

on Portraits

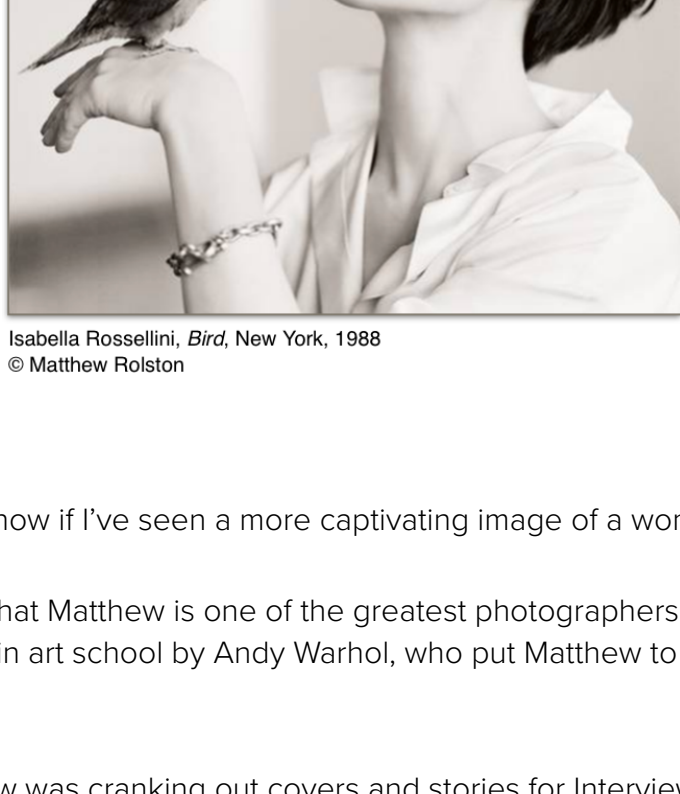
Matthew Rolston's Hollywood Royale: An Oddly Beautiful Twist on Celebrity Portraiture

By Michael Comeau

Back when I was a 90's kid, I thought Matthew Rolston was only a music video director. He made visuals for top hit songs like "Bootylicious" by Destiny's Child, "Whattaman" by Salt-n-Pepa, and my personal favorite, "Creep" by TLC.

Fast forward to around 2010, and I was thumbing through a use book store and I came across Big Pictures: A Book of Photographs by Matthew Rolston.

I remember thinking, "oh that music video director guy. He's a photographer? Really??" Turns out, Matthew wasn't just any photographer. I was floored by the work in Big Pictures. One image in particular stood out to me: this incredible portrait of Isabella Rossellini:



Isabella Rossellini, *Bird*, New York, 1988
© Matthew Rolston

To this day, I don't know if I've seen a more captivating image of a woman.

Soon, I discovered that Matthew is one of the greatest photographers of our time. He was discovered in art school by Andy Warhol, who put Matthew to shoot for Interview Magazine.

Before long, Matthew was cranking out covers and stories for Interview, Rolling Stone, Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, GQ, W, Esquire, and Cosmopolitan, among many others. His commercial clients include L'Oreal, Revlon, Estée Lauder, Clairol, Levi's, Pantene, Elizabeth Arden, Gap, and Polo Ralph Lauren.

Matthew's even extended his talents to Creative Direction for brands like Target, The Redbury Hotel, the Lifetime Network, and Dark Horse Vodka.

Matthew's unusual, at least to me.

In 1992, he told the LA Times that "The idea of postmodernism was to borrow ideas from the past, ransack the past. I hate to use the word postmodernism, it's such a cliché, but that's what I do."

When I hear the word postmodernism, I often think of deconstruction, and even laziness – as if reinventing something is enough to make it interesting.

But Matthew's pictures, many of which are inspired by early-20th century glamour photography, are well thought out and flawlessly executed.

