

All pictures © Michael Birt

OPPOSITE

**Jason Isaacs,
St Pancras
Renaissance Hotel,
London, 2011**

MOVING WITH THE LIGHT

Portrait photographer **Michael Birt** has been at the top of his profession for over 30 years. How does he make sure his style evolves in an increasingly competitive market, asks Max Houghton

Michael Birt is a collector; of first edition books, of photographic prints, and of faces. His archive, reaching back to the late 1970s, reads like a roll call of the nation's most talented and creative people, while his current portfolio is agleam with today's brightest stars.

When we meet, in his serene and orderly Fulham home, the Booker prize has just been awarded to Hilary Mantel. Birt had travelled to the writer's house in Devon when *Bringing Up the Bodies* was published, to photograph her for *Newsweek*. It was a low-key shoot, just Birt and his assistant, on the local beach at Budleigh Salterton, with Mantel, resplendent in a claret-coloured hat and scarf, and in charge of her own make-up. The portrait has since been selected for the 2012 Taylor Wessing Prize and will be exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery (where, incidentally, some 33 of Birt's prints are held). Three first edition copies of her books, one a gift from the author, now grace his brimming shelves.

Like his other famous portrait, of Keira Knightley, which received much attention in last year's Taylor Wessing, the Mantel image is a colour photograph. Birt is in part so sought after because he still loves to work with black & white film, and even when working digitally, is rightly protective of which photographs may be converted to black & white. His policy is straightforward: only images conceived

as black & white as well as colour at the moment of capture can be switched. Recent black & white film shoots include portraits of actor Sarah Kestelman, writer Doris Lessing and chef Skye Gyngell. If he is shooting digitally, as he did for his latest portrait (his third) of Damien Hirst, he might desaturate the colour on screen so he knows it will also work in monochrome. Such technological advances have meant that Birt's work has evolved stylistically as well.

'I came quite late to digital, in 2004,' says Birt. 'By 2007, I was good at it. It presented a whole new format, and took me from a lifelong practice of looking at everything as a square – but actually I adore it. I had to compose my pictures differently. Your eye and your brain, which is one and the same thing, get used to placing people within the confines of the square, balancing the photograph in thirds. The first theatre poster I did was with Lindsay Duncan. I was shooting quite close-up, and just concentrating on the face, and I fell in love with the upright format and also with the clarity of digital.'

'It is critically important that having understood film, you apply those exact disciplines to digital. You do wonder, with people who have only used digital, if the discipline is there. Is the light absolutely perfect? The exposure? You may think it doesn't matter if it is printed very small in a magazine, but the problems begin when you start to make a large print for exhibition.' >





Doris Lessing, at home, London 2007



Sara Kestelman, at home, London, 2009

◀ The move from editorial photography to art photography is one that interests Birt, of necessity as much as passion. His old friend, the photographer Norman Parkinson, said that every photographer needs a magazine behind them.

'I never forgot that,' says Birt. 'It's very hard to exist without the support mechanism of a magazine.'

And Birt has worked for them all; for the *Sunday Times* under Michael Rand's art direction, for *Loaded* in its glory days, edited by James Brown, for Tina Brown's glamorous US publication *Talk* at its inception, among many others.

'Their support was terrific. You get to photograph people it would be very difficult to meet otherwise; people want to promote what they do and that's fine – they sit for you for magazines – and they

happen to be great experiences. You fly round the world, meet these people and hopefully get some good pictures. I get that support now from the theatre world and from *Newsweek*.'

As if fate were listening to our conversation, I hear the news via Twitter, within minutes of leaving Birt's home, that *Newsweek* is to cease publication in print form by the end of the year. Birt is sanguine: 'Print is dead. Long live print,' he emails back instantly. He has of course been navigating this changing landscape constantly. He remains in demand, and says he works on bigger assignments these days and is paid more, echoing a trend only applicable to those at the very top of their profession. Commissioning editors are not taking risks, which might spell bad news for emerging talent, but means that those with a flawless track record are on fairly safe ground.

So, what's the secret to top class portraiture? As he answers, Birt is surrounded by exemplary work from his photographic heroes: Horace Royce, Helmut Newton, Bill Brandt (who he has photographed), EO Hoppé and August Sander. It is evident in his work he has ingested Sander's observation that it is not only a person's face that defines their character, but also their movement, capturing both in a single image. His own answer, however, is as simple as it is accurate:

'Lighting. I enthuse over it and look at it constantly. If you see a set I have lit, it may not look overly different to that of other photographers, but it's also about how you get the subject to move towards and with the light. It is both things, not just how the light falls on the subject. People look good in various directions, so you

look at them and decide what's going to work best. As time goes on, and you shoot Hollywood stars, if the lighting isn't right, you won't work.'

The other magic ingredient of course is being able to connect with the subject, even if there are only a matter of minutes in which to negotiate that relationship.

