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Sunday Morning Post

南華早報

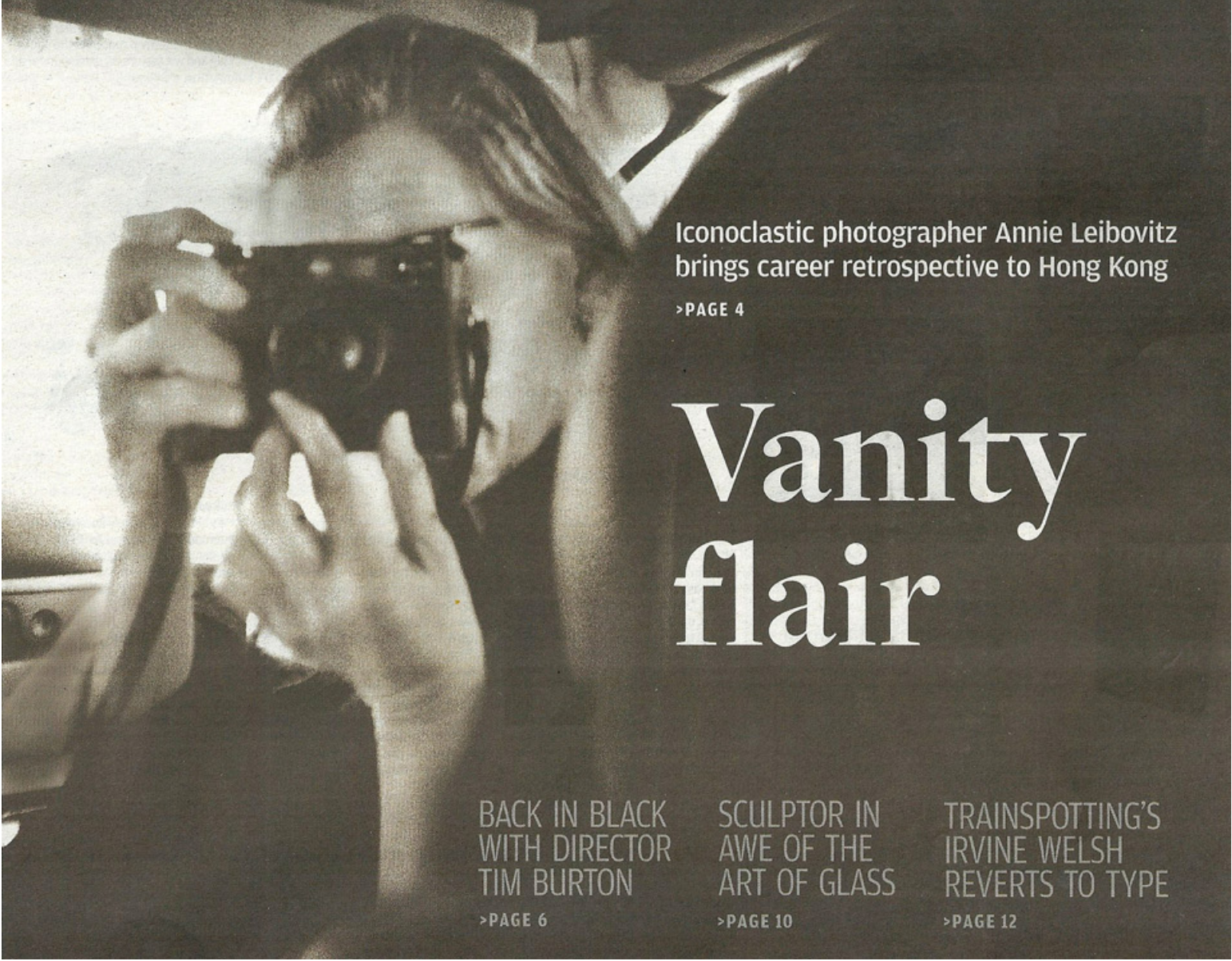
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YOUR GUIDE TO CULTURE & ENTERTAINMENT

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THE REVIEW



Iconoclastic photographer Annie Leibovitz brings career retrospective to Hong Kong

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Vanity flair

BACK IN BLACK WITH DIRECTOR TIM BURTON

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SCULPTOR IN AWE OF THE ART OF GLASS