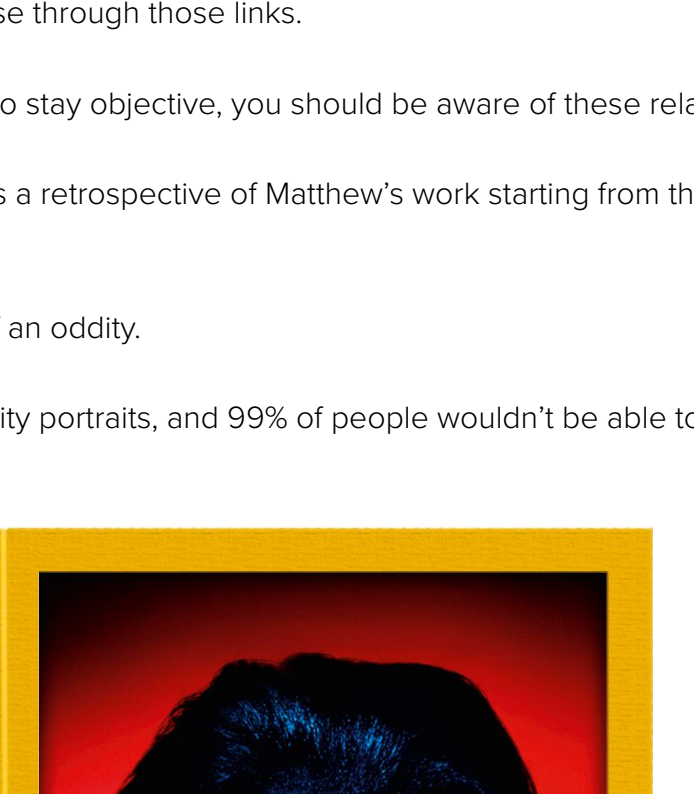
Yes, he's taking influence from the likes of George Hurrell, Irving Penn, and Richard Avedon, but unlike many postmodernists, he's not mocking or making fun.

Matthew is elevating and paying tribute. I view some of his pictures as a sort of high-brow, flawlessly executed remixes.

Let's look at Avedon's infamous picture of Charlie Chaplin sporting devil's horns:



And used that as inspiration for this quirky picture of Robert Downey Jr.:



So let's talk about Matthew's latest book, Hollywood Royale, published by teNeues Media.

Review Disclaimer: teNeues Media provided a copy of Hollywood Royale for my review.

Additionally, all links to Amazon in this article are affiliate links, meaning I receive a portion of what you purchase through those links.

While I do my best to stay objective, you should be aware of these relationships.

Hollywood Royale is a retrospective of Matthew's work starting from the late 1970's and into the 1990's.

The cover is a bit of an oddity.

It's a book of celebrity portraits, and 99% of people wouldn't be able to name the person on the cover!



And it's... Prince!

I never would have guessed, even though Prince is one of my favorite musicians of all-time!

Hollywood Royale is very nicely sized at 11.2" x 1.3" x 15.1"

It's 278 pages long, and includes 150 images, equally split between color and black & white images.

Hollywood Royale also includes essays written by:

- Pat Hackett, Andy Warhol's longtime collaborator and diarist
- Colin Westerbeck, noted photographic curator
- Charles Churchward, former Vogue and Vanity Fair art director

The essays are a nice addition, and give us expert views on Matthew's unique 'old Hollywood glamour meets modern celebrity' style.

I particularly enjoyed Mr. Churchward's, which discusses Matthew's role (along with Herb Ritts and Greg Gorman) in elevating Los Angeles to a hotbed of celebrity portrait photography.

In those days, New York City was the center of the photography world, but this trio started a West Coast explosion, particularly with their work in Andy Warhol's Interview Magazine.

By the way, if you're ever looking for inspiration, Interview still publishes some of the best portrait photography out there.

UPDATE: Sadly, just days after this article was published, Interview Magazine announced it was closing down. That's said because it introduced me to so many great photographers like Craig McDean, Sebastian Kim, and Gregory Harris.

Anyway, back to the book.

Hollywood Royale is itself a beautiful object, and a real attention-getter.

The print quality is stunning, right up there with the best-printed books I've ever seen, like Albert Watson's UFO and Michael Thompson's Portraits.

In fact, I was tempted to cut out Matthew's pictures and frame them!

And this book has a very unique design feature that needs to be come an industry standard: none of the horizontal images are spread across both pages.

