

Annie Leibovitz
A Photographers Life
1990-2005

In professional terms, there are two types of photographers. There are those for which photography is a career, who have an office from where they conduct their business, a studio where they undertake commissions, a business card and a letterhead and a glossy portfolio full of photographs they've been paid to create. At the end of the day this photographer packs away their camera, heads for the Bundy Clock and locks the search for captivating imagery away until he or she clocks back on the following day. For this photographer, it is a job; nothing more. Then there are those who *live* photography, who never fail to be without their camera, who, after collecting their day's wage continue to consider and critically observe the visual world around them.

Annie Leibovitz, whose retrospective exhibition, *A Photographers Life 1990 – 2005* has just opened at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney is a photographer of the latter variety.

As famous for the work she has performed throughout her career for Vanity Fair and Vogue, as those at whom she has aimed her camera, in *A Photographers Life* we are invited into a world beyond Hollywood, beyond the glamour, pomp and sycophancy of celebrity and into Annie Leibovitz's life.

So it is in conjunction with the work for which we know her so well - her commercial work, that we now bare witness to a world which until now, Leibovitz was fairly adamant about keeping to herself. We are privy to moments of rare intimacy – moments of birth, relationships, loss, struggle, love and almost predictably, death. Pivotal to this diarised aspect of the exhibition is Leibovitz's relationship with the self-professed "freelance intellectual" and novelist, the late Susan Sontag and to a slightly lesser extent, her immediate family. As well as this side of her personal work we're also introduced to her short-lived move into photojournalism and a suite of more spacious and introspective landscape photographs.

For most people Leibovitz's elaborately staged, manicured and fastidiously directed images will spring to mind upon the mention of her name. Many of these works, of subjects such as Nicole Kidman, Julianne Moore, The White Stripes, Scarlett Johansson, Leigh Bowery, Donald Trump, Queen Elizabeth II and perhaps most *infamously*, a pregnant Demi Moore are included in the show and rightly so. It is after all, if only for a fraction of the dubiously titled, 'Photographers Life' (the exhibition represents a 15 year period of her life), somewhat of a visual biography. That she has included this career driven work, when many artists' personal and professional facades are often dichotomous, gives viewers a sense of equilibrium between work and play. However, it must be said that in terms of her professional work, these portraits and others like them direct more curiosity toward the *creation* of the image than to the subjects themselves. You can spot camera equipment junkies - eye to eye with George W. Bush - attempting to count the number of strobes used; where wind machines were placed for Uma Thurman; how many

assistants were required; what was done in post production etc, etc. In one case, Queen Elizabeth II's portrait, the location is seemingly the wintry gardens of Buckingham Palace. However - and I should note that Leibovitz is freely forthcoming with such information - in this case we are dealt a valuable lesson in modern photographic reality. The Queen, who had refused to go outside to be photographed, was shot on a grey backdrop inside the Palace which was later digitally exchanged for the Palace Gardens – shot days prior. To an audience largely unaware of such manipulation, this is misleading and very much a contribution to the slippery slope of existential modification.

It is with this in mind that I want to point to and highlight the importance and necessity for honesty in portraiture as well as photography in general. And conveniently enough, we need look no further than Annie Leibovitz herself for myriad examples upon which to base such a paradigm.

The first portrait which struck me for its integrity was a diptych of the American, William S. Burroughs. Photographed in the garage of the writer's Kansas home, Leibovitz, with only the lighting afforded her by the open garage door places Burroughs in a familiar, comfortable environment and directs our gaze nowhere but into and beyond the face of this subversive genius.

The next arresting portrait is of the photographer's mother. Again a gentle, black and white portrait where the focus in both senses of the word is solely on the subject – an elderly face, a tussle of greying hair, a chest bespeckled by the sun and with it all, a summoning of pathos that might be conjured by a portrait of one's *own* mother.

Two other portraits of similar triumph, one of Eudora Welty, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and the unlikely philanthropist Oseola McCarty are once again made at the homes of the respective sitters. Welty, photographed in colour and showing the fragility and vulnerability of her age, clutches the arm of an antique chair while drawing the lapels of her overcoat together in response to the chill of early spring. The lighting is so subtle it is almost indefinable but more importantly, unobtrusive. In her portrait guise, this is Leibovitz at her best – when subject rules over process.

One of the finest images in the exhibition, taken in 1996, harks back to the style of Leibovitz' early years when she toured with The Rolling Stones in the mid-seventies. The intimate, homely scene of Patti Smith reclined on a mattress while her children Jackson and Jesse pick at a guitar and nurse the family cat is as honest and observant as those early vignettes of Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and co. The scene also bares a striking resemblance to the image adorning the cover of world renowned photojournalist, Eugene Richards' book *Dorchester Days* taken some decades earlier and indicates Leibovitz' early influences - Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Again, when the subject is given priority over the process, the result, albeit discreet is a success.

Such intimacy, while apparent in all of her sittings with regulars such as Smith and Jagger is incomparable however to the relationship she shared with Susan Sontag and the veracious nature in which she went about portraying her lover. They are photographs

much like those that photographers the world over might have tucked away in shoeboxes never to be seen by another outside of that immediate relationship. The exhibition of such personal events a tribute or homage to a muse, especially in this case considering Sontag's passing.

