

Self-portrait of Annie Leibovitz in her New York apartment, photographed for *Luxury*

And in Annie Leibovitz's case, who would dare? The photographer who made us see celebrity with new eyes turns her gaze on the fashion world. And discovers to her surprise that it isn't 'too frilly' for her after all

When I arrive at Annie Leibovitz's New York apartment she is in the middle of a photo shoot – but instead of being in her customary position behind the lens, she is the subject, which throws her off balance. She invites me in on one condition: 'You can't write about the shoot or I'll kill you. I'll come find you and kill you, OK?'

Leibovitz, 72, is nothing if not forthright. I had expected that. But her sharp phrases are delivered with humour, and beneath the crackly exterior she is surprisingly warm. She is horrified that I have flown in to meet her. 'You didn't come in just for this, did you? I'm sorry. I hope you're getting some other shit done.'

The most impactful photographer of our age, Leibovitz has a portfolio stretching over half a century, including everyone from John Lennon (she shot the celebrated *Rolling Stone* cover of him curled up naked clinging to Yoko Ono, just five hours before his murder) to the Queen, who invited Leibovitz to photograph her on her 90th birthday. In 2000 the Library of Congress designated Leibovitz a Living Legend.

It goes without saying that her Central Park West apartment is flooded with natural light. 'I walked in the front door and I just looked straight out to the park. That was it for me. I've always loved the park. It's like the crown jewel in New York City. I like the light and, most importantly, I can see a tree.' She moved here in 2014 after widely reported financial troubles forced her to sell her three properties in Greenwich Village.

The rooms are spacious, with bundles of fresh flowers – lilies, tulips – in vases on every available surface. Everything is meticulously organised: 'I cleaned up because I knew you were coming.' A grand piano dominates the living room, a music book of Woody Guthrie's *Columbia River* songs propped on it, and bookshelves line the walls, a ladder in place to reach the highest volumes. 'I collect photography books. This is like a tenth of my collection – a small sampling.'

The shelves include books by all the great names in photography: Sally Mann, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Irving Penn, Herb Ritts, Richard Avedon, Robert Mapplethorpe, to name but a few. And the photographs on the wall are not by Leibovitz. 'I don't hang my photographs in my house.' David Wojnarowicz's picture of buffalo charging off a cliff edge takes pride of place above the fireplace. A Hiroshi Sugimoto gelatin silver print of *Earliest Human Relatives* is propped against a



By Helena DE BERTODANO

'You cannot underestimate the person taking the picture'

skirting board. Also on display are Ansel Adams' black-and-white photographs of the Old Faithful geyser, and a close-up of Victoria Falls taken by Lynn Davis. 'Her work is so emotional,' enthuses Leibovitz, perhaps providing a clue as to what underscores her own photography.

The apartment is, she says, 'a pied-à-terre'. Her real home is in Upstate New York, part of the former Astor estate in Rhinebeck, where she has lived for the past 25 years. Pre-pandemic, Leibovitz was thinking about leaving the city altogether. 'I was really making the exit from New York. And on some level thinking at my age that maybe I should be less here.' But she has been swept up by the recent surge in energy in the city post-lockdown. 'It just has a whole new vibrancy. It's really cool.'

Leibovitz shows me her new book, *Wonderland*, an anthology of her fashion images. 'So here we are,' she sighs with mock grumpiness, 'on the occasion of the book I didn't want to do.'

In a foreword to *Wonderland*, American *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour expresses her surprise that she ever managed to convince Leibovitz to work for the magazine. 'I never thought that fashion, as an enterprise, would hold much interest in her eyes. Style, yes...'

Despite working with Wintour for nearly 30 years, Leibovitz agrees that she has long harboured mixed feelings about fashion photography, hence her reluctance to do the book. 'To me fashion was the low man on the totem pole. It was a little too frilly. Not as serious as other forms of photography.'

She is, after all, one of the greatest chroniclers of our times, having photographed almost every US president since Richard Nixon. She captured his helicopter leaving the White House in 1974, and was in the White House on the last day of Barack Obama's presidency. 'I'm only doing this because I love you,' Obama told her.

