

Michael Childers: A Biography in Context

Christine Giles

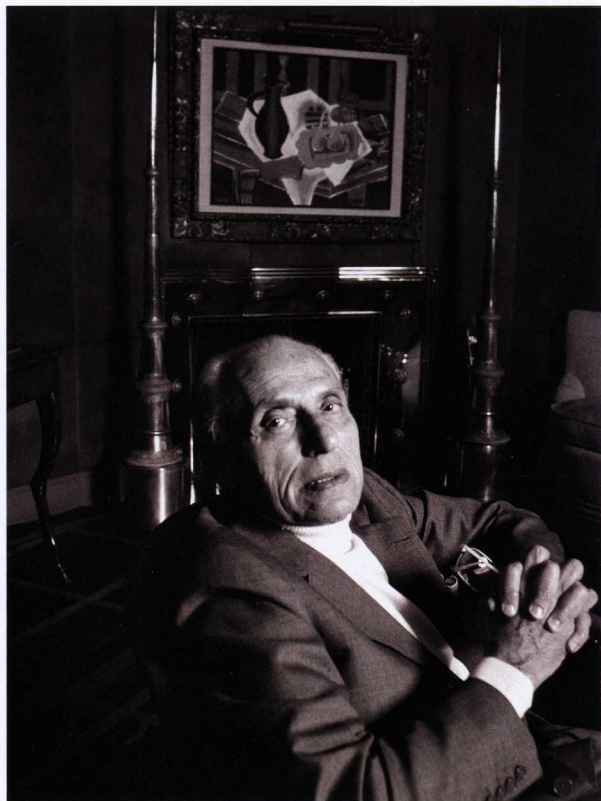
MICHAEL CHILDERS WAS BORN IN Edenton, North Carolina, the son of Mary and U.S. Marine Colonel Lloyd Childers. In 1958, when Michael was 14, his father gave him his first camera. Before long he was shooting portraits of his friends and providing photographs for publication in the Camp Lejeune High School newspaper. While his two younger brothers decorated their rooms with posters of sports idols, Michael Childers' preferences were magazine clippings of fashion and film photographs by famed photographers Irving Penn, George Hurrell, and others. In his free time, Childers pored over photography books, visited museums and galleries, and went to the movies to see the latest Federico Fellini, Alfred Hitchcock, or Ingmar Bergman film.

After graduating from high school in 1962, Childers moved to California. That summer he found work as a lifeguard for a girl's Christian camp in Idyllwild. Photographing the wooded landscape and taking in the art and music events in the small mountain community filled Childers' off-hours. In the fall he enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Childers' father had expected him to study business administration; that endeavor lasted four months. Bored by classes, Childers secretly transferred to the theater arts department to study film and photography, which had become a passion. To make ends meet while a student, Childers photographed his friends, most of whom were musicians and actors needing portfolio portraits; two early clients were Rod McKuen and the pop singing duo Chad and Jeremy (*p. 8*). Fees earned in this way paid the bills and provided an immediate reward for his efforts—two practical incentives that encouraged him to turn his love for photography into a career.

By 1960, UCLA had become a major center for art activity on the West Coast, and Childers was exposed to an emerging group of fine art photographers, especially Robert Heinecken (American, born 1931) and Edmund Teske (American, 1911–1996). In 1961 Heinecken introduced photography as a study into the University's fine arts curriculum and a year later he developed a graduate program in Photography.¹ A Los Angeles-based photographer, printmaker, and multimedia artist, Heinecken typically incorporated images from popular culture into his work. When Childers met him in the early 1960s, Heinecken was already well known for his montages—especially of female nudes—and for using a broad range of technical approaches in his work. Today he is considered one of the most important American artists concerned with photographic concepts. Establishing photography as a separate practice in the visual arts, he influenced an entirely new generation of art photographers. Heinecken soon invited Teske to teach at UCLA. Like Heinecken, Teske used a variety of photographic processes in his work, including multiple printing and solarization techniques that lent romantic and dream-like qualities to his photographs. Childers recalls Teske required students to use Mortensen screens in their assignments. Popular with pictorial photographers at the turn of the twentieth century, Mortensen screens were thought to give images an "artistic" character similar to that of painting.

