

Sandro

FROM THE HEART

BY CLAIRE SYKES

Sandro Miller remembers it well. That day in his studio, a full crew of assistants and Ogilvy & Mather advertising clients were awaiting direction on the next shoot when his phone rang. He had to answer. Hearing his doctor's words, "I took a Mike Tyson punch to the gut," says Sandro, who goes only by his first name. "Cancer? I don't have time for cancer."

That was July 2011. There in Chicago, 34 years into an award-winning career, he had long since arrived just where he wanted, as one of the world's best advertising photographers. Clients like BMW, Dove, Coca-Cola, Nike, *GQ*, *Forbes* and *Esquire* had him shooting big-name CEOs, and famous athletes and actors. As personal projects, he'd photographed renowned Chicago blues musicians and traveled the globe documenting boxing.

For four years, Sandro also had followed bikers to an annual Harley-Davidson rally in North Dakota, making 300-plus portraits of them. A few were featured in one of *The New Yorker's* first pictorials, and many more as *American Bikers* (Te Neues Pub Group, 1998). The book joined others featuring his photos, namely Michael Jordan's *I Can't Accept Not Trying: Michael Jordan on the Pursuit of Excellence* (Harper San Francisco, 1994) and *El Matador: Joselito: A Pictorial Novel* (Charta, 2010), which includes portraits



of the acclaimed Spanish bullfighter. In 1999, the Cuban government invited Sandro down to photograph its athletes, the first U.S./Cuba collaboration since the 1960 trade embargo, which led to his book *Imagine Cuba: 1999–2007* (Charta, 2009).

"I was creating and banking it like never before. My schedule was full, with all these great shoots lined up." And now this — stage 4 neck and throat cancer. "My doctors told me if I made it through, it would be one of the most painful years of my life."

For Sandro, who thankfully did make it through, it was also one of the most life affirming. He continued working during chemo and radiation, thinking hard about what mattered most. "Love became the most important feeling. I loved my wife, my kids, my family harder and deeper," he tells me. "And photographing, which has been the center of my universe, took on new meaning." He still snapped up the high-end commercial work. "But now it had to bring awareness to people's lives and change them for the better." His personal work, for himself, foundations or charities, "had to continue to come from the heart and be of a subject I was deeply connected to or curious about. I knew now that my life wouldn't go on forever, and whatever I did behind the camera had to be fantastic and meaningful and helpful to others."

