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Photographer Jonathan Becker's New Book Spotlights Celebrities, Royals and Designers

The former longtime Vanity Fair lensman celebrated his latest book Wednesday night at The Waverly Inn.

By Rosemary Feitelberg | October 3, 2024



Nicole Kidman, Vanity Fair Oscar Party, West Hollywood, 2000. Photo by Jonathan Becker/Courtesy Phaidon

From a distance, Jonathan Becker's book party Wednesday night was much like the portraits he has captured for more than 50 years — cinematic yet unscripted. Even after twilight, friends, former colleagues and other well-wishers preferred to linger on the sidewalk and along the leafy street outside of The Waverly Inn, periodically ducking inside for a bar run.

In fact, those in search of the Phaidon-published “Lost Time: Jonathan Becker” had to venture into the “Garden Room,” where the books were stacked near a table-clothed table in the corner. Metaphorically, that is just the type of hunt that Becker had made a career of — passing by the glitz and the glamour for something more substantive. Before becoming an established photographer for Vanity Fair, Vogue, W magazine, Town & Country, and Interview, he drove a New York City taxicab. By his account, “One grows antennae driving a cab.” (Becker also kept notes of his impressions of passengers and overheard conversations.)

Imagine Diana Vreeland’s surprise after Becker, when he revealed after arriving to take a portrait in her Park Avenue apartment that he had recently ferried her home. Vreeland’s response? “I love people who work.” And as Becker informs readers in his new book, “She wasn’t kidding.”

He lived up to that too. While freelancing for WWD in New York in the late '70s, he would buzz by swanky parties during night shifts to snap notable guests. And then returned to his parked cab to get the meter going again. Some of those assignments “never much” interested him so he worked “directly and with dispatch.” But he didn’t distinguish those from the portraits he took in more controlled settings.



Charles, Prince of Wales and Camilla Parker-Bowles, Buckingham Palace, London, 2001. Photo by Jonathan Becker/Courtesy Phaidon

A connection to the eminent Parisian photographer Brassai provided a certain cachet when he started his career. After first picking up a Rolleiflex camera as a teenager, the once wayward Becker had enrolled in a summer course about Surrealism at Harvard University. But Becker mailed his thesis on Brassai to his professor six months late and in English — instead of French as it had been assigned — the professor didn't know why he had bothered to and flunked him. But he also suggested that Brassai might be interested and provided his mailing address. That later led to Becker becoming a protégé of Brassai in Paris.

More than 50 years later, Becker, with the help of Mark Holborn, has compiled 200 photographs that flex his dexterity in portraiture, fine art, party shots and more. An instinctive social observer, the lensman's retrospective features royals, A-listers, artists, authors and other power brokers at ease and at work. His former boss Graydon Carter, Tom Freston, Carey Lowell, Andrew Jarecki, Loren Stein, Claire Spaht, Ophelie Renouard, Bob Colacello, Aimée Bell, Edward Helmore, and Wilbur Ross were among the guests who cycled through Wednesday night's low-key soiree in the West Village.

Nicole Kidman, Gwyneth Paltrow, the now King Charles and Queen Camilla, Aung San Suu Kyi (under house arrest), Peter Beard, Arthur Miller, Melania Trump, Carla Bruni, Cindy Sherman, Jackie Kennedy, Andre Leon Talley, Edward Albee, Mick Jagger, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, JFK Jr., David Bowie, Harvey Weinstein and Andy Warhol are among the subjects spotlighted in the book. Designers abound too, including Carolina Herrera, Calvin Klein, Gloria Vanderbilt, Diane von Furstenberg and Pierre Cardin, among others. A few lesser-knowns are also featured, including his son Sebastian as a toddler running through St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and another of two butchers with one holding a pig's head in front of his stomach.



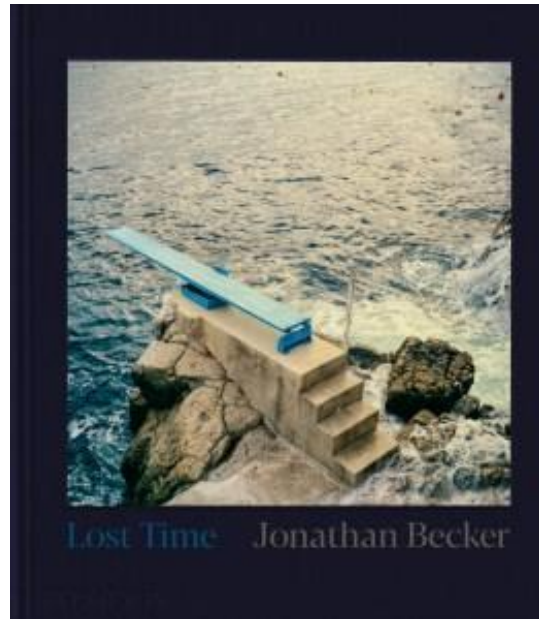
André Leon Talley on the Pont Alexandre III, Paris, 2013. Photo by Jonathan Becker/Courtesy Phaidon

“I’m a portraitist. That’s all I am,” he said. “I do pictures of things, but they always relate to a person somehow.”

As for how he portrays his subjects as they truly are versus how they want to be seen, Becker said, “The way people appear is a result of how they want to be seen. But that’s the difficulty that I don’t pay any attention to. That’s not my problem. It just begins with how they want to be seen. The reality of it is what’s really interesting.”

Referring to a recent talk at the Katonah Art Museum with the art historian and curator Robert Storr, Becker recalled, “Rob said, ‘Most people are on the outside looking in. Jonathan sees on the inside looking around.’”

Images from his book or on view in an exhibition at the museum until Jan. 26. The title riffs on Marcel Proust, whom Brassai read “over and over again,” due to Proust’s fascination with the power of photography and his “obsessive interest in getting photographic portraits of people that he cared about,” said Becker, who shared that information with Holborn.



The cover of "Jonathan Becker: Lost Time." Photo by Jonathan Becker/Courtesy Phaidon

As the name suggests, the monograph makes Becker somewhat sentimental and more attune to the passage of time. "And every time I look at it, I see it differently, because time passes between the times you look at it," Becker said.

Now that the book, which was 15 years in the making, is complete, Becker will be off to Europe to promote it. First up will be a talk at the V&A South Kensington, slated for Nov. 4.



Gloria Vanderbilt Photo by Jonathan Becker/Courtesy Phaidon

Once that international tour is done and dusted, the question is what he will do instead of shooting for magazines. “That was the big loss for me. I still want to work for magazines. I love the deadlines. I love the simplicity of the assignments and the boundaries of the whole thing. I *live* for it. I was like a monkey swinging from one vine to the next,” he said. “It was great. And then it stopped.”



Sebastian Becker running through St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Photo by Jonathan Becker/Courtesy Phaidon

Private portraiture has become a partial substitute. And he said many of his prints have been selling. “But that’s not so interesting. That’s commerce.”