

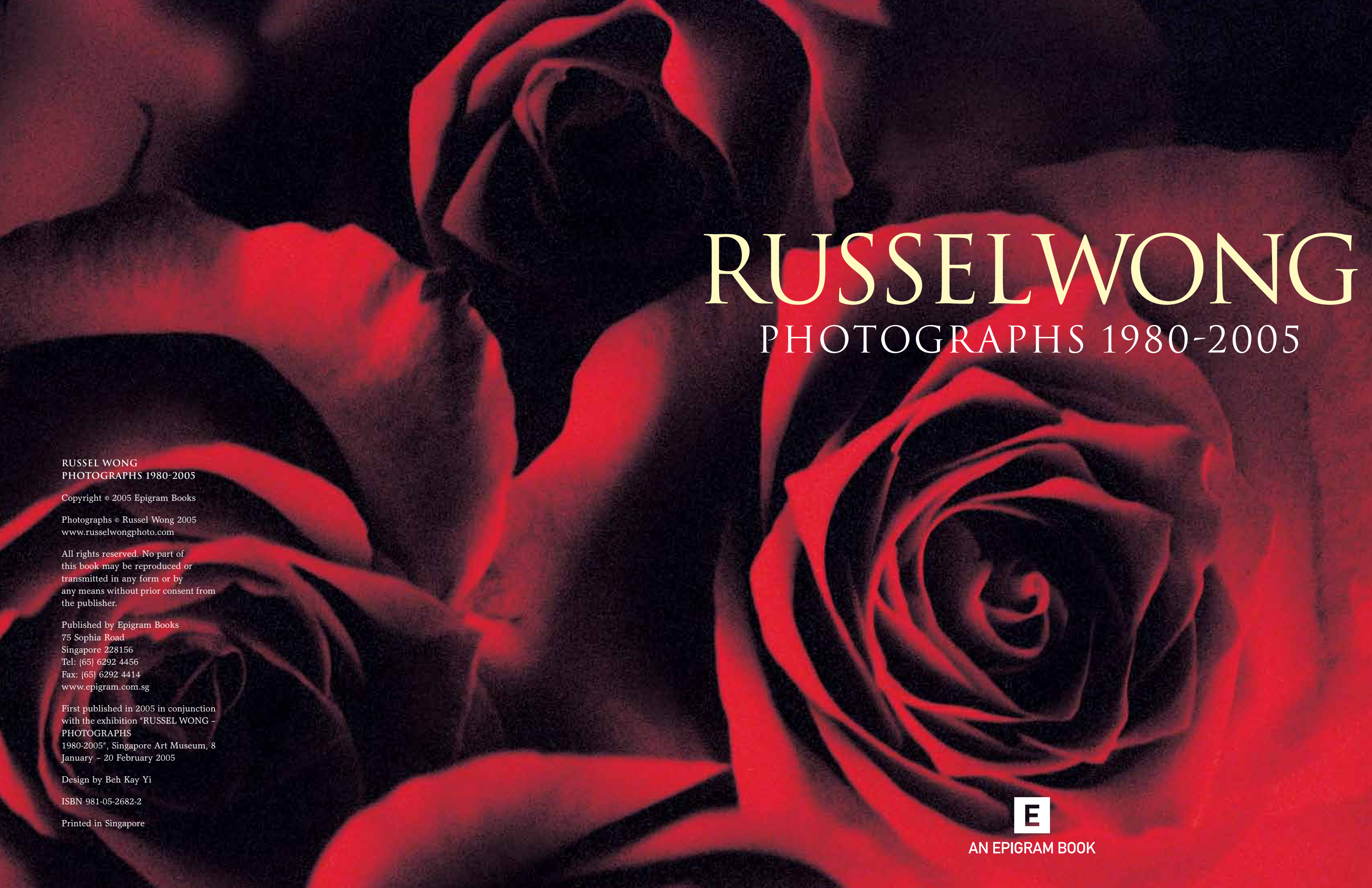


RUSSEL WONG

PHOTOGRAPHS 1980-2005

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AN EPIGRAM BOOK



F O R E W O R D

The Singapore Art Museum is proud to present Russel Wong's solo exhibition. This exhibition is significant on two levels. As the museum's first exhibition for a Singaporean photographer, Russel's name comes naturally to mind. Noted for his singular style, he has long been acclaimed as the photographer of choice amongst celebrities who range from prime ministers to Hollywood superstars. Few in Singapore can match his consistency and dedication, in a career which has seen him working steadily at his practice since the age of 19. From his first break with the American publication *Track & Field News*, Russel has gone on to work for a slew of international publications, winning many awards for his various projects and commissions.

