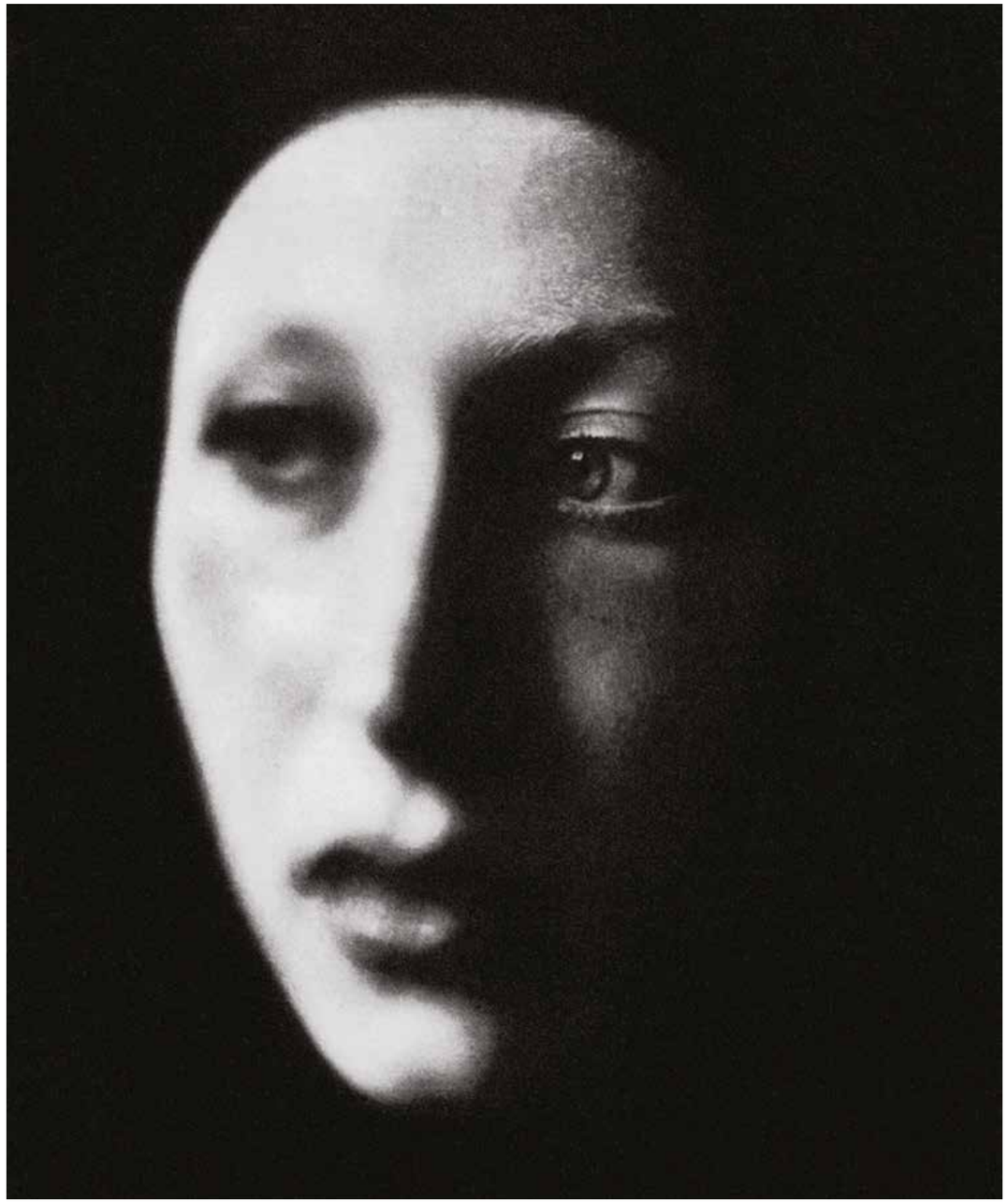
FEATURE

PEOPLE POWER

Jack Davison recently photographed 88 people over the course of three days. He talks to Graeme Green about simplicity and authenticity in portraits, and his plans to broaden his project out across the UK and worldwide.

All images
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In photography, as in life, less is often more. Whereas many celebrity shoots for magazines involve vast teams, with extensive lighting, hair, clothing, make-up and numerous assistants, Jack Davison prefers to keep things simple. Often taken with a small point-and-shoot camera and using naturally available light, his photos have appeared in the likes of British *Vogue* and *New York Times Magazine*.

