

Portraiture

Sandro Miller: Rodin with a Camera

Mark Edward Harris

Tragedy can sink us into a bottomless pit of disappear or rally our energies to produce greatness. Chicago-based Sandro Miller epitomizes the latter. In 2011 and 2012, while being treated for stage 4 cancer, the concept for his series *Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich: Homage to Photographic Masters* was born. One of the most unique conceptual series ever devised, it's not only a testament to Miller's technical bravura, but a heartfelt salute to some of the 20th century's most iconic portraits and portrait photographers.

Mandatory bed rest gave Miller time to reflect on his life. He contemplated how he might be able to say thank you to the photographers past and present who have inspired him. "I had two bouts of radiation per day over an eight-hour period, then would go back home," he says. "I was on a lot of painkillers. I was creating in my head in a bit of an altered state. In



Sandro Miller

my mind's eye the classic portraits of the masters of our medium appeared one by one."

Miller decided to reproduce them with his longtime friend and muse John Malkovich playing the starring role in each scenario. Miller had met the legendary actor while shooting the ensemble of the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in the mid-nineties. For nearly two years, Miller and a team of assistants—a stylist, a hair and makeup person, props and prosthetics people—did their homework. They studied the original photographs reproduced in Miller's extensive book collection, as well as online and in galleries, and did intensive research to better understand the stories behind the historic images.

To emulate the lighting sources for each photograph, the team would scan a reproduction of the original image, then zoom into the eyes, in which reflections of the lighting would often reveal its type and placement.

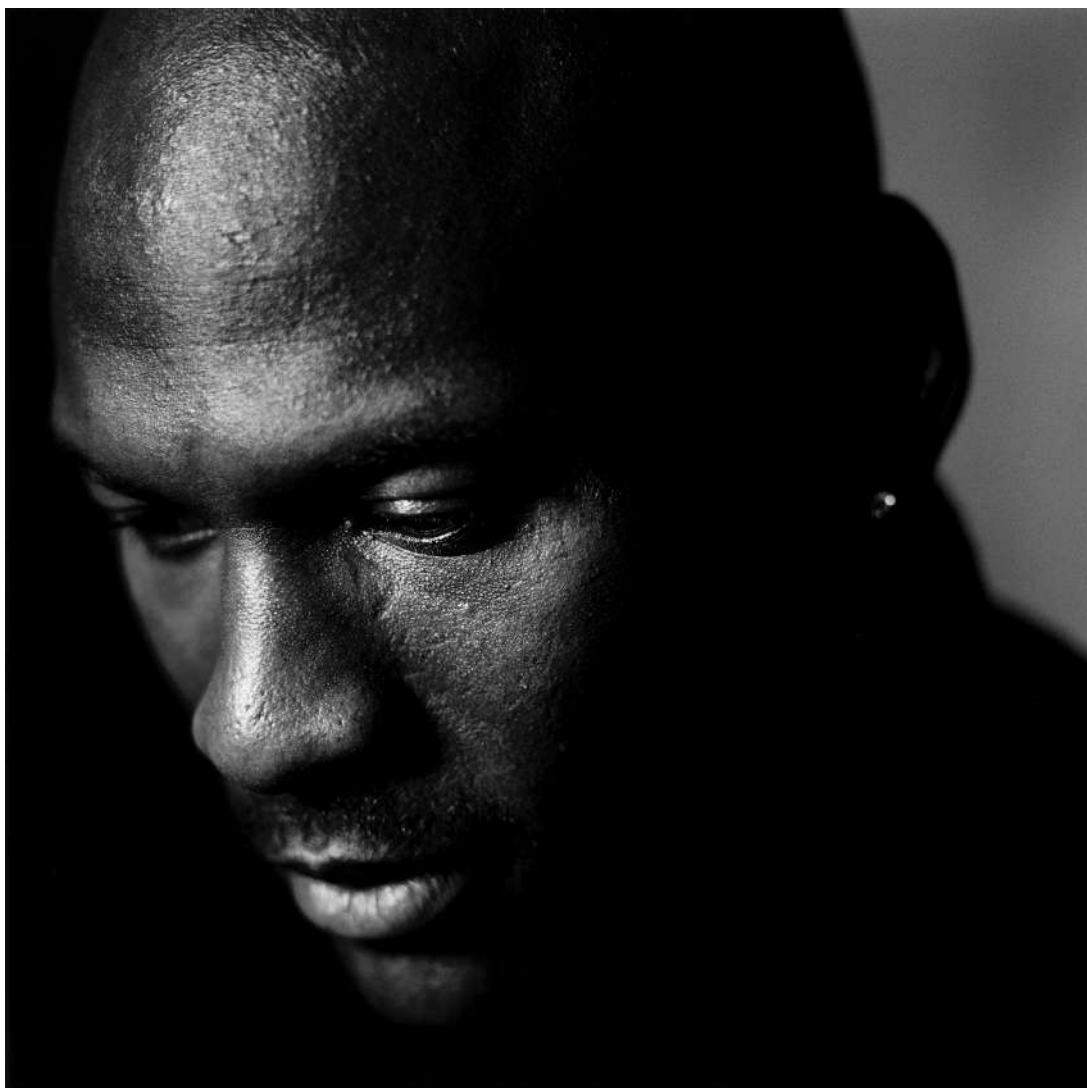
Miller found the research healing and enlightening: "I got even closer to these wonderful images that had inspired me and helped make me the photographer I am today. This project was an education in itself and really deepened my understanding of the richness of every one of the images we recreated."