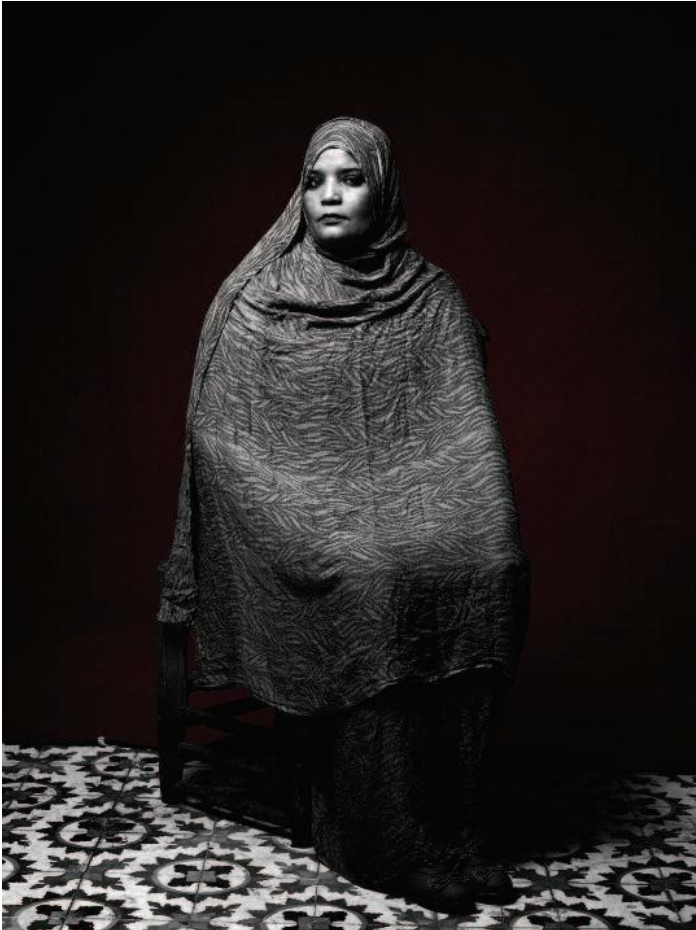


Michael "Biker Mike" and Michelle Hicks, 1973 FLH / 1976 FX Liberty Edition, San Antonio, TX, 1991. From the series American Bikers

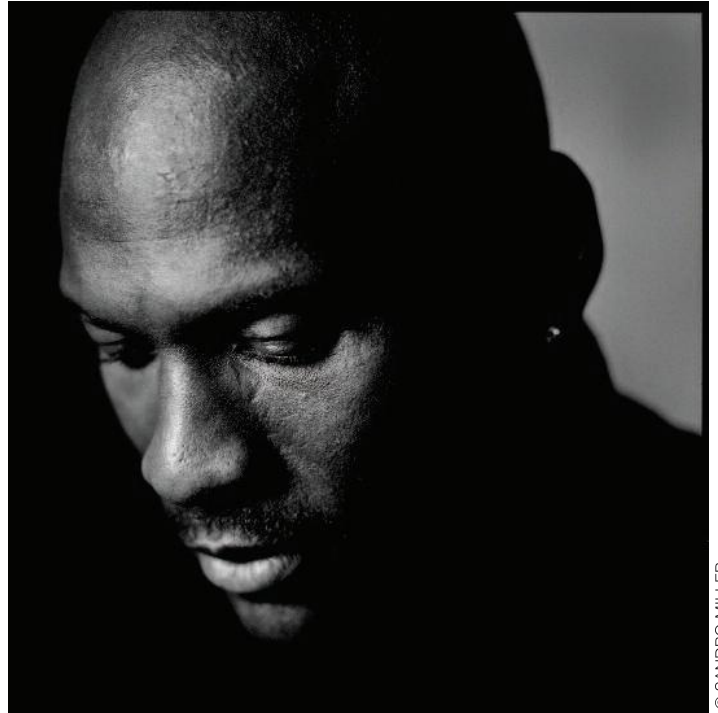
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– Catherine Edelman



Rifkka Rokia, 2013. From the series Eyes of Morocco



Michael Jordan 1994

It has been, especially when it comes to his portraits, for which he is most well known. With all their wrinkles, enlarged pores and scars, the faces in Sandro’s photos tell what’s truest about his subjects. “In the end it’s always about storytelling,” he says. That’s why he generally prefers plain backgrounds. “I try to avoid distractions that take away from my sitter’s eyes, mouth, hands.” He also prefers controlled lighting and says he can use hundreds of different types of lights to light someone a thousand different ways. “Sandro is a master at lighting. His ability to see and understand it is part of what makes him so successful,” says Hollywood-celebrity portrait photographer Greg Gorman.

Even deep in Morocco, no sunlight entered the makeshift studios that Sandro and his crew set up in riads and rented apartments, Moroccan-blanket tents and mud houses. Inspired by Irving Penn’s *Small Trades* and August Sander’s *Face of Our Time*, for 20 days in November 2013 he traveled around photographing 230 local

bakers, carpenters, Gnawa musicians, snake charmers, a fossil-digger, a clown and other tradespeople and nomads in front of a large canvas he had painstakingly hand-dyed blood red (generously paying them). In Photoshop he converted only the people to black-and-white; 30 of them peer out from the pages of his book, *Eyes of Morocco* (Blanchette Press, 2014). The series won him the Lucie Foundation’s 2014 International Photographer of the Year Award, one of dozens of awards he’s received.