Although he does like to play with props and abstraction, the results, with people including recent Oscar-winner Jessie Buckley, Dwayne Johnson, Paul Mescal, Kate Winslet, Cate Blanchett, Emma Stone and Denzel Washington, as well as Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya and other cast members from the *Dune* films, often tend to be stark and arresting rather than colourful and glossy.

Simplicity was also key to his recent project *Portraits: 13-15 November*, in which he set himself the challenge of trying to photograph around 100 people in London over the course of three days.

Born in Cambridge in 1990 and now based in Essex, Davison has been taking photos since his early teens. He received his first major commission from Kathy Ryan, photography editor of the *New York Times*, in 2016. Realising that his first love – classic portraiture – was fading from his work, he worked on a street-casting collaboration in 2024 with casting director Coco Wu, bringing in their friends and acquaintances and people they'd met or seen into Oval Space, a studio in east London, where each person sat for around 10-20 minutes. The portraits have been exhibited in Paris and recently London, with a book, *Portraits: 13-15 November*, also published.

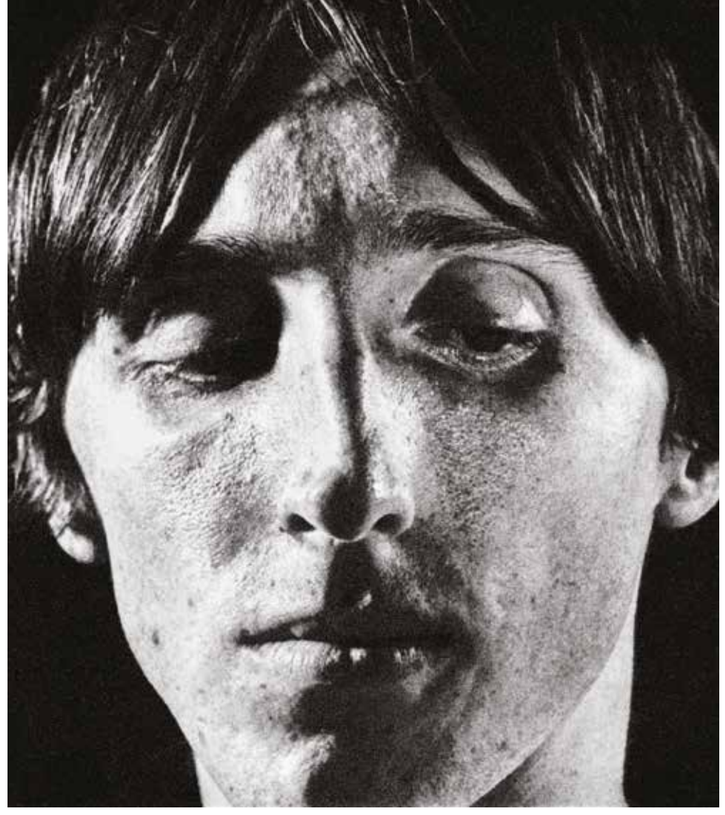
How did the original idea for *Portraits: 13-15 November* come about?

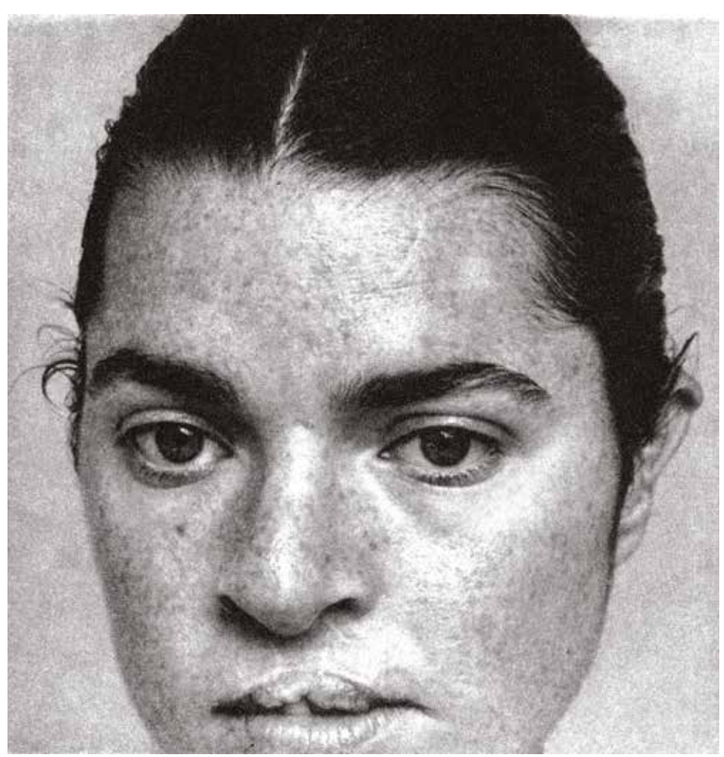
At the end of the year I always sit down and do a self-evaluation, where I look at what pictures of mine have survived the year or that I think have a strength to them. In the past few years, I have been finding less and less portraiture with that simple and classic mugshot style. That was something I'd always done. I thought, 'I miss that and I want to rectify that.'