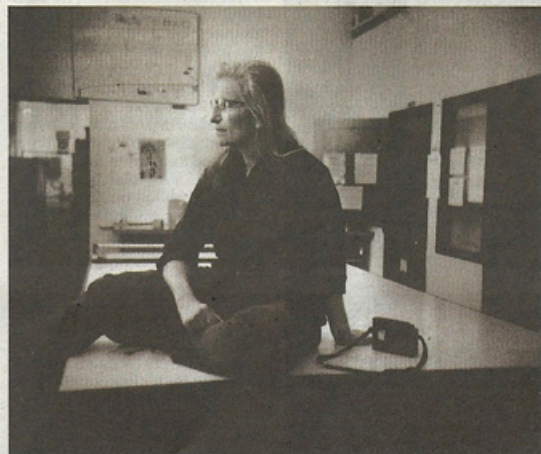
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TRAINSPOTTING'S IRVINE WELSH REVERTS TO TYPE

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Many snappy returns

Annie Leibovitz's images for her inaugural Hong Kong exhibition capture 40 years of popular culture, writes Richard James Havis



Pictures of Annie Leibovitz (above) in 2006 at the Photo Department of the San Francisco Art Institute, where she attended school. She has captured many of the world's most famous faces, including Hillary Rodham Clinton (for *Vogue* in 1998); a heavily pregnant Demi Moore (*Vanity Fair*, 1991); Steve Martin in 1981; and a naked John Lennon kissing Yoko Ono (*Rolling Stone*, 1980), taken just hours before the former Beatle was shot outside his Manhattan apartment. Photos: AP, Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press

Mention the name Annie Leibovitz, and some iconic images of 20th-century pop culture immediately spring to mind. There's her photograph of rocker Bruce Springsteen's backside, gracing the cover of his album *Born in the USA*. There's the heavily pregnant actress Demi Moore posing for the front of *Vanity Fair*. But after a career that now spans four decades – and her thousands of pictures of musicians, actors, politicians and business figures – the 62-year-old's sprawling portfolio is as much about the individuals she photographed as it is about how the world, especially the West, has changed.

Here's a case in point: Leibovitz took a photograph of Arnold Schwarzenegger when he was competing for the Mr Olympia title in South Africa in 1975, as a muscleman. "I remember I'd come off a Rolling Stones tour, and Mick Jagger, who was very skinny, was a sex symbol. By contrast, Arnold looked like a freak to me back then, like something from Mars," she says. "But now that look is considered an acceptable aesthetic, although perhaps not quite that blown-out."

Then there's the picture, taken in 2001, of former US president George W. Bush surrounded by his staff: Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, CIA head George Tenet, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. Only 11 years old, it's a portrait of a very different America.

Hong Kong will be able to catch some of these compelling narratives when a selection of Leibovitz's work, which she says is culled from her own "master set" of photographs, goes on show at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery on Hollywood Road from May 17. Curated by Tagore himself, the solo exhibition is said to revolve around the theme of "power in public and private spheres".

There are shots of musicians such as David Byrne and Patti Smith, and presidents Bush and Bill Clinton. There's even a photograph of *Star Wars* robot R2-D2 in storage at Britain's Pinewood Studios. "I felt that, with this exhibition, I had a responsibility to reflect the history of the last 40 years," Leibovitz says by telephone from her studio in New York.

"There is all kinds of wonderful history in these pictures. Sundaram curated the exhibition from a

156-picture master set of my work that I had started developing.

That is an eclectic and strange set of pictures. It's an edit of work I have thought about a great deal. These are, to my mind, some of my more iconic pictures. They show me achieving a certain threshold in my work."

Leibovitz says she has photographed every US president since 1970. She recalls what stood out in the 2001 group photo was Bush's steadfast, arrogant pose. "It was just after the start of the war [in Afghanistan]," says Leibovitz. "He'd had some success, and he was feeling strong. I have photographed him many times, and I had met him when he was governor of Texas. He had this very Texan way of standing, and he was wearing a Texas belt buckle in that picture, which interested me. One of the interesting things about this picture is that Democrats and Republicans look at it in very different ways."

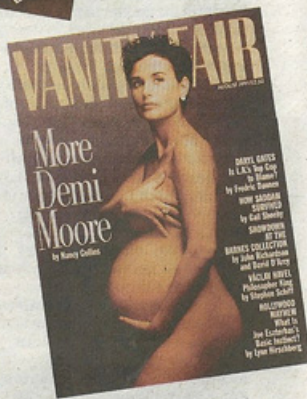
What is special about Leibovitz's Hong Kong solo debut is that it also features a lesser-known aspect of her work: landscape photography. There are two pictures of the gigantic siltstone rock formations in Monument Valley, which sits on the Arizona/Utah border. Westerns director John Ford used Monument Valley as a location in classic films such as *The Searchers*, and it has since become an icon of the American west.