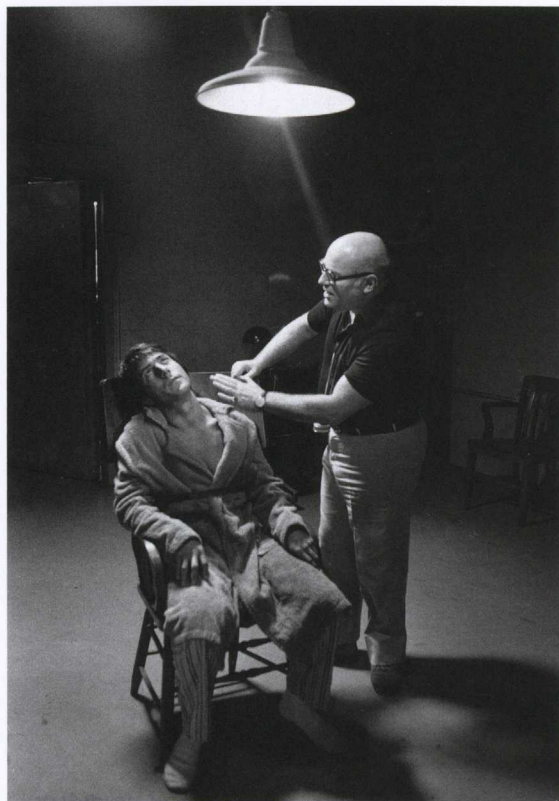
At UCLA Childers also studied filmmaking and enrolled in a class with renowned French filmmaker Jean Renoir (1894–1979), a visiting professor. He recalls that not only did Renoir teach him a fresh way to see and hear by using pre-visualization techniques,² he encouraged his students to visualize a film scene *before* filming, instead of focusing solely on the actors' dialogue. To this day, Childers seldom crops his images, but instead uses the full frame of the camera to capture his subject on film.



ABOVE George Cukor with Georges Braque painting, *Hollywood*, 1978, gelatin silver print

Cukor, director of *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) among many other films, was a collector of modern art including works by Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, and others. Childers photographed Cukor at home, in a room designed by Bill Haines with upholstered suede and molded copper ceilings.

ABOVE RIGHT Dustin Hoffman with director John Schlesinger, during the filming of *"Marathon Man,"* Paramount Studios, *Hollywood*, 1975, gelatin silver print



UCLA's film school has one of the world's finest film archives, and as a student, Childers availed himself of classic 1930's and 1940's Hollywood films. Such film directors as George Cukor and Mitchell Leisen often advised students about their films. With some of the "Golden Era" film legends still residing in Southern California, Childers had opportunities to meet many of Hollywood's greatest starts: Norma Shearer, Agnes Moorehead, Clifton Webb, Claudette Colbert, and Rosalind Russell, among others. One evening, just days after a class in which Leisen had discussed Shearer's films, Childers had dinner with Shearer and friends. Shearer was astounded by the 21-year-old student's detailed knowledge of her films.³

Another major influence on Childers' work was celebrity photographer George Hurrell (American, 1904–1992).⁴ Childers had admired the luminescent quality of Hurrell's portraits and had been studying his technique since high school. Working from 1930 to 1943 in the major Hollywood motion picture studios, Hurrell is credited with creating the standard for idealized Hollywood glamour portraits. His subjects were some of the most glamorous stars of the time, including Shearer, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, James Cagney, Greta Garbo, and Jean Harlow. Originally trained as a painter, Hurrell employed fine-art techniques in his compositions, using light and shadow to create intense contrast, mood, and drama—known as the "Hurrell style." While Childers greatly admired the photographs of Penn, David Bailey, George Hoyningen-Huene, Horst P. Horst, and others, he credits Hurrell as the primary influence on his work. In Hurrell's later years, Childers photographed Hurrell with his camera before one of his most popular images of Marlene Dietrich.

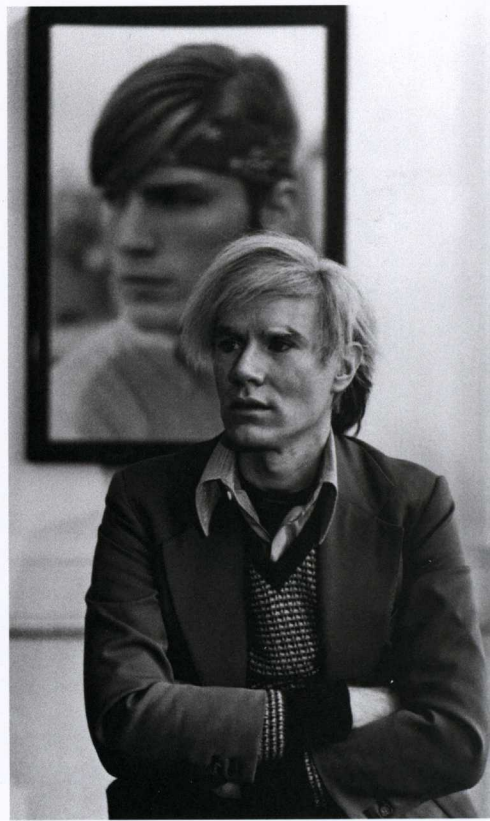
"I consider myself lucky," explains Childers. "I arrived in Los Angeles just as the old Hollywood was disappearing." He views this period as a "magical" moment in his life—meeting some of the original film stars and directors from the "Golden Era"—yet these experiences of an earlier era contrasted dramatically with the social and political climate of the 1960s. At the time Childers enrolled at UCLA, the Kingston Trio represented the



ABOVE George Hurrell, *Hollywood*, 1979, gelatin silver print

Childers admired the photographic work of George Hurrell, and in the early 1970s they met and became friends. This photograph shows Hurrell with one of his famous images of Marlene Dietrich. Hurrell once said, "You know, glamour to me was nothing more than just an excuse for saying sexy pictures." (Mark A. Viera, *Hurrell's Hollywood Portraits: The Chapman Collection*, 1997, New York, Harry N. Abrams, p. 162.)

