

# RICHARD AVEDON PORTRAITS OF POWER

September 13, 2008 to  
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**CORCORAN**  
GALLERY OF ART • COLLEGE of ART+DESIGN

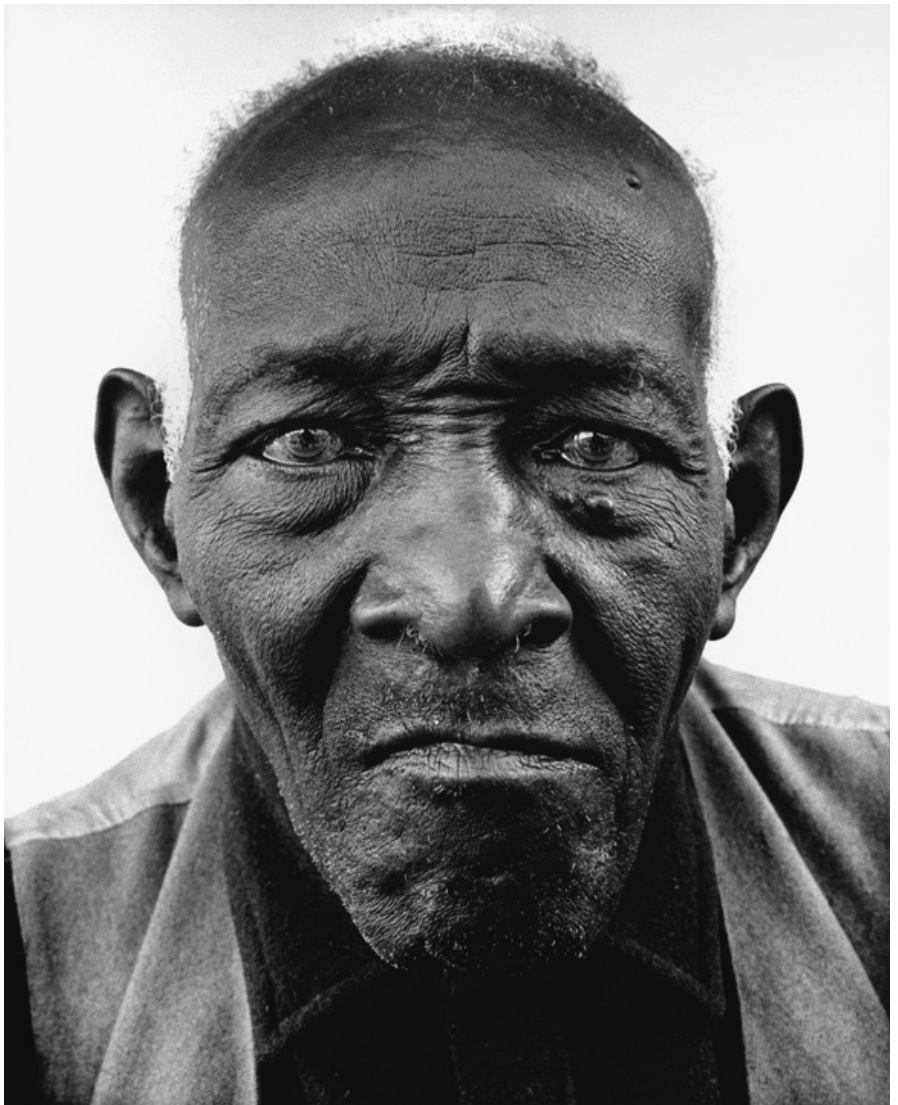
Richard Avedon, America's pre-eminent portraitist and fashion photographer, portrayed significant figures of the American political landscape throughout his career. This exhibition brings together Avedon's work on the subjects of politics and power for the first time. Avedon's renown allowed him access to the most celebrated figures of American culture. He was especially drawn to creative people, particularly those known for their political activism, ideological conviction, and involvement in matters of public debate. His interest in politics and power emerged in the 1950s, during his tenure at *Harper's Bazaar*, and continued until his death in 2004.



