francisco Art Institute.

The two traveled together, and one of the most elegant photographs in the exhibition and the book pictures Sontag as a diminutive outline, standing between high, dark sandstone hills that frame a fragment of the pale walls of the ancient Jordanian city of Petra. In turn, Sontag made pictures of Leibovitz at home.

One of Sontag's great sentences about photography seems like a comment on the personality of this book:

"To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."

The selections are generous with pictures of Sontag in New York and on the road (actually a little too generous). There are also harrowing images of her dying of cancer and even a view of the writer's corpse, taken on Dec. 29, 2004, one day after her death. Leibovitz pictures her father in the same state. (He died only weeks later.)

The progression of public and personal pictures can be jarring. In the book version of "A Photographer's Life," a two-page spread features a "portrait" in profile of a battle droid from "Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones" and then a sweet portrait of daughter Sarah along with moments of Sarah with her parents.

It would be heartless to begrudge her this foray into visual autobiography. It is self-indulgent, but it is also an expression of love. And, of course, it is Leibovitz's popularity as a portrait photographer that has given her the prerogative to present this mix of images.

The story of these years seems more important to Leibovitz than the individual pictures. Surely this is why the pictures are presented as they are. For her, life trumps the visual theater of the more formal portraits. This project, exhibition and book, offers a way of standing at a distance from the heat of time's melt, of freezing it as photographs can also do.

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