“Sandro’s work makes me feel that I am being drawn into the subjects’ worlds or surroundings. I feel like they’re looking directly at me, into me,” says Kim Blanchette of Blanchette Press, the book’s printer, based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

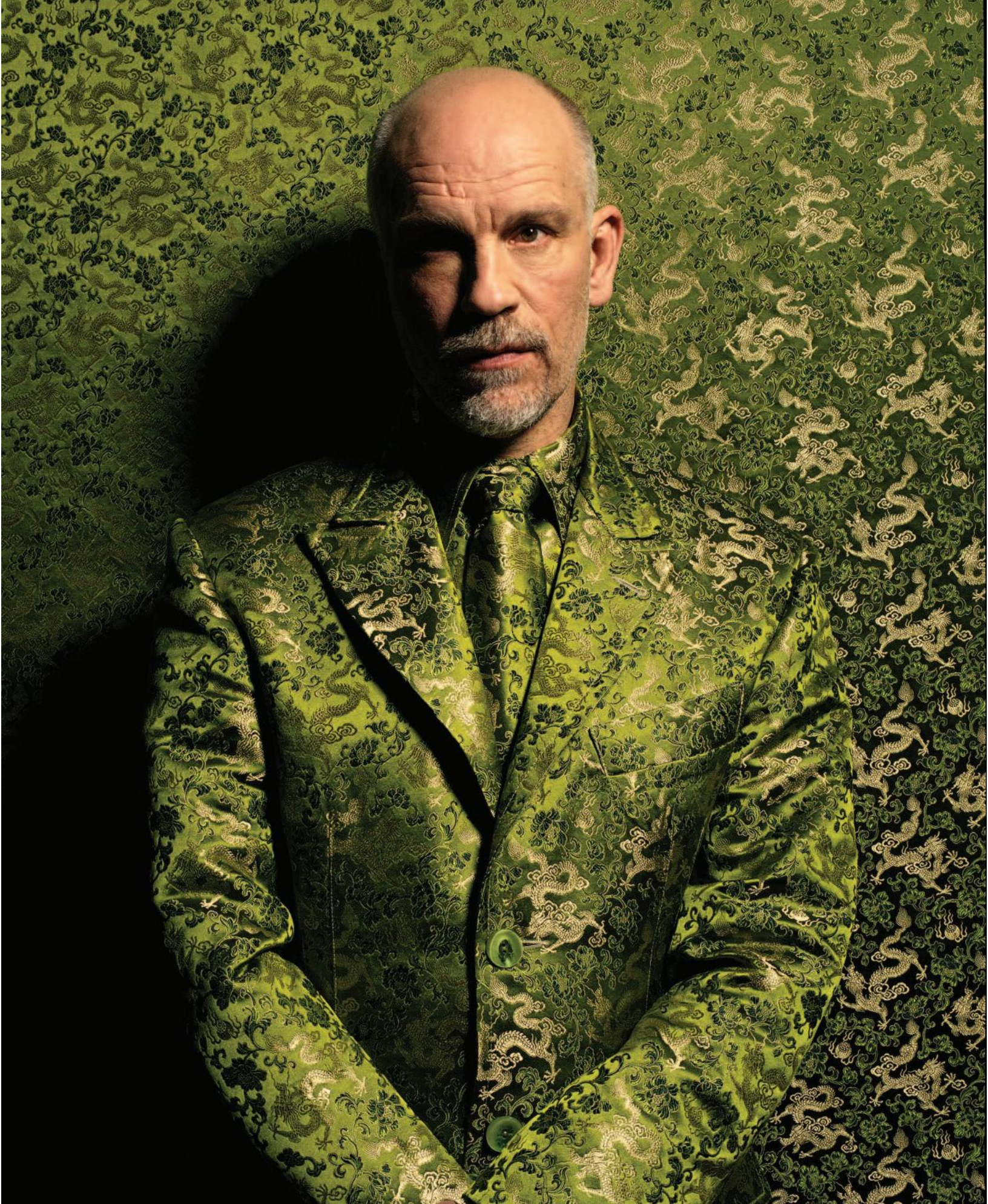
Catherine Edelman, of Catherine Edelman Gallery in Chicago, tells me, “Sandro is one of the most gifted photographers working today. He has an innate ability to connect with all types of people, which results in astonishing, personal photographs. He approaches his subjects with a gentleness and curiosity that come through in the final images, and that’s why he’s so successful. He allows himself to be vulnerable, and he shares his experiences with people. It’s this honesty that his subjects relate to and, therefore, barriers are broken.”