Marian Anderson, contralto,  
New York, June 30, 1955

Gelatin silver print  
Collection of The Richard Avedon Foundation

In his early portraits, Avedon transcended straightforward depiction to envision his subjects in crisis, embattled by their engagement with the world. He photographed contralto Marian Anderson (1897–1993) as she became the first African American to perform with New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 1955. Her groundbreaking role was Ulrica in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Anderson is also known for her 1939 Easter Sunday performance, which she carried out on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after having been denied access to the Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution because of her race. Anderson became a delegate to the United Nations in 1958 and was awarded the United Nations Peace Prize in 1972.



William Casby, born in slavery,  
Algiers, Louisiana, March 24, 1963

Gelatin silver print  
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase,  
Alfred Stieglitz Society Gifts, 2003 (2003.367)

In 1964, Avedon explored power, social injustice, and idealism in *Nothing Personal*, a book coauthored by James Baldwin. It featured photographs of politicians, religious leaders, and figures on opposite sides of the civil rights debate, sequenced into an urgent visual narrative. The portrait series dramatized a battle of conscience between young idealists and corrupt official power.

William Casby was born in slavery in Algiers, Louisiana, a town that is now in the 15th Ward of New Orleans. Before it was absorbed into New Orleans following the Civil War, Algiers was a holding area for both slaves arriving from Africa and Acadians, or Cajuns, arriving from Nova Scotia. Avedon photographed Casby in 1963, 101 years after Algiers surrendered to Union troops.

### **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION:**

The portrait of Marian Anderson was created by Avedon about eight years before the one of William Casby. Could you guess, from looking at her image, that Marian Anderson was a singer or someone who used her voice as part of her profession? Why or why not? Avedon's style of portraits changed by the time he photographed William Casby. What is different about the two images? What is the same? What location did Avedon choose for these two portraits? What can you learn about William Casby by looking at his portrait?



The Chicago Seven: Lee Weiner, John Froines,  
Abbie Hoffman, Rennie Davis, Jerry Rubin,  
Tom Hayden, Dave Dellinger, Chicago, Illinois,  
November 5, 1969

Gelatin silver print

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the artist, 2002  
(2002.379.4)

In 1969, Avedon developed a new style for a series about the power of dissent. Adopting an 8×10–inch view camera, he photographed figures of the antiwar movement and the counterculture in a minimal style, with even light against white or grey studio backgrounds. Fascinated by America’s cultural upheaval during the Vietnam War, Avedon sought to capture a “state of emergency” in the faces and postures of his subjects. His extraordinary group portraits of the period such as the Chicago Seven are among the most important works of his career. Modeled on the police lineup, these images offer an entirely new way of observing the face of power.



Members of the Chicago Seven were protesters who picketed the 1968 Democratic National Convention to demonstrate their opposition to the Vietnam War. Originally, eight protesters were arrested and charged with inciting riots and crossing state lines with the intent to commit conspiracy. The group acquired the nickname “the Chicago Seven” during the Chicago Conspiracy Trial after the case of the eighth defendant, Bobbie Seale, was severed from the trial. Avedon photographed the group together in 1969 during the course of the trial which was met with bitter protests by antiwar activists outside the courthouse. On February 18, 1970, all seven defendants were acquitted of conspiracy; five were convicted of intent to incite a riot and sentenced to five years in prison each. However, all of the convictions were overturned on appeal in 1972.

### **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION:**

The images in this portrait of the Chicago Seven are larger than life-size. You may be able to see that Avedon put three photographs together to make one large picture of seven people. Why do you think that Avedon positioned the figures so that two of them are shown on in two different sections of the photograph? Perhaps in keeping with the unrest of the times, this compositional device was used to create tension or uncertainty. Do you think this group looks like they are participating in a police lineup? How much do you think our reading of the image is dependent upon what we know of the group and how much is inherent to their presentation of themselves in front of Avedon’s lens?

