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**Art Review | 'Annie Leibovitz'**

**Photographer to the Stars, With an Earthbound Side**

**By** [**ROBERTA SMITH**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/roberta_smith/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

**Correction Appended**

Apparently it is time for Annie Leibovitz’s close-up. In her exhibition at the [Brooklyn Museum](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/b/brooklyn_museum/index.html?inline=nyt-org), simply titled “Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer’s Life, 1990-2005,” this well-known portraitist of the talented, the powerful or the merely celebrated tries to reveal a more personal side of her self.

The show, of course, has numerous portraits that jump off the wall with characteristic Leibovitzian flair — a heady mix of intimacy and posturing, elaborated, like paintings of saints, by recognizable attributes. Here’s [Demi Moore](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/filmography.html?p_id=103370&inline=nyt-per) in her controversial Vanity Fair cover, naked, extremely pregnant and protected by an imposing diamond ring. There’s [Donald Trump](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/t/donald_j_trump/index.html?inline=nyt-per), seen as the proud possessor of a fancy car, a private jet and a beautiful young wife also heavy with child. Wearing little more than a golden bikini, Melania Trump stands on a stairway leading to the underbelly of the jet, which dominates the image like a giant male-female fertility symbol.

Power is similarly met with irreverence in an official portrait of Attorney General [John Ashcroft](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/a/john_ashcroft/index.html?inline=nyt-per) three months after 9/11. Ms. Leibovitz simply pulls back from the seamless white backdrop against which Mr. Ashcroft is being photographed. This enables her to include the messy room beyond and a Secret Service agent, in profile, trained on Mr. Ashcroft like a pointer.

Ms. Leibovitz’s gift for rich color and startling presentation booms forth in images of three members of World (Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Diseases), an information and support group for women with [H.I.V.](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/health/diseasesconditionsandhealthtopics/aids/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) or AIDS, from San Francisco, seen here with their naked bodies painted with symbols, slogans and warrior stripes.

In a sense Ms. Leibovitz’s portraits reiterate aspects of Conceptual, performance and installation art, as well as postmodern setup photography in popular form — aided by the innovations of Richard Avedon. Especially when her subjects are performers, she is likely to treat them as sculptural opportunities to incite them to extravagant displays of their gifts.

Sometimes she does both, creating images that transcend identity, as in a striking image of a bare-chested man, seated in the middle of the room, muscles straining, mouth agape, eyes squeezed shut, in a cosmic, yet comic, howl against the universe. It is [Jim Carrey](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/filmography.html?p_id=11257&inline=nyt-per), venting his highly ambitious, slightly crazed genius while also functioning as a rubbery object that gives the image a life of its own.

Annie Leibovitz

Leibovitzian flair: A portrait of Jim Carrey from the exhibition “Annie Leibovitz.”

The best portraits in this show stand out like beacons, but there is much else to wade through, including bits of photojournalism and a pretentious foray into landscape photography. Most numerous are black-and-white photographs of her close-knit family and ones of the writer Susan Sontag. Exquisite printing aside, the family images are professional but pedestrian. The best are, not surprisingly, portraits that bestow an aura of quasi-celebrity, especially one of her mother looking sage, lively and handsomely androgynous.

Stranger are the images of Sontag, Ms. Leibovitz’s companion for more than 15 years. We see Sontag beside the Seine, napping on a couch in the Hamptons, eating breakfast in a plush room at the Hotel Gritti Palace in Venice, sitting in the rubble of a bombed-out library in Sarajevo or standing in the famous rock corridor of Petra, a tiny silhouette against the temple’s facade. We also see Sontag in the hospital during her second bout with cancer in 1998 and laid out in a favorite dress in a funeral home after her death in 2004. It is hard not to feel that Sontag functioned a bit like Ms. Leibovitz’s own personal celebrity, enabling her to share a fame that she found more authentic than her own.