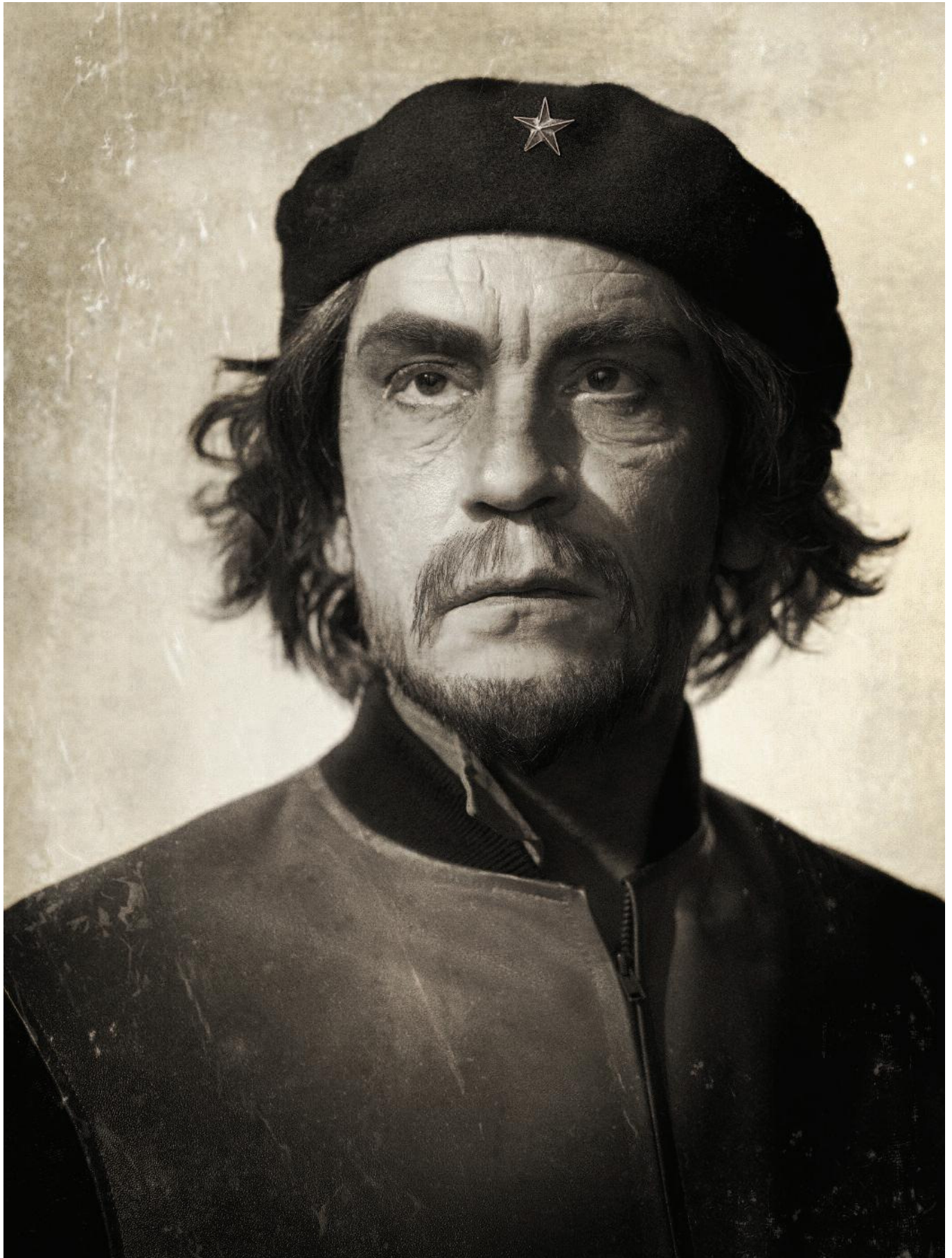
Susan Credle, Global Chief Creative Officer at the international



