

## ANONYMOUS STARS

“I remember the landscape of your face.”

Photographer Federico Pedrotti, from Bozen but living in Munich now for over a decade, is a master of celebrity photography, even if the expressive faces in his portraits don't belong to famous actors or singers but instead belong to people whom only a few would recognize by name. Recognition is not what's significant, but rather the suggestive effect of these portraits, their aura—which the photographer knows how to create subtly, according to all the rules of his art and craft.

He shows heads en face, in slight or stark profile, sometimes together with cut-off shoulders, torsos, and décolletés, gesturing hands or a raised, bare leg, often pulled up so close to the observer that the face dominates the page. Facial landscapes, shaped by light and shadow, soft and yet striking, invite exploration but simultaneously hold us at a distance. This ambivalence between attraction and mysterious secretiveness owes itself to the gaze of the photographer and his craftsmanlike ability.

We see the people depicted through his eyes and through his interest in the subject, through the attention—yes, the care—he devotes to them. The portrait betrays something about the style of communication between the subject, the portraitist, and his specific technique of producing portraits. The subjects look to objectify their self-image in the gaze of the photographer. Because they cannot see their own gaze, they're reliant upon the intuitive empathy of the photographer. They must trust him to be favorably disposed to them, because in the end he is the creator of this one view of them that will be, in the developed picture, the view for posterity.

The photo reveals how masterfully the photographer understands looking at people, his ability to communicate with them, and leaves us with the belief that his subjects are the one and only to set eyes upon. They look at us and appear to pose only for us. They seem fixed in everlasting contact with us as the gazing Other. And yet our putative dialogue is a conversation with ourselves, searching for that which we see.

The photographic image is not a copy but rather an invention—a proposal for reality, a utopia—against which we measure our own wishful thinking. The image is a surface for mirroring and projecting; this surface is not what it shows, and it shows only indirectly that which inheres to it. Its secret lies in the power of suggestion. Pedrotti's portraits possess this magic. The photographer is present in his pictures—intangibly, and yet you can't get him out of your mind. His signature is indelibly inscribed on every print as if with magic ink. The act of creating an image via eye, hand, and a piece of photographic equipment is profane, but it owes a debt to his experience, his talent, and his skill at executing his métier.

Pedrotti lets his subject take a seat in the room, determines the camera angle, chooses the background (neutral), sets the lighting (partially indirect from behind, scattered), the distance (standard telephoto), sets the lights and contrasts, focuses, and waits for the right moment for the shutter release—or, more precisely: he engenders it. He photographs with an analog, mid-format SLR camera, develops, makes the 50 x 60 cm large prints on warm-tone barite paper (in part old Agfa paper that's no longer available in stores) in his

own darkroom and mounts them afterwards with dry adhesive film on acid-free Bristol board. Every print of the print run—limited to four—is thus unique.

In the digital age, Pedrotti uses a downright Old Masters-ish technique which hardly any other photographers of his generation or their students execute with such perfection or are capable of achieving. The pictures produced this way are of a timeless, virtually beguiling beauty. It is not the synthetic beauty that can be generated by digital photography via purely arbitrary post-production work—with, so to speak, plastic surgery-like interventions. Nor is it the conventional photocopy of a flawlessness created by stylists in a studio.

Earlier, Pedrotti worked on the production of fashion photos and grew weary of this superficial perfection whereby faces conform to the latest ideal of beauty and thus lose their individuality. He doesn't want wrinkles, skin bumps, pigment spots, or unruly strands of hair to disappear, nor does he want to use cold light to foreground them in the name of an aesthetic of ugly authenticity. His heads have character. Certainly, this has something to do with the fact that he—like his father and grandfather in Bozen—were trained as theater photographers.

In her book, *Fremden Bühnen, Mitteilungen über das menschliche Gesicht* (Strange Stages: Notes on the Human Face), writer Gisela von Wysocki wonders what we recognize in the face and cites Paul Valéry, who compares humans in a state of attentiveness with a diver who can only acutely perceive as much under water as “his lung capacity allows.” “A fine description for the temporary increase in vision; for the heightening of presence in a particular moment,” writes Wysocki. The initiator of our attentiveness is the photographer. The attraction of the faces is his accomplishment.

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