Avedon said, “there is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.” Bearing in mind this statement, to what extent do you think Avedon’s photos of the 1960s and 1970s are “accurate” or “truthful” as a representation of the times?



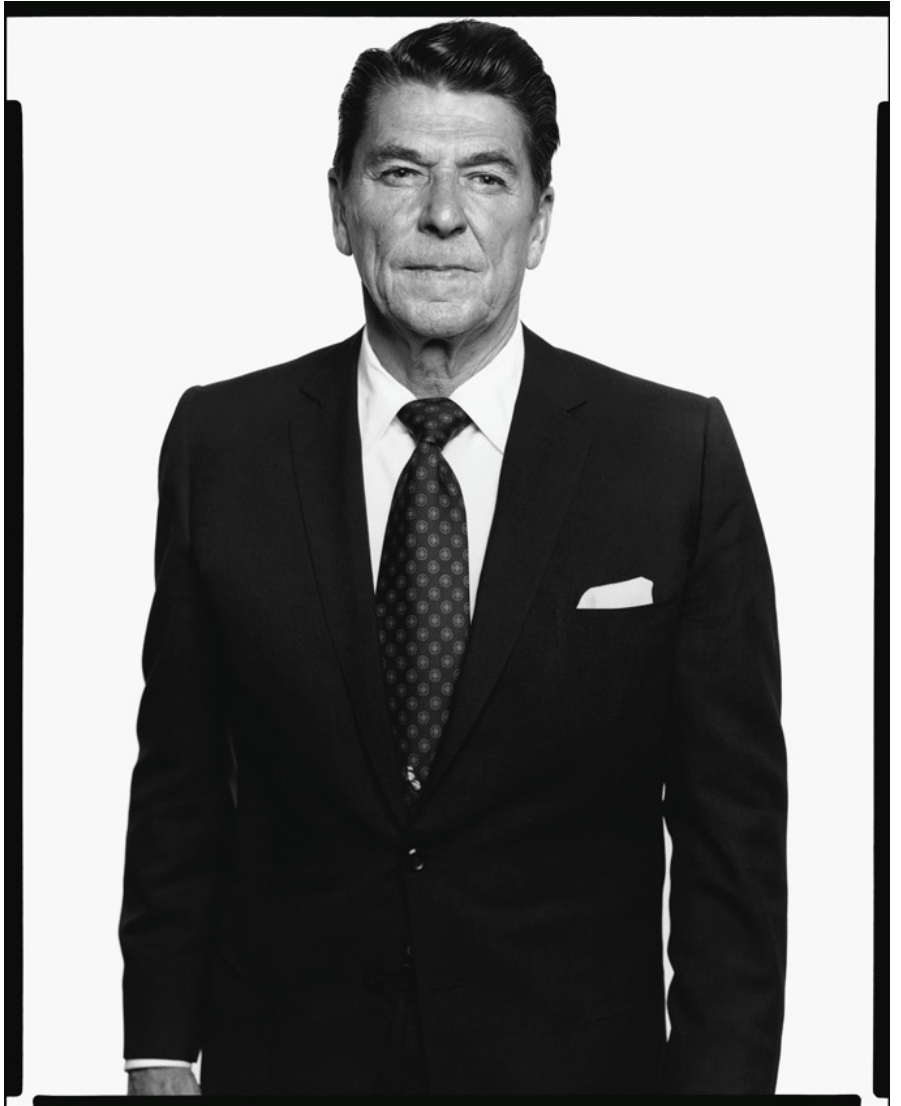
Dao Dua, "The Coconut Monk," pacifist,  
Mekong Monastery, Phoenix Island,  
South Vietnam, April 14, 1971

Gelatin silver print  
Collection of The Richard Avedon Foundation



In 1971, Avedon went to South Vietnam, where he photographed soldiers, peace activists, social workers, journalists, and victims of the war. Upon arriving in Saigon, Avedon explained that his “reason for coming to Vietnam is that all the people I have photographed in the last year and a half have been affected by Vietnam—as has all American life. Vietnam is an extension—unfortunately—of everything sick in America.”