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Crouching Maia in Mask, 2009. From the book Dance For Life

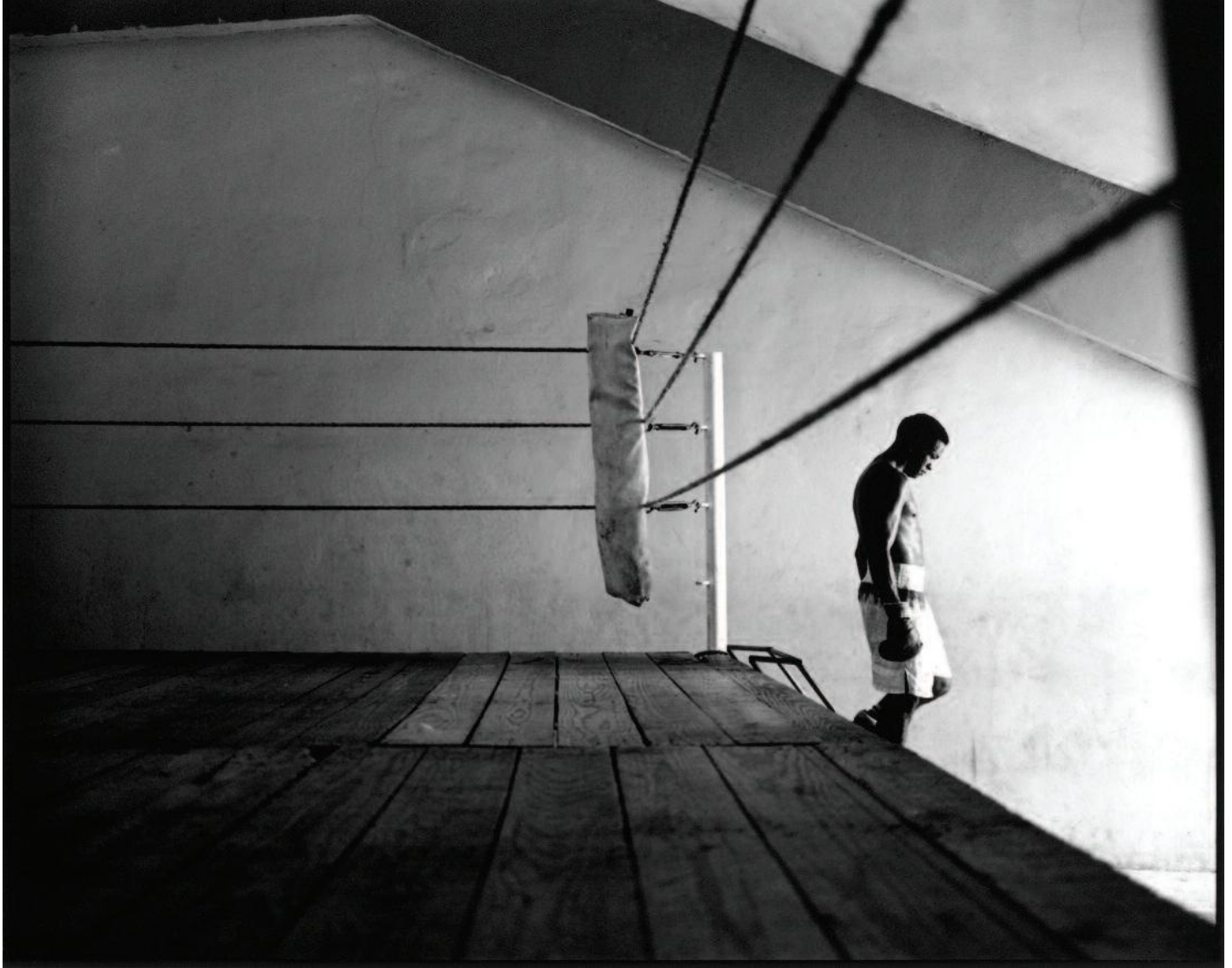




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Opposite: Green Malkovich, 2005. From the book The Malkovich Sessions. Above: Alberto Korda / Che Guevara (1960), 2014. From the series Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich: Homage to Photographic Masters



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Defeated Boxer, Dominican Republic, 2001. From the series Blood Brothers

advertising agency Foote, Cone & Belding, says, “He has this ability to make you feel comfortable, immediately. I felt like I was the most important person in the room and doing everything right. He has a way of pushing you to get what he wants, but there’s this peaceful presence about him.”