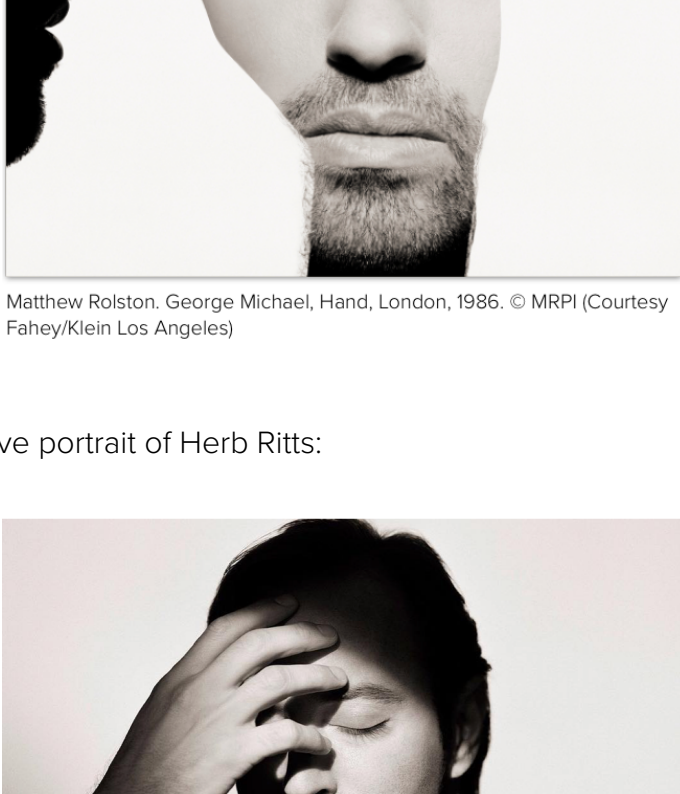
Instead, they fold out, which is very convenient.

Most photo books spread images across the spine, which is annoying if the subject is in the middle.

So let's go through some of my favorite photos from Hollywood Royale.

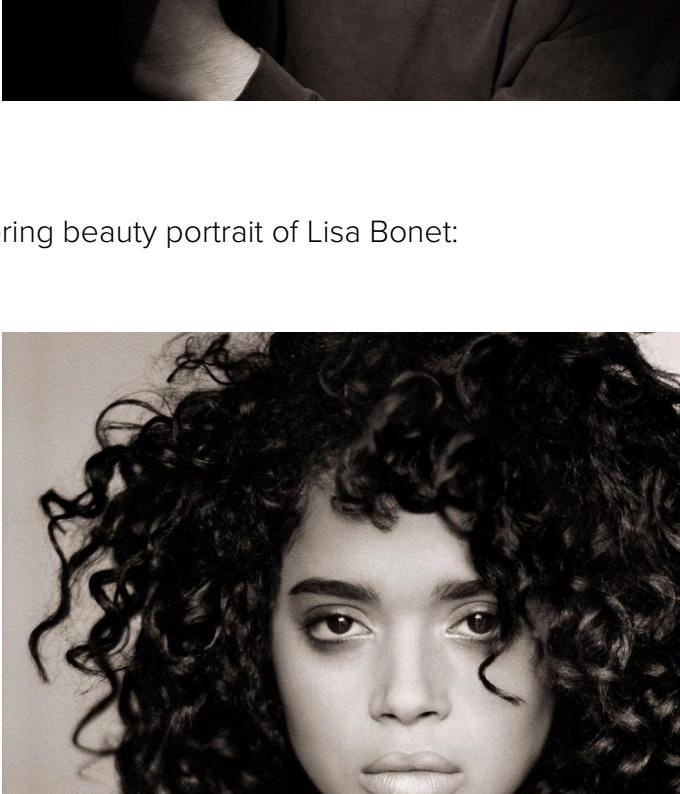
I'm using embedded images from Matthew's Instagram for convenience's sake.

