

PORTRAITURE: JACOB ISRAEL AVEDON

...Whenever he poses for me, he smiles and becomes benign, gentle and somehow wise. My photographs show his impatience. I love that quality in him. He isn't interested in the fact that he looks his age, eighty-three, and is still fantastically vibrant and angry and hungry and alive. He's more interested in looking sage. So my sense of what's beautiful is very different from his.

Richard Avedon, 1974

Avedon took photographs of his father at intervals between October 1969 and August 1973, prior to Jacob Israel dying of cancer. They are an insight both into Avedon's use of sequential imagery and the power balance that resides between artist and subject. Eight photographs of his father were exhibited together in 1974 at the Museum of Modern Art.



Jacob Israel Avedon, Florida, 1969 - 1973

POINTS OF DEPARTURE:

1. Above are two of the images originally exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art. Despite both being head and shoulder portraits of the same subject against a white background the two are very different. Describe the compositional differences between the two images. How do these differences affect our reading of them?

2. In the quote above Avedon describes the sittings of his father as almost a battle in which their two visions of the individual compete. Are you aware from the images of this power balance between photographer and subject?
3. In 1994 Avedon described the format that had come to define his later photography. "I've worked out a series of no's. No to exquisite light, no to apparent compositions, no to the seduction of poses or narrative. And all these no's force me to a "yes." I have a white background. I have the person I'm interested in and the thing that happens between us." How does this "yes," this reduction of elements affect our reading of the image? In what way is it different from us seeing Jacob Israel within the context of his home for example?
4. Avedon was involved in every aspect of exhibiting his photographs, right through from their creation, to the selection of images and finally to the hanging and juxtaposition of the works. As audience how do you think Avedon's decision to display the images hugely magnified and in sequence affects our reading of them?
5. Throughout art history painters have dealt with the concept of death through portraits of the living, *memento mori* in which the subject is often depicted holding a skull, reminder that we all shall die; death as unavoidable. Describing the images of Jacob Israel Avedon, Harold Rosenberg describes that, "at the height of his desperation, the older Avedon's head seems on the verge of metamorphosis into a petrified skull." To what extent do you think these images of Israel Avedon could be read as a continuation in the *vanitas* tradition?
6. When asked, "What kind of son could it be who would take such pictures of his dying father?" Avedon replied that the photographs do not represent his father or what he felt or feels about him, but rather "what it is to be any one of us." Considering your own reaction to the images do you think that they are merely portraits of one individual's father or that they transcend the individual and illustrate the human condition?