I'm also someone who, as a father, has less time than I did previously, so with costs and scheduling, I set myself the challenge to try to make a body of work on a smaller timescale. We originally set out to do 111 people over three days. We got to 88 people. The aim was to focus on why I love portraiture and what it means to me in this simple, stripped-back way.

Who are the people in the images?

I worked with Coco Wu, who had just graduated from a creative university and had started doing street casting. We worked together and found a collection of people. We weren't ›





trying to represent London, but I wanted the faces to be the kind of people I would be drawn to. We shot it in 2024 in Oval Space in east London, a space that has nice light.

What were you looking for in your subjects?
I'm always looking for people who look like they could've stepped out of any era and that once you strip them back to simple garb or have their hair back or remove earrings or anything that might hint too heavily at the modern day, then they have a kind of face that has a timeless quality. I like the idea that someone might find this book in 1,000 years and go, 'Oh, what was this collection of people and why were they together?' Through the styling and the simplicity, it hopefully gives more and more to the viewer to make their own stories up about these characters.

Was the project driven a lot by practicalities, including the time limitations you mentioned?
It's a mix of practicality but I also do like a challenge. I work quickly. When I started as a teenager, I would always stop people in the street. Often with that kind of portrait, you might have 30 seconds because those people are rushing for a train or to meet a friend. People don't have the luxury of time.

With these portraits, it had quite a rhythm. We'd stagger people coming to the studio, and we didn't do much in terms of hair and make-up – we usually just put people's hair back. Each person would spend 10-20 minutes with us.

Did each sitting still feel like a personal encounter?
For me, there's always a frisson. Some of the people were people I knew and had long-term relationships with, but it was still interesting to try to portray them in a different way. But with a lot of the people, I was meeting them for the first time.

My space is always calm and non-hectic. It was about guiding them through the process. I use a small point-and-shoot camera, a Fujifilm X100V, which allows me to not have it right up to my face, so there's an interesting relationship with the sitter.

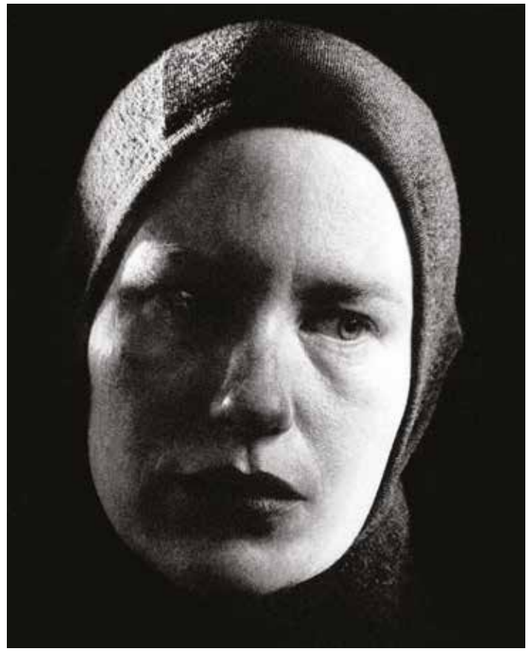
A lot of what I do is talking, giving people stuff to do that takes them away from the portrait happening. It might be asking them to choose three people in the room to pick out with their eyes and look at them, or 'Can you count to 10 for me?' or 'Can you throw this bottle between me and you?' Anything to create in-between moments where it's less expected and less pose-y.

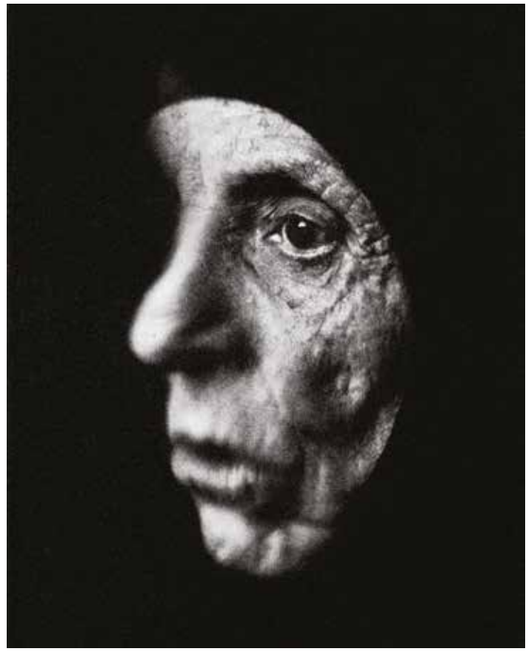
Your portraits don't usually flatter or beautify people. Are you going for a raw, authentic style?
Especially with this project, I describe it as being like when you make a good stock – I'm trying to boil down the portrait into its simplest and strongest form, which, for me, is that classic head-and-shoulders space that people have been doing for generations, whether it's sculpture or paintings. I've never been a flatterer. I don't want to show anyone in an unkind way, but I want to try to be honest to what I'm seeing.