ABOVE RIGHT Andy Warhol in his New York studio, No. 1, original photograph 1976, gelatin silver print



popular musical style; button-down shirts and short haircuts were the style adopted by fashionable students. By the middle of the decade, however, the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Chad and Jeremy, and Bob Dylan were the rage, and suddenly music, fashion, and movies changed radically. Childers considered himself a "peacenik" and "a bit of a hippie." A long-haired political activist and war protester at the time, Childers recalls that the Sixties "galvanized the youth of America against the absurdity and injustices of the Vietnam War and the political establishment of the time."⁵ These experiences, and personal changes about to take place in his life, would contribute to the development of his photography career.

In 1968, within a year after receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in Film from UCLA, Childers met filmmaker John Schlesinger (1926–2003), who was to have a major influence on his life and career. In a relationship spanning thirty-six years, they collaborated in Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, and other locations around the world wherever their film, opera, and theater productions took them. Soon after they met, Schlesinger asked Childers to assist him on a new film, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). As a member of the production team, Childers created photographic stills and portraits of the actors. He introduced Schlesinger to the 1960s art and underground culture of New York and Los Angeles, which influenced several of the scenes in the movie.⁶ During the filming in New York, they often visited Max's Kansas City (a popular art bar) where they met artists Robert Rauschenberg, Salvador Dali, Larry Rivers, and others.⁷ Starring Dustin Hoffman and Jon Voight, the film won the 1969 Oscar for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Childers recalls his experience working with Schlesinger: "John was an inspiration with his work ethic, discipline, and the way he worked with people. I learned more in nine months working on *Midnight Cowboy* than in six years at UCLA!"⁸ Although he worked on various theater and dance productions as well, Childers continued working on film projects with Schlesinger and other directors over the next two decades.

Soon after completion of his work on *Midnight Cowboy*, Childers was introduced to Broadway theater producer Hillard Elkins. Impressed by Childers' dance and portrait



ABOVE "Ob! Calcutta!" original cast, London, 1969, gelatin silver print

This notorious stage play by Kenneth Tynan premiered in 1969 and ran until 1972.

ABOVE RIGHT "Hair," original cast, London, 1968, gelatin silver print

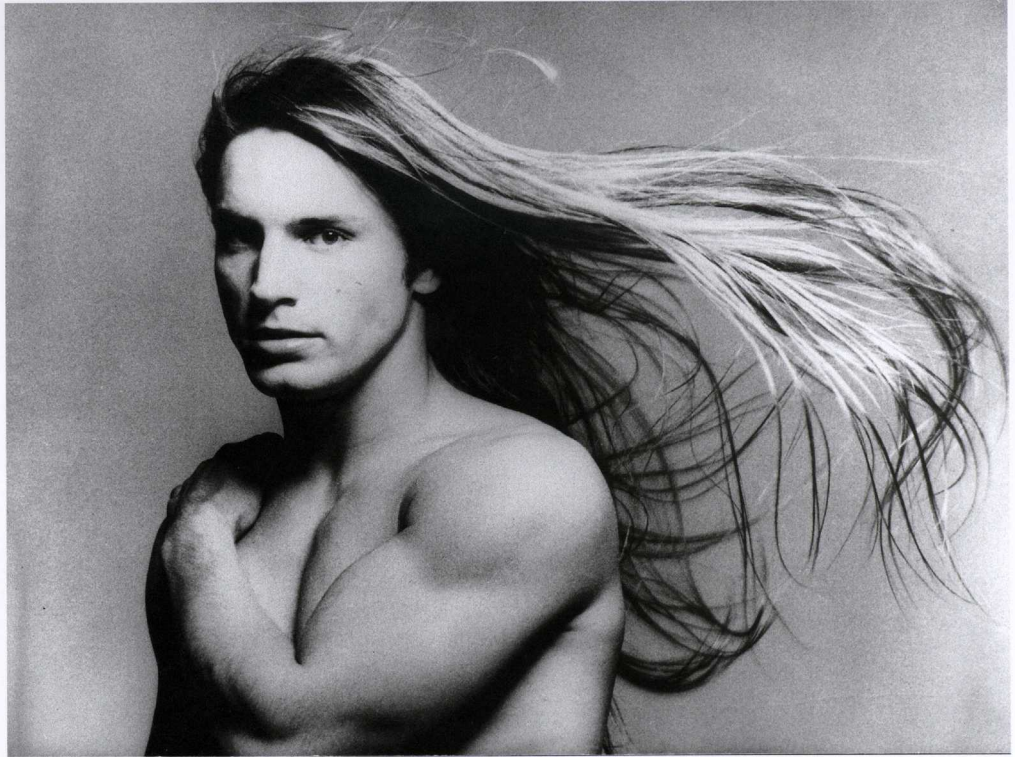


photography, Elkins hired him for a new production called *Ob! Calcutta!* (1969). With contributions from writers Thomas Wolfe, John Lennon, and others, this notorious stage play by Kenneth Tynan broke new ground, featuring full nudity and sexually explicit dialogue. During Childers' photo sessions, the actors and crew insisted that he also strip down, allowing only his tennis shoes and camera. "You lose a lot of inhibitions quickly!" says Childers.