Nam Nguyen Thanh, a monk, teacher, and peace activist, was known as Dao Dua (“The Coconut Monk”) because he was rumored to have spent three years eating coconuts and meditating. He formed a new religion in the 1960s that merged Buddhist and Christian theologies; his religious community was located on an island in Vietnam’s Mekong River. Dao Dua’s school was a haven for local residents and American soldiers during the Vietnam War. At one point, he had an estimated 3,000 followers. Dao Dua was arrested repeatedly during the war for his pacifist teachings. Avedon traveled with heavy photographic equipment for several days on a boat to reach Dao Dua’s island and make his portrait.



Ronald Reagan, former Governor of California,  
Orlando, Florida, March 4, 1976

Gelatin silver print  
Collection of The Richard Avedon Foundation

By the 1970s, Avedon photographed his subjects in a formulaic style, framing them in mid-length close-up, capturing characteristic postures and expressions, and rendering their appearances with great detail. In 1976, *Rolling Stone* commissioned Avedon to make an extraordinary portrait series depicting America's political and economic leadership at the time of the country's Bicentennial. "The Family" included 69 portraits of select members of the political, legal, media, military, and corporate elite. Rejecting the usual ways in which societies portray their leaders, Avedon both humanizes his subjects and calls into question their power, subjecting them to the steady gaze of the people they rule. Typically, he encouraged his subjects to appear as they were when they arrived to be photographed and he tried "to allow people really—if that's possible—to photograph themselves."

### **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION:**

Have you ever had your portrait made? Where did you sit or stand? What did you wear? Did you include anything in the portrait with you such as a soccer trophy or your pet? If you had your portrait made by Avedon, how do you think it would affect you to be photographed standing, hands at your sides, against a white background, as opposed to an environment specific to you? How do the portraits of Dao Dua and Ronald Reagan differ? How are they the same? Can you determine the professions of the two men by looking at their photographs? Compare the expressions on their faces. How would you describe them? In 1976, Ronald Reagan was former governor of California and unsuccessfully seeking his party's nomination for president. (Four years later, he became his party's nominee and was elected president for two terms.) If Avedon could photograph "The Family" of today, who do you think he would choose to include?



