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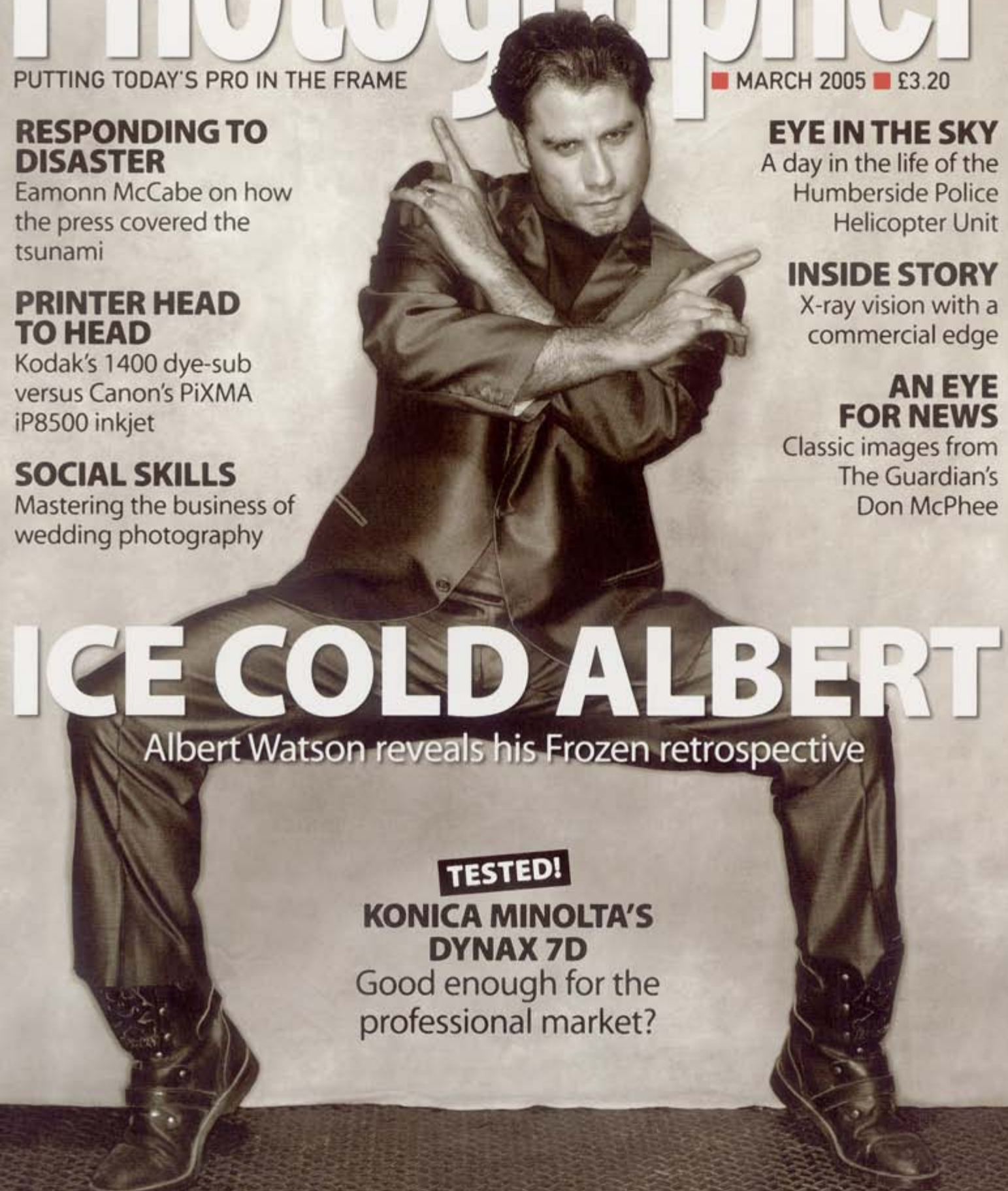
ICE COLD ALBERT

Albert Watson reveals his Frozen retrospective

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IF YOU DON'T HAVE A GOOD SUPPORT TEAM YOU'RE NOT AS EFFICIENT AND YOU'RE NOT AS GOOD. THAT I WOULD EMPHASISE TO A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO ARE PROFESSIONALS

■ **TERRY HOPE:** Can you tell me some more about *Frozen*, the Milan retrospective?