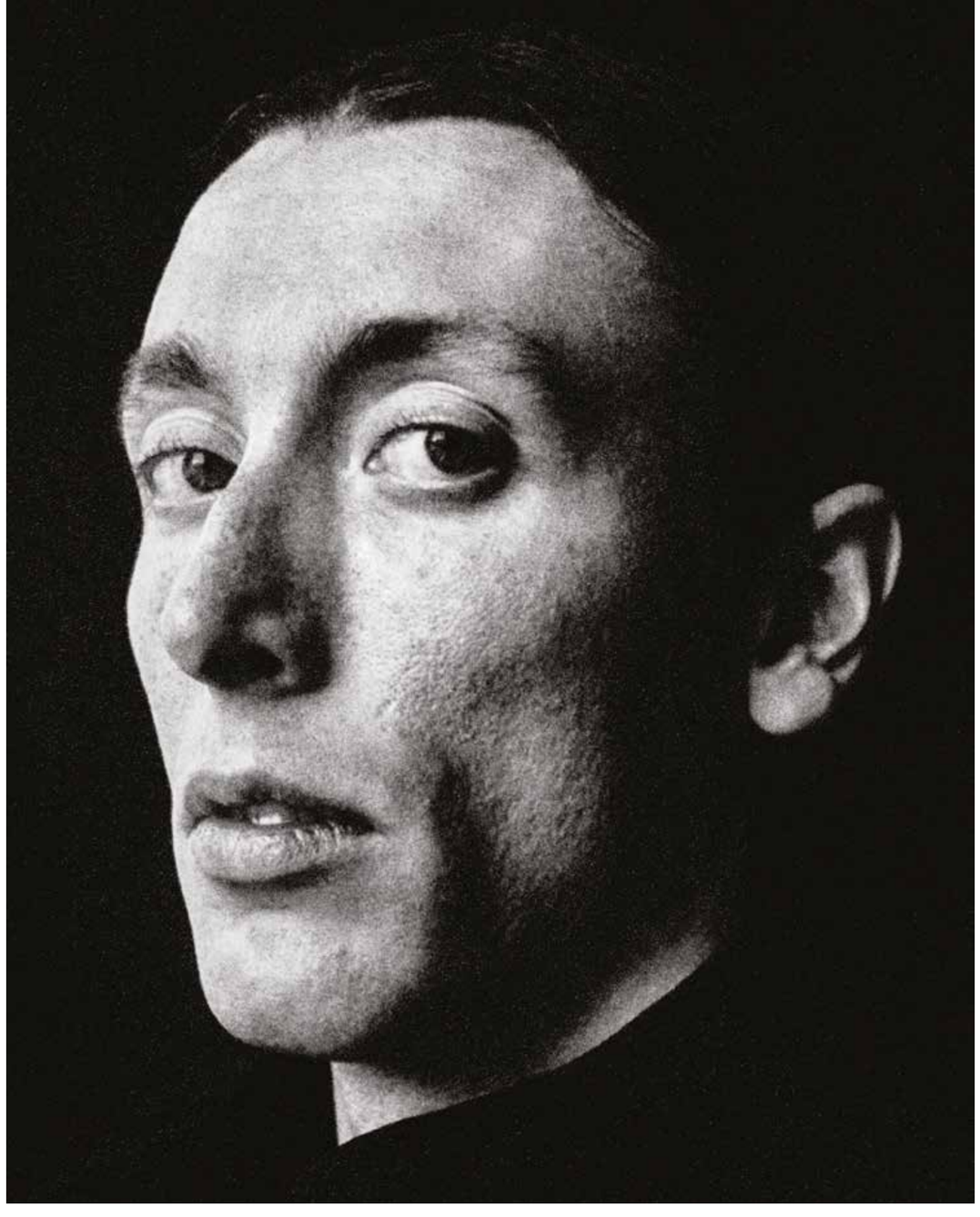
Do people like the results?
It's a real mix. The people I'd photographed who visited the exhibition were really enamoured with it, but you often don't usually hear from people after portraiture. Even with a celebrity, it's rare you'd hear back from someone.