Brandenburg Gate #17,  
Berlin, Germany, New Year's Eve, 1989

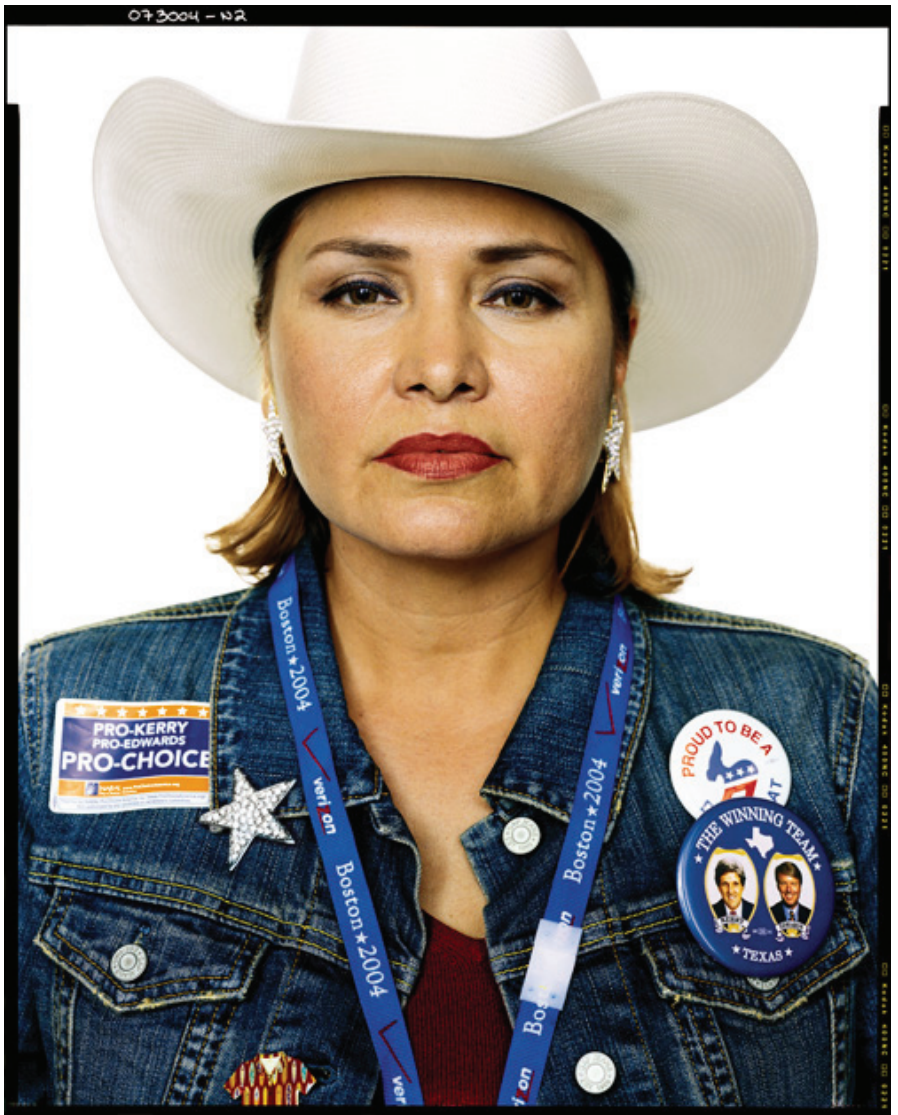
Gelatin silver print  
Collection of The Richard Avedon Foundation

From the 1980s to the early 1990s, Avedon often made work in an experimental spirit, returning to the expressionist style of his early work. On December 22, 1989, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Brandenburg Gate opened. Residents flocked to the gate to observe this historic event, which marked the end of the physical division between East and West Germany. Avedon traveled to Germany to photograph the first New Year's party in the reunified capital. The event was marked by a sense of uneasiness that Avedon sought to capture in this series; he later said that the partygoers expressed "the first signs of a sense of loss and disillusionment."

**SUGGESTED DISCUSSION:**

Does this photograph of the Brandenburg Gate look different from other photographs by Avedon? If so, how? Would you call this a portrait? Why or why not? How does Avedon express "the first signs of a sense of loss and disillusionment" in this image?





Mary Alice Palacios, delegate from Texas,  
Democratic National Convention, Boston,  
Massachusetts, July 28, 2004

Pigment inkjet print  
Collection of The Richard Avedon Foundation



Avedon's final project took measure of the times during the 2004 presidential election season. Reflecting on the contentious state of the commonwealth, he set out to celebrate the unruly spirit of American democracy. He photographed everyone from citizens to cultural icons, from public intellectuals to convention delegates, from media pundits to soldiers returning from—or preparing to leave for—another American war. Notably, he included few political officials. Portraying the exuberance of a dawning era of “people-powered politics,” the artist made many color portraits, an unusual choice for him. He worked on “Democracy” for more than a year, and scheduled his sessions—as was his custom—right up to deadline. While finishing the series, Avedon suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, and died a short time later. He was 81 years old. *The New Yorker* published the essay in incomplete form on November 1, 2004.

Mary Alice Palacios, a justice of the peace in the southern Texas town of Edinburg, was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Palacios' portrait is one of many that Avedon took in an effort to capture the spirit of the hotly debated 2004 presidential election.

### **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION:**

How is Mary Alice Palacios' portrait different from others by Avedon? How does the use of color change Avedon's images? Why do you think this series was called “Democracy”? Is this portrait representative of the concept of democracy?