In a way, this exhibition also marks a high point in the continued growth of photography as a serious art form in Singapore. In recent years, photography galleries and magazines have taken root in Singapore, signalling an active interest and demand for such works. In addition, few can fail to notice that our young photographers have also been winning international acclaim for their work, particularly in the field of fashion photography.

In a parallel development, commercial success has also been accompanied by artistic acclaim. The last two years have seen prestigious awards, such as the Singapore Cultural Medallion and the Phillip Morris ASEAN Art Awards, being conferred on our local photographers, marking a watershed of sorts, in the recognition of photography as an art form within Singapore.

Hence, it should come as no surprise that the Singapore Art Museum has chosen to open 2005 - Singapore's 40th anniversary - with a show that honours one of our best home-grown talents. We would like to thank Russel for sharing his works with us. Apart from his celebrated portraits, this exhibition will also showcase his hitherto lesser-known portfolio of still-life compositions, nudes, landscapes, and conceptual pieces.

A show like this would not be possible without the enthusiastic support of friends and partners and we would like to thank everyone involved, especially curator Lindy Poh, for their generosity and kind assistance. - KWOK KIAN CHOW, DIRECTOR, SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM



REFLECTIONS

by
JOAN CHEN

It was during the Singapore Film Festival in 1989 that I first met Russel Wong. I was sitting with some friends in the Somerset's Bar at the former Westin Plaza hotel (now Raffles The Plaza) when he walked over from an adjacent table and handed me his business card. On the card was the black and white photograph of Robert Downey Jr - the first of many portraits by Russel which I would come to admire. He politely introduced himself and asked if he could photograph me when he came to Los Angeles in a few weeks. I said that I would call him.

In my profession, I encounter many people who hand me their cards. I am naturally shy and had never called any of them back. When I returned to LA and was unpacking my luggage, Russel's card happened to fall out of



the suitcase, and Robert Downey Jr's melancholy eyes stared up at me. Something sparked in me and to my

surprise, I called the number on that card. Later, we did a photo session in Brentwood, LA. One of the shots became the poster for his first exhibition. This was the first of our many collaborations.

Over the years, we have done photo sessions for magazines such as *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue* and *TIME*. We have worked together in Los Angeles, Singapore, Phuket, Shanghai, San Francisco and New York. The photo shoots were always inspired, and he always knew how to show my best side. But what I remember the most were the snapshots - the easy laughter and the fun we had in all those places.

Although Russel and I grew up in different worlds, we both share a common passion for food. There was no time too late or too early, no place too far or too inconvenient to find something we craved. I remember calling Russel at ungodly hours because of jet lag, and he would be happy to go out for sweet, soft bean curd with me. After inhaling a few bowls of bean curd, we would go to the fruit stands and get Pakistani mangoes. If I had the good fortune of being in Singapore on a Sunday, I would always be a guest at his mother's house for the world's most delicious laksa. When Russel came to photograph me in Phuket during the filming of *Heaven and Earth*, we went deep sea diving and caught two monstrous fish. Nothing beats having fresh sashimi right on the boat.

Our professional relationship has become a great friendship. When I was struggling through the difficult process of fundraising for my directorial debut, *Xiu Xiu, The-Sent-Down-Girl*, he introduced me to potential investors in Singapore. When I directed *Autumn In New York* for MGM, he came on assignment for *TIME* magazine to generate publicity for me and the film. When he learned that I was looking for topics for my next film, he called to tell me the family saga of a neighbour – a story he thought would make a good film. His generosity in friendship, his enthusiasm for life,

and his genuine interest in people make Russel an extraordinary human being as well as an extraordinary photographer.

