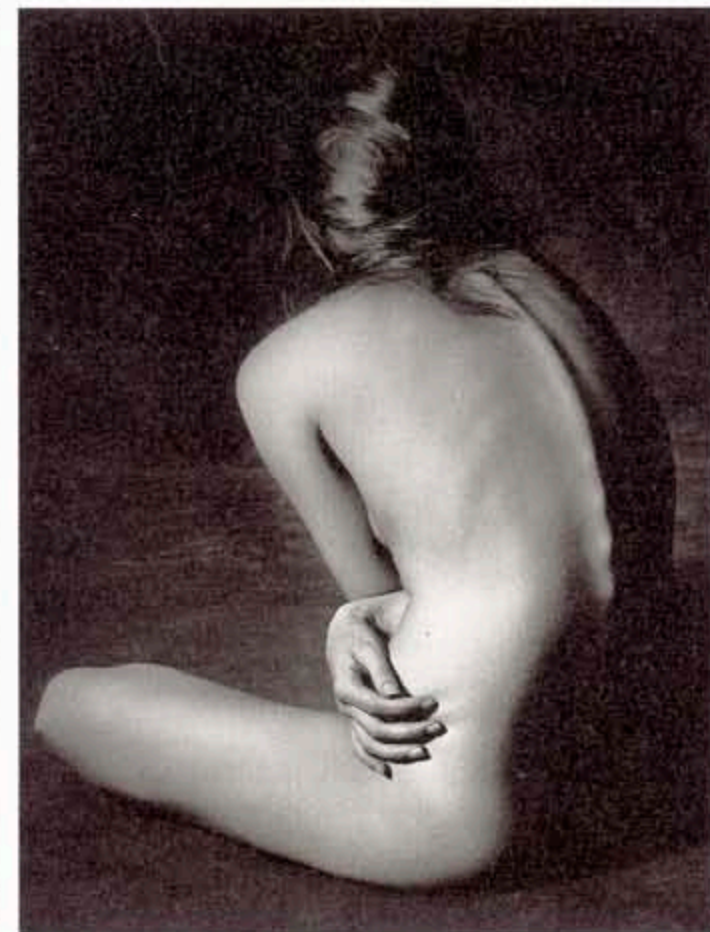


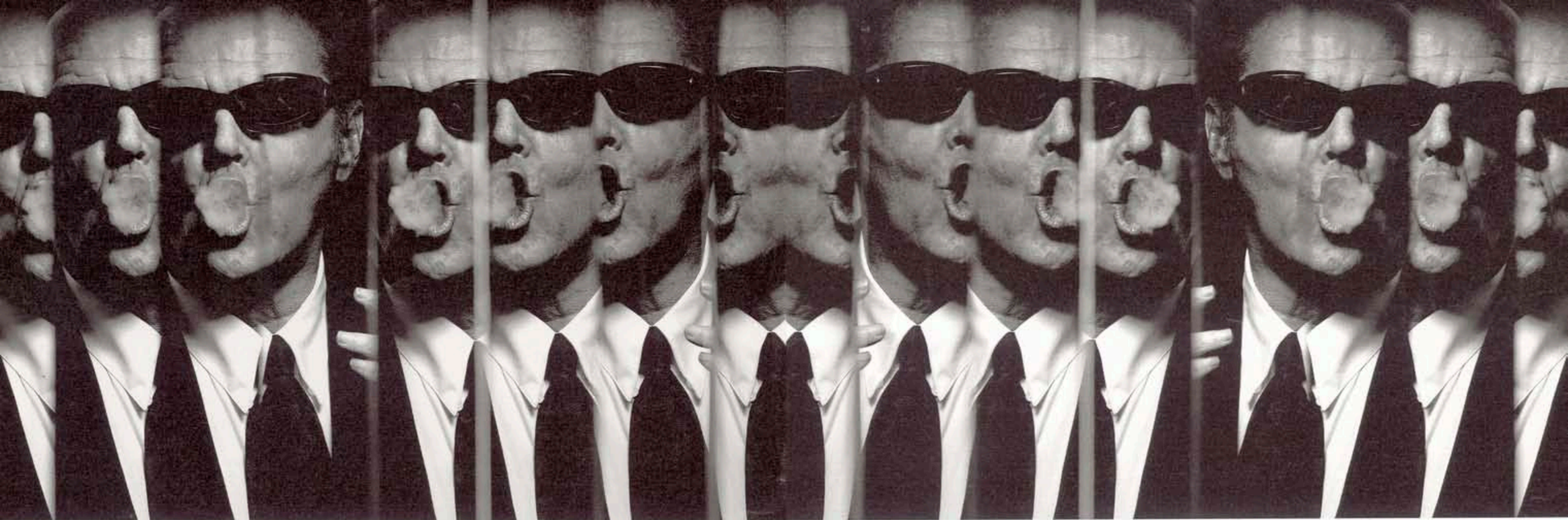


LOS ANGELES, 1992
The face of a leopard
superimposed on Mick
Jagger. 'The leopard
started acting up a bit
and I had to shoot them
separately.' Opposite:
the gamine Kate Moss
in Marrakesh in 1993.
'Kate was absolutely
adorable, just 19 still and
all wide-eyed about being
in the fashion business'