To track sideways, as Leibovitz has done with the inclusion of a couple of images in the exhibition, it's interesting to see a couple of forays into photojournalism intertwined with the softer, more pensive subjects aforementioned. The two I speak of are both from 1993/4; one from Rwanda, the other from the besieged Capital of Bosnia, Sarajevo. In one grainy, 35mm black and white print, its mother negative has been processed hastily with areas of higher density draining from the sprocket holes of the film where chemical developer has rushed through in an overzealous developing process. An abandoned bicycle lies on the road with an ellipse of smeared blood encircling it. The blood belonged to a young boy who had been wounded by a Serb mortar shell while riding. He didn't survive. This single photograph is allegorical of a wider issue and bears a subtlety often overlooked by war-hardened photojournalists. The problem is that this is the *only* image that remotely points to the cause that one would presume Leibovitz was aiming to draw attention to. The others in the exhibition, with the exception of an image of a wounded man in the operating room of a Sarajevo Hospital which includes the presence of another photographer in the background and reeks of 'photo-opportunity', are not only insufficient but detached from the tragedy that had befallen the city. One wonders whether visiting a war-zone on the back of Sontag who was working on a theatre production was merely a holiday or a box-ticking exercise rather than a serious attempt at reportage.

Returning to her strengths and to Sontag (whom she had accompanied to Sarajevo) viewers are given a chronology of the late writers final years of life. In shared moments in hotel rooms, at work, in hospital beds, in the studio and unflinchingly, in death, Sontag's life and to an extent *their* lives are posthumously laid bare.

The task of photographing a loved one through the journey of death is without doubt the hardest of undertakings. For Leibovitz, whose job it has been to present her subjects in guises more glamorous than reality generally allows, this must have been particularly confronting. Sontag is as willing a participant as Leibovitz is objective throughout and beyond the time that Sontag was alive to grant her unspoken consent.

One of the most striking portraits of Sontag was taken across the road from their Paris apartment on the Seine a year before her death. Shot for the jacket of Sontag's book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*; it is an ominous portrayal. Perhaps this sense of foreboding is heightened because we are already aware of Sontag's fate but nonetheless Leibovitz has again maintained her honesty towards photographing those closest to her and revealed a stoic yet frightened and perhaps resigned Sontag. Also in this image we see the use of one of Leibovitz' oft-drawn upon methods - the David Hockney-esque paneling of multiple photographs. In this case we are granted an out-of-focus but instantly recognisable glimpse of The Seine and beyond it, the arched Pont Neuf on a typically melancholic, winter's day in Paris.

In an unfortunate but cyclical coincidence, Leibovitz documents not only with the death of her lover and a month later her father but her own pregnancy and the lives of her new born. It is with the latter that we see a touching sequence of three images depicting affectionate scenes two days prior to, the day of and the day following his death. One cannot help but be moved.

Finally, and with by far the largest prints in the exhibition, Leibovitz presents her landscapes. Again she adopts a grainy, low-key, black and white aesthetic but in this instance uses a more technically impressionistic approach. A preoccupation with fog and mist is evident with almost horizon-free panoramas in Venice hanging beside ghostly, twisted trees from rural New York State and a mosaic of foliage crawling like urban sprawl across a Temple wall in Japan. These are all quiet, lonely observations and although the dates of their shooting run throughout much of the 15 year span, one might assume that the act of seeing and capturing these vistas is a cathartic process and one which provides a much needed counterbalance to 'work'. It is one of the most visually pleasant rooms in the exhibition this one. With only half a dozen or so prints, it has a continuity that sometimes lacks in other parts of the show. The negatives from which the images have come have been stretched to capacity to produce images of such grandeur and for the technical buff this might seem a mistake. However, together with the chosen subject matter and the free and almost haphazard fashion in which they were captured, the pebble-like grain is not inappropriate.

When looking at Liebovitz's exhibition it is vital to consider the work without succumbing to the awe and hyperbole that surrounding everything she points a camera at. It needs to be said that by the time any artist reaches the levels of success that Leibovitz has, almost anything that he or she undertakes thereafter is looked upon with elevated importance. Therefore one needs to be especially discerning to make an objective assessment. This is as true for the wider audience as it is for your reviewer.

Having a famous personality in a photograph does not mean it is a good photograph. Having said that though, one must remember that to be in a position to be photographing such personalities, the photographer, without question has paid their dues.

There is no question that Leibovitz is a great photographer. She has proved herself time and again over the past decades and her abilities continue to be highly sought after the world over. However, for an audience that will most likely be attracted to the MCA by her reputation as the photographer to the stars, one must not give unconditional credence to the other half of her work. Much of this work is worthy of no more or less credit than the many hundreds of lesser-known photographers such as Larry Towell with the work from his book, *The World From My Front Porch* (Boot 2008) or even the Australian, Trent Parke with his series, *The Christmas Tree Bucket*, who both tackle similar themes of friends and family to far less fanfare.

Of any genre, Annie Leibovitz is of course one of, if not the tallest of poppies in the current crop of international photographers. For an Australian audience notorious for its

propensity towards the harvesting of them, it will be interesting to see the response to *A Photographers Life*.

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