In addition to still photography, Childers worked on the multimedia presentation for *Ob! Calcutta!* using techniques similar to the psychedelic mixed-media performances developed by the Joshua Lightshow in New York.⁹ With screens mounted around the stage, fifty-six movie projections with superimposed photographic images fading in and out produced a result that Childers describes as reminiscent of an Edmund Teske photograph.¹⁰

Kenneth Tynan introduced Childers to the National Theatre in London—then under the direction of Sir Laurence Olivier—where Childers photographed great theater stars including Olivier, Sir Anthony Hopkins, Dame Diana Rigg, Sir Alan Bates, and others. He also worked on *Hair* and photographed Gary Bond for *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (both premiering in London in 1968). Given that he was the first, and perhaps only, American photographer to work for the National Theatre and was so young, only 26, Childers felt intense pressure to "prove himself" as a great photographer.

After two years in London, Childers returned to the United States and developed his commercial photography career throughout the decade of the 1970s, working intermittently in studios on both coasts—New York and California. He renewed his friendship with Pop artist Andy Warhol and was invited to be one of the founding photographers of Warhol's new magazine, *Interview*.¹¹ A few years earlier, Childers had photographed several "Warhol Superstars."¹² *Ultra Violet, Andy Warhol Superstar, in Robert Rauschenberg's bed* of 1968 (p. 30), is the quintessential image of Pop Art and culture. With an American flag as a bed cover, a languid Ultra Violet leans against a large Roy Lichtenstein banner mounted on the wall above the bed. Entitled *Pistol* of 1964, the image of an oversized hand grasping a gun



Joe Dallesandro, *Andy Warhol Superstar*, New York City, 1970, gelatin silver print

pointed directly out at the viewer presents a powerful symbol in conjunction with the American flag blanket laid out over the bed below. By contrast, the photograph of *Joe Dallesandro, Andy Warhol Superstar* of 1970, is representative of high fashion and glamour showing Dallesandro's muscular torso and long, wind-blown hair. It was photographs like these that appealed to Warhol for his new magazine. According to Childers, "Warhol didn't pay his photographers. You were happy to have the exposure and your photographs printed as full-page spreads in the magazine. His instructions were, 'Please, only photograph rich, famous, or very beautiful people.'"¹³

Childers later made two more important portrait series of Warhol, the first in 1976 in Warhol's New York studio, and the second in 1980 in Paris, which are believed to be the only photographs taken of Warhol in his Paris apartment. In *Andy Warhol in his New York studio, No. 1* of 1976 (p. 33), Warhol stands next to an early portrait of the young man he made into a superstar—Joe Dallesandro. In *No. 5* (p. 44) from the same series, Warhol is seated in a chair wearing a winter fur coat. Taken from overhead, a pensive Warhol looks upward, directly at the viewer.

In 1974 Childers returned to Los Angeles to work on *The Day of the Locust* (1975) directed by Schlesinger. He set up a studio on Melrose Avenue and began focusing on celebrity and commercial photography. Around this time he produced a series of sensual portraits of Natalie Wood that helped recreate her image. Childers had met Wood in 1968, and they became close friends. He photographed her in numerous movie roles and also made intimate portraits of her and her family. In his 1974 portrait *Natalie Wood* (p. 18), using black and white film and techniques inspired by Hurrell, a sultry but elegant Wood gazes confidently and directly into the camera's lens. Childers uses dramatic lighting to help sculpt her face and highlight her hair, lips, and cheekbones. Wearing a satin dress, one arm is resting upon her knee, while the other is bent upward to create a sweeping diagonal movement to the portrait's composition. Inspired by portraits of the silent-film star Rudolph Valentino, Childers uses a similar romantic style in his 1978 series *John*