ALBERT WATSON: The show was massive, and it was held in a huge space – the ceiling heights alone were 80 feet – in a museum as opposed to a conventional art gallery, and it took a vast amount of time, effort and money to get it all organised. The space was organised into two galleries, one an intimate space that felt more like a conventional exhibition area, another a huge space that accommodated all the really big work, and then Sony built a cinema in the middle of it all to allow all the video work that we've done to be shown.

This was important for any retrospective of mine to have real

meaning, because I wanted to be able to show a selection of the 600 commercials that we have produced over the years. We did what I think was quite a smart thing, in that we put together a compilation of commercials, and took out the commercial message so that you only got to see the glossy side of the piece. This meant that you didn't end up having to look at soap commercials or anything like that.

■ **Given the diversity that has marked your career, was it difficult to select the work to show in a retrospective?**

From my point of view it wasn't difficult, although it did take me a lot of time to select what I wanted to show, and some people confuse time

taken with the degree of difficulty involved. The decisions about what to include came from me, and the space that I had allowed me to categorise things to a certain degree, but then a lot of what I do is fragmented anyway. You know, pictures of monkeys would be next to a Tutankhamen artefact would be next to a picture of Johnny Depp or something. There was a very diverse kind of grouping of materials. Sometimes portraiture held together, but at other times it was broken up by landscape, and at other times I'd put in something from the Vegas project or something.

■ **How did you come up with the name for the show?**

Well, the Italians wanted a title for the show, and we wanted to do something that tied in to one of the pictures, which featured a girl in a refrigerator. We thought about the word 'cold' originally, but you could never call a show that because it's the opposite to hot with all the connotations that

carries, so eventually we hit upon the word 'frozen' and that worked really well. The Italians knew the word, and therefore it worked fine, there was no need for any translation, and the title also works well even in English, where it could be taken to mean 'frozen in time'.

■ **The catalogue that accompanied the retrospective was also quite something, with very much the feel and quality of a high-end book.**

Although it has a hard cover, and there was a separate version available that had a stainless steel cover, it was never intended to be a book as such. I've always tried to make catalogues distinct from the books that I've done, much more simple and clean cut. There were 100 pictures inside, and so we called it *The Frozen 100*. A few people in the UK have the catalogue, but it's not in general distribution here. The fashion designer Paul Smith, who I have known for a long time, stocked it in his shop pre-Christmas, and I was





INTERVIEW



PRO FILE:

Albert Watson

Widely acknowledged by his peers as one of the world's finest photographers, Albert Watson is now getting serious about introducing his body of work to a wider public

WORDS Terry Hope PHOTOGRAPHY Albert Watson

TO HIS PEERS ALBERT Watson is a byword for professionalism, a man who works legendary long hours and who takes his craft seriously to the point of obsession. In between tackling a bewildering variety of assignments that has taken in everything from *Rolling Stone* magazine through to celebrity portraiture, fashion, film posters, car shoots and the direction of a stream of highly regarded commercials, Watson sets himself personal challenges that are designed to stretch him and to extend his body of work still further.

While the intensity of his working life has brought him personal satisfaction – he recalls with relish the fact that on a recent visit to Times Square in New York a fashion picture of his was featured at one end, while in another corner was a portrait and close by were six billboards of his car photography – it has also guaranteed that there has been little time to promote his

work and to get it seen and acknowledged by a wider audience.

The consequence has been that Watson, recently made an Honorary FRPS for his contribution to photography, has been sitting on a mountain of extraordinary images, many of which have never been widely seen. The two books – *Cyclops* and *Maroc* – that he has produced to date have both been critically acclaimed, but represent scant return for someone of Watson's undoubted powers, and exhibitions have also been few and far between.

Now, following a huge retrospective in Milan late last year that was visited by over 30,000 people, things are about to change. A major new book on Las Vegas will appear during 2005, a hard backed catalogue to the Milan show has been made available in limited numbers, talks are underway to tour the retrospective and Albert Watson is intending to make sure that his work from now on starts to receive the coverage that it so richly deserves. ◉

surprised at how many people bought the stainless steel version, which was quite expensive.

■ **Was *Frozen* a success, and will it be travelling?**

It was phenomenally successful during its time in Milan. More than 3000 people came to the opening, and during the month it was open 30,000 people came to see it. It was such a big event that I said we shouldn't just wait two or three years until somebody else says do you want a show, and so now the tentative plan is for it to show at the Royal Academy in London possibly later this year or early next, and then perhaps Germany and Tokyo after that, while it's also definitely scheduled to be at the Edinburgh Festival next year.

