

# Ready for his close-ups

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Photographs of famous faces from Martin Schoeller's *Close Up* exhibition showing at the National Portrait Gallery.

**Martin Schoeller's portraits are both epic and intimate, writes ROBERT McFARLANE.**

There is a desiccated, slightly stunned look to each sitter facing Martin Schoeller's camera, as if they might have just witnessed some unfortunate event, such as a nuclear explosion, a car crash, or perhaps a favourite sporting team's disgrace. Subjects' faces are rendered in frightening, almost forensic detail, with sharply defined lines, skin pores, even minute scars and, of course, their inevitably glittering eyes. In each colour picture, Schoeller creates both a vivid life mask of his famous subjects and an undulating landscape of flesh through which we discern evidence of a life's journey.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume Schoeller treats every portrait sitter the same. Though all are photographed full face, mostly looking directly to camera, frozen momentarily by luminosity from Schoeller's powerful lights, gulfs of meaning separate, for example, his portraits of Andre Agassi in 1998, seemingly bemused by how fate has greatly enriched the unlikely Las Vegas-born son of an immigrant Iranian Olympic boxer, and Henry Kissinger, weighed down by his fading fame in 2007.

When the mantle of celebrity slips, for just a click of a shutter, in these larger-than-life portraits currently on show at the National Portrait Gallery, the famous are exposed. Schoeller treats his celebrities (and a few anonymous, indigenous subjects) apparently equally - not just as people but as vistas of flesh across which sometimes incongruous emotions are seen to wander. Schoeller also addresses the effects of time on celebrity - with increasing age reducing once-impregnable icons to ravaged, fraying mortality. Actor Jack Nicholson, a perennial favourite of celebrity portraitists, offered up his actor's "instrument" - his lived-in, battered face - to Schoeller, without reserve in 2002. Advertisement: Story continues below

Singer Iggy Pop assumes the air of a lean, vigilant animal in Schoeller's 2005 portrait, seemingly unsure whether he is being portrayed as hunter or prey. Joe Namath, a legendary American quarterback and perhaps the first truly wayward US celebrity athlete, has a weathered, quizzical face in 2006 that resembles a majestic, derelict building from which the inhabitants have fled. Heath Ledger's 2005 portrait is, not surprisingly, one of Schoeller's saddest, revealing the handsome young actor's face to be an open canvas, his character as yet largely unwritten.

Schoeller came to prominence in 1999, shooting portraits for the New Yorker magazine, following in the elite footsteps of the late Richard Avedon, who first introduced fine photography to a magazine better known for its evocative writing, illustration and acerbic cartoons. Avedon's best works, especially his close-ups of famous faces, were as witheringly accurate as those of his young German successor. However, Schoeller's portraits introduced more colour to the magazine and created a closer relationship to celebrity flesh than had Avedon, seven years before. The young photographer was also clearly committed to any revelations provoked by his portrait process, once telling the New Yorker's David Remnick that a photographic close-up is "perhaps the purest form of portraiture" and adding it creates "a confrontation between the viewer and [the] subject that daily interaction makes impossible or, at least, impolite". Remnick concluded that Schoeller's portraits were "spookily truthful ... they strip away everything that has been employed to protect the celebrity".

Schoeller first encountered celebrity as an assistant working for Annie Leibovitz but now clearly pursues portraiture on different terms to that great visual entertainer. Above all, Schoeller's photographs rigorously apply his democratic vision to every subject, leaving only the most subtle character traits to emerge. Somehow, from within such narrow parameters, revealing details emerge.

Nascent political giant, US President Barack Obama's African-American complexion appears surprisingly unruffled by doubt in Schoeller's 2004 view. Only the then state senator of Illinois's eyes register a hint of impatience - suggesting grander goals might have been temporarily thwarted by Schoeller's demands on his time.

Bill Clinton, however, appears as a man surprisingly at peace in 2000, the penultimate year of his troubled presidency. Soon Clinton would leave the White House to embrace his destiny as an agent for world philanthropy. This portrait pulses with Clinton's legendary confidence.

Another unique element within Schoeller's portrait technique is his rendition of eyes. While faces are captured in peerless detail, this photographer applies to his subjects' eyes a curious technique that I have yet to fully decipher. Somewhere within the seismic layers of flesh he presents, Schoeller treats eyes quite differently, allowing them to glitter brightly, whether blue or brown, revealing twin highlights resembling cat's eyes.

I assumed he had done this by lighting his subjects using dual banks of vertical, soft-light boxes placed closely together (some are actually visible in a close scrutiny of subjects' eyes). The effect is eerily crystalline, adding bright, flickering highlights to contrast with otherwise uninterrupted vistas of skin and hair. In Cate Blanchett's 2006 portrait, her eyes glisten green above cheeks of flawless, luminous skin. The portrait is far from cosmetic, however, suggesting a stubborn passion underpinning Blanchett's already celestial career.

Schoeller grew up in Germany "deeply influenced by August Sander's countless portraits of the poor, the working class and the bourgeoisie", Remnick says, "as well as Bernd and Hilla Becher". It is a curious irony that 80 years after Germany's photographers influenced a generation of exponents (Australia's Max Dupain was one), Schoeller and contemporaries such as Thomas Struth are again ruffling currents in their field.



By isolating his subjects totally (a hint of differing background colour is the only variation we ever see behind his sitters), Schoeller divorces them from arenas in which their fame, whether in entertainment or politics, was forged. Schoeller then goes for close, uninterrupted access to his famous faces, focusing more closely than Avedon ever did.

By accepting Schoeller's epic, but still intimate portraiture, we ultimately have to view his subjects' existence away from the shadow and substance of their fame. What remains are these undeniably powerful images - visible fruit of a unique rapport Schoeller establishes with his subjects.

Martin Schoeller: Close Up is at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, until February 13.