Matthew's technical wizardry is on full display in images like this trippy, Irving Penn-inspired beauty shot:



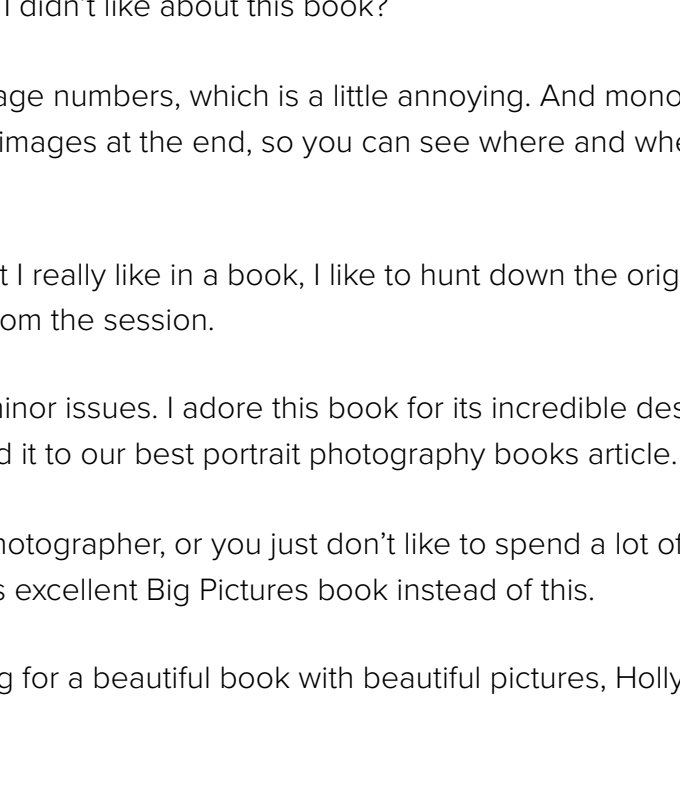
Anitta, *Clock Face, The Surreal Thing, Series*, New York, 1987
© Matthew Rolston

And this portrayal of actress/director Jody Foster, as well, a director!



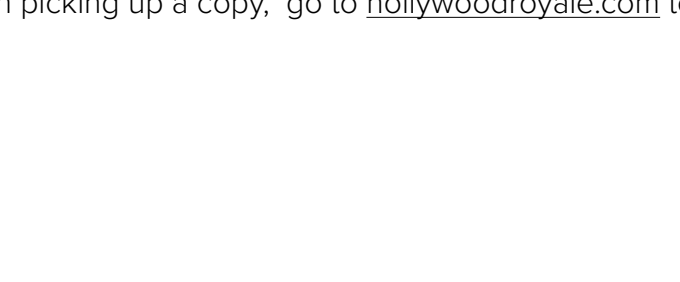
Matthew Rolston, *Jodie Foster, Director II*, Los Angeles, 1991. © MRPI
(Courtesy Fahey/Klein Los Angeles)

Here is Sade in a sort of French New Wave-inspired collage of objects



Matthew Rolston, *Sade, With Cocktails*, Los Angeles, 1986. © MRPI
(Courtesy Fahey/Klein Los Angeles)

A double exposure of George Michael (RIP):



Matthew Rolston, *George Michael, Hand*, London, 1986. © MRPI (Courtesy Fahey/Klein Los Angeles)

A quiet, contemplative portrait of Herb Ritts:

And a simply staggering beauty portrait of Lisa Bonet:

So is there anything I didn't like about this book?

Well, there are no page numbers, which is a little annoying. And monographs typically have a guide to the images at the end, so you can see where and when they were originally published.

When I see a portrait I really like in a book, I like to hunt down the original story so I can see other pictures from the session.

These are relative minor issues. I adore this book for its incredible design and gorgeous pictures, and I added it to our best portrait photography books article.

If you are a broke photographer, or you just don't like to spend a lot of money on books, I would get Matthew's excellent Big Pictures book instead of this.

But if you are looking for a beautiful book with beautiful pictures, Hollywood Royale fits the bill.

In fact, it makes a great gift for Hollywood/movie buffs that would appreciate a dramatic, eye-catching coffee table book.

I can't emphasize the phrase "eye-catching" enough.

The cover portrait of Prince just begs people to ask "who's that?" and to open the book.

If you're interested in picking up a copy, go to hollywoodroyale.com to check it out.