To help make things like this happen we've brought in a person who's going to be responsible full time for exhibitions. Believe it or not we've never had that: we spend all of our time working, so things would always happen almost by chance, and I've now decided that it's time for that to change.

■ **In terms of other projects that you have on the go at the moment, can you tell me a little about the Las Vegas book that you're currently working on?**

The Las Vegas book will come out some time this year, and it really got held up because of the show in Milan but it's nearly finished now, and in fact several of the pictures from the project were in the retrospective.

■ **Was it a long-term project?**

It was huge. The equivalent shooting was 17 weeks, and after doing basically five weeks on my last book, *Maroc*, 17 weeks was huge. The Vegas project was also more intense, and, being something that I set up myself, it was also hugely expensive.

Think about it: I'm in New York, and Vegas is nearly the other side of America. So you have to get there. Every time I go there I take a production manager and two, sometimes three assistants. You're working with big cameras and you need extra help. You can't work with 8x10in cameras on your own: well, perhaps you can, but it sure is a pain in the neck, and it makes taking pictures very tough. Not that every picture was



going to be taken on a big camera, but certainly some of the project was due to be shot in this way.

With an assistant, instead of having to search around for a 150mm lens, you just stick out your hand and it's there. You also have to take a production manager to organise things, because I wasn't just shooting in the street I was shooting everywhere. It all meant that every time I was going to Las Vegas it involved taking along a team of five people, which meant five hotel rooms, and I also had to hire equipment there, because I didn't necessarily want to take all my strobes with me.

Sometimes this equipment has to come in from LA, and very rapidly the cost of all this can rise to \$50,000.

Think about 17 weeks, and it's easy to see how the actual cost of putting that project together is pretty close to \$450,000 to \$500,000. And that's a lot of money.

■ **Why did you choose to do something on Las Vegas?**

The choice of Vegas was because it was the opposite end to Morocco, which was featured in *Maroc*. Morocco is classical, while Vegas is underground, decadent and all these things. With *Maroc* I wanted, to a certain extent, to take you to Morocco, while in the Vegas project I didn't necessarily want to take you to Vegas. So it was a slightly different thing.

In the beginning when we started the project we began by just calling it 'Las Vegas', and that seemed to make sense. Then we changed it to simply 'Vegas', because I thought, following on from a title like *Maroc*, it just sounded better. And then in the end we changed the name to *Shot in Vegas*, and the minute that we changed the name it absolutely became completely the right title, and it let me off the hook.

If you call a book, 'Paris', for example, then the reader is going to think, 'oh good, there will be a picture in here of the Eiffel Tower'. So, if you do Vegas, you'll be thinking, 'hang on a minute, where's the gambling chips, where's the backgammon tables?', but the thing is that I don't really want to photograph backgammon, roulette, the poker games or to do any of the gaming things. To be honest I found it difficult to shoot: how do you tell



people about the gambling part of Vegas? When you go into a casino there's a blackjack table, and, believe it or not, the blackjack table there is pretty similar to the blackjack table in Monte Carlo.