Some photos have blurs from movement, which many photographers would look to avoid.
I've always played with abstractions, whether it's blurring or putting something in front of the lens or playing. The human face is so recognisable, so you have a lot of leeway to abstract. There's less of that in these portraits than I'd usually do, but I like that there are little moments and peaks and troughs of surrealism. That's always something that's been important to me.

Do you plan to repeat the project in other cities?
When I set myself this project, I knew I'd want to do it forever, or for as long as I want to take pictures. The next city we're doing, hopefully this year, is the city my dad is from: Newcastle. The idea for me is that every other year over the next 20-30 years, I'll choose a space. I'm very interested in starting it in the UK, then moving to other places that I have connections to. The idea is that I'll have a stack of portraits that encompass the world.



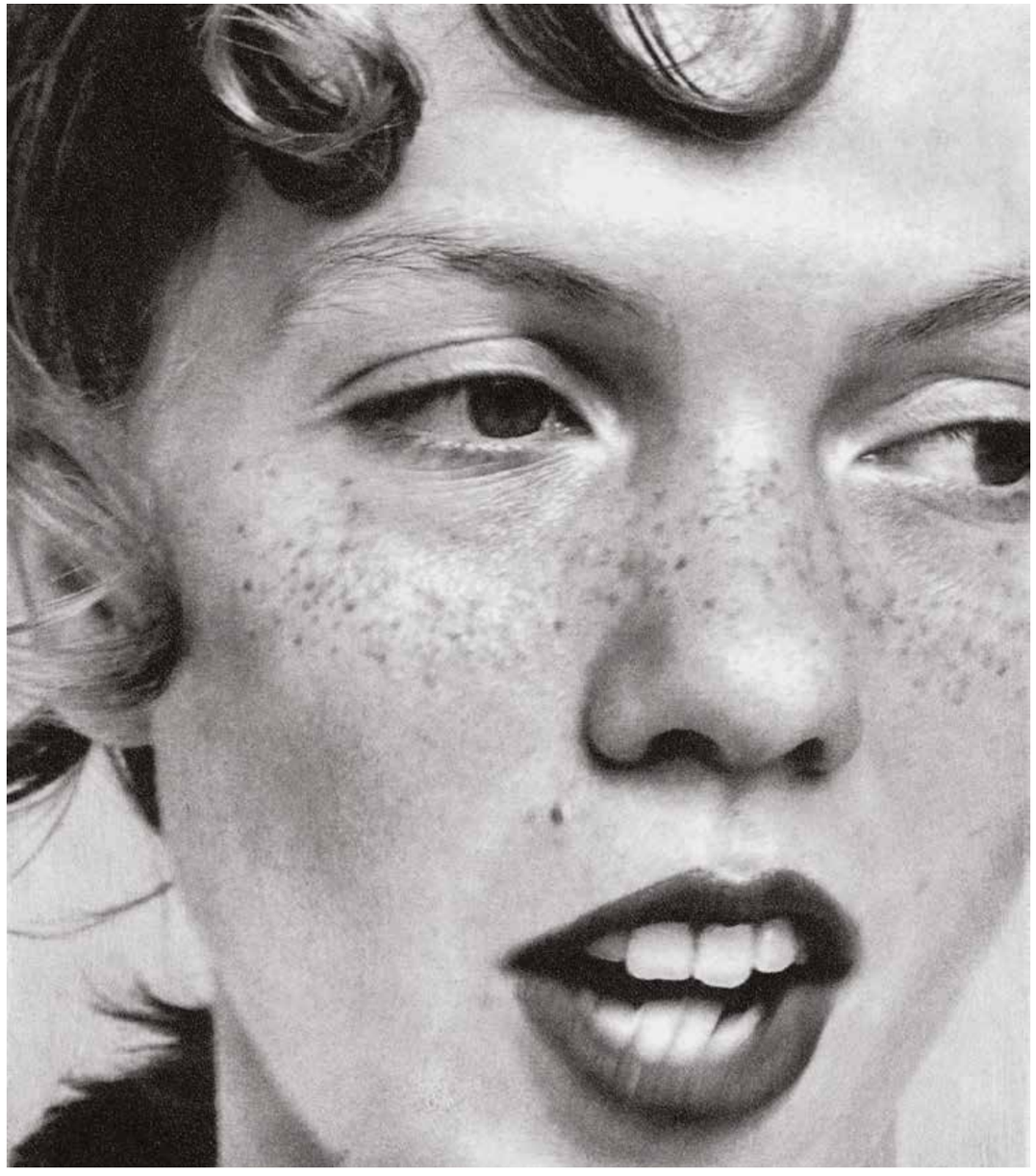




What makes a great portrait for you?
It's often about moments of in-betweenness, where the sitter isn't fully aware of that moment and they're not presenting to the camera. You're working to find those moments of play or spontaneity. As much as I like to plan and figure things out, I like to leave quite a lot of space for that randomness.