No matter how stylised or how simple his shots are, they always feel authentic and alive. His sincerity and confidence put his subjects at ease and inspire them to be the best for him. His lens is able to capture not only their physicality, but also the essence of their character. When he shot Wynton Marsalis, he talked about how the trumpeter's soul stirring music had influenced his life. When he shot Zhang Yimou, he talked about what a visual feast the filmmaker had created in his new film. Russel genuinely appreciates the unique and admirable qualities in each of his subjects. And most of all, no assignment is ever just another job.

I have modelled for many distinguished photographers in my life, but the only photograph of myself that I display in my house was shot by Russel. In the photograph I am standing in full profile before a spray of lush tropical leaves. I am preening, but reserved at the same time – the way I understand myself to be. Somehow he made my neck look a graceful foot long. I have always wondered how he did this. Perhaps it was because he told me that this was going to be the last shot and tempted me with the promise of shaved ice with red beans?

I am so glad I picked up that phone and called Russel in 1989.



ON BOTH SIDES OF THE CAMERA

The legendary celebrity-photographer the late Richard Avedon [1923-2004] had once sharply noted 'my portraits are more about me than about the people I photograph'. This observation from the towering figure who chiselled his reputation on photographing the celebrated and the powerful suggests that the portrait-image could reveal as much about the photographer as it does the sitter-subject – or more. Russel Wong [b. 1961-] who has been christened the Richard Avedon of Asia by the popular media, wields an inventory of celebrity portraits that would exhaust most name-droppers. Joining the tradition of celebrity photographers like Avedon, Annie Leibovitz [1949-] Helmut Newton [1920-2004] and Herb Ritts [1952-2002], Wong's practice ruptures the slender line between celebrity photography and fine art. Whilst some critics banish this genre as a soft art form shaped by the pressures and demands of celebrity publicity machines, most agree that this species of photography remains one of the most potent and most difficult to commandeer. It is one thing to wrestle for access to celebrities and quite another feat to persuade strong self-willed celebrities who are well-acquainted with camera tactics to trust if not share, one's vision.

If we are prompted by the observation that the photographer is himself revealed in his portraits of other people, crucial aspects of Wong's approach can be discerned in his images. Without doubt, it is Wong's prescient understanding and subtle manipulation of the viewer's expectations – particularly of public icons – that shapes his portrait compositions and gives

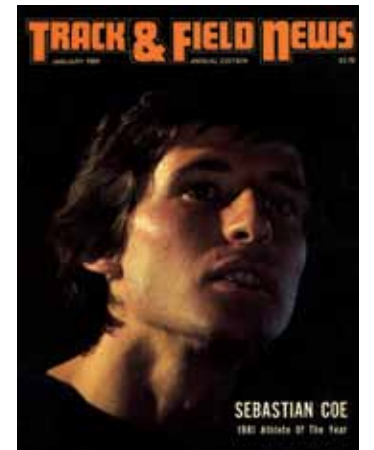
them their visual edge and power. What makes Jackie Chan 'Jackie Chan'? Or contradicts and subverts such expectations? Brandishing over two decades of iconic imagery in his portfolio, Wong has coupled his familiarity with the voyeuristic psyche with an uncanny knack for picking up on his subject's attributes in their public and private personae. This capacity to observe how life shows up on the face and in the way the body moves and then to condense this into a single frame – defining and immortalising the subject – is one of Wong's strengths. It is



this capacity that produced the marvellous portrait study of Isabella Rossellini's fragility and incandescent presence, of John Galliano's outrageous sense of fun, Robert Downey Jr's disarming quirky sense of style, or that gave us the extraordinary *TIME* magazine cover of action superstar Jackie Chan, cheekily grinning in a chair set up in the middle of a traffic-packed Nathan Road in Hong Kong.