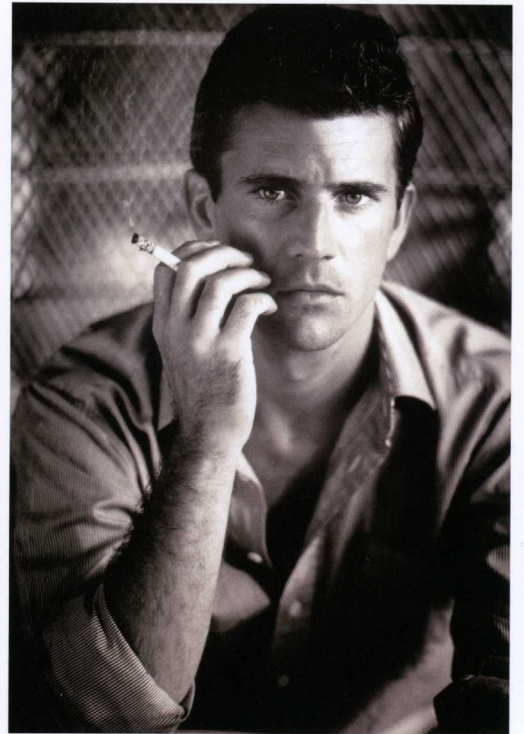


ABOVE John Travolta as Valentino, *Hollywood*, 1977, gelatin silver print

This photograph was taken the same year Travolta starred in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). Childers developed a series of photographs of Travolta inspired by the romantic images of the former Hollywood legend Rudolph Valentino.

ABOVE RIGHT Mel Gibson in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Manila, Philippines, 1982, toned gelatin silver print

Childers met Gibson after he first moved to America from Australia when he was 23 years old. This photograph was taken in the Philippines during the filming of *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1983).

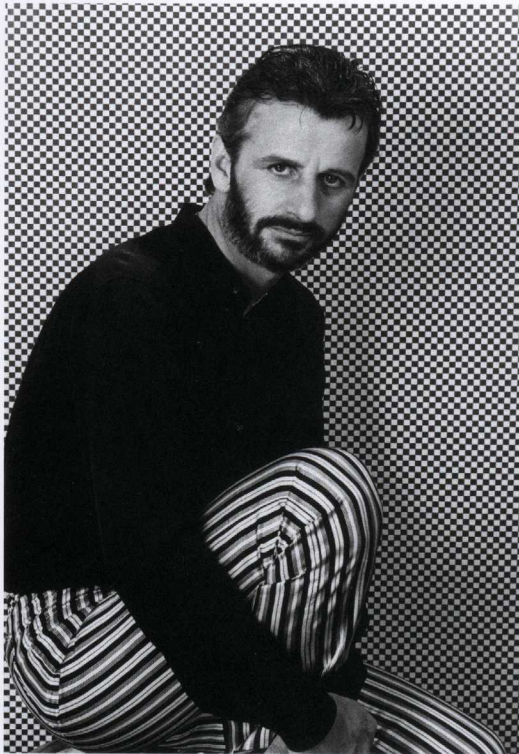


Travolta as Valentino. These and other glamour portraits earned Childers the title, "the modern Hurrell."¹⁴

Childers enjoyed working with John Travolta and other young stars who had not yet settled on their professional "image." According to Childers, "It was more exciting than after the star has settled on a personal 'look'—which side of the face to photograph, if they're going to smile or not, etc. After an actor becomes popular and settles on a 'look,' the photographer is often locked into producing a set image."¹⁵ Some of the young stars Childers photographed early in their careers include Brooke Shields, Demi Moore (p. 26), Mel Gibson, Sissy Spacek (p. 27), Richard Gere, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (pp. 16–17).

Childers believes that even good photographers fail if they lack the ability to communicate with their models/subjects. Childers learned this skill from experiences in theater work and from watching great film directors, including Schlesinger, work with actors. He describes Schlesinger as a "great actor's director," one who has the ability to inspire exceptional performances in his actors. Schlesinger also had a unique ability to identify and recognize new talent. "He discovered a lot of young talent and turned them into stars," explains Childers. "That also happened when I found Demi Moore and when Mel Gibson first arrived in America. I met and photographed Richard Gere in New York City when he was doing theater, and Tom Berenger was modeling shirts when I recognized his talent and sent him to a movie agent. A great actor has a special presence that we don't have and the camera 'sees' this."¹⁶

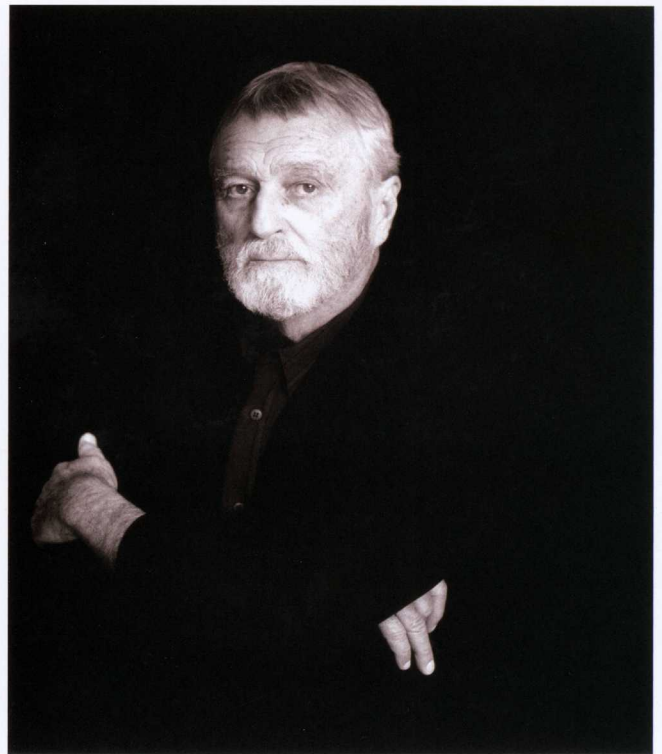
In his photography, Childers also adapted lighting techniques used by cinematographers. The award-winning Conrad Hall worked on several films with Schlesinger and Childers, including *The Day of the Locust* and *Marathon Man* (1976). According to film producer Richard D. Zanuck, "Every film that he [Hall] worked on was something beautiful to the eye, and very imaginative...you could virtually take every frame of his work and blow it up and hang it over your fireplace. It was like Rembrandt at work."¹⁷ Childers spent days studying his lighting technique, explaining: "Conrad Hall is one of the greatest cinematographers in the world. He taught me how to use mirrors and reflection from water.