Sandro also is known to get right up in someone’s face during a shoot and scream, cry or laugh, daring them “to feel something deep in their hearts,” he says. To coax them, he revisits the turmoil and pain from his childhood.

One of his earliest memories, from age four, growing up in Elgin, Illinois, is the sound of the doorbell and his mother’s loud, chilling scream. His father had been killed in a car accident. The family was already poor, and now his uneducated Italian-immigrant mother, who wasn’t fluent in English, had to raise her three kids alone. Not for long. “She married a man who was the devil’s brother, so brutally violent that the beatings became a part of our everyday lives,” Sandro tells me. “By the time I left home at 17, my heart and soul were that of an aged, well-experienced warrior who had for years carried the burdens of the world on his shoulders.”

His own world shifted during a fifth-grade field trip to the Art Institute of Chicago, his first formal exposure to art. “I became mes-

merized by the paintings. They were all talking to me, looking at me, some scaring me. I just wanted to run out.” Then the kids were steered toward Picasso’s *The Old Guitarist*. Sandro felt sad for him. “I wondered why this painting moved me emotionally, and how could a painting move me at all? It was then that art began to make sense to me. I began to understand movement, emotions, hues, contrast, shadow and light, and composition. A light turned on in my soul, never to be switched off.”

In his teens, he discovered the magazine rack at the neighborhood Jewel supermarket, and in the glossy pages he dreamed of life as a mountaineer or the next Mickey Mantle. “I always had this desire to be something great, I think because of always being told I’d never be anything. Just the opposite needed to occur.” Then the cover of *American Photographer* caught his eye, and inside, black-and-white portraits by Penn. “I remember asking myself, ‘Who are these people? Where did that light come from? Why am I feeling something so strong from looking at them?’ So many questions and only one way to the answer. I must see what Irving saw, feel what he felt and give to others what he gave to me. That was it. Life had a purpose. Let’s get started.” Sandro bought that magazine with Penn’s photos of Picasso and Colette, and carried home with him



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Left: *Melody B. #1*, 2016. Right: *Daja H. #1 (Braids)*, 2017. From the series *My Hair, My Soul, My Freedom*

the “determination to create portraits all over the world and cover cultures from every corner of the earth. I was on fire, burning from the inside out.”

A high school photography class and a Nikon F stoked the flames. So did his photography teachers at Elgin Community College. After studying for only a semester while working for his stepfather’s construction business, he was encouraged to skip the education and go straight for the profession. He started out assisting photographers in the suburbs, doing small-time catalog work for about two years; then Chicago called him. He researched the possibilities, and in 1980, top product photographer David Deahl hired him — to answer the phone, run errands and clean. Soon Sandro became his right-hand man, working 14-hour days six days a week.

“I was this sponge soaking up all the knowledge that I could. I couldn’t shoot enough frames. I couldn’t spend enough time in the darkroom. Photography books became my teachers, and I would study a portrait by Penn for hours — the direction and quality of the light; the composition, mood, the background; the photographer’s hand making a statement in the shot; the secrets from the eyes, the mouth, the eyebrow.”

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He knew New York City and working with one of the “big boys” should be next, but he was now a 23-year-old divorced, single parent to his 11-month-old daughter. Within a year, Sandro had opened his own studio in Chicago, shooting electronics and food products for catalogs. So much money coming in every month made him an excellent provider, but after about three years the work had dug a hole inside him. He filled it with people — portraits of friends; and blues artists John Lee Hooker, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells.