The photographs for the homage series



William Klein/Smoke and Veil, Paris (Vogue) (1958), 2014

"I got even closer to these wonderful images that had inspired me and helped make me the photographer I am today."



Michael Jordan

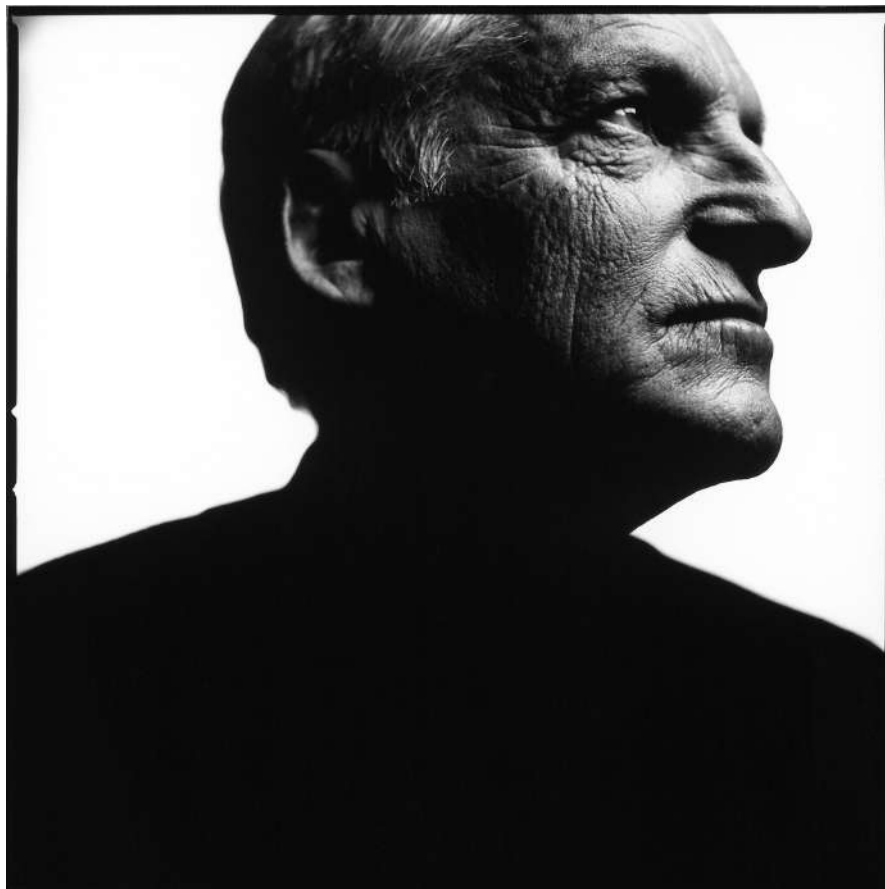
were created in the studio, and it was in the makeup chair that Malkovich would begin his transformation during two marathon multi-day shoots in 2014 and 2017. He was no longer John Malkovich but Marilyn Monroe, Winston Churchill, Che Guevara, Alfred Hitchcock, Ernest Hemingway and, in the two examples shown here, Abraham Lincoln and the fashion model in William Klein's famous "Smoke and Veil, Paris (Vogue) 1958."

Miller used a Hasselblad, a Nikon and a 4x5 depending on the look he was aiming for, as well as different film stocks in addition to digital captures. For example, he loaded his 4x5 with Polaroid Type 55 film for an Edward Curtis image, which he felt would give him an almost "exact look" of a Curtis piece. His team then made minor adjustments in post to match the original Curtis photograph. Miller utilized modern lighting equipment to illumi-