In the show’s introductory wall text, Ms. Leibovitz is quoted as saying: “I don’t have two lives. This is one life, and the personal pictures and the assignment work are all part of it.” But saying it doesn’t make it so. This exhibition ends up refuting the premise on which it seems to be built: that an artist’s life is as interesting — or in the end, even as personal — as her best work.

Viewed in the context of the recent dumbing-down of art, gallery design and visual experience at the Brooklyn Museum, the Leibovitz show is above average. It is better than the museum’s dreary “Star Wars” show, its disappointing “Hip Hop Nation” and its weak “Graffiti” presentation. But it similarly lacks curatorial rigor and imagination, which lends an air of Faustian bargain.

The museum, desirous of a big-name exhibition, seems to have ceded too much control to its subject, and as a result, the show is an unconscious exercise in ego gratification that serves no one well. Leaking vanity and ambition, at once yearning for greatness and blithely assuming that greatness has been achieved, the works on view are like a high-brow, static form of reality television. It is fueled by an obsession with celebrity and accented with the trappings of first-class travel, serious real estate and privilege. Its revelations are mostly inadvertent.

Although Charlotta Kotik, the museum’s curator of contemporary art, is credited with organizing the show, Ms. Leibovitz is clearly and to her detriment the dominant personality. She speaks to us directly from the wall texts throughout the show and from a 12-minute excerpt from a documentary that will be presented on [PBS](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/p/public_broadcasting_service/index.html?inline=nyt-org) on Jan. 3, often in sentences that seem weirdly flat-footed, unperceptive and patronizing. “There are truly intelligent photographers who work in the studio, but it’s not for me,” she says in one text. This from a photographer who has done much of her best work in the studio or under carefully controlled studiolike conditions.

Elsewhere: “Richard Avedon’s genius was that he was a great communicator. He pulled things out of his subjects. But I observe,” she says somewhat haughtily. “I’m so busy looking, I can’t talk,” she adds a few sentences later.

The show’s high point is a detour from its main flow: in a space evoking a wide hallway, there is a re-creation of the enormous pinup boards on which Ms. Leibovitz laid out the lavish book that accompanies the exhibition. With row upon row of small prints and tear sheets, the display forms a condensed, fast-track version of both the book and show, and may be better than either.

Ms. Leibovitz’s images are best at magazine scale, and here you can skim across them, like turning pages. In addition, several of the most lively here have been omitted from the book and the more formal sections of the show.

It is only on the bulletin board that you will find [Tony Curtis](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/filmography.html?p_id=86429&inline=nyt-per) and [Jack Lemmon](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/filmography.html?p_id=99306&inline=nyt-per) several decades after their hit movie “Some Like It Hot,” holding hands and wearing his and hers underwear and showgirl makeup; the Osbourne family gathered about Ozzy on the toilet; and Brian Wilson standing next to his pool at dusk, a sleepwalker in bathing suit and bathrobe. It is as if Ms. Leibovitz is ambivalent; she wants to play down her portraits, but also knows they are the fulcrum of her achievement.

The show’s low point comes at the end, with a gallery devoted to eight ridiculously large and blurry black-and-white landscape photographs: Venice in the fog, Monument Valley from a helicopter, Mount Vesuvius. Measuring up to 11 feet across, they are meant to overwhelm; two large, daybedlike platforms, with mattresses covered with industrial felt, encourage viewers to recline and meditate on the images’ profundities. But mainly these photographs read as a frantic plea: “Take me seriously as an artist!”

Three not-so-large large photographs in a small side gallery elaborate. An image of [Uma Thurman](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/filmography.html?p_id=70905&inline=nyt-per) evokes Irving Penn’s portraits of distinguished culturati. And there is a beautiful portrait of Avedon — white-haired, glaring defiantly at the lens, his view camera discernible at the picture’s edge. The final picture is of that camera on its tripod. The lengthy text panel begins, “I hadn’t realized how much Avedon meant to me until he died.” Here, as in other parts of this show, there is a surfeit of the personal that nonetheless stays too much on the surface. Surface is Ms. Leibovitz’s strength, which is why her work is best when she leaves herself out of it.

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