It is also apparent that Wong demonstrates a clear emotional generosity and sensitivity to his subjects' own views of themselves. It is an elusive quality that cannot be explained or reduced to technical virtuosity or fortuitous access to the celebrities. Joan Chen was incisive about Wong's sympathies with her own self-perceptions when she wrote about Wong's portrait of her: "I am preening, but reserved at the same time – the way I understand myself to be." ['Reflections' in this publication]

Wong catapulted into a photographic career quite unexpectedly when his photograph of world record miler Sebastian Coe made the cover for *Track & Field News* – the American publication nicknamed the Bible of the Sport. Wong was then 19 years old, and a business undergraduate at the University of Oregon. A self-professed 'crazy track nut', Wong had cycled to a Sunday morning talk in the park by Coe, shooting him on a roll of Kodachrome and a \$160 manual Topcon camera – a 'going-away' gift from his father, who was himself, a fervent amateur photographer. Wong's initial works, comprising numerous sports event assignments were in fact, characterised by a kind of spontaneous, adrenaline-charged quality – before the stylisation and more rigorous compositions of the mid 1980s. Even so, Wong's vigilance and homing instinct for a gripping or dramatic scene was evident, bearing out the popular belief that one can always learn technique but not how to look or where to look.



Several pivotal shifts in Wong's practice occurred after his enrolment in the prestigious Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles in 1984 for a fine art degree (Photography). There he encountered tutors and mentors whose personal charisma and professional triumphs exerted great influence over his formative development. In his second year, Wong made a 4-month 'immersion trip' to Milan, Italy – 'the Mecca, where all aspiring fashion photographers go to, and where all the big-name photographers pay their dues' [Russel Wong,

interview 2004]. Wong learnt the language, ate the food and hung out at the Italian fashion cafes, like The White Bear, where models and photographers congregated. Most importantly, his photographic style and approach changed radically, and these shifts were not lost on his mentors. Amongst these was Paul Jasmin [1935-], the renowned fashion designer and photographer who worked with *Vogue* and *Interview*. Jasmin introduced Wong to his agent who also represented Herb Ritts. The agent subsequently became Wong's first agent in his career – opening the doors to major magazine assignments. Another seminal figure was Antonio Lopez [1943-1987] the flamboyant Puerto Rican fashion illustrator noted for his portraits of Jerry Hall, Jessica Lange and Grace Jones. Lopez, a cult figure in the circles, had in the 1970s, run a Paris salon with Karl Lagerfeld for fashion celebrities. Lopez noted Wong's work and connected Wong to the remarkable photographer Art Kane [1925-1995] who had photographed the Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin and Bob Dylan amongst others.



Antonio Lopez

"Antonio said, 'Go to New York. I will help you!' He invited me to his New York studio in Union Square and he called up a bunch of photographers. At the point when Antonio introduced me to Art Kane, I was ready to be an assistant, intern, anything. I didn't really care, because I just wanted to see what it was like to do real photographic work in a New York loft. I would have waited tables, carried the photographer's lights, made coffee... you name it. But it turned out that I didn't have to do any of that. I don't know if this is good or bad but I didn't have to assist any photographer on my way up. They liked my work, and it all began." [Russel Wong, interview 2004]

By the late 1980s, when Wong returned to Singapore to launch his photographic studio – Russel Wong Photography – he had already cultivated a signature style. Seldom indulging in melodramatic or complicated sets, Wong believed in the power of the simple gesture, often adopting a modernist, minimalist aesthetic, except where detailing was integral to the subject's persona. The success of Wong's studio saw the influx of several huge advertising accounts and international shoots including more than 10 covers for *TIME* magazine, and assignments for *Fortune*, *Elle*, *GQ*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. Riding the surge of interest in Asia, Wong's studio honed its reputation for delivering a distinctive

branding and artistic interpretation of the elusive 'Asian identity' for its clients. Not surprisingly, these directions exposed Wong's studio to other creative individuals and initiatives that were advancing similar pursuits, and who sought kindred collaborators. In a series of milestone projects, Wong became the first and only photographer to have shot the publicity portraits for a succession of the most critically and commercially successful Asian films in cinematic history. Wong's exquisite and staggeringly visual publicity images of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers* became the visual focus and heart for the publicity blitz that supported the phenomenal success of these award-winning Asian films.