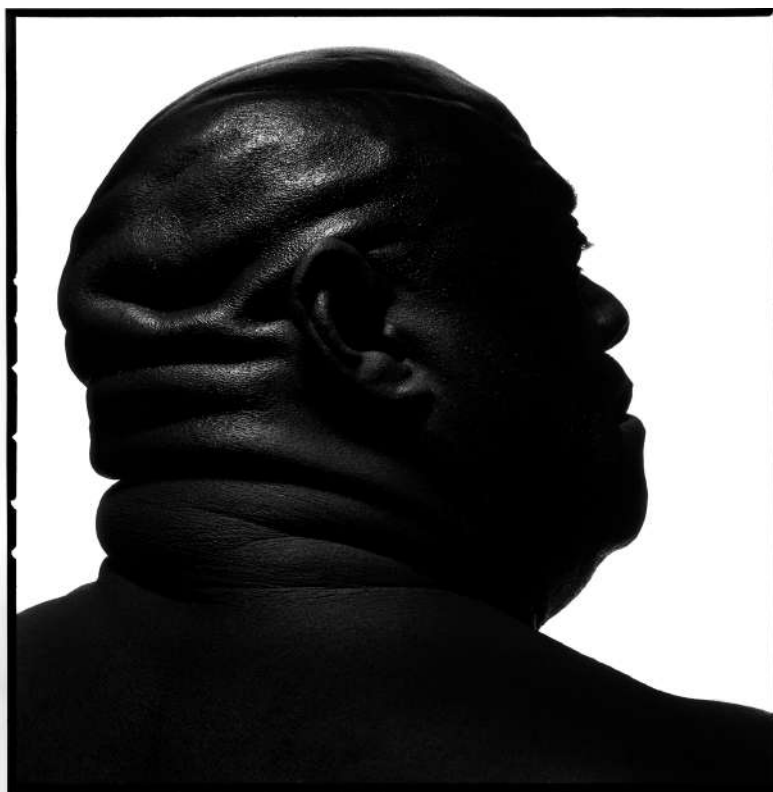
nate the historic recreations, including Profoto and Speedotron strobes, as well as continuous lighting mixed on occasion with natural light coming through big banks of windows.

Miller and his team successfully met the daunting task of replicating the lighting schematics, wardrobe, hairstyle and makeup, combined with recreating the environments of 62 historic photographs of vastly different styles from Man Ray to Diane Arbus. The triumphant results are at once a lesson about perseverance and a visual primer on photographic portrait history. The touring exhibition of the series was even printed on different types of paper and in different sizes to match the original prints. The book, *The Malkovich Sessions*, was published by Glitterati in 2016.

The success of the series led to Miller being named International Photographer of the Year at the Lucie Awards in 2015. The year



Man in Black Turtleneck



Bob Darden

Miller's intimate portraits encompass every segment of society.

before he had been given that coveted title for his series, *The Eyes of Morocco*.

Another of Miller's photographic series, one that investigates the mind, is *Psychogenic Fugue*, with Malkovich channeling characters from David Lynch's films.

"David had seen the homage to the masters I had done with John," says Miller. "He had the idea of us creating this film and a series of stills that would help him raise money and awareness for the David Lynch Foundation, which teaches at risk youth and adults about the healing benefits of Transcendental Meditation. He's meditated for over 45 years and written books on the subject. He believes that meditation can help people with epilepsy,

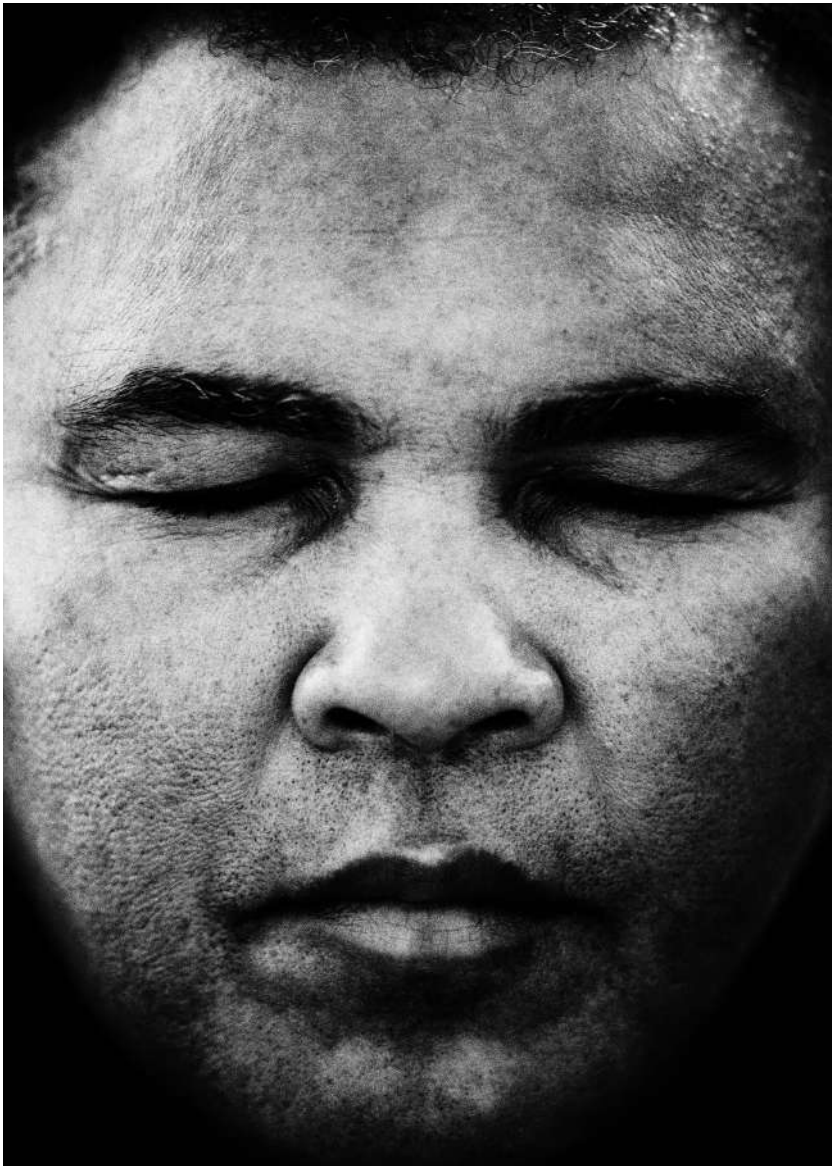
soldiers that come back with PTSD, and so many other mental and physical issues."