For me, a strong picture is one that, if separated from the whole series, you can put it up somewhere and it holds its own. Doing a series is an exciting process, but I want each image to be strong while also informing the other images.

Which photographers have influenced your style?
August Sander is a big influence, for the simplicity of his work. I was given a book by a friend called *Least Wanted*, which is a book of 1920s mugshots. Those portraits have emotional power. They're from a perilous time of their lives, and they're really beautiful and simple. ›

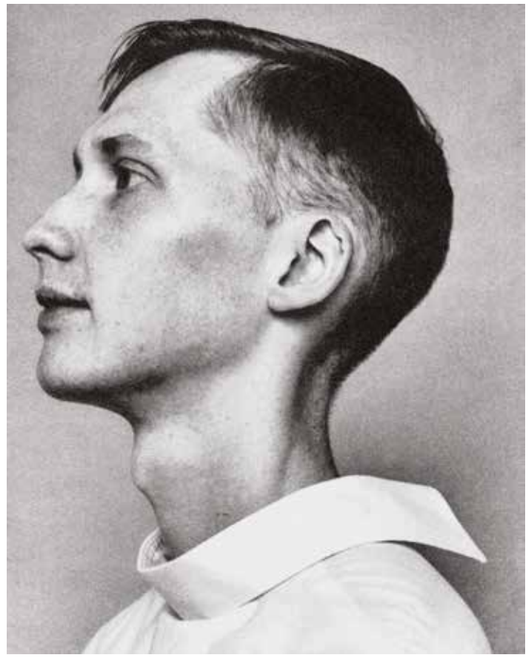


‹ **With celebrity portraits, your work is still not glossy. What do editors come to you for in terms of style?**
I've never changed my process for the person. I don't overly light images. I love a hard sun and the blistering rawness of that. There are never any reflectors. I'm never thinking about bouncing extra light to make someone look a certain way. I've always tried to keep things really simple, or to go the other way and make it really surreal and heightened.

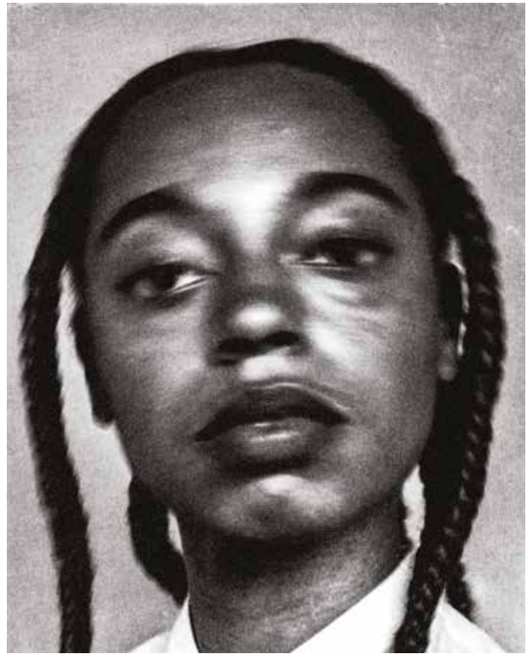
With the Dwayne Johnson photos, I felt that he'd never really been photographed properly before. He'd done a lot of glossy stuff. I think he sat for Annie Leibovitz once. But for someone with his fame, there were no strong, simple images of him that weren't obsessed with his body or size. For me, it was about, 'How can we isolate his head?' He's bald and looks quite sculptural to me, like a bust, so it was about simplifying things. I haven't heard from him, but I'm intrigued what he thinks of those pictures.