ABOVE Ringo Starr for *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Hollywood*, 1980, gelatin silver print

This portrait was taken the day after John Lennon was killed, which no doubt explains Starr's pensive expression. It appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine April 30, 1981. For this shot, Childers used a poster by British Optical Art painter, Bridget Riley, for the background. The checkered background contrasted with Starr's striped pants creating a lively, vibrating visual pattern.

ABOVE RIGHT Conrad Hall, *Hollywood*, 2000, toned gelatin silver print



Working with Conrad Hall is like sitting next to George Hurrell or David Hockney. I stood behind him all day long. I just wanted to see how he did everything."¹⁸

The goal of fashion and celebrity photography is to create illusions, and *Vogue* magazine and others set the standard for the "fashionable" image. As early as the 1920s, the opulent soft-focus style still used today was introduced in *Vogue*. By the 1970s, Richard Avedon and other photographers of high style became major influences on fashion photography. They combined naturalism and mannerism reflective of the profound changes in sexual and social mores of the 1960s. Childers combines both these approaches in his image of Lesley-Anne Down photographed for *British Vogue* in 1980 (pp. 70–71), and in his portrait of Catherine Deneuve in 1981 (p. 21) for *Elle*. In most of his celebrity portraits, however, he offers a more naturalistic image, such as in his 1980 portrait of Ringo Starr taken for the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine.¹⁹ Whether for a commercial publication or for personal interest, Childers' portraits emphasize the faces of his subjects, revealing their personalities in the process.

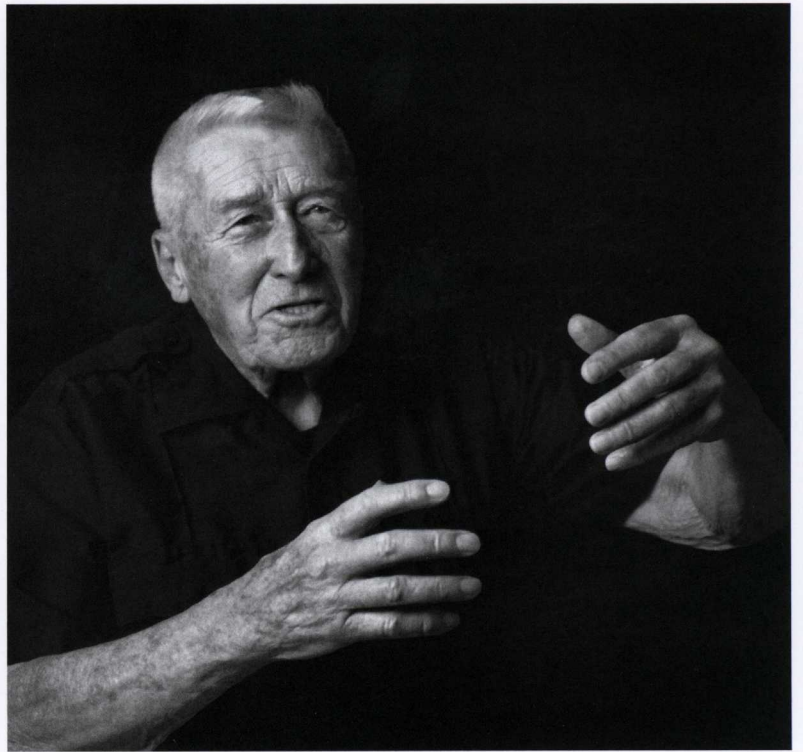
The celebrity photography industry changed dramatically in the 1980s. Publicity managers began to exercise greater control over photography sessions—what the celebrity could wear and how they posed. This interference destroyed the creative process for Childers. Although he was at the height of his professional career, he had grown weary of the industry. His interests turned to film production. A *Los Angeles Times* article inspired an idea for the film *The Falcon and the Snowman* (1985), directed by Schlesinger and co-produced by Childers. Childers continued to be involved in film production for most of the 1980s, including *The Believers* (1987). He later regretted abandoning photography. "My personality is not suited to be a movie producer. You're just another cog in a system of a hundred people. For bad or for worse, in photography it's about me: it's you and one other person. It's my vision. In a movie it's the vision of a hundred people."²⁰