Ironically, years earlier Lynch had asked Malkovich to play Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*, but was turned down. "John had just come out of a long theatre run in which he had played a very aggressive, violent maniac, and he just couldn't go into another role that would demand this kind of energy," Miller says. "The part ended up being played by Dennis Hopper. I don't know anyone who could have played that part more scarier than Dennis, and John agrees, the part was made for him."

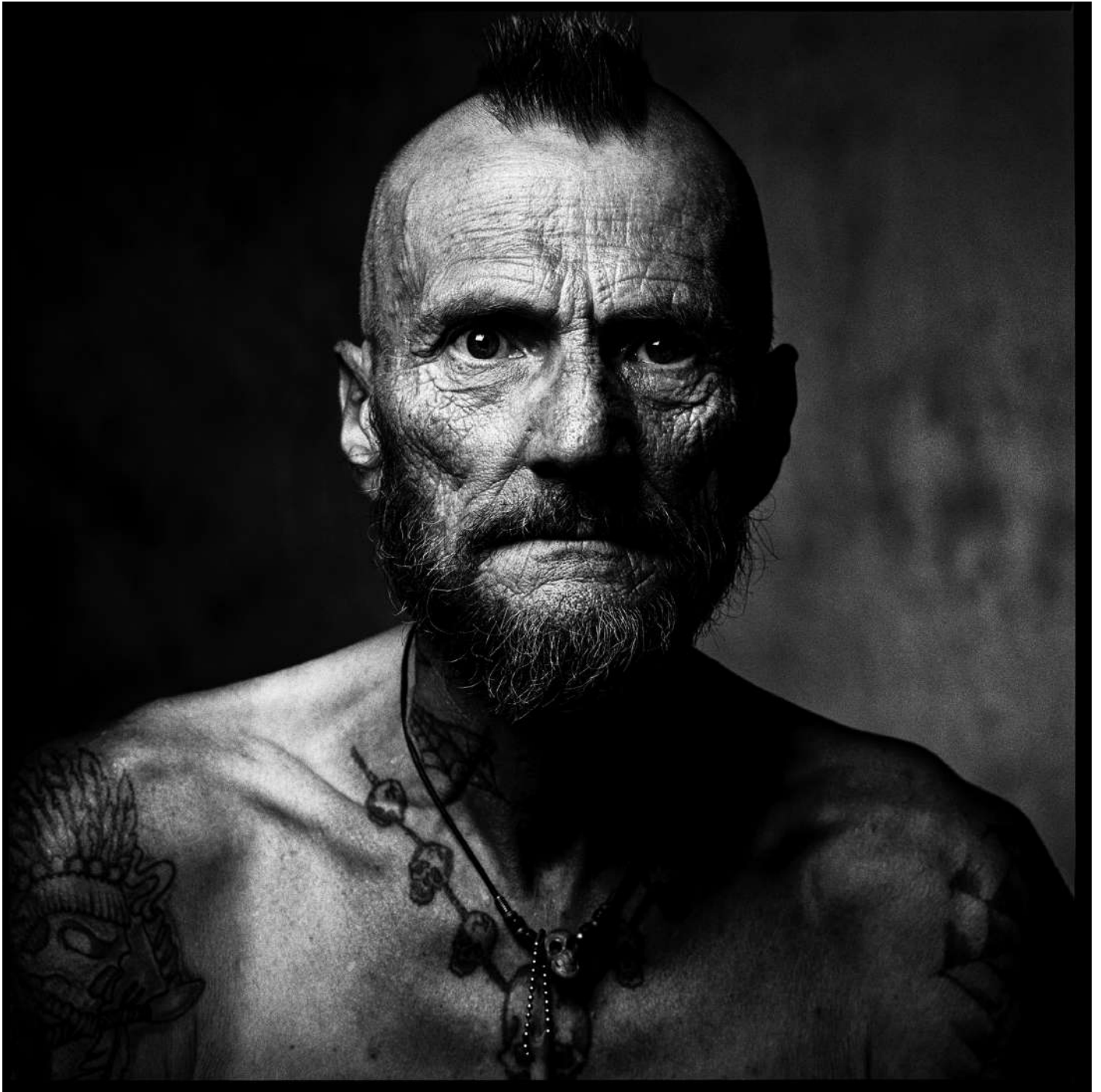
Malkovich and Miller have also teamed up on a number of films, including *Butterflies*, which netted Miller the "Best New Director Award" in the short film category at the Cannes Film Festival. The film addresses the mental stresses caused by aging workers being replaced by a younger generation. From Miller's synopsis: "The loss of a job and his wife caused this man to fill his life with his demons—booze, drugs, pornography—which in the end causes the ultimate sin to occur, suicide."

