

# marieclaire

## Candid Photos

By Vanessa Kindersley | 2009

Photographer Martin Schoeller, a former assistant to Annie Leibovitz, has taken some of the world's most honest portraits, convincing countless celebrities to release his images without retouching.

It's a startling image. Christine Roth's blue eyes stare apprehensively out of the frame: her bleached hair framing a pretty face. She's wearing lipstick and a red sequined bikini, but the bulging muscles in her arms are grotesque and exaggerated, her veins visible, straining beneath taut, spray tanned skin. It's an unexpected picture, shocking even, but ultimately honest - a typical Martin Schoeller portrait.

Impressed by their extraordinary appearance and "fascinated that anyone would want to do that to themselves", the New York-based Schoeller has spent nearly three years taking portraits of professional female body builders in America. He has witnessed how they "torture themselves with drugs and diets", taking laxatives to empty their systems before shows and spitting in buckets like boxers to rid their bodies of excess fluid. By the time they're on stage these women are teetering on the edge of starvation, Schoeller says, trying to sustain that physical state before their muscle tissue is broken down for energy. They can only achieve this briefly, at the peak of their fitness. "They think it's feminine; they think it's beautiful, while everybody else think it's ugly. That discrepancy is fascinating," he says.

Although viewers are unsettled by these images of the intersection between masculine and feminine, Schoeller insists that his pictures are not about shock value. "I want to go behind first impressions", he says, in order to portray these women as ordinary people.

Whether he's taking portraits of body builders or the US president, Schoeller's approach to his subjects is the same. Unpretentious and not in the least bit starstruck, he puts his subjects at ease by talking nonstop. He also plays music to lighten the mood - Miles Davis for Bill Clinton, apparently, and Al Green for Obama.

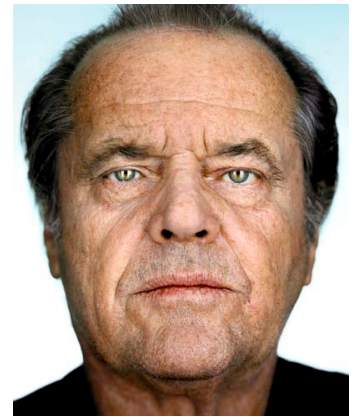
Schoeller was born in Munich, Germany, studied photography in Berlin and moved to New York in 1993, where he got his break working for the grande dame of the industry, Annie Leibovitz. Taken on as her third assistant, he describes his time working for her as "enormously" challenging and at times unpleasant". Apparently Leibovitz "get easily frustrated", he says diplomatically. The other two assistants left, but Schoeller worked with her for three years and admits that he wouldn't be where he is today without that training. At 41, he has since achieved worldwide acclaim, working for the likes of The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, GQ, Esquire and Vogue, photographing everyone from Brazilian tribes-people to American presidents.

In 2005, Schoeller published *Close-Up* (TeNeues, about R770), a collection of celebrity head shots taken at very close range. This intense style, with no frame of reference and no retouching, has become his signature. The results are startlingly intimate and realistic, as every flaw, scar and wrinkle is revealed: Angelina Jolie's pores, Jack Nicholson's wrinkles, Barack Obama in the days before the White House.

When shooting these portraits, Schoeller tries to make his subjects forget, just for a second, that they're being photographed - capturing that off-



Barack Obama, 2004



Jack Nicholson, 2002

guard moment that makes for absolute honesty. Actors are particularly frustrating, he says, "constantly posing or squinting or trying to look foxy, sexy, or whatever they want to portray"; they are always acting, rather than being themselves. He also confesses to finding the world of celebrity exhausting at times - an ongoing battle with publicists and personal assistants. "Often you're given a location, clothes and a pain-in-the-ass celebrity who doesn't want to do anything." This is what led to his now-famous head-shot style: "(It allows) me to walk away with something for myself, a very honest, simple portrait that no publicist can say anything about."

One of his more memorable experience involved shooting Jack Nicholson at his home - a rare occurrence. When Nicholson appeared he was wearing a red clown's nose. "He thought it was a genius idea!" laughs Schoeller, and it was for a few shots, but then he had to spend the rest of the shoot desperately trying to get the actor to take it off.

Schoeller acknowledges that it's impossible to capture the true essence of someone on film: "I think all photographs lie. They capture such a small amount of a person's personality, if they capture anything. A sixtieth of a second might give you at most an insight into a person's personality - I'm trying to go for that edge where you might learn a little bit (more).

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His latest book, *Martin Schoeller*, includes more conceptual, Leibovitz-style portraits of well-loved US stars, including comedienne Tina Fey leaping through the air on ice skates, Steve Carell caught hook, line and sinker and Jack Black relaxing in a bubble bath with his dachshund. More technical than his head shots, these images all involved serious planning. The picture of Fey, for instance, involved an elaborate rig and harness and was expensive to produce. Fey was initially reluctant and then "very nervous", Shcoeller remembers, while Jack Black was actually advised against the bubble-bath setup by his publicist. "Luckily Jack replied, 'I'm a comedian, that's what I do!'"

Schoeller's preferred subjects are athletes: "They're easier... I often feel like they're never looked in a mirror in their life" - and despite having worked with some of the most famous faces on the planet, he says he still doesn't "get" the notion of celebrity. Growing up in Germany in the Eighties, "we had our favorite musicians and movie stars but not this. Not this crazy culture, where people worship celebrities." Still, there is one person Schoeller would move heaven and earth to photograph. Someone who, more than anyone else, has earned his iconic status. "Who?" I wonder. "(Nelson) Mandela," comes the answer. Who else?