'The sitter has to respond to the photographer and vice versa. Terry Gilliam was a very generous sitter, always making faces, using his hands. I do a lot of research, no matter how famous people are, because I want to know about their lives. It's not often you become lifelong friends with the person you have photographed but people need to like you if they are going to be photographed by you, even just a bit. At the very least, you mustn't annoy them.' >

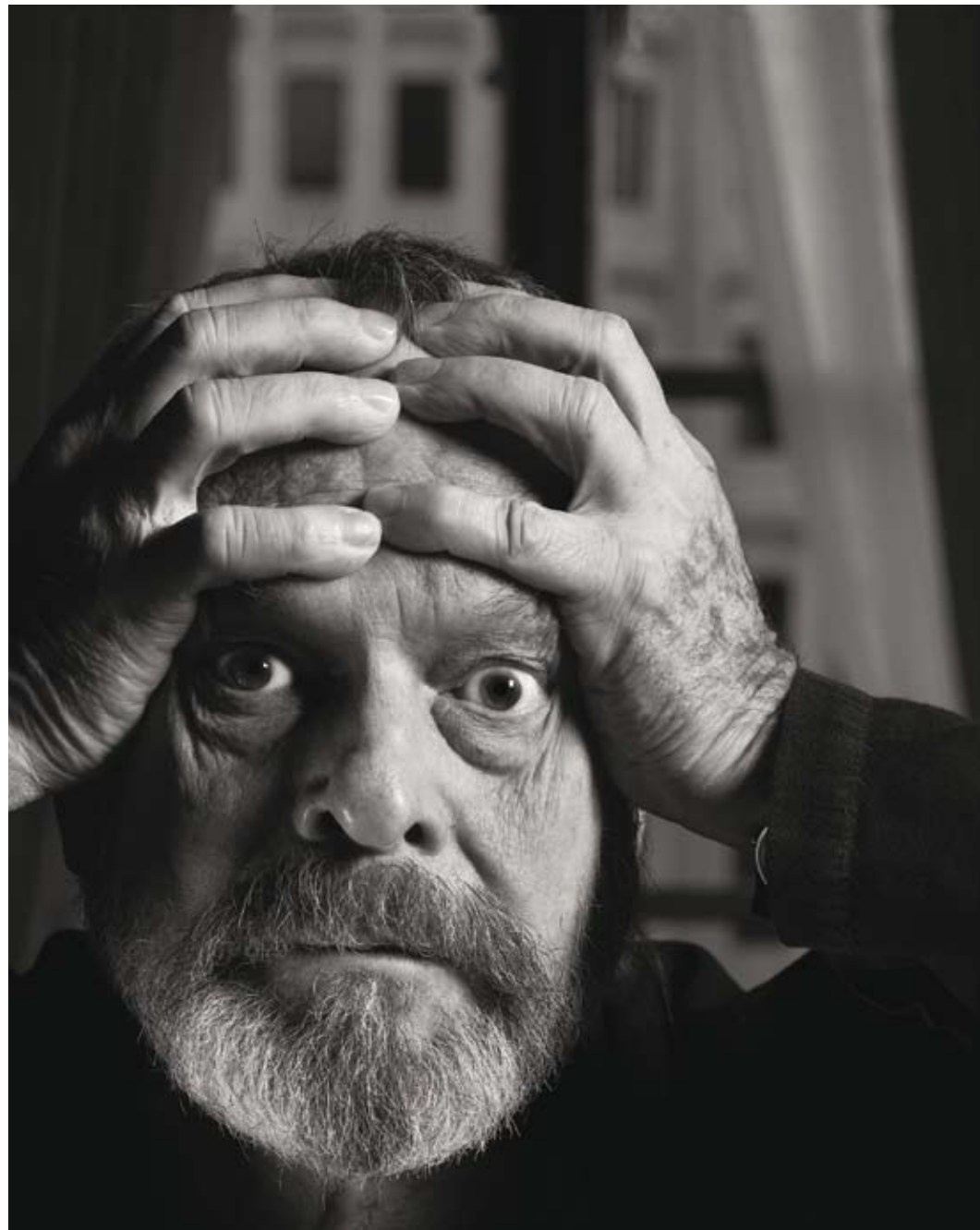
RIGHT
Nick Rowe,
London, 2011



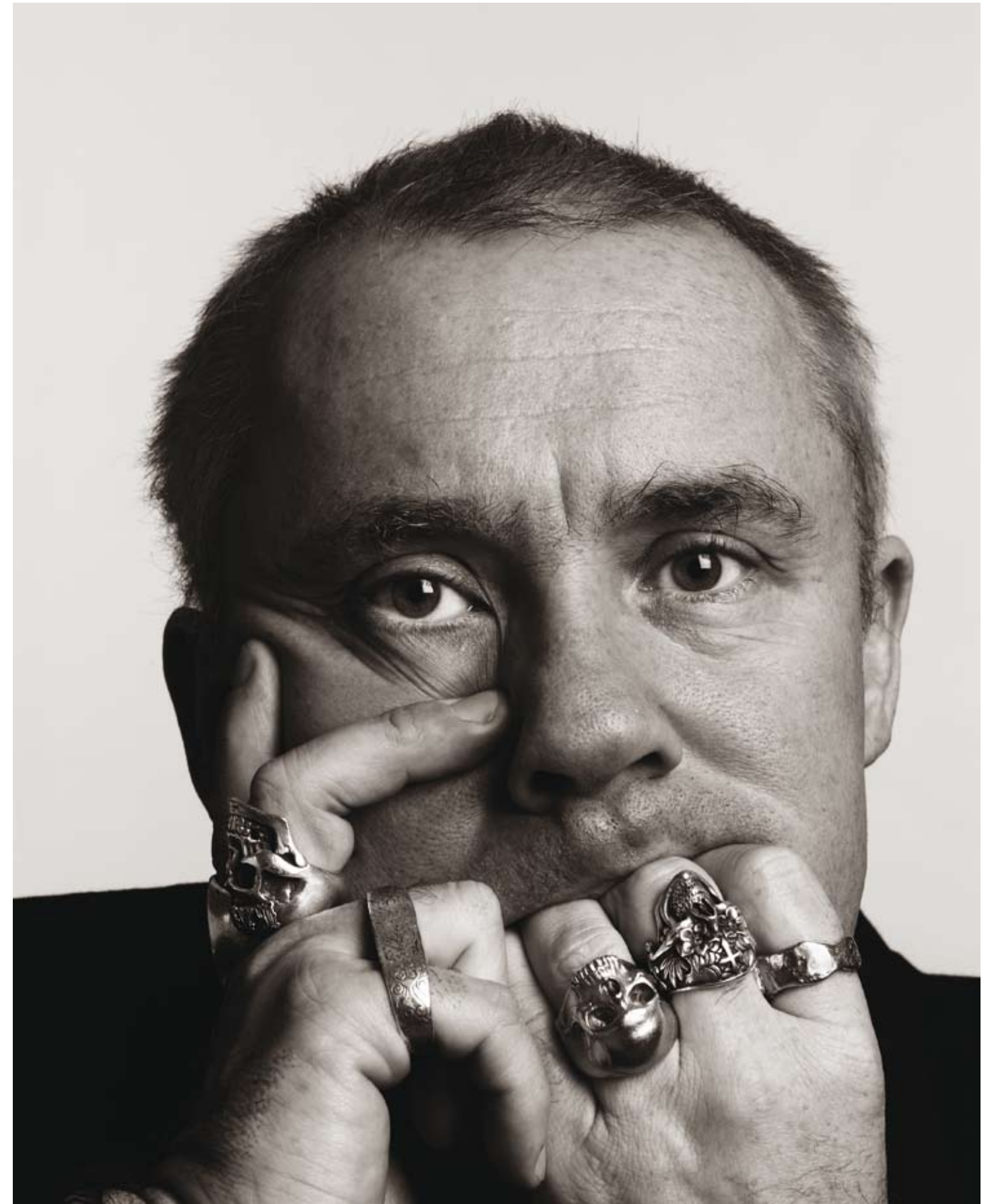
FAR RIGHT
Robert Harris,
Berkshire, 2012



BELOW
Terry Gilliam,
St Pancras Renaissance
Hotel, London, 2011



'People need to like you if they are going to be photographed by you, even just a bit. At the very least, you mustn't annoy them.'



Damien Hirst, at his office, London 2012



Jaymay, London, October 2007

◀ A recent shoot with the artist Billy Childish has proved something of an exception in that a relationship between photographer and sitter has endured, with the two sharing a dialogue about the paintings Childish produces prolifically. Birt hopes to return, and build a more sustained series of portraits with the artist; a method he hopes can be a template for a project he has in the pipeline. The turn to art photography has meant more emphasis on self-generated projects; something a highly successful photographer like Birt has barely had time to think about. He believes in evolving his own practice every half decade, as he did with his move into theatre, which was a gap in his book he wanted to fill.

'You have to make sure your subject matter moves along, trying to be quite catholic about who you photograph, and it makes it more

interesting too. If you look at other photographers who have done their decades and moved on, people like Helmut Newton – whether you love him or hate him is irrelevant – it's impossible to deny he was working so wonderfully well and with great passion until the day he died. People don't realise how hard that is. Then there are photographers who tend to replicate the work they did best and then carry on doing it. I don't want to be in that category; I want to move on.'

When once his ideal subject was Marlene Dietrich, for her perfect beauty, his attention has shifted recently to the more political. His focus is on dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

'I absolutely love his work and everything he stands for. It's dangerous to think this but I think we'd get on really well!'

Let's hope we get the opportunity to find out, on the wall and in print. **B+W**