Another Miller-Malkovich film, *Hell*, is based on Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave*. "It's about people that are misunderstanding and misinterpreting what's going on in the world," says Miller. "They are believing what the people in power are telling them. They live in the shadows. While John is dressed as a soldier reciting *The Allegory of the Cave* I'm illustrating in the background all the hypocrisies, the brainwashing, the cruel things we have done to our fellow human beings throughout time. These are self-funded art films that I do with John with messages in them, as a way for me to express myself."

Miller's other projects (funded by his commercial work, fine art and book sales) include series on American bikers, blues musicians and people in the transgender community. Regarding the latter, he says, "I have a deep empathy for this community that has suffered tremendously. For the longest time these people have been thought of as mentally ill. It's only in recent years where it's been tested and it shows evidence that a boy or a girl could actually have enough genes of the other sex that they really are that sex. As I've traveled around the world I have listened to stories of how they have been abused. I've had beautiful sittings with these lovely, gentle



Muhammad Ali



Dick Fields, Bones, Denver, Colorado

"That light can change so much in just one inch on a person's face. I know how to read that light."



Barbara Crane

people. I've learned more about them as I've photographed them. I'm hoping that someday my photo project will educate people that don't understand this community."

Miller's intimate portraits encompass every segment of society—activists, the aged, cancer survivors, people living on the fringes, cultural icons like Muhammad Ali, artists like Barbara Crane.

"Most of my portraits—if they don't have a lot of action where I will use a Nikon—are done with the Hasselblad," he says. "I love their 60mm and 80mm lenses for portraiture. If I want to emphasize the hands or make something just a touch distorted I'll go with that 60mm. I don't use anything longer than the 80mm because I'm always looking to be really intimate and trying to get through the eyes to the soul of my sitter."

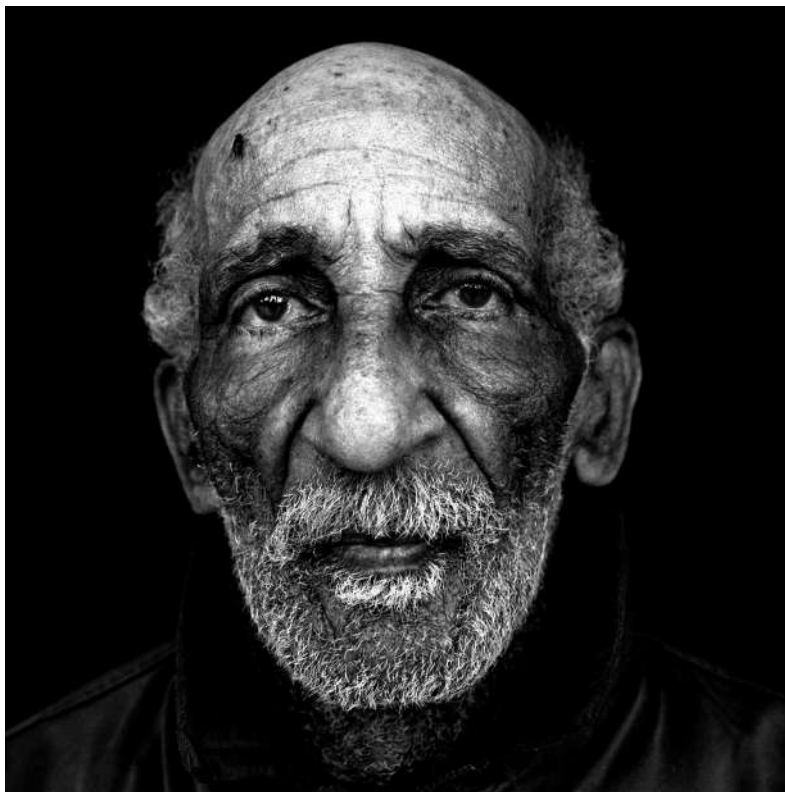
Miller can't mold a subject like clay from a

distance. "When I start pulling away with a longer lens I'm losing that intimacy with my subject. I like to put my hands on their shoulder or slightly adjust the angle of their face with a gentle movement." These minor adjustments have major impacts on the final results, positioning the face so the light falls exactly where Miller wants it, usually just in or out of a shadow for dramatically different looks.

"I rarely use more than two lights, usually Profoto, and often just one light that will illuminate both the subject and the background. I'm also starting to work with Stellas as a constant light source. Either way, I begin by taking light away and sculpting the light using gobos and cutters, things that will help me shape the light on the background and on a person's face and body to get just the shadows and curvature I'm looking for.



Old People #5



Old People #1

"That light can change so much in just one inch on a person's face. I know how to read that light. I know how to read the curves on the face, the nose, how deep the eyes are. I want to create the most beautiful, buttery light, so I'm often working with silks in front of a six-foot parabolic depending on the tone and texture of the skin of the person I'm photographing."