"I have always been interested in landscapes," she says. "In my book *A Photographer's Life*, I used the landscape as punctuation. I am not a landscape photographer, but I thought that as most of the portraits in the show are of Americans, I should put a picture



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ANNIE LEIBOVITZ



of the American landscape."

She was working for *Condé Nast Traveler* at the time (in 1993) and says in Monument Valley, she felt like she was on a movie set: "I was there for days doing very traditional photography work. But on the last day, I rented a helicopter and photographed these pictures just as the sun was going down. I don't really like aerial photography, as it always looks like just that: aerial photography. I felt I was cheating, shooting from the helicopter. But we kept low, and the photos that I took, I thought, might look as if I was standing on another bluff."

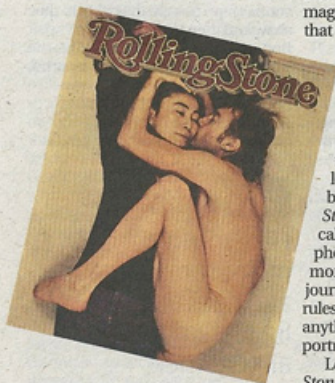
Leibovitz, who was born in Connecticut in 1949, began her career in the visual arts studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute. She studied photography in the evenings. She was originally interested in the classic photojournalism work of photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and American photographer Robert Frank, whose 1950s book *The Americans* was an influential work. It was her work on *Rolling Stone* that pushed her into portraiture, she says.

"When I first went to school, I was interested in Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank, who did a more personalised form of reportage. That was the way I learned about photography. Then I started working for *Rolling Stone* magazine, where I applied the reportage techniques I

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had learnt at art school. *Rolling Stone* asked me to shoot the magazine's covers, and I realised that portraiture was a different animal. It's a moment, and it's a more formal moment," says Leibovitz.

"The work became more like a series of appointments, and I didn't have the luxury of following the subjects around. I learned about doing portraiture by shooting the covers for *Rolling Stone*. I found a kind of comfort in calling myself a portrait photographer because it gave me more licence and leeway than journalism work. Journalism has rules, and you must not tamper with anything that you see. But portraiture allows some creativity."

Leibovitz worked for *Rolling Stone* from 1970 to 1983, a period that encompasses the years when

"classic rock" was at its height. But she likes to point out that, then as now, the magazine was always about more than just music. It has always run well-researched investigative articles on US politics. Having spent 40 years photographing stars, it's only fitting that Leibovitz has been officially designated one herself – in 2000 by the US Library of Congress.

One particularly arresting image Leibovitz photographed for *Rolling Stone* in 1980 features a naked John Lennon cuddling up to Yoko Ono. Lennon looks childlike and vulnerable in the shot. Lennon was murdered a few hours after Leibovitz took the photograph.

"I'd photographed Lennon for *Rolling Stone* back in 1970," she says. "When I first met them, they liked the idea that I was this unknown young photographer, and they

helped me along. I actually thought that everyone would be that nice and kind to me.

"Ten years later, I was doing them again for the cover of *Rolling Stone*. I spent two or three sessions at their place in the Dakota building. They had just worked on the *Double Fantasy* album and that gave me an idea at the very last session. They were kissing on that album cover and it was very romantic. I thought about seeing them holding each other for the cover. It wasn't unusual to see them without their clothes on. But at the last moment, I said to Yoko that she should leave everything on. When they embraced each other, it was beautiful to see John so vulnerable."

What happened later changed the meaning of the picture for Leibovitz: "What was horrifying is that John was killed later that night.

The story of the photograph changed. It became more about a last kiss, a parting moment."

Forty year into her career, Leibovitz is still active. She is reportedly working through financial troubles that left her millions of dollars in debt and contending with the occasional controversy, such as "Tiaragate", when a BBC news report in 2007 misrepresented Queen Elizabeth's opinion of a Leibovitz royal shoot.

She has embraced digital photography and feels that it has unrealised potential. "I feel like I am going to be doing this until I drop," thereview@scmp.com

Annie Leibovitz, *Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Rd, Central. May 10-Jun 17, Mon-Sat, 10am-7pm, Sun, 11am-7pm. Inquiries: 2581 9678*