

ARTS CORNER

Dermatology and Photography

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I suppose any optimistic person with a positive outlook on life can come to consider their line of employment as a stroke of luck rather than a divine punishment. I often think this way, and, moreover, consider dermatology one of the best specialties to which a doctor can dedicate his or her time. Firstly, because it is one of the most versatile, having both medical and surgical aspects, while also allowing flirtation with pathology, microbiology, internal medicine, psychiatry, and even research, if so desired. But it is also a specialty which offers opportunities for advancement toward a special understanding of art and literature; something I believe is demonstrated by this section of *Actas Dermosifiliográficas*.

Film and photography, amongst other genres, now rank—with full rights and on the basis of their own merits—alongside the classic fine arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, and recital.

Those of us who consider photography both a visual record of reality and an art form can approach the subject in 2 ways. As with a painting, a sculpture, or an opera, if our knowledge of the subject in question is limited, we can at least say whether or not we like it, which is something in itself. But if we have greater knowledge, our approach can be more intellectual, and we can gain greater enjoyment.

As dermatologists, we use photography to collect clinical images of our patients to different ends,¹ and the use of these pictures is just as important as any clinical history or other complementary studies. Hence, I feel it is essential for dermatologists to know how to take good medical photographs of their patients. My interest in photography was born of my perceived need to study the subject in order to complete my training as a dermatologist. The knowledge I have acquired as a result has allowed me to approach photography in a more intelligent manner and, I think, given me a greater capacity to enjoy it. For years, this has led me to visit every photography exhibition I have come across along the way.

In 2002 the Fundació la Caixa in Barcelona and Madrid showed a series of photographs entitled *In the American West, 1979-1984*. It was also possible to see these photographs in Granada in an exhibition organized by the local authorities.³

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The series was very interesting and included portraits, mostly black and white, showing Americans from the western United States in their natural surroundings. Alongside their artistic aspect, the photographs also constitute a very interesting record of American society of the time and place. They portray a series of characters we recognize as representative of the tough underbelly of the western states. Images that imply far more than they show, produced with perfect technique.

Two photographs in the exhibition—which also featured in the diptych announcing the show—showed portraits of people with illnesses all dermatologists know well. The most striking photograph is that of a bee-keeper with alopecia areata universalis (Figure 1). He has the characteristic look of all alopecia areata sufferers, which grants him an air somewhere between the enigmatic and the aggressive. The strangeness of his appearance demonstrates the importance of hair to the human perception



Figure 1. Bee-keeper with alopecia areata universalis, by Richard Avedon.

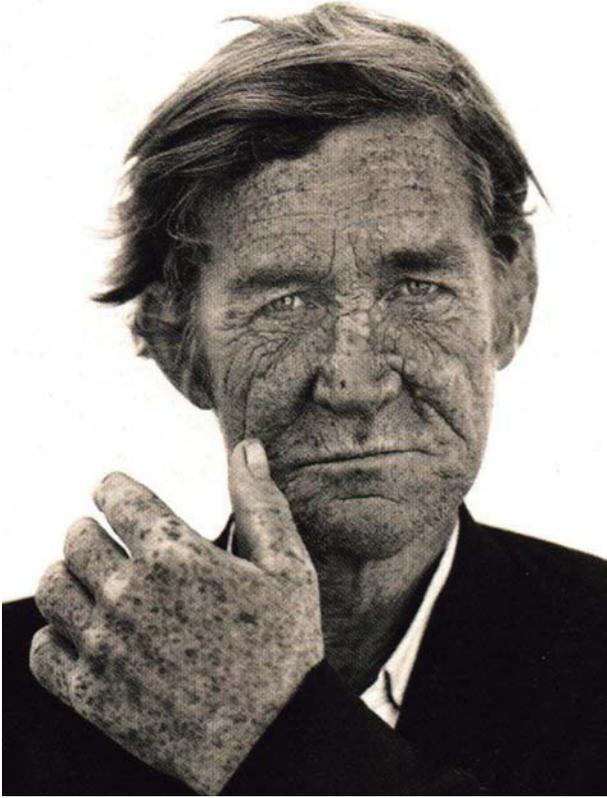


Figure 2. Drifter with actinic damage, by Richard Avedon.

of other people, and where such baldness can lead to rejection and an impoverished quality of life.

Another photograph shows the portrait of a drifter with very serious actinic damage in the form of lentigines, actinic keratosis, and deep wrinkles on his face and the back of his hands (Figure 2). This is the sort of actinic damage we often see in our practices, and this photograph invites us to reflect on how lucky we are with the quality and universal accessibility of our public medical services, compared with the fundamentally private medical systems of the United States. The drifter in the photograph surely had no access to treatment for skin disease.

The photographer, Richard Avedon (New York 1923-San Antonio, Texas 2004), was an American primarily known for his career in high fashion photography for magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Egoïste*, and other current affairs publications like *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Newsweek*.⁴ He worked along with George

Hoyningen-Heune, Cecil Beaton, Edwin Blumenfeld, Irving Penn, William Klein, David Bailey, and Helmut Newton to elevate fashion photography to an art form, working for various fashion houses, including, most notably, Versace. It is likely that his work in fashion photography guaranteed him the income he needed to develop the other aspects he explored in various exhibitions and books that highlight the vast contrast between glamour and reality. This section of his work includes his outstanding studies of the Vietnam War, the related anti-war movements, and the civil rights movement between 1963 and 1970 in the southern United States.⁵

Although art exhibitions are ephemeral displays, we can enjoy all the work of this artist through catalogues from shows or in the many books which have been produced. A year after his death, a foundation was established in his name (www.richardavedon.com), to preserve, study, and market his work and his books—books which can also be found in most specialist photography bookstores.

As I mentioned before, any form of art can be enjoyed when we approach it from an uninformed point of view, simply by saying whether or not we like it. I confess that I am absolutely ignorant of music, and I can only say whether or not I like such and such an opera, symphony, or song. However, with photography, my deeper knowledge grants me a different, more intelligent, approach, which I believe affords me greater intellectual satisfaction. I urge you all to take an interest in photography and to make the most of the professional knowledge you have—or should have—in order to enjoy it. While expanding your understanding of dermatology, it will also provide frequent surprises just like the one I have told you about.

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