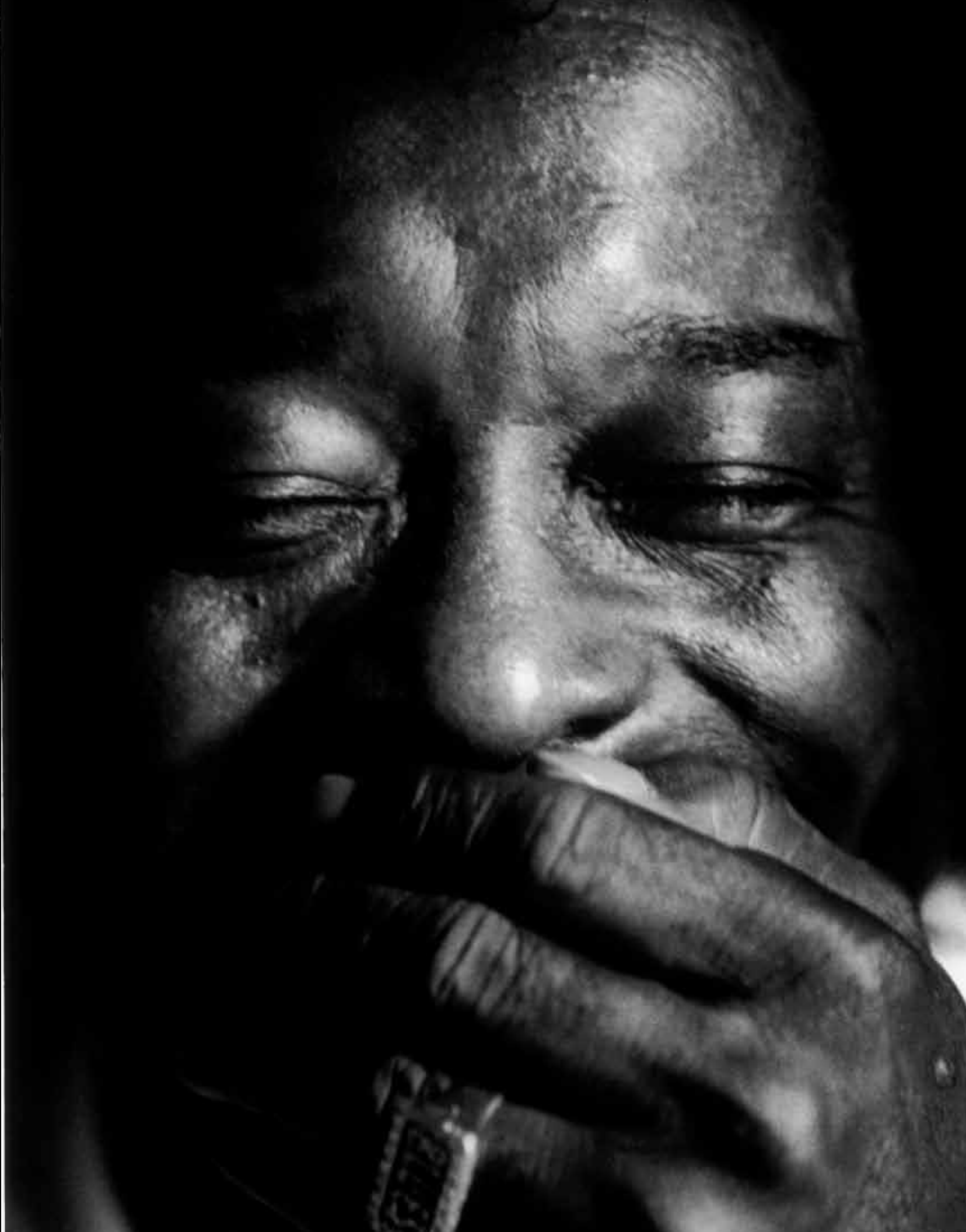
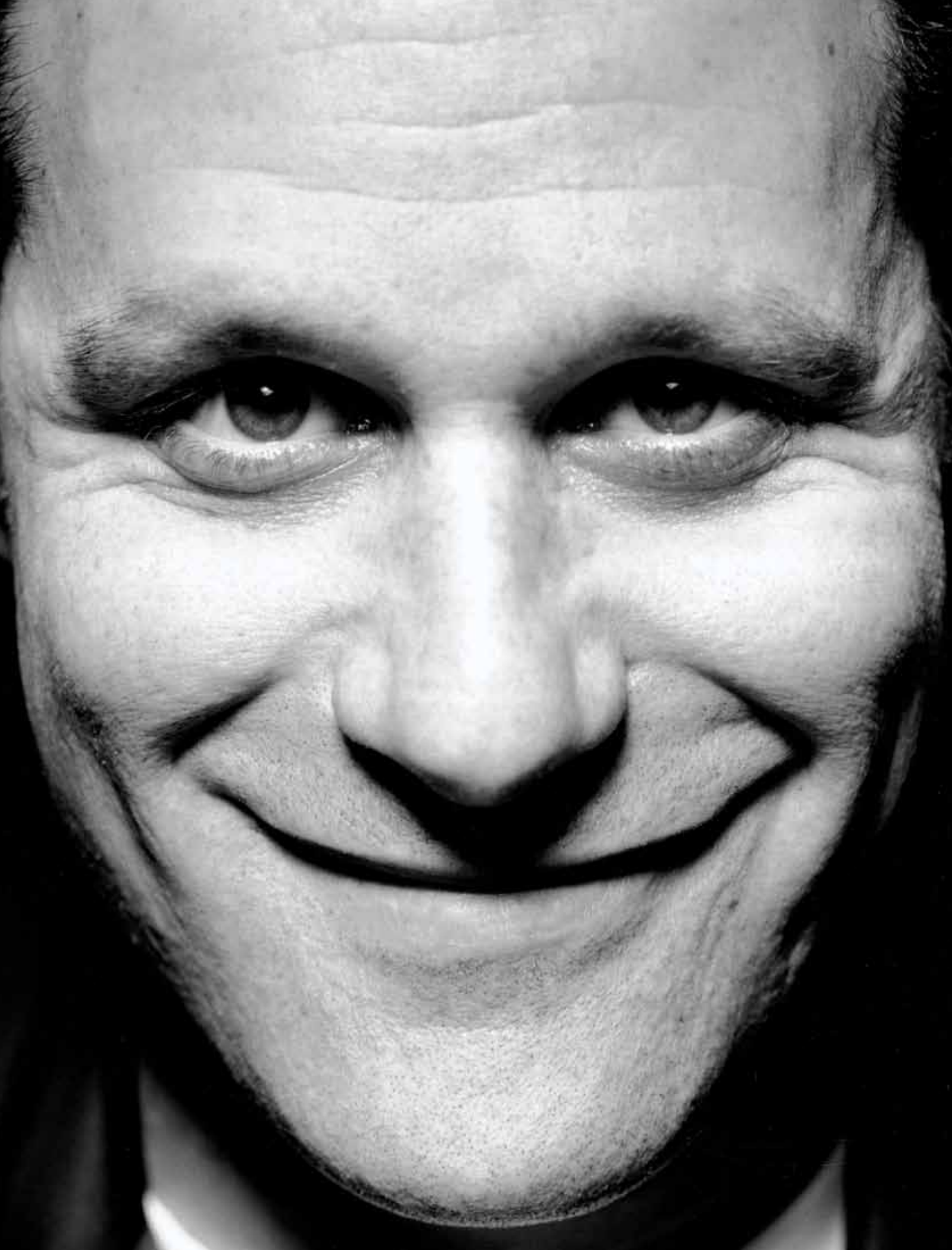
Wong's most recent artistic works, produced with the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) continues to address the notion of the Asian identity. These mixed media prints inspired by Asian pop icons, feature Wong at his most self-knowing and self-reflective in addressing the celebrity phenomena. These works are tinged with irreverence, acknowledging the existence of the immense star-making machinery that engineers identities and that operates to sustain celebrity culture. Whilst acknowledging the shift in sensibility, Wong maintains that certain aspects of his creative process are not variable – the element of control, the force of character not to be overawed by celebrity subjects and most of all to 'have that composition in your head, and know above all else how you are going to light it. And it won't matter if there is total chaos around you... you don't lose that image in your head. You keep the eye on the ball'. [Russel Wong, interview 2004]