“My studio became a sacred place for me to connect in a loving manner with so many people. Along with being a parent, it was behind the camera that I learned what love and care was all about. The word *empathy* became my motto for being.” Meanwhile, the bikers and boxers, the Cubans and the bullfighter “were about living through my childhood, shooting these school-of-hard-knocks subjects. All have to fight for their right to be somebody and prove something. This helped me move past the anger, fears and insecurities I was holding onto from childhood and raise myself up from its dark hell. Now I felt that I could conquer the world.”

Sandro showed his portfolio to agencies around town and the work rushed in. From now on it was portraits. Knowing that the advertising industry relies on superstar photographers to boost its image, he attached the “SANDRO” brand name to more and more personal work, and he started winning awards.

His advertising photos paid for his personal projects, and the latter freed him to show the raw and gritty. For the first time, in 1994, the industry saw the deglamorized celebrity, in his Nike-ad portrait of Michael Jordan. Sandro had just three minutes to do the shoot. And instead of retouching out the scar under Jordan’s eye, he left it in. The photograph landed on more than 20 magazine covers, catapulting him into the big league with a portrait style all his own.

While recovering from chemo and radiation, he pored over his nearly 1,000 photography books and mused on the masters who had influenced him, such as Penn, Sander, Diane Arbus and Dorothea Lange. He wanted to thank them — by re-creating their iconic photographs. “My hopes were to bring attention to these great photographers, and that people, especially young photographers, would seek out their works,” says Sandro.

He asked Hollywood actor John Malkovich to portray the figures in the photos and called the series *Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich: Homage to Photographic Masters*. What could be a parody in anyone else’s hands, in theirs is a thoughtful and meticulously crafted tribute. “You have to take a second look to see that these aren’t the original photos by the masters who created them,”

says Gorman.

Well, not all of them. How could Malkovich pass as the young girls in Arbus’s *Identical Twins*? As David Fahey, of Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles, says, “So now you have two artists decontextualizing that famous picture and creating something else from it. If it’s strong as an iconic image, it’s twice as strong as something else. The truth can be reproduced in a different way, without needing to be truthful to the original photographer. It makes you re-look at what Sandro and Malkovich are doing and, as a consequence, look at what the original picture that we’ve seen so many times means.”

The two met in 1992 at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre, where Malkovich was an actor and Sandro its publicity photographer. They’ve become dear friends, having worked together on 70 portraits and Sandro’s four short films featuring the actor. Photos and stills from these collaborations, plus 32 images from the *Homage* series, appear in Sandro’s book *The Malkovich Sessions* (Glitterati, 2016), for which he won the 2017 Art Directors Club Photography Book Series Silver award.

In Malkovich’s email to me he says, “We’ve built great trust over those years. Some of the things we’ve done have made a big splash and some probably passed more or less unnoticed, but I’ve always enjoyed the journey with Sandro and his crew, and the destination mattered less. [They] are impeccably well prepared, always, which is both necessary and critical in the kind of projects we try and pull off.”

Sandro spent 18 months researching the 41 photos, tracking down the original prints or books they’re in, if he could. He studied every detail about them, from the film and equipment used to the stories behind the photos to the items and clothing, which his seamstress replicated. Wigs, hairpieces and beards also were custom-made. He hired only the best, including hair stylist and make-up artist Randy Wilder and stylist Leslie Pace.

“The lighting was the hardest, as the system a photographer used decades ago was no longer available. I then had to try to reproduce the same quality of light with modern-day equipment,” says Sandro, who used a digital camera and only minor Photoshop retouching.

Before Malkovich arrived for the six 15-hour days of shooting, Sandro and team practiced pre-lighting and preparing each set (some taking days to set up), leaving six of the most difficult standing. While Malkovich was getting made up and dressed — imagine 400 dead honeybees glued to your body, reenacting Richard

“In the end it’s always about storytelling.” — Sandro

Avedon’s *Ronald Fischer, beekeeper* — he studied the photo tacked on his mirror.

“Once I was on the set,” says Sandro, “I took on the character of the photographer who shot the original and addressed John as the character he was to become. I had studied these photos so deeply that I often knew where and what time of day they were taken, and the conversations between the photographer and sitter. I remember watching John go deep into thought, the shoulders start to move, and slowly the expressions on the face would begin to form like putty. I had never seen anything quite like this, as John, in his mind and body, became Alfred Hitchcock, Truman Capote or Igor Stravinsky.”

