



Ritts, Herb (1952-2002)

by Linda Rapp

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Award-winning American photographer Herb Ritts was acclaimed for his artistic and insightful pictures, many of them in black and white. Best known for his magazine covers, photos of celebrities, and extremely successful ad campaigns for such top fashion designers as Giorgio Armani, Gianni Versace, and Ralph Lauren, and for companies including Revlon and Tag Heuer, he is of special interest to the glbtq community because of the homoerotic qualities and the "homosexual iconography" in many of his photographs.

Ritts's work was the subject of two important exhibitions, one in Boston in 1996 and the other in Paris in 2000.

While Ritts favored a "classical sensuality" in the tradition of George Platt Lynes, his versatility and accessibility led to a high demand for his commercial work.

Herbert Ritts, Jr. enjoyed a comfortable childhood. Born on August 13, 1952 to parents who owned a profitable furniture business in California, Ritts was part of a family who lived in a mansion in Beverly Hills and also had a summer home on fashionable Santa Catalina Island. Young Ritts grew up in glamorous surroundings, with movie stars for neighbors.

After high school Ritts enrolled at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where he majored in economics and also studied art history. Following his graduation in 1975, he returned to his native California and worked as a sales representative for the family business.

At that point Ritts had not decided what profession to pursue, but he certainly was not considering a career in photography, which he had only recently taken up as a hobby. It happened, however, that in 1978 he had his camera with him when he and a friend--the then little-known actor Richard Gere--had to stop at a gas station to repair a flat tire. Among the pictures that Ritts snapped was one of a sweaty Gere clad in jeans and a tank top, his arms languidly stretched over his head, and a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

Soon thereafter, when Gere received widespread attention for his role in Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo* (1980), Ritts sent his photos to Gere's publicist. "A few months later she sent me *Vogue*, *Esquire*, and *Elle*. They all used my pictures. I got checks too," Ritts recalled. *Newsweek* also ran a photo of Jon Voight that Ritts had managed to take when he made his way onto the set of Franco Zeffirelli's *The Champ* (1979).

Ritts had found his calling as a photographer, and his pictures were in demand. Within a few years his photos were gracing the covers of *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Interview*. He also did fashion spreads for important designers such as Gianni Versace and Ralph Lauren.

Ritts's photographs were the basis of a number of provocative and extremely successful advertising campaigns, including ones for Revlon, Donna Karan, the Gap, and Calvin Klein. Hank Stuever of the *Washington Post* commented that "most of his homoerotic 'nudes' actually wore Calvin Klein briefs."

Ritts delighted in the portrayal of an idealized--even exaggerated--human form. One of his best-known works, "Fred with Tires" (1984), shows an almost impossibly muscular young man clad only in jeans that sag slightly below his waist.

Ritts became well known for dramatic black-and-white photographs that focused on a single part of the subject's body. His portrait of Olympic heptathlon champion Jackie Joyner-Kersey captures her lower torso and powerful thighs in mid-leap; her head appears only in shadow on the ground.

Many of Ritts's photographs celebrate the well-developed body. Some of his images have been compared to classical statuary because of the exquisiteness of the subjects' form. Other photos, however, show human vulnerability: Christopher Reeve posing in his wheelchair, Elizabeth Taylor revealing her scar after brain surgery, the brilliant physicist Stephen Hawking struggling against his frailty.

Ritts published a number of books of photographs, including *Pictures* (1988), *Men-Women* (1989), *Duo* (1991), *Notorious* (1992), *Africa* (1994), *Modern Souls* (1995), and *Work* (1996).

The publication of *Work* coincided with an exhibition of Ritts's photographs at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Museum director Malcolm Rogers described Ritts as having "an ability to create unforgettable images of great force and beauty" and also "a sense of the bizarre, of style and drama, [and] of erotic energy." He added that Ritts's images show "a world without barriers of race or barriers of sexuality."

Two of Ritts's books, however, speak to issues of race and sexuality. The photos in *Africa* depict the daily lives of indigenous peoples of eastern Africa. Ritts was pleased when Nelson Mandela praised the book, commenting that "it reminded him of his childhood."

Duo celebrated the relationship of 1983 Mr. Universe Bob Paris and his then-partner Rob Jackson.

Ritts's male nudes have been described as having "a profoundly intimate feeling." The photographer himself felt that his pictures reflected a "classic sensuality" rather than a "gay sensibility." Nevertheless, although his images are widely admired by mainstream audiences, they have a particular appeal to gay viewers.

Ritts was always candid about his own sexuality. He realized that he was gay while he was in college. He soon came out to his parents, who were accepting and supportive.

In 1993 Ritts appeared in *The Gay '90s*, an NBC news special about the life of gays in the last decade of the twentieth century. After the program aired, he received many letters, some from gay teens who had contemplated suicide. Ritts stated that he had not considered himself a role model, but "you suddenly get one of these letters, [and] you realize how important it is that there be encouragement for gay people."

Although he is best known for his still photographs, Ritts also directed music videos, including two MTV Award-winners, Janet Jackson's "Love Will Never Do (Without You)" (Best Female Video, 1991) and Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game" (Best Male Video, 1991). In addition, he directed Madonna's "Cherish" (1989), in which the singer cavorted on a beach with "hunky mermen," as well as videos for Shakira, 'NSYNC, Jennifer Lopez, and Britney Spears.

Ritts will also be remembered for his vigorous fund-raising efforts in the quest for a cure for AIDS, in particular for his efforts on behalf of amFAR, the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

Ritts kept working until just a few days before his death. Among his last projects were the cover shot for the March 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair* and a photo session with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Ritts died in Los Angeles on December 26, 2002, of complications of pneumonia. He had been diagnosed as HIV-positive years before, and although his death was not specifically HIV-related, the virus had

compromised his immune system.

He is survived by his partner, Erik Hyman, an entertainment attorney.

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