Miller seldom has the luxury of time when working with celebrities, yet still captures the same intensity and connection as with his out-of-the-spotlight sitters. "As soon as I get the call to do a session my mind starts working immediately. It will be like someone flipped the switch: 'You're not going to stop thinking about this until you've got a brilliant idea of what you're going to do with this person.' I've always worked this way. I get to the location

way before my subject shows up. Everything is set up and tested with stand-ins. If the shoot is a week or two away I might set up in my studio in Chicago and tweak everything—the nuanced light, the composition—so that when I go on location I'm completely ready for anything and everything that could possibly happen that day."

For his Willem Dafoe shoot for *New York Magazine* Miller was tasked with creating four wardrobe changes on multiple sets, all within a 30-minute window. How to create rapport in such a short time? "The first five minutes is spent just getting the subject to understand how much I care about the shoot, how much I respect them and how much I want to do something very special with them. From there we just roll. With Dafoe we went from set to set with wardrobe changes in between. I got him in and out of there in 26 minutes with five different sets in a New York hotel ballroom."

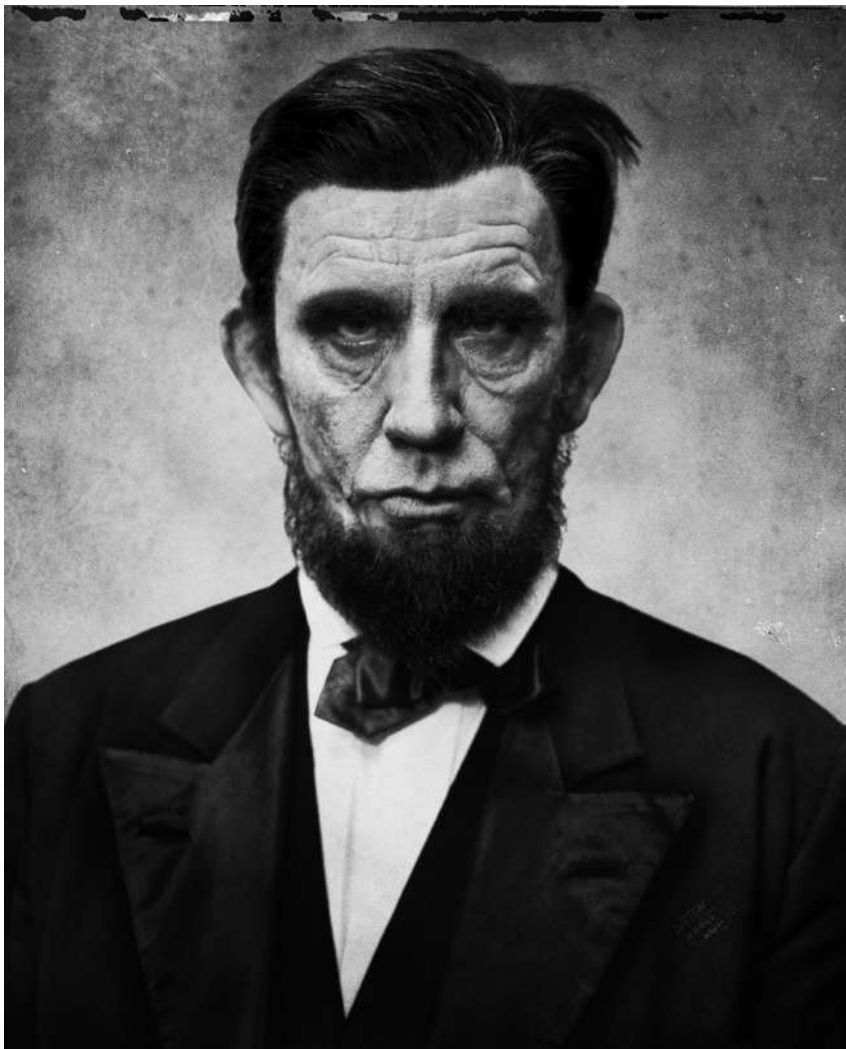
Miller discovered his favorite background for this shoot hiding behind 200 stacked chairs: "I could see these little hints of muted colors, so I had my assistants move these chairs that were against the wall to expose this mural that was so beautiful it became my background for a couple of the shots." Once again, preparation, clear objectives, on-set adaptability and spontaneity, plus natural talent yielded spectacular results.

The self-taught photographer traces the roots of his success in this highly competitive field to hard work, belief in himself and commitment to following his ambition. "I came from a poor family with no funds for art school. Love, desire, passion and a very huge dream have kept me going."