As Malkovich put it to me, “It’s interesting to watch how a face and a persona can be adapted, created, transformed, hidden, found, reinvented, reimagined, even re-created. I suppose it sort of reinforced for me that identity is maybe more supple, less concrete than one might imagine.”

Sandro brilliantly captured the identities in his *Homage* series, shown around the world for the past two years, and booked out through 2018 with ten more photos coming. For this work, in 2015 he became the first photographer to win a second Lucie Award.

If anyone could receive a third, it’s Sandro, for his 25 years of photos of Chicago’s leading dancers. They leap, dive and twirl off the pages of his *Dance for Life* (Glitterati, 2016), for the 25th anniversary of Dance for Life Chicago, an annual gala-benefit dance concert. Funds raised, including 100 percent of sales from the book, go toward organizations supporting people with HIV/AIDS and other serious health issues.

“I was always moved by the perfection mentality of dancers and their movements, from the precision of their outstretched fingers to the tension in the soles of their feet, and even the effortless facial expressions,” he says. “Most of the time, these beautiful, perfectly sculpted bodies were in front of my camera naked, exposing every minute muscle that bulged through their skin. They gave my camera the best of what their bodies had to offer, making love through dance as I asked them to jump farther, fly higher, dance harder. The light loved their glistening, sweaty, oiled bodies. Never before had I seen such beautiful light wrap around a subject.”

“These are really intense images of dancers, yet there’s a gentleness to Sandro’s photography,” says Blanchette, who printed this book, too. “He captures the essence of who these people are, beyond what they do as dancers, and that’s what makes this work so strong.”

As much as these photos honor dance, Sandro’s ongoing *My Hair, My Soul, My Freedom* series, he says, “celebrates the diversity,

artistry and power of black women’s hair, and the many ways they embrace their freedom of choice and express their creativity with their hair,” however they want to wear it. Historically, they’ve been forcefully shaved, required by law to cover up, told to unbraid and pressured to straighten. He started this work, in 2016, also because he admires black hairstyles of the past, especially those of Africans enslaved by Europeans.

Sandro asked each woman to share her personal hair story. A past style of hers or one she’d wear today was done up by his hair stylist and makeup artist. He chose the colorful African-print backgrounds based on the shape or color of the hairstyle his sitter wanted for her portrait. The same black skin tone for all “emphasizes the beauty of blackness, avoids skin-color biases and makes the hair the focal point,” he says. The photos will likely become yet another exhibit and book.

“There is nothing worse for me than work on the shelves collecting dust. My goal is to get it out there for people to see and enjoy,” says Sandro. “And I can never sit too long without having one or two projects going on. My eyes and heart are always open for new ideas. I’m always going to galleries and museums, the theater, and music and dance venues.”

He encourages emerging photographers to “get out there and listen, see, feel and do, firsthand. And get off your cell phone. They’re great for selfies, but if you’re going to call yourself a photographer, buy a real camera and make important decisions about lens, shutter speed and aperture. Otherwise, you’re just a button pusher.”

For Sandro, photography has given him an extraordinary life “filled with beauty, and a way to express myself, to feel something in my heart, especially empathy for those in need,” he tells me. “I’ve been blessed with meeting some of the most interesting, successful and enduring people, from Muhammad Ali, Al Pacino and Dennis Hopper, to indigenous tribesmen from Papua New Guinea, to the most beautiful, ordinary folks like most of us. I have learned so much and entered so many different worlds because the camera was my ticket in.”

Sandro is ours. Whether they depict a biker giving the finger, a snake wrapped around a Moroccan’s neck, Malkovich being anyone but Malkovich or dancers hurling the impossible, his photos pull us into whole other lives, compelling us to imagine what they must be like and making us think more deeply about our own. ▲

Claire Sykes is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her articles appear in Communication Arts and dozens of other magazines, as well as on American Photographic Artists’ website. She also serves on the Exhibition Committee of Portland’s Blue Sky Gallery.