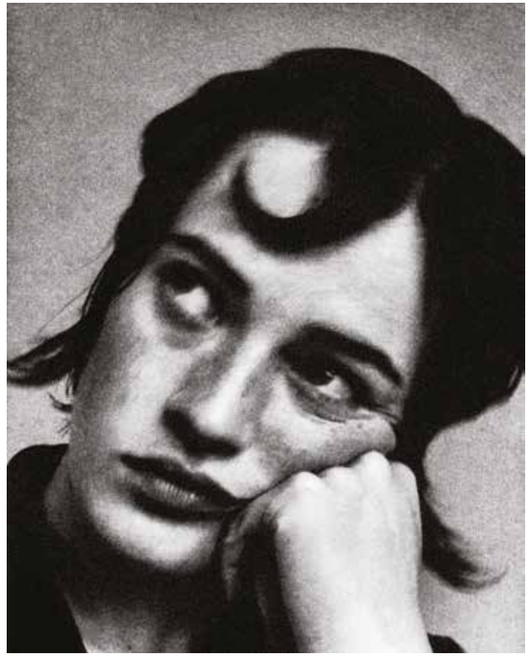
Do you find these famous actors are open to your ideas?
I knew Dwayne Johnson was trying to step into a riskier space. He was doing an indie movie called *The Smashing Machine* and he was taking more risks. I do also like showing people my references beforehand. ›