THE MASTER MANIPULATOR

ALBERT WATSON BRINGS OUT THE BEAUTY OR THE BEAST IN HIS SUBJECTS. A-LIST STARS BECOME WILD CREATURES, AND ANIMALS PERFORM LIKE HUMANS. THE RESULT IS ALWAYS THE SAME – A POWERFUL, ICONIC IMAGE. BY SCOTT ATHORNE

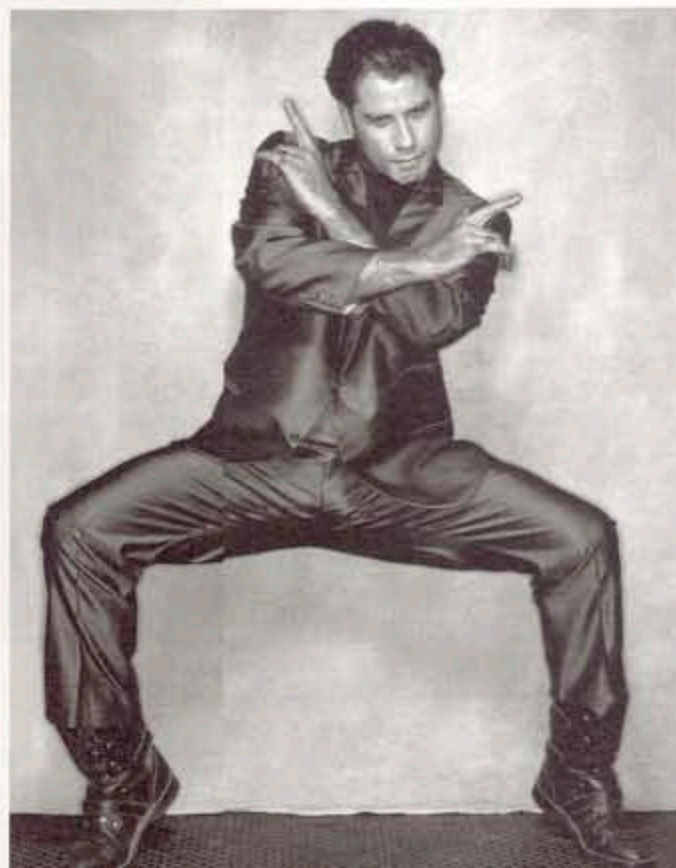


NEW YORK, 1998 (above) Jack Nicholson looks into seven mirrors. 'I flipped the negative and then doubled it. Jack is wonderfully charismatic, funny, charming, mad'

MEMPHIS, 1991 (left) Watson shot this suit in the kitchen at Graceland. 'Elvis had worn it in 1958 on the cover of his Golden Records album'



LOS ANGELES, 1973 (above) 'This was for an article called Hitchcock Cooks His Own Goose. He was contributive and emotional. He pretended to be very sad and cry'

