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Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life, 1990–2005

Maison Européenne de la Photographie, June 18th->September 14th, 2008

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- 1 The Annie Leibovitz exhibit has elicited many responses around the world. I invite you to follow the links to a number of interesting websites, articles and slideshows, before allowing me to use this Parisian event as an excuse to comment on a photograph that did not make the cut, as it predates the period encompassed by the exhibit. It is a portrait entitled "[Whoopi Goldberg in a bath of milk](#)".
- 2 Annie Leibovitz' autobiographical retrospective exhibit "A Photographer's Life, 1990-2005" was originally set up for the [Brooklyn Museum](#) (October 20, 2006 to January 21, 2007) before [touring](#) around the US ([San Diego Museum of Art](#), Atlanta's [High Museum of Art](#), San Francisco's [de Young Museum](#)) and then internationally at the [Maison Européenne de la Photographie](#) in Paris, and at London's [National Portrait Gallery](#).
- 3 Curator: Charlotta Kotik
- 4 The book of the exhibit is available online from [Random House](#) and [Amazon](#).
 - Download the [Catalog of the San Diego exhibit](#).
- 5 Annie Leibovitz, following the Warholian precept that you become famous by associating with famous people, is best known for her photographs of stars:
 - *The Age* (Australian news) presents [Nine of Leibovitz' most famous photographs of most famous people](#).
- 6 One of the purposes of the exhibit, however, is to juxtapose Annie Leibowitz' creative takes on celebrities with more personal photographs, which one might arguably interpret as an attempt at extending stardom to her own life.
 - Click on the [New York Slide Show](#)

- 7 Annie Leibovitz is of course famous for having shared her life with philosopher Susan Sontag, equally celebrated in her own field.
 - Four pictures of Susan Sontag on a Spanish blog: [Annie Leibovitz a través de Susan Sontag](#).
 - You may watch a [documentary made at the Paris exhibit](#) and read the New York Times article [Annie Leibovitz: Life, and Death, Examined](#) by Janny Scott for the opening at the Brooklyn Museum, as it perhaps goes furthest into the issue of [Leibovitz as exhibitionist](#), explaining how she participated most directly in the curating of her own exhibit.
- 8 The exhibit is a case study in the merging of public and private and the portrayal of intimacy through a very controlled art form. Whether showing [Lance Armstrong](#) naked on a bike in the rain or [Eudora Welty](#) shrinking in her over-sized beige coat, Leibovitz' photographs of stars attempt to convey personal affect – the inner being – as much as if not more than family pictures, whether of [her brother and father](#) or [her family at the beach](#).
 - Etienne Hatt offers an interesting study of the blending of family pictures with celebrity photo-shoots ([in French](#)) and the attempt at blurring the distinction. Leibovitz presents her art as her life and her life as her art, rather than her life as art, or art as life. All her pictures are equally personal because she is the artist who conceived them, and equally artful, whether portraying stars in contrived settings or family in everyday activities or gratuitous poses.
- 9 Not included in the exhibit, possibly because it was taken before 1990¹, "[Whoopi Goldberg in a bath of milk](#)" is a picture which is particularly creative, powerful, participative, and loaded.
- 10 Leibovitz' portrait of Whoopi Goldberg stages race in the central, comical position Whoopi built her persona around. Whoopi Goldberg acknowledged being Black while refusing the political limitations coming from both sides of the racial line.
- 11 Born Caryn Elaine Johnson, Whoopi chose a stage name that honors the Goldbergs in her ancestry as well as the "whoopee cushion" her friends thought she bore a likeness to, because of her uncontrollable habit of spurting out and sharing the laughing gas she couldn't contain. She has called herself a "Jewish American Princess" and claimed the greatest role of her career was as a guest star in *Star Trek*, a show she admired as a child for casting a Black woman without having her clean the ship.
- 12 She both refuses to be limited by producers to Black-scripted roles and by her audience to what is deemed tasteful and racially uplifting. This portrait obviously contrasts her chocolate skin color to white milk and porcelain, cutting out her face and limbs like a laughing puppet and drawing on images of black minstrelsy, but also painfully summoning images of children experimenting with the permanence of their skin pigmentation when rubbed with white or transparent liquids.
- 13 On closer look, Goldberg's wide smile and side-look are not natural: she is following instructions, painstakingly posing to achieve the prescribed effect of lining out her lower lip and symmetrically framing her face while keeping still enough for the liquid to appear perfectly smooth. The balancing act is impressive. The white milk outlining her features acts as a photographic negative version of the black cork used by artists performing in blackface. Instead of blacking out the face, the photograph whites out its contours. The effect is hypnotic: if you look at the picture long enough, circles start forming where her face, arms and legs break the surface of the bath milk.

- 14 The baseboards at the back, the inch of circular bath mat, the piece of wall on the left might have been kept out of the frame, but they serve to reveal the prank, with the yellow bar of soap on its holder distracting the eye from the mesmerizing effect of the perfectly smooth milk surface.
- 15 Goldberg and Leibovitz invite a complex reading of their combined provocative approach to art: the milk reveals Goldberg's black buffoonery while allowing for Leibovitz' feminist non-display of female frontal nudity. Under the white opacity is the supposedly nude body of a woman lying arms up and legs akimbo.
- 16 This photo was taken in 1984, when Whoopi Goldberg was still primarily known as a hilarious stand-up comedian, the year before Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* turned her into an international movie star.
- 17 It was taken before Spike Lee criticized her in 1986 for wearing blue contact lenses, getting back at her for having said Steven Spielberg was the only director who could have adapted Alice Walker's novel. Spike Lee suggested she read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.
- 18 It was taken before Goldberg took on roles that had film critics refer to her as a coon (*Jumping Jack Flash*), a magical negro (*Ghost*), or a mammy (*Corrina, Corrina*), while duly recognizing she was doing her part for the advance of African American actors, taking on challenging, diverse roles in Hollywood, fighting to be cast in parts written for white actors (*Fatal Beauty*, *Jumping Jack Flash*) and winning an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress (*The Color Purple*) and an Oscar for Best Supporting Role (*Ghost*, 1991), the first since Hattie McDaniel's in 1939.
- 19 Most importantly, this photo was taken before Ted Danson shocked some of his fans and all of his detractors by appearing in blackface at a 1993 Friars Club roast in Goldberg's honor, in an act she had largely contributed to write and she believes should have been received with grace as the "tasteless, vulgar humor" a roasting is supposed to consist of.
- 20 With hindsight, perhaps Annie's take on Whoopi is more loaded today than it might have been at the time it was made, influenced as it is by a black woman's 25-year career of treading in the white waters of show business with a fearless sense of humor. Leibovitz captured the controversy while it was still taking its morning bath.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that many family pictures date back to the late 80s, and the portrait of Mark Morris is also pre-1990.

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