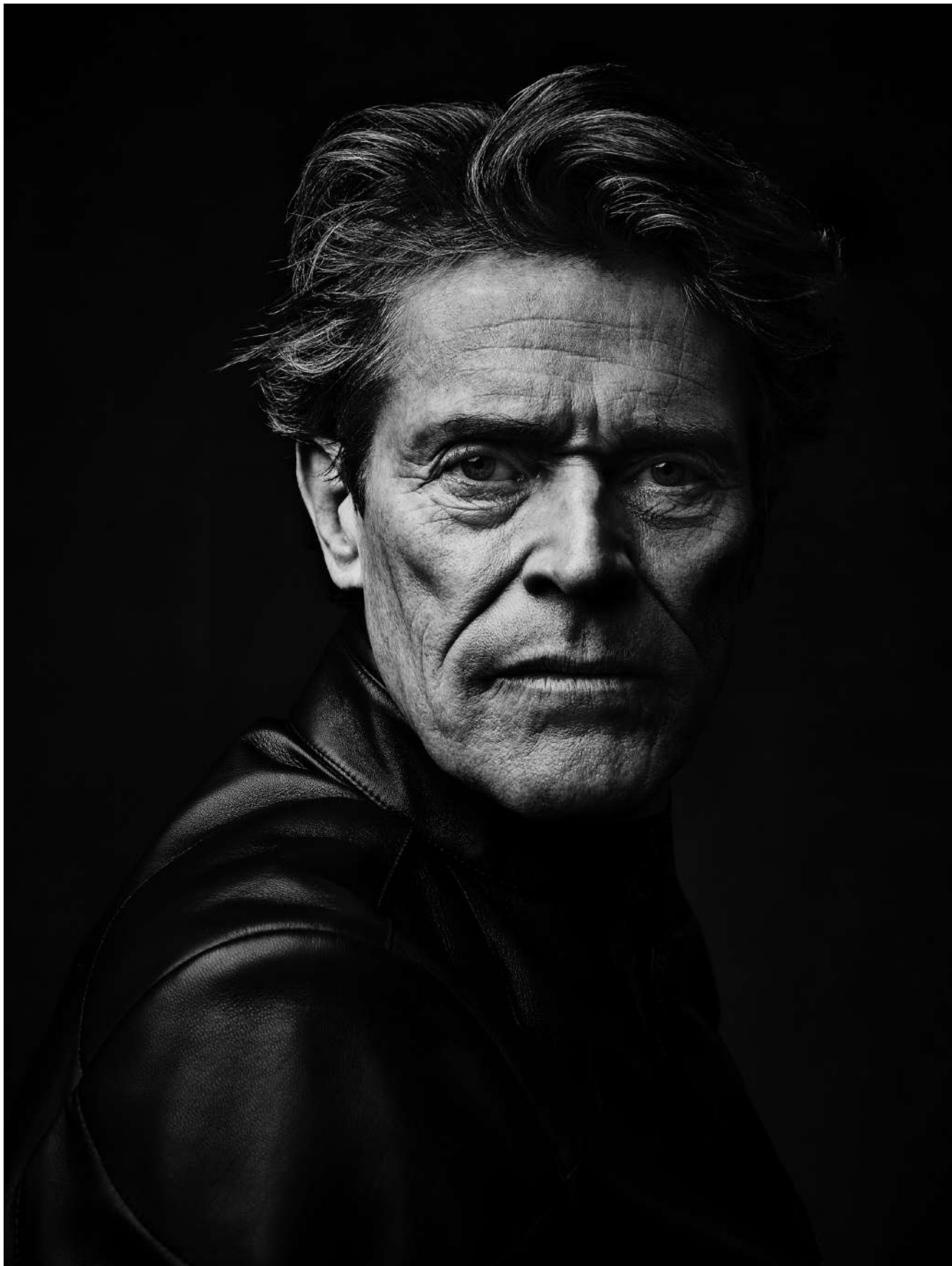
Miller's defining moment came at age 16 when he encountered the work of iconic portraitist Irving Penn. "His dramatic images of Pablo Picasso and French actress and writer Colette were powerful and mysterious. I knew right then and there that I wanted to be a photographer."