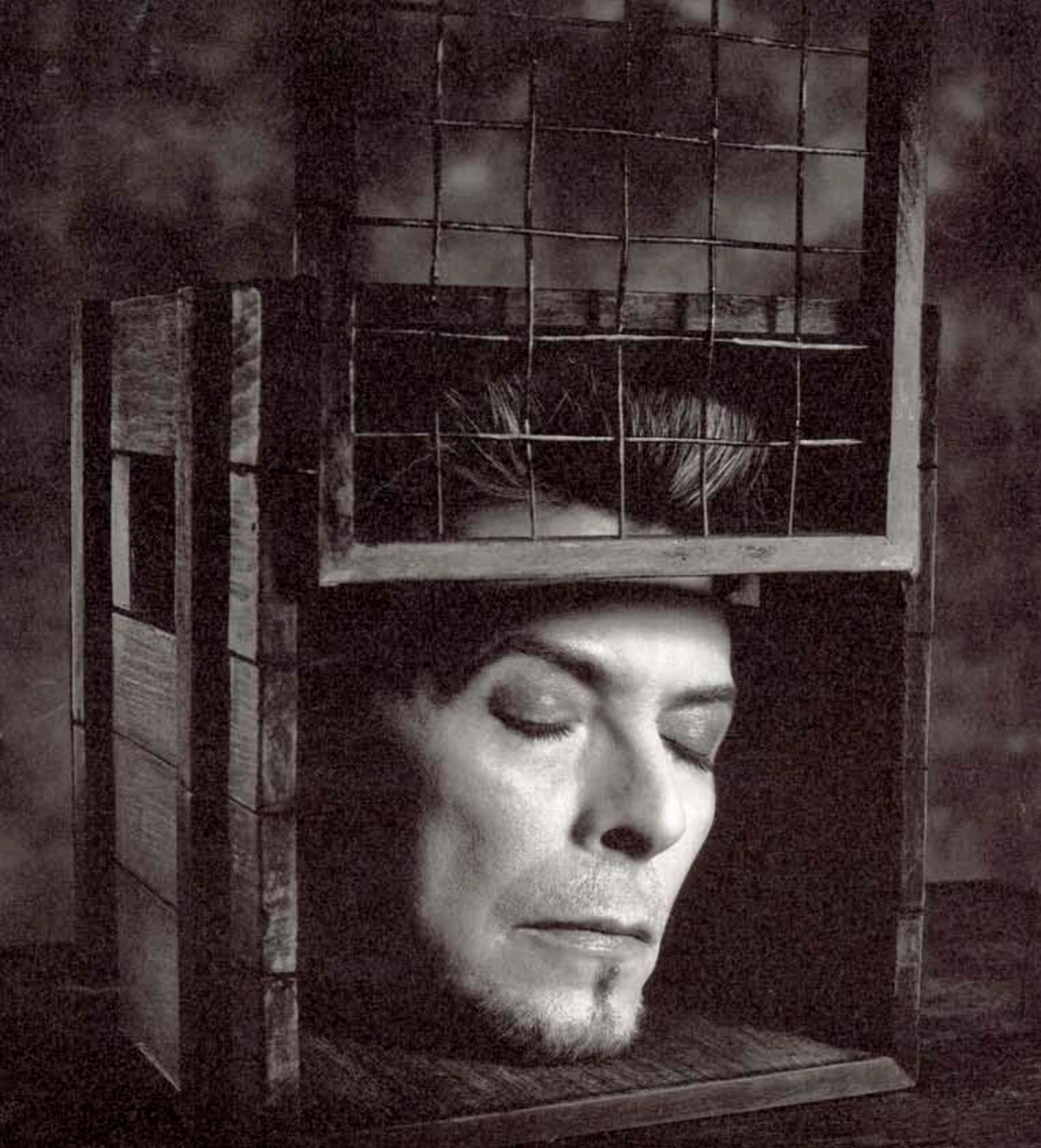


'WHETHER IT'S TUTANKHAMUN'S SOCKS IN CAIRO OR MICK JAGGER, MY APPROACH TO THE FINAL IMAGE IS ALWAYS THE SAME'

NEW YORK, 1994 (left) 'John Travolta was so smooth. He dances very well, even in front of the camera, and he was extremely fit at the time'

NEW YORK, 1996 (right) 'Marilyn Manson used Vaseline to mess up the make-up, so we decided to shoot him like that. A real performance artist'