Early in the 1990s Childers moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. He returned to photography and focused his attention on fine art—or "personal photography" as he calls it—and



ABOVE *Eric Idle*, 1989, toned gelatin silver print

ABOVE RIGHT *Mickey Spillane*, *Palm Springs*, 2003, gelatin silver print

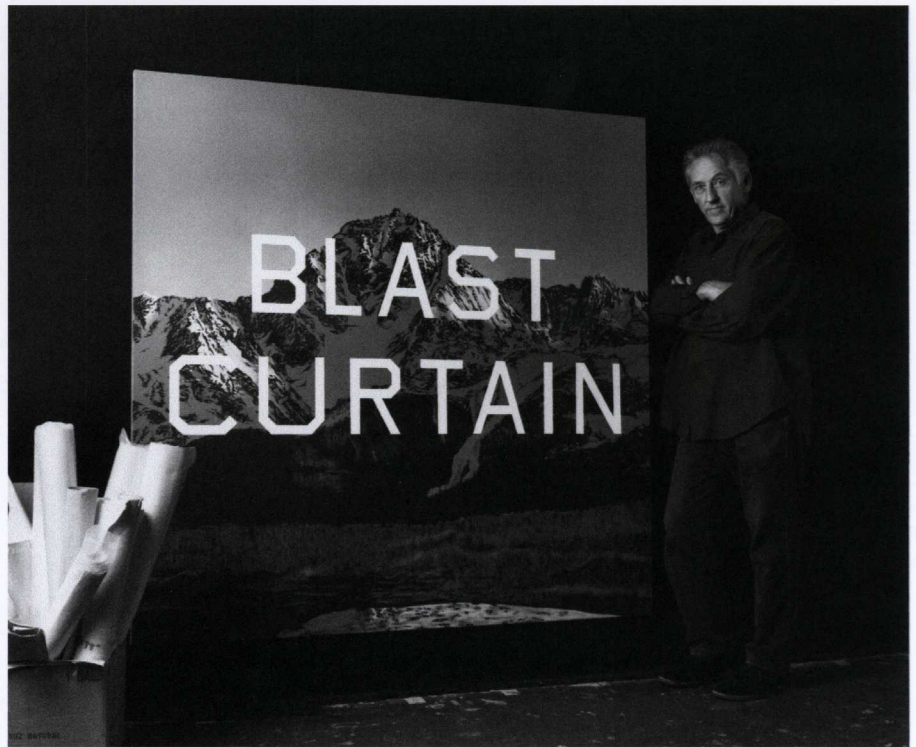


portraits of artists and friends. He explains: "I discussed the issue of commercial versus fine art photography with Hurrell and Horst. Commercial photography was our job—granted, a fabulous job, but nonetheless a job—and we went to work every day at the studio to produce glamour images for movie posters, albums, magazine covers, or whatever. I had produced somewhere in the range of three hundred magazine covers and thousands of images of celebrities. Some are iconic images and some are of legendary people. Photographing for the Hollywood film industry was like working in a factory with twenty retouchers on staff and a darkroom full of printers. It was a factory!"²¹

Childers felt he had done what he wanted to do with celebrity and commercial work. When he returned to photography, it was to concentrate on his personal interests: fine art photography and portraits of people he admired. Arlene Lew Allen encouraged and exhibited his work in her Santa Fe gallery. Today Childers continues to do commercial work, but he is more selective in accepting assignments.

A personal interest over the years has been photographing visual, literary, and musical artists, as well as architects. The basic elements of a portrait are expression, gesture, lighting, and décor. They are key to revealing the sitter's social class, profession, and psychology, and Childers has mastered these elements to reveal the essential personality of his subjects. For example, in the portrait of author *Mickey Spillane* (2003), Childers portrays more than a likeness including the sitter's attributes as well. Captured in animated conversation, Spillane's black shirt disappears into a black background, which emphasizes his facial expression, arms, and gesturing hands, all symbolizing the essential tools of the writer's profession: his thoughts, voice, and hands. In a portrait of his friend, comedienne Lily Tomlin, her head is thrown back in laughter—the same reaction she elicits from her audiences.

While black-and-white photography relies on tone to create a sculptural effect, color may be used to create atmosphere. Childers often incorporates color in his portraits of contemporary artists, as with Ed Moses and his two dogs photographed in the artist's



Edward Ruscha with "Blast Curtain,"
Venice, California, 2001, gelatin
silver print

Venice, California, studio (p. 55). Seated in an overstuffed chair with beaded designs, Moses' striking white hair contrasts with the colorful setting. Using a double exposure, both upright and sideways, Childers creates an effect similar to Moses' colorful abstract painting style. In each of these examples, Childers has found an essential quality unique to his subject, revealing far more than the outward appearance.

