

## Up close and personal with the stars

BY SALLY PRYOR, CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS REPORTER

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A room full of celebrity photographs is not a very threatening notion, especially when the subjects are so famous that we feel as if we know them already.

But when these photographs are all close-ups that resemble overblown mugshots, you might be forgiven for feeling a little uneasy as you stroll through the rooms of the latest exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery.

Close Up is a collection of works by New York photographer Martin Schoeller, who is best known for capturing the essence of celebrities through stripped back, hyper-close portraits.

The exhibition is a selection of the images for which he has become famous, of the likes of Cate Blanchett, Barack Obama, Robert de Niro, Meryl Streep and the late Heath Ledger.

All are cropped so that the subject's face fills the frame in close-up, excluding any context, but revealing details of the faces that you might never see otherwise.

Contrasting with the rows of famous faces is a separate room of images of unfamiliar subjects, mainly from South America and Africa. The artist has deliberately captured all with the same unflinching gaze as their celebrity counterparts in the other rooms.

Portrait Gallery curator Michael Desmond, who hung the pieces for the show which opens today, said the exhibition was an interesting reflection on the cult of celebrity.

"Celebrity culture is being celebrated on the one hand, but equally undermined quite strongly," he said. Aside from the name of each subject on the label, there is very little else in terms of biographical information no mansions in the background, slums or identifying clothing. In short, the portraits are so stripped back as to be almost naked.

"To not have the accoutrements of fame is important, and what the photographer is doing is evening out everybody," Mr Desmond said.

Martin Schoeller: Close Up opens today at the National Portrait Gallery and runs until February 13. Admission: \$10/\$5 free for children 12 and under.

**For more on this story, including comments from Graham Howe, the director of Curatorial Assistance, the Californian company that distributes Schoeller's work, see the print edition of today's Canberra Times.**



Director of Curatorial Assistance Graham Howe with some of the celebrity photographs at the National Portrait Gallery.

Photo: MARINA NEIL