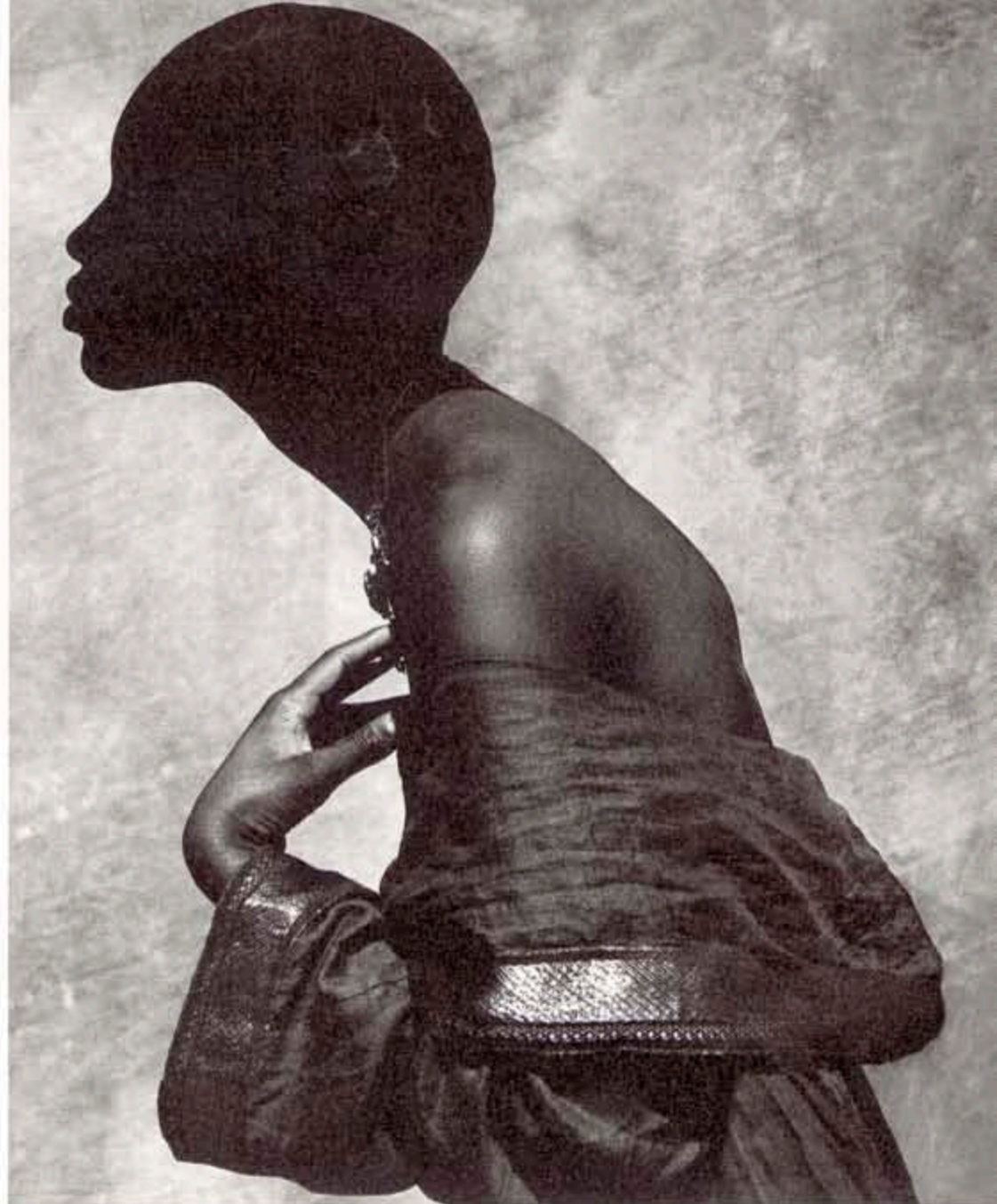




NEW YORK, 1996
 'This box was based on a surreal painting. Bowie's a very good actor, and he did this meditation thing to relax his neck muscles'



'YOU'RE TRYING TO CREATE AN IMAGE THAT CAN MOVE FROM A MAGAZINE PAGE TO A GALLERY WALL - IT'S A TRICKY JOURNEY'

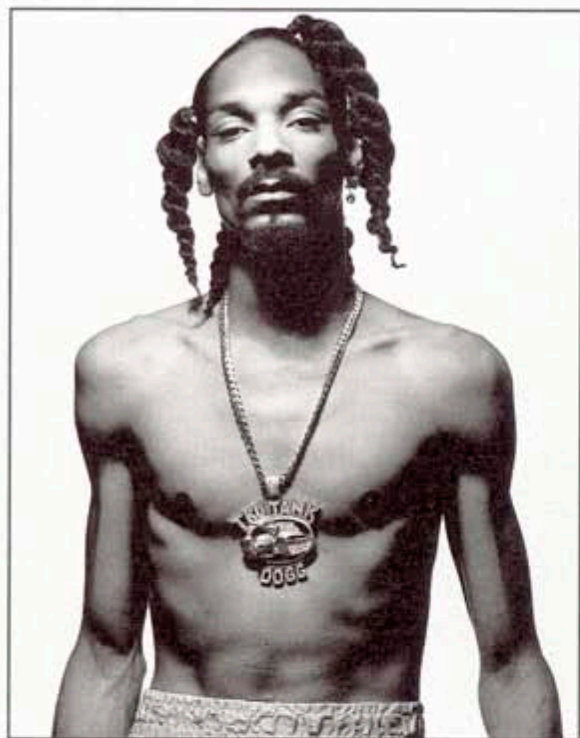


PALM SPRINGS, 1989
 (above) 'In front of the camera, nobody is better than Naomi Campbell'

LAS VEGAS, 1998 (top left)
 'Estella Warren used to be a synchronised swimmer, so she had no problem with this shot'

NEW YORK, 1994 (far left)
 'A smart chimp like Casey will do what you show him'

NEW YORK, 1996 (left)
 'It took hours to cover the basketball player Dennis Rodman in gold leaf'



LOS ANGELES, 1999 (far left) "Snoop Dogg was a funny character and very nice to me. He gave me a call in the middle of the night a month later and asked if I wanted to "come out and hang!"