No wonder fashion seems insubstantial in comparison, but she began to realise that it 'plays a part in the scheme of everything'. Gradually, she came round to the idea of a book – particularly during the pandemic, most of which she spent in Rhinebeck with her three daughters, Sarah, Susan and Samuelle. 'Having that time with my family and looking out at what was seemingly paradise, I started to fall in love with the romance of [a fashion book]. And if you've been doing [photography] for – it's hard to believe – 50 years, then why not dabble in everything?'

Only Leibovitz could describe her work as 'dabbling'. The effort she puts into each shoot is extraordinary. She spends days researching her subjects. Even today, when she herself is the subject, I can see reams of research about me laid across her dining-room table. Once a shoot starts, writes Wintour in *Wonderland*, 'She's a bundle of nerves chased by the clock... Annie has many laurels and she rests on none of them.'

The sweep of the book transcends conventional fashion photography. Two of the most moving images are of Karl Lagerfeld towards the end of his life, at home in his cluttered Parisian apartment, wearing a nightshirt instead of his usual armour of sunglasses, black suit and powdered hair. It took Leibovitz several months to persuade him to do the shoot, and he agreed on the condition that she came alone – no assistants. 'I asked him where he drew, but we couldn't find the desk,' she writes. 'I had to clear out some books and papers to make a space for him.'

'It was upsetting, actually,' says Leibovitz today. 'He obviously didn't let anyone up there.'

This is part of Leibovitz's mysterious talent: the intimacy of her photography, capturing something that seems to penetrate the soul of the subject. Even she

does not know how she does it. 'I'm not very good at making people at ease or anything. I'm better with people who can project themselves... Richard Avedon was brilliant at conversation. [For me] it's so much work to take the picture. I have stories about the early work where people in my picture started to walk up to talk to me, and I was like, "Don't walk up and talk to me! Stay in the picture!" I'm not a very good director.'

The relationship between sitter and photographer naturally feeds into the work. 'I have a picture of myself with my three sisters taken by my mom [when] we took her on a drive before she died: it's the four of us looking at my mom with all of this love.' She is on the verge of tears as she recounts the story. 'It's probably my favourite picture of me and my sisters... You cannot underestimate the person taking the picture.'

The third of six children, Leibovitz was born in Connecticut. She had a very close bond with her creative mother, who was a dance teacher, and with her father, a lieutenant-colonel in the US Air Force. Leibovitz studied painting at San Francisco Art Institute with the intention of becoming an art teacher, but a photography workshop inspired her to change course. While still a student, she took a photograph of the poet Allen Ginsberg smoking pot on an anti-Vietnam march. Jann Wenner, the creator of *Rolling Stone*, published it. By the age of 23, Leibovitz was chief photographer for the magazine. She spent months on the road with bands, most notably the Rolling Stones, producing some of the most iconic images of the publication.

'I was young and energetic and obsessed and insane. And had great drive and verve, and really believed in what I was doing. To be a kid at *Rolling Stone* and to be told when you're young that what you did mattered was a big deal. And also working with extraordi-



Leibovitz shot Karl Lagerfeld at his Paris apartment in 2018. 'It was upsetting, actually'



Sean Combs and Kate Moss, in Paris, 1999. 'The shoot was a cross-cultural straddling of two worlds: rap culture and high fashion. And of course they weren't all that different'



Michelle Obama, photographed by Leibovitz in 2007. 'She was a working woman who would become a very modern First Lady – stylish, pragmatic, engaged'

nary journalists like Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson...'

Would she still describe herself as obsessed and insane? 'No. My children changed my life. Having children – thank God – slowed me down. I just lived inside of my work, so it gave me an alternative universe. I come from a big family; family is important. I wanted to have children, and time just went by. I did it probably a little too late [she was 52 when her first child was born; her twin daughters were born by surrogate four years later]. I don't think I was counting right.' She has raised her daughters alone, with some help from her siblings: 'I wouldn't have had the children if I didn't have a big supportive family. It's definitely a two-man job.'

There seems to be no artifice to Leibovitz. Friendly and direct, it is easy to see how she disarms her subjects. And there is a generosity to her style; they know she is trying to capture the best of them. 'It's your image: I think you have the right to look as good as you can. And what does that mean? It doesn't necessarily mean a beauty picture – what is the part of that person that should come out that showcases them as being the best that they are? I have a good idea about how people imagine themselves.'

