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THE RECORDER

A swell party it was: Portraits from the golden age of magazines



André Leon Talley, Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, on the Pont Alexandre III, Paris, 2013. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Becker.

By JOYCE CORRIGAN

Renaissance phenoms like Leonardo and Michelangelo knew they'd really made it when their work was in the Vatican, a Medici villa or in front of Florence's town hall (ciao, "David.") In the golden age of magazines, the pinnacle for portrait photographers was Vanity Fair, Harper's Bazaar and Vogue.

Art directors like Alexey Brodovitch, Alexander Liberman, Graydon Carter and Tina Brown were the popes while the publishers of Condé Nast (billions-rich with luxury fashion advertising) were the Medicis. They'd commission masters like Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, and later Annie Leibovitz and Jonathan Becker to take provocative, modern pictures of Hollywood, art, literary and rock royalty — and occasionally real royalty.

Magazines hosted the dominant narrative of 20th- and 21st-century American culture and what a swell party it was. If somehow you managed to miss the heyday — digital dealt the final death blow about 10 years ago — go directly to the KMA to see "Jonathan Becker: Lost Time." This thrilling exhibition features over 50 of the artist's timeless square-format photographs in both dazzling color and black and white, captured through the lens of his trusty Rolleiflex.

Madonna, John F. Kennedy Jr., Andy Warhol, Prince Charles, along with fashion legends André Leon Talley and Diana Vreeland and many of their peers are all here. Icons, who, through Becker's intimate lens, are laid bare — looking natural, never posed, and capturing what legendary photographer Robert Frank believed was the essence of a great photograph, "the humanity of the moment".

"Postwar magazines mirrored the mainstream of American culture," offered curator Mark Holborn, whose monograph "Jonathan Becker: Lost Time" forms the basis of the exhibition. "It was a moment of optimism, and magazines offered readers aspiration," he explained. "Jonathan would take us to places we otherwise wouldn't be."

Here is a laughing Madonna with fashion icon Calvin Klein as they partied backstage at Martha Graham's final performance. Graham, the modern dance legend, then 76, with a sultry look aimed straight at the camera, cheekily upstages the 20-something Material Girl. There's Warhol in the chaotic kitchen of legendary New York celeb hangout Elaine's. The feisty, much-feared Elaine is there, too, and together with Becker, coaxed a rare smile out of the pop art icon. Photographed from behind, the Prince of Wales, in casual clothes walks alone in 2010 in the gardens of Highgrove, contemplating the heavy crown he would one day wear. And JFK Jr., at the White House correspondents' dinner, sitting on his crumpled tuxedo jacket, observes the goings-on, no doubt

contemplating his own political career that was, of course, not meant to be. He would die in a plane crash two months later.

“We are delighted to celebrate one of the great photographers of our time with revelatory works spanning 50 years of outstanding magazine work” says Katonah Museum of Art director, Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe. “That said, Jonathan’s deft eye and gift as a storyteller transcend the boundaries of the printed page, enabling his images to maintain a powerful presence when transposed to a grand scale befitting a museum setting.”

One of the show’s most powerful and poignant portraits is of the late great photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe. Taken at the opening of what would be his final solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Mapplethorpe, cane in hand, looked frail and vulnerable surrounded by adoring colleagues and museum patrons. Becker’s depiction was far from the polished image Mapplethorpe created for himself in the several self-portraits he did during those same final days; and Mapplethorpe was less than happy about it. “He actually hated it,” offered Becker from his Bedford Hills studio. “His vanity was offended by the starkness of the portrayal. But he compared it to a Diane Arbus, so there was at least a backhanded compliment.”





Pictured left to right, Martha Graham at New York City Center after her final onstage bow, backstage with Madonna and Calvin Klein, 1990; Patricia Herrera at home; John F. Kennedy Jr. and Carolyn Bessette after the White House correspondents' dinner, Washington, D.C., 1999; Photos courtesy of Jonathan Becker.

"Great editors would let you do your thing," continued Becker. "I was left to my own devices with subjects who had no influence over those devices. A perfect circumstance for portraiture." Unlike today, when an "honest" image of a famous person is hard to come by — between Adobe Photoshop, AI and overbearing public relations teams — Becker feels fortunate to have been working in an era when a portrait was a document of a genuine moment. "And seeing was believing," he added.

As fate would have it, the KMA show came about because of a portrait taken by Becker about 10 years ago. Katonah resident, author and longtime KMA patron, Sara Arnell, was asked to be part of a magazine story about mothers and daughters. The editor was her good friend and longtime Becker collaborator, Leon Talley (Two outstanding portraits

of Talley, winner of the KMA's prestigious Himmel Award, appear in the show). Last year Arnell, who'd been so impressed with Becker, called Mapplethorpe and suggested the exhibition. "Jonathan sort of 'uncaptures' you," explained Ms. Arnell. "He waits until all the self-consciousness of a portrait sitting falls apart, and then he takes the picture." Arnell recalls inching around the set, trying to do what she thought Becker wanted, posing a little here and there, and then realizing he wasn't shooting. "My daughter starts playing her guitar and the second I look over at her, Jonathan takes the shot," she said. "And it became the shot because it was when I looked genuinely maternal."

Much has been made of Becker's formative tutelage under one of the giants of 20th century photography, the Hungarian-French Brassai. His iconic 1933 "Paris by Night," was a collection of dreamlike black-and-white photos of nocturnal Parisian life. "Brassai really informed Becker's aesthetic and positions him within a rarified artistic lineage," observed Mapplethorpe. "To me, Jonathan's after-dark images of the cultural scene of the '80s and '90s seem like a 'New York by Night,'" commented Arnell. Becker's genius is in the fact he didn't have to take rolls and rolls of images, believed Holborn. "He knew what he was looking for and knew when to strike."

"Creativity," observed Albert Einstein, "is intelligence having fun." Looking at the photos of "Lost Time" you can't imagine Becker not enjoying the process. "Always" he confirmed. "Subjects often comment on my look of amusement as I peer down into the Rolleiflex viewfinder at a private theater. Even the tough ones; the challenge was always part of the joy."

Like the people he photographed, Becker is a citizen of the world, immersed in the zeitgeist; part artist and part documentarian. The son of a film distributor who specialized in arthouse and foreign movies and an award-winning dancer/choreographer mother, he grew up around what he has called "starry circles." The photographer's spontaneous, sometimes irreverent style of portraiture mirrors his own dapper style: seersucker blazers, white trousers, South of France tan and signature cigar. He just happened to have a knack for sharing his vision with the generations who aspired to being a part of his rarefied world.

"Jonathan's pictures, like Brassai, offer us a glimpse into a world that's now passed," offered Holborn. "Memory is the most valuable asset for us all not only on a personal level but on a wider social level. We need to remember history as strongly as we need to remember those who we knew and are no longer with us." And what better way than to spend a few hours getting a little lost in "Lost Time."

Becker and curator Robert Storr will discuss the photographer's body of work on Saturday, Sept. 21, from 5:30 to 7 p.m. as part of KMA's "Artists in Conversation" series.

Becker will share the stories behind the iconic images on exhibit and unique insights into the art of photography. Reception to follow. Tickets are \$25, \$15 for museum members.

The Katonah Museum of Art is located at 134 Jay Street. For information, call (914) 232-9555.