

# GREG GORMAN

COMEDIE HUMAINE



American Photographer Greg Gorman Born in Kansas in 1949, the photographer Greg Gorman now works at the heart of America's, and the world's media scene: Los Angeles. Here he presents a retrospect of 30 years' work. Except for the frontispiece, these are all black and white photos. Revealing deep-rooted humanity as well as masterly craftsmanship, they attest to the photographer's compassion, empathy with his subjects, irony and playful wit. His earliest work, done in the 1960's, was a stroke of beginner's luck that made him decide to become a photographer. His recent work, by contrast, is distinguished by meticulous attention to planning and executing the prints. The works shown here have been selected on the basis of iconography, that is, they are thematically ordered yet in such a way that backward glimpses

enable us to follow Greg Gorman's development as an artist. Many of the works shown in this anthology date from the 1980's and even more from the 1990's. Starting with early photos that mark Gorman's beginnings as a photographer, such as the untypical snapshot of the young, as yet unformed, Jack Nicholson and the photos taken by Gorman at concerts, the relatively few 1970's photos show a clearly traceable development from snapshot as the quick product of chance to sophisticated compositions reflecting the graphic idiom of classic black and white photography.

Gorman is part of the classical tradition. During the 1970's and 80's, he concentrated heavily on details of facial features like eyes, etc. Dominant motifs like the mouth or the scream pursue us throughout the book. In recent years Gorman has attained the consummate mastery of light and lighting which also distinguishes the studio photography of Horst P. Horst, G. Hurrell, and George Platt Lynes. In Gorman's studio portraits, the play of light lends faces and bodies to ethereal quality as if they glowed from within. His work looks back on a long tradition which has evolved from early 20th century fashion and portrait photography. Gorman does not ask his "fellow players", and this is truly a game played by the photographer and his subjects, to live it up in an extroverted way, as the Dutch photographer Corbijn does. Nor does Gorman, unlike Annie Leibovitz, stage his subjects. They are not searching for a lost identity nor are they building up a tentative new one as permanent mirror fixtures. No, his photographs have the quality - a mark of all great portrait photographs - of allowing the subject to unfold his or her own personality in front of the lens. We should always bear in mind that photography began as alchemy, a magical process. Particularly in the field of portrait photography, where the here and now is caught and transfixed, it has

retained that magical quality. Most of Gorman's subjects are people in the public eye - actors, artists and architects - people in the public at large and the readers of this book have already invested with their own personal idea of them. We experience them only in films and in the icons of photographic illustration. They and their bodies are figments of our imagination in a modern mythology. Photography is the projection of a figure, evoked, it is true, by reality yet, like all photographs, these are, in reality, fiction.

Photography is a medium with its own intrinsic reality beyond the bounds of all discussions of truth and lies. The affinity for photography of those who are active in the related medium of film is typical of photography. Classical in form, Gorman's nudes are informed with a neo-classical aesthetic. These figures move like dancers yet are freed of all meaning. They are sensuous and their sensuality is not devoid of abstraction. They might be reliefs by Canova or Thorwaldsen. The whiteness of their skin is like marble, sculpted by the black of stark shadow. The protagonists of these nude photographs, T. Ward, for instance, feel completely comfortable with nakedness. In Gorman's nude portraits, the dialectical tension between intellect (face) and sensuality (genitals) has been resolved. As for Gorman's iconography, he is perceptibly part of a classical tradition. A case in point is "Aaron, Red Rock". This is a figure of a youth in a squatting pose that is a reference to 19th century art historical tradition and specifically Flandrin. Numerous fin de siecle photographers took it up. A work like "Speedy", too, shows more than a nodding acquaintance with 19th century academies and the Grecism of turn-of-the-century photography. By contrast, Gorman demonstrates a deftly ironical touch capturing the porn star Jeff Stryker, who is legendary for his build. There is certainly much of the traditional face-on portrait here but viewers are expected to imagine the rest, the sexy body. We have to add what is really relevant in other cases, too. Guess the rest and supply it applies to other portraits here as well. The likeness of David Hockney shows the artist with his face turned away from us and yet this, too, is a "portrait" even though the painter's most significant attribute, his eyes, are left to the viewer's imagination.

The sequence of pictures is an androgynous dream, permeated with the popular modern play on sexual identity in the ironical mode. In this selection of his works, Gorman embraces outsiders. Many are friends of his and not all their faces are familiar to the public, for instance the Canadian artist, R.A. Lukacs, whom Gorman confronts with the flamboyant Divine. Pictures of people have been contrasted deliberately in the present book, such as the two great old "ladies" Bette Davis and Quentin Crisp. The photos of the 1990's are brilliant. Here portraits and bodies have been transported from everyday reality to a more elevated and luminous plane. This selection of Greg Gorman's work makes it utterly clear that he sees his protagonists and subjects as players in a contemporary comedie humaine.