A broad look at the arc of Wong's career and development over 25 years discloses a practice that is marked by a confluence of opportunities (some fateful, others self-initiated), resourcefulness, obsessive drive and focus, a lethal combination of impatience, tenacity and relentlessness, superb chemistry with celebrity subjects, media savvy and a broad philosophical view of creativity as a 'total commitment to the craft' – explaining in part why people see a celebrity on both sides of the camera.

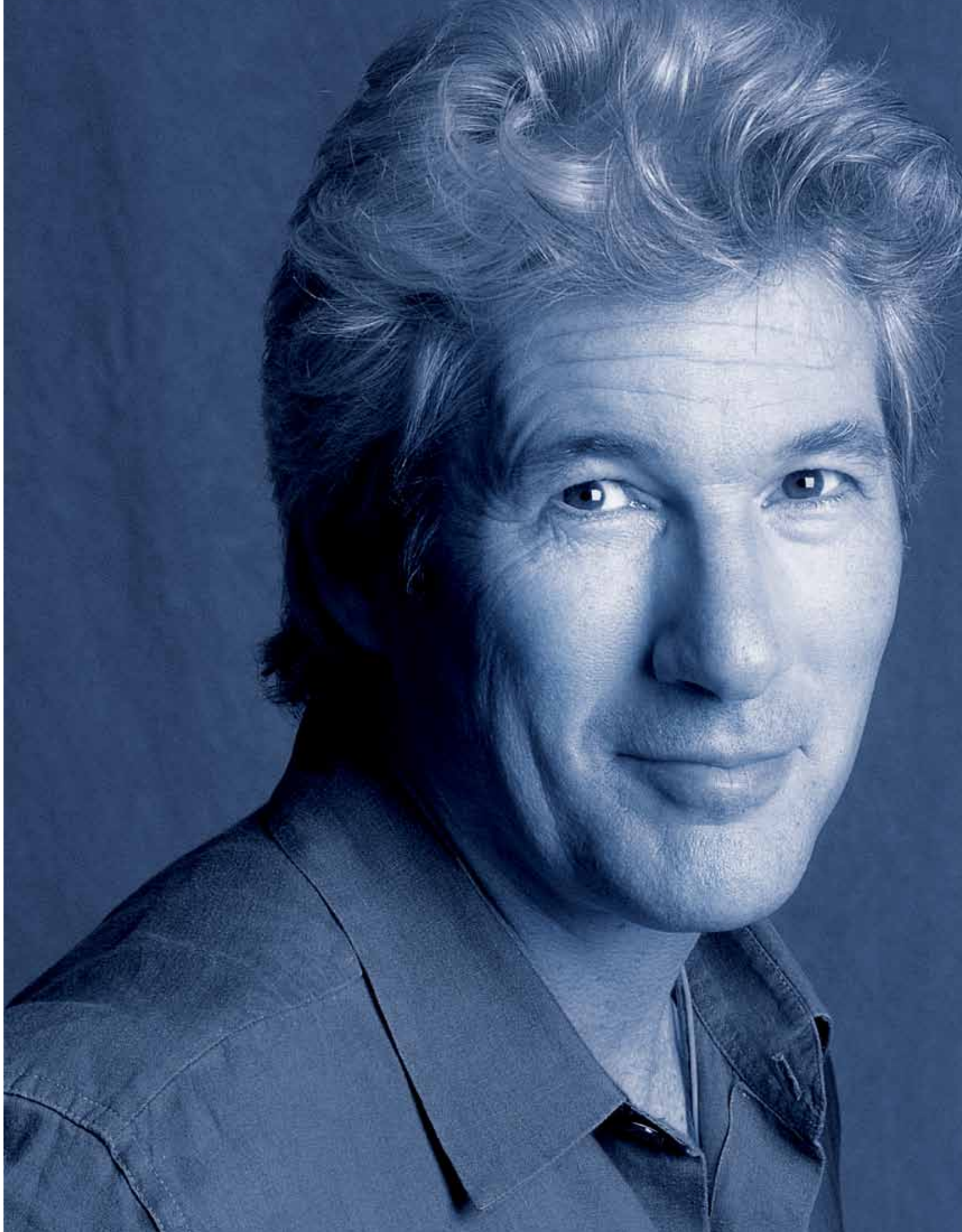
Lindy Poh is a writer, curator and legal partner in Balkenende Chew & Chia, specialising in intellectual property, culture and entertainment law. Her art curatorial and consultancy interests include photography, corporate art and art education.