She usually only accepts assignments to photo-

graph people she likes. 'I'm not very good at people I don't admire.' As a result, she couldn't quite bring herself to photograph Donald Trump during his presidency (although she had photographed him and Melania back in 2006 for *Vogue*). 'I toyed with that. There is a way to do it [but] I didn't feel comfortable. It was so horrible every single day.' Would she have felt obliged to stick to her principle of making the subject look the best they can? Leibovitz hesitates. 'I think in that case that would not apply.'

She herself does not bother with hair and make-up and is always dressed from head to toe in black ('It's a kind of uniform,' she explains), her long hair an unruly mop. 'I like a lot of people without hair and make-up.' She describes an occasion, in 1999, when she arrived to photograph Elizabeth Taylor. '[She] told me to come up to the bathroom, and she had no make-up on. It was so endearing. And then she proceeds to become Elizabeth Taylor – she did her own make-up – and I could only have empathy for her.' Although Leibovitz did not photograph Taylor unvarnished, it gave her a new insight into the actress. 'It was a fascinating session. Although the pictures were not very good.'

Her stories often end like this, criticising her own

*'My children changed my life. I just lived inside my work, so it gave me an alternative universe'*



Leibovitz's long-time love Susan Sontag



Cate Blanchett, photographed by Leibovitz at the Sydney Theatre Company, 2008. 'Cate is a creature of the theatre. She doesn't resist the camera'



Kim Kardashian and Kanye West in Los Angeles, 2014. '[They] were living at her mother's house when we did their prewedding shoot. "There's not a room in this house that's me," he said'

work. In her book she quotes Cate Blanchett telling her, 'You are never satisfied, are you?' 'That haunted me because she is most likely right,' says Leibovitz.

She still beats herself up about moments she missed. 'I [remember] driving up and seeing Ella Fitzgerald standing at the window. I should have shot that picture and I didn't. I went on to do something more elaborate with her and I lost the real thing.'

One of the most important relationships in Leibovitz's life was with the critic and essayist Susan Sontag, who was her partner for 15 years until her death in 2004. 'I've always loved intelligence,' says Leibovitz, explaining what drew her to Sontag. 'It is one of the sexiest things alive. Look at those early years at *Rolling Stone* and being around all those brilliant people... So you can imagine, if [Sontag] suddenly turned and liked me, it was like, "Who are you looking at?"'

They met in the late 1980s, when Leibovitz photographed Sontag for the latter's book *Aids and its Metaphors*. They arranged to have dinner together, and Leibovitz was a bundle of nerves. 'I sweated through my clothes completely, not knowing what to say.'

Sontag made her sharpen her game and broaden her horizons, encouraging her to go to Sarajevo in 1993 to photograph the siege of the city. They travelled widely together, and Sontag would give her books to read then chastise her for reading so slowly. 'That's all true,' says Leibovitz. 'I think that I have intelligence visually,

*'I've always loved intelligence... I have intelligence visually, but I didn't go to good schools. It's a self-taught thing'*

but I didn't go to good schools. It's a self-taught thing.'

A few days after we meet she is going to Paris, where she has a show at the Académie des Beaux-Arts to mark her winning the William Klein photography award. 'Sebastião Salgado [the Brazilian photojournalist] nominated me, and if he told me to go get him a cup of coffee from the corner I would do it. So I said, "Sure." I mean, he's Sebastião Salgado!'

Leibovitz once said she hated the word 'celebrity'. I wonder how she feels to have become one in her own right. At first she sidesteps the question. 'I've had a leap in age. People are less likely to recognise me.' But she returns to address it. 'I think it comes along with doing something for so long. There's no magic to it; it's just work. I'm really just an artist using photography.'

With some reluctance, she has started using social media. She joined Instagram in 2019, and although she only posts occasionally ('I have people who throw things on there') she now has 615,000 followers. It seems entirely fitting that she follows no one herself.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, she embraces advances in technology. 'I'm thrilled with the camera phones and they're only getting better and better.' She says she has never been interested in the equipment, only the content. 'If I could have a camera implanted in my forehead, I would probably be happy with that.' ●

*Wonderland* by Annie Leibovitz is out now (Phaidon, £69.95)