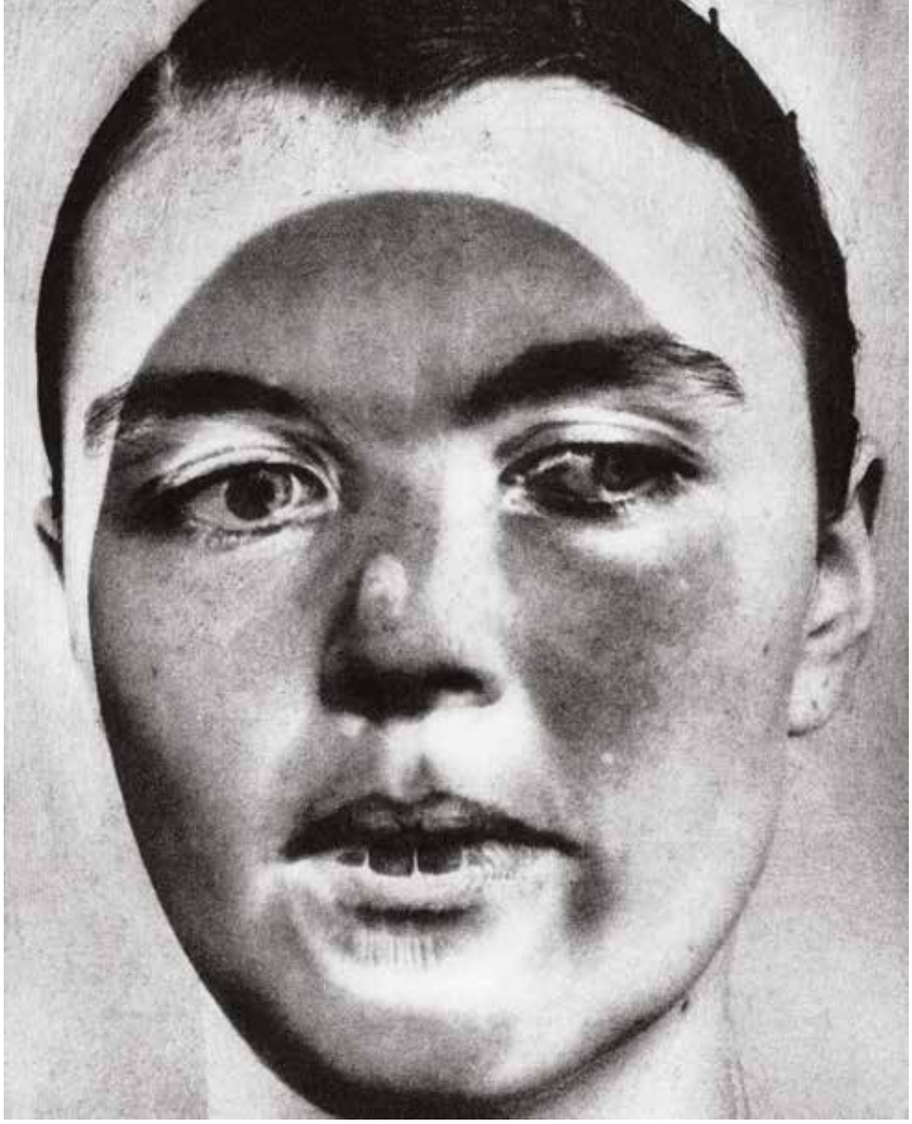


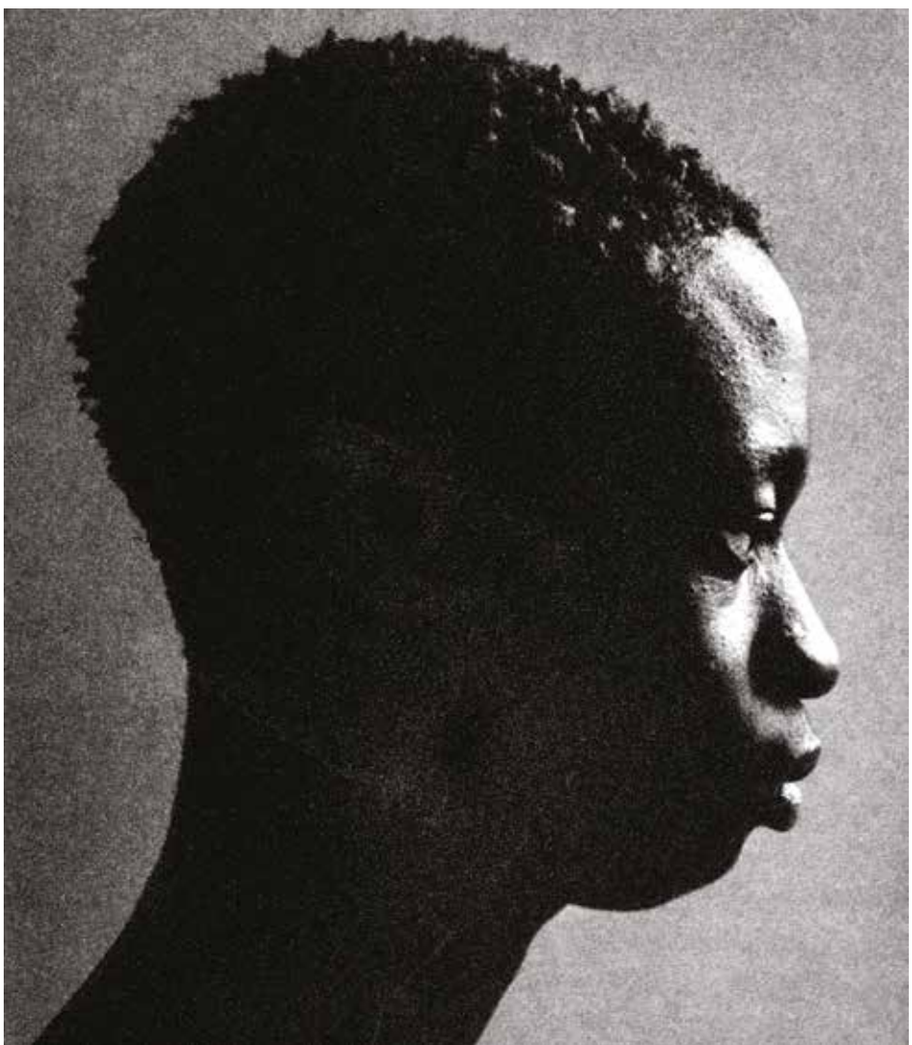


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‹ Most people are excited by the simplicity of the set and that there aren't lots of people and we're just working outside. I usually just start with my little camera.

I've been asked to photograph certain people and I've said 'No', as I just don't see them in my work or I don't think this person would come on this journey with me. Sometimes you take a risk and it works, sometimes it doesn't. Denzel Washington, for example, is a handful. I was shooting through all kinds of objects that come with me. He had so many people with him, and he spent a lot of the time purposely trying not do what I was asking him to do. He wasn't an arse or anything – he was very playful – but finding those in-between moments was tough.

People, especially actors, are often excited that you have ideas and thoughts, and you're not just turning up and saying, 'I'll stick you in front of a background.' With Jessie Buckley, Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* was a reference in the shoot, but also the figure of grief from her film, *Hamnet*, and the spectre of death. I had a friend play that figure. There's a moment in there where they're kind of holding each other. For Jessie, I think it was great to have something to bounce off. We're trying to build little moments or spontaneity, and if you have another person there, then there's less control over that space.

What's the important thing that you want your images to have?

It comes back to 'How can one picture hold the eye and draw people in?' There's a mix of things that are important. There's an element of honesty, but also a twisting of the truth and a little push of the surreal that comes in. I also keep a space for play and things that I can't control. Some of my most formative pictures are singular moments that I happened to grab.

As much as I think about an idea for a shot, I always try to keep that space so it can come together in the moment. Like with Jessie, there will be movement of the wind or a change in the light. Because I don't light things, I have to deal with what the light is on that day, and that day was sunny in the morning, then largely overcast. It means there's a moodiness to some of the images.

There's another shoot I did recently in Iceland where it rained all day and the pictures are really special because of that. The rain was oppressive, but it became another character.



***Portraits: 13-15 November* by Jack Davison is out now, price £45. See jackdavison.co.uk.**