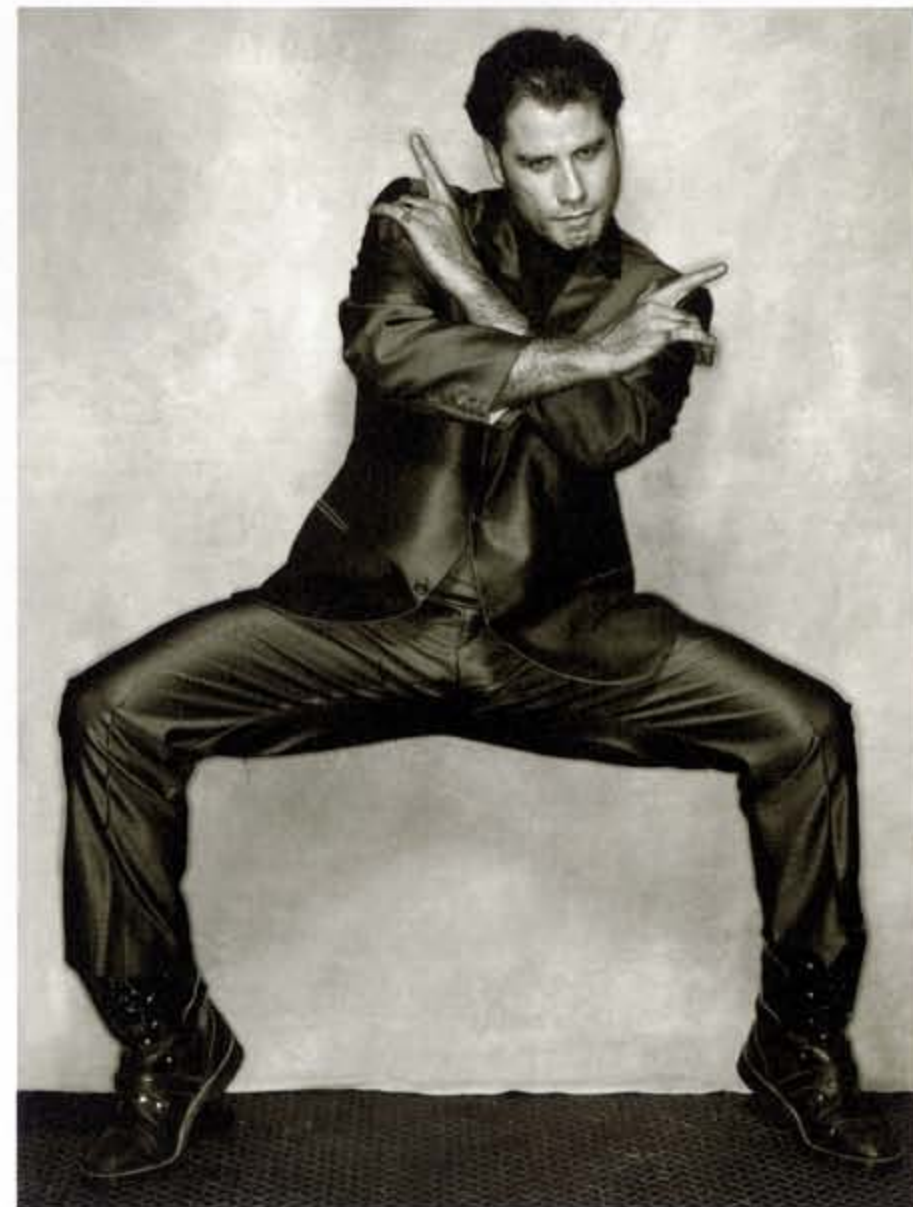
And you might say: well, there are different things around and different people involved, and you know what? I didn't care! And that's why, when I called the book *Shot in Vegas*, it just simply meant that if I shot pictures that appealed to me and someone said 'well, that could be shot in London', I could go 'yes, but it wasn't'. Because, as the title makes clear, it was shot in Vegas.

■ **Looking ahead, what kind of challenges do you see that are left for you as a photographer?**

I think the challenge for me is to address this whole exhibition thing. It's quite strange really: so much of the work that we did exhibited well, and a lot of the fashion work we did also exhibited well, and we never really addressed it. It was really strange; we were just too busy working. The advantage to that was you have a tremendous amount of material because you're working all the time. The disadvantage was that we weren't doing a lot with it.

■ **And I suppose it will be a benefit that so much of it will be fresh to people as well.**

Oh yes, people won't have seen a lot of that stuff, especially when you go back in time. And things can look better almost, from the perspective of time: for example, in my opinion the really



great fashion era was before my time, with the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s. But now the 70s and 80s look pretty good from here. Everything tends to look better 30 or 40 years on. When you look at an Irving Penn now, which has a great deal of beauty in it, you're looking at the 1940s and 50s, and it really is exceptional.

■ **What advice might you give to other professional photographers, based on your experience?**

I think that people can underestimate the value of a very good support team. There's only one name on the pictures, but a lot of people contribute. Elizabeth, my wife, does a lot of things, and gives me great support, and you also need a good make-up team, good studio backup – you need everything.

If you don't have that you're on your own and you're not as efficient and you're not as good. That I would emphasise to a lot of people who are professionals; that you really need to have that whole thing sorted out. ■

The Frozen 100 catalogue to the Milan exhibition is available in very limited supplies from the Paul Smith Store in Covent Garden, London (020 7379 7133; www.paulsmith.co.uk) and also from Shipleys book shop in Charing Cross Road (020 7836 4872; artbooks@compuserve.com; www.artbook.co.uk). The stainless steel version is £140, and the standard version is £60. Readers of Professional Photographer can also email aaron@cyclopsnyc.com for details of how to obtain the catalogue.