NEW YORK, 1994 (left) "I found Casey from a guy who trained chimps. I had to be patient and ready to shoot very, very quickly!"

Portrait photography isn't about reality or truth. The process of taking a picture conspires against it. First there is the lighting, which can radically change the mood and look of a shot. Then there is hair, make-up, styling, cropping, editing. Not to mention, nowadays, Photoshop, which can shed 20 years and many more pounds off a person in a few of clicks of a mouse. Forget about a picture telling a thousand stories; more like a thousand lies.

Which brings us to a 62-year-old Scottish photographer called Albert Watson, one of the biggest and most original fibbers of all. You may not have heard of Watson – he's more famous in his adopted city of New York than in the UK – but you've almost certainly seen his pictures in magazines. Bold, brazen images; sometimes hostile and shocking, sometimes heroic, and always beautifully and originally composed.

recognisable as a "leopard-man"; John Travolta in an unlikely gangsta-rap pose; a real-life monkey holding a gun. "It doesn't matter whether I'm photographing standing stones in the Orkneys, or Mick Jagger, or Tutankhamun's socks in Cairo," says Watson from his studio in New York, where he has lived since 1976. "I don't really have a different way with them. My approach to the final image is always the same. I'm after an image that has power. I want power from a sock and a rock, just as much as I want power from Mick Jagger."

He recalls a shoot in 1986 with Clint Eastwood, who turned up in a fluffy, peach-coloured tracksuit top. "I wanted to photograph him as this monumental Mount Rushmore character, because he takes on these almost mythic proportions," explains Watson. "But he didn't want to change. He said, 'This is me. I'm not playing a cowboy or a cop here.' I said, 'Yeah, but this picture isn't for your piano, or to send to your mother. It's not a picture for you. It's a picture for the media, for Rolling Stone magazine.'" Eastwood obeyed. "Remember, I have some choices here," Watson adds. "I have to put my fingerprint on it at some point. I'm not a Cartier-Bresson in a doorway observing people. I'm there with them, right there in their faces."

Brought up in Edinburgh by a boxer-turned-PE-teacher father and

a hairdresser-turned-PE-teacher mother, Watson attended the local Rudolf Steiner school, where "they were very interested in your inner creativity and pushed art into everything". After school, in the 1960s, he studied graphic design in Dundee, then film at the Royal College of Art in London. It wasn't until he moved to LA in 1970 and started taking pictures that he found his calling. "I was just looking for new experiences," he says. "And I liked the States – that American thing: cowboys and indians, rock 'n' roll. And from the minute I picked up a camera it felt very natural."

In 1985 he opened his current headquarters, a large studio in a former ice house in New York's West Village – now worth some \$30m, he reckons – which he shares with a permanent staff of eight, and his wife of 44 years and business manager, Elizabeth. Round the corner are their production offices, and a further 22 staff.

In the early years, money was tighter, and he had to learn to be versatile. He shot more than 50 covers for the American magazine TV Guide, album covers, corporate work. Then, in the late 1970s, he became less compromising. "I started refusing to take hand-held, motor-driven 35mm shots of girls in swimsuits falling backwards into water. I found it too frivolous."

Nowadays, all his work – fashion, portraiture, still life, landscape – has what he calls an "emotional weight". Interestingly, he has been blind in his right eye since birth, and though he says it is impossible to know how this might affect his work, by way of compensation, perhaps, he has a reputation for being technically superb and a demon for detail.

"Yes, you're always looking for perfectionism," he concedes, "but nothing's ever perfect. It's a quest. You can't help who you are. You find yourself automatically moving lights, selecting lenses and a certain style. It's like a golf swing. You can analyse it up to a point, but it takes place in less than a second."

He doesn't pretend it's easy. "When you're trying to create an image that can move from a magazine page to a gallery wall, it's a tricky journey for a photographer to make. It's a journey littered with landmines and explosives. You're raising the stakes. You're increasing its monumentality. Snapshots look good in magazines, less good in books, and really silly on a gallery or museum wall. An editor once said to me that not every shot has to go into a museum. My philosophy always was, 'Yes it bloody well does.'" ■ *Frozen, a retrospective exhibition of the photographs of Albert Watson, is at La Rotonda della Besana, Milan, from September 27 to October 19.*