Childers has been photographing David Hockney since their friendship began in 1968. The swimming pool has been a major subject in Hockney's paintings, and Childers wanted to photograph the painter in a swimming pool. The idea for the resulting 1978 photograph, *Hockney at Rising Glen* (p. 45), was inspired by the French photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue's (1894–1988) portrait *Zissou, Rouzat of 1911* (p. 40), in which his brother Zissou, dressed in a suit and hat, sits in an inflated tire tube floating in water. Childers asked Hockney to dress in a white suit and sit in an inflated raft in Childers' Hollywood Hills swimming pool. Hockney appears casual and relaxed. Our eye scans the surface of the surrounding water, and we are drawn to the ball in the upper left corner. Childers also captured Hockney at work by his home swimming pool in Hollywood. In a 1982 photograph, Hockney arranges his Polaroid images into a montage as the two models he's just photographed look on from inside the pool. In *David Hockney in his London studio* of 1980 (p. 15), the artist—surrounded in his studio by several large-scale paintings leaning against the walls—intensely studies a portrait of his parents.

Other contemporary artists Childers has photographed include Sam Francis, Edward Ruscha, and Robert Graham; architects Richard Meier and E. Stewart Williams; musicians Cat Stevens, Grace Jones, and Rod Stewart; and writers Tennessee Williams and Christopher Rice.

Always open to new photographic subjects, in the late 1990s Childers developed a series entitled *Passionate Moves* (pp. 68–69) in which he combines a love of dance and human form. In a recent series, *Distortions in My Mind* (pp. 62–67), Childers uses mirrors to distort images of the human body and reflect light. This process was inspired by the use of mir-

rors in Orson Welles and Jean Cocteau films from the 1940s. In earlier years Childers had studied the distortion photographs of André Kertész (1894–1985), who used a similar mirror technique with nude female subjects in the 1930s. The concept for *Distortions* became clear during a fashion shoot involving mirrors, and soon Childers arranged to have custom moveable mirrors built in his studio so he could begin to photograph the series.²²

A radical departure from his days as a commercial photographer, today Childers concentrates on the surreal environment of distorted reflections. *Distortions* is the result of what he calls a “liquid abstraction” of movement. Reminiscent of the sculpture of Henry Moore, Childers’ forms float in a gravity-free space that appears to have no top or bottom.

Childers has been creating images of icons and legends of our popular and artistic culture for forty years. Yet, when we compare one of his early photographs of Chad and Jeremy taken in 1964 (p. 8) with the recent photograph of contemporary artist Jim Isermann taken in 2003 (p. 10), we are struck by how each favors a similar Pop Art-inspired style of the 1960s. We are left wondering what really has changed in forty years. Perhaps it is the essential power and mystery of an icon to transcend time, allowing the past to continue to inform and intrigue us. In this particular mental journey, we are guided by the magical photographs of Michael Childers.



Zissou, Rouzat, 1911, Photograph by Jacques Henri Lartigue, © Ministère de la Culture—France/AJHL

1. Michael Childers interview by the author, Palm Springs, California, July 2, 2003. Robert Heinecken was a Los Angeles-based artist primarily working with photography and print-making and a professor at UCLA from 1961 until 1992. Childers remarked on Heinecken’s innovative use of photo montages which he developed as early as the 1950s, decades before David Hockney or Chuck Close began their experiments with assembling Polaroid images.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. Michael Childers met George Hurrell in the early 1970s as they shared the same agent.
5. Ibid.
6. For example, there is one café-scene in the movie where Jon Voight watches a mother and her son play with a live rat. Childers and Schlesinger observed a similar scene during a late-night visit to Fairfax Avenue in Los Angeles.
7. Conversation between Michael Childers and the author, Palm Springs, California August 23, 2003.
8. Ibid, Interview July 2, 2003.
9. The Joshua Lightshow operated in the New York area and was founded by filmmaker Joshua White. They were the “house lightshow” at the Fillmore East for most of its existence.
10. Ibid, Interview, July 2, 2003.
11. Interview made its debut in November 1969 under its initial title: *Inter/VIEW: A Monthly Film Journal*.
12. “Warhol Superstars” was the name given to a group of people in Warhol’s films.
13. Ibid. Conversation with Michael Childers, August 23, 2003.
14. *Los Angeles Magazine* published an article around 1978 entitled “Hollywood After Hurrell: Michael Childers.” A copy of this article is in the Michael Childers’ archive.
15. Michael Childers interview by the author, Palm Springs, California July 15, 2003. Most of the information provided in the photo captions was provided by the artist during this interview session.
16. Ibid, Interview July 2, 2003.
17. Kit Bowen, “Cinematographer Conrad Hall Dies,” *Celebrity News @ Hollywood.com*, January 6, 2003.
18. Ibid, Interview, July 2, 2003.
19. A close-up portrait of Starr taken during this photo session appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, April 30, 1981. A copy is available in Michael Childers’ archive.
20. Ibid, Interview, July 2, 2003.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.