Addendum

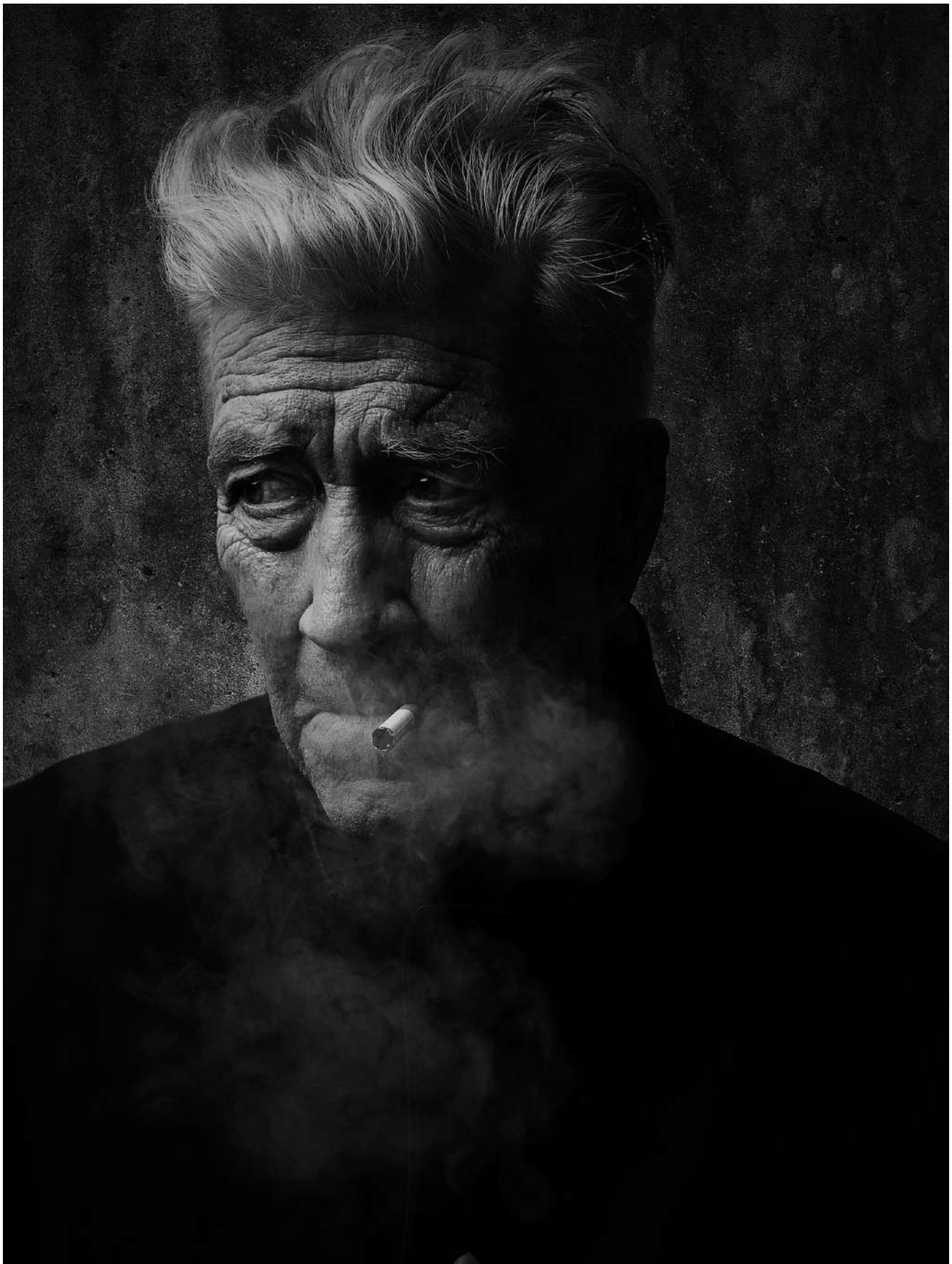
All photographs copyright Sandro Miller. To see more of his work, visit sandrofilm.com and [instagram.com/sandro_film](https://www.instagram.com/sandro_film).



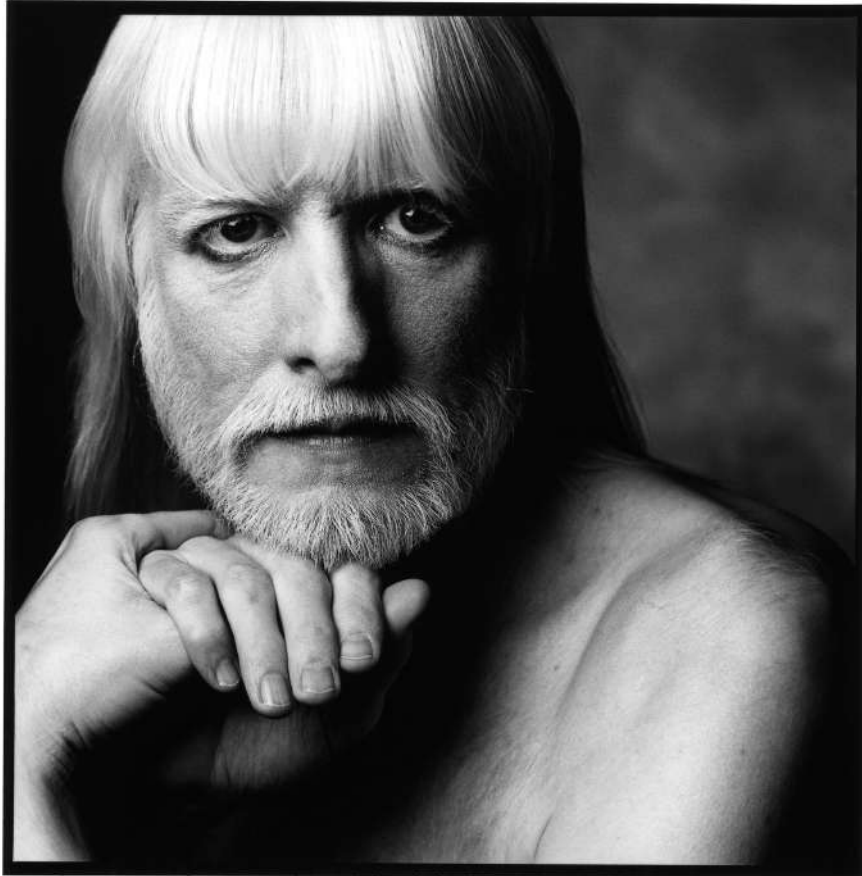
Alexander Gardner/Abraham Lincoln (1863), 2017



Willem Dafoe



David Lynch



Edgar Winter



Kimberly Hand-Jones