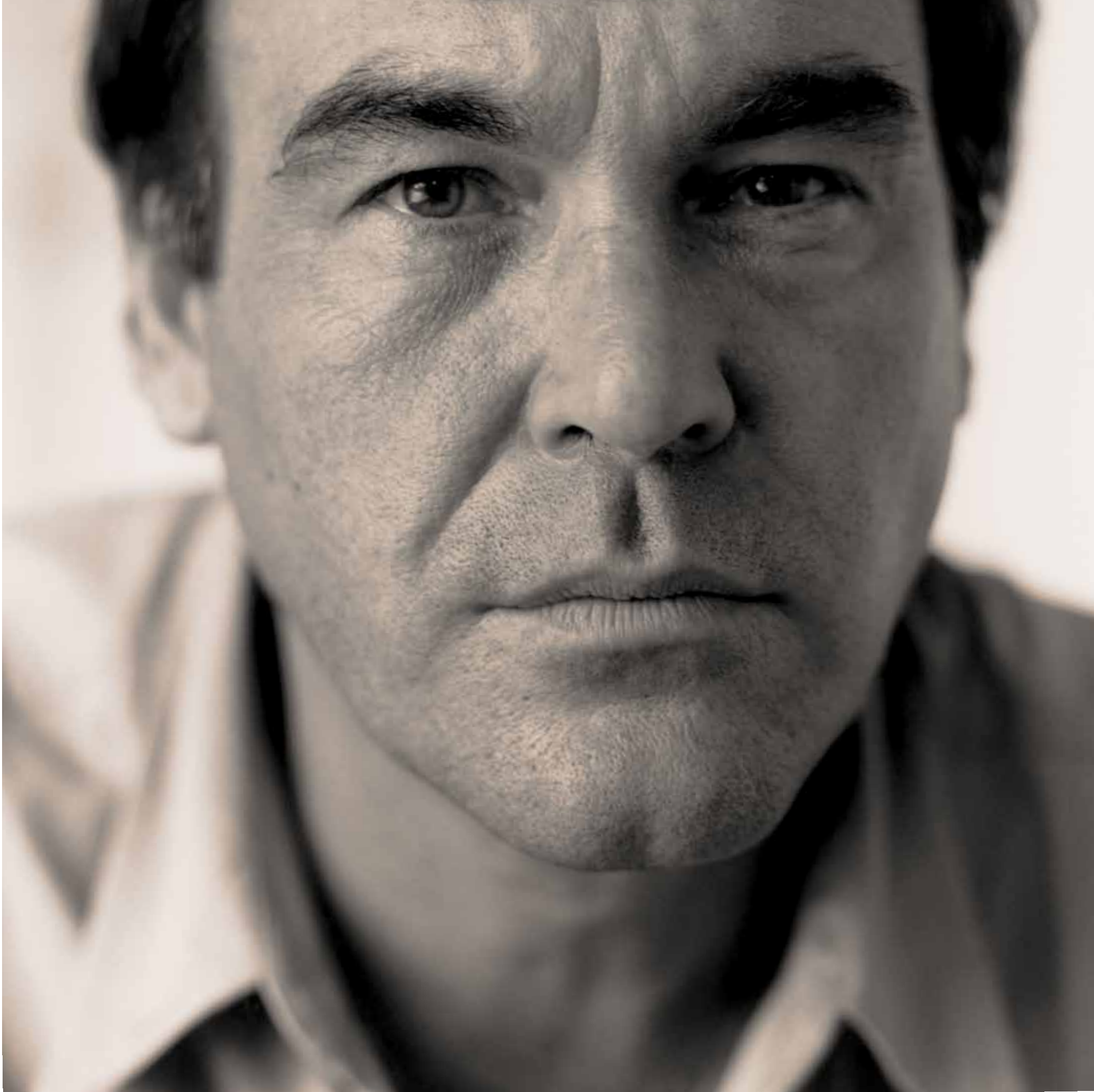












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