

DOUBTING THOMAS

The Bohemian Bachrach

By Thomas Mallon

In a time of pretentious photoimagery, Christopher Felver's collection of portraits reflects an easy affection for its somewhat raffish subjects

THE SEASON OF ICONOGRAPHY bears down upon us, months when, over and over, we shall be seeing both Leader and Usurper in the established style of modern political portraiture: the square-jawed, soft-focus freeze-frame ending a thirty-second television spot, the fine print of attribution beneath (PAID FOR BY CITIZENS FOR CLINTON-GORE) serving as the little white gallery plaque specifying provenance.

To fortify oneself against these pictures' intended seductions, it may be a good idea to look at Christopher Felver's portraits of an American antiestablishment, a new collection he calls *Angels, Anarchists & Gods* (Louisiana State University Press, \$45), a photographic assortment of artists and agitators known for their belief in "humanity, equality, and social fairness." This is longhand for "left-wing," of course. The 50-year-old Felver's previous work includes *Seven Days in Nicaragua* '89, a collaboration with Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, himself the subject of a number of photos in this new book.

Felver's exact allegiances elude me. Douglas Brinkley's introduction describes him as "a democratic socialist imbued with a heavy dose of Catholic libertarianism." The first of these is always a neat



Pete Seeger

trick, while the second seems about as possible as, say, Quaker militarism. But all of this is less important than the photographer's generalized feeling of goodwill toward his sitters, the respect for his mellowed, rabble-rousing elders that sustained two decades' of picture taking. A few merely middle-aged naysayers (Laurie Anderson, Oliver Stone, David Byrne) are on view here, but Felver's real business is bringing ancestor worship to the counterculture.

In prefatory remarks called "Felver's Faces," the poet Robert Creeley marvels that each of this photographer's subjects "seems altogether open to being seen." This is putting it mildly. Most of these pictures seem principally to be about an eagerness to be photographed. The sitters have been permitted or encouraged (like the candidates in thirty-second spots) to surround themselves with whatever props and totems will remind the viewer of who they are. Thus that laureate of drink Charles Bukowski stands before a beer-filled convenience-

store refrigerator, flexing a breakfast-of-champions biceps. Gloria Steinem, smiling and approachable, sits behind a desk topped with flowers and manuscript pages, the elements of the composition adding up like strokes of a Chinese ideograph (femininity + intellectual engagement = Gloria) or the (continued on page 79)

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(continued from page 74) "graphic" beside a local news anchor's head (teddy bear + falling tear = child abuse). Brinkley's introduction proclaims Felver's portrayal of "the human face behind the celebrated mask"; in fact, we rarely see more than a wink through the eyeholes.

Some of the pictures show their posers rather wishfully saddled up and ready to go: Hunter Thompson (1994) sits inside a convertible; Ken Kesey (1990) stands before the Magic Bus; and Wavy Gravy (1990), despite a few too many chins, remains bowler-hatted and peace-buttoned. "I can still fit into the old uniform," they appear to be saying. A few less fringy characters (Helen Frankenthaler, Kurt Vonnegut, Ned Rorem) are shot without a lot of setup, but Felver much prefers to cue us with objects. Carolyn Cassady, Neal's on-the-road doll, is these days coiffed and dressed like a thinner Barbara Bush, a transformation that nearly keeps one from noticing that Felver has her leaning against a motorcycle.

At times one almost expects to see a little registered-trademark symbol floating in the picture. Felver's photography colleague William Wegman holds onto that poor, and for once undressed, dog of his, while Jack Kerouac's daughter, Jan, determined to assert her lineage, poses first with Kerouac buttons over her eyes and then, some pages later, above Father's remains in the Lowell, Massachusetts, cemetery. Frank O'Hara, chiefly important for being dead, prematurely, joins the gang via a shot of his gravestone.

Even among the living, there is a fair measure of posthumousness. How many times can Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and Gregory Corso be brought together? *Angels* makes a viewer contemplate the death-in-life that early fame, of the Establishment or the "alternative" sort, brings to its possessors. One of the few truly haunting pictures here is Felver's approximate re-creation of Patti Smith's 1975 pose for Robert Mapplethorpe. Twenty years later, the fingers of her raised hand look not delicate and percipient, the way they did on that long-ago album cover, but fused and useless.

Almost always, though, Felver serves as the bohemians' Bachrach. "Warmth is so emphasized," writes Creeley, "the caring so evident, in all one sees as choice in these photographs." One or two of them seem sly (Julian Schnabel loading canvases onto a truck—as in "by the truck-

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* While supplies last.

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load"?), but more typically, a striving for simple affection between photographer and subject strikes the viewer as pleasant—no more, no less. Yes, those handsome, comfortably smiling matrons are Angela Davis and Joan Baez.

It is rare for Felver's people to be *doing* much (Anne Waldman in performance is one exception); more often the pictures are a matter of rewarding passion long since spent. Felver's few Establishment subjects—Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter (in Habitat for Humanity cap); Catherine and John Kenneth Galbraith, like *Affluent Gothic* on the front steps of their home—give off unexpected charm, not so much memorializing themselves as offering friendly, slightly bewildered cooperation to this young fellow with a camera. There's a refreshing naturalness, even candor, to portraits like these, a measure of simple human kindness that might have expired with Alfred Eisenstaedt. "I don't like gruesome pictures," the master said when nearing 90, and those sitting for him never had to fear them. He often allowed his subjects the same signature paraphernalia that Felver does, putting Shaw at a typewriter, Hemingway on his fishing boat, Churchill under his own V-splayed fingers. If Eisenstaedt's photographs remain more interesting than Felver's, it's because his subjects do, too.

An observer not equipped to judge Felver's technical methods may still, while regarding his pictures, reflect upon the whole range of dynamics that has been tried between photographer and subject. Felver occupies an extreme of benignity, the photographer as ally or enabler. (If he worked with words, he'd be a ghost-writer.) At the opposite end lies Richard Avedon, whose portraits are driven by a sort of sadomasochism, his victims submitting to coroner's lighting and white-slab background, the visible film border asking for a viewer's congratulation, like a gun racked up on the same wall as the moose's head. Avedon is heir to the genre's earliest practitioners, who locked their sitters into position and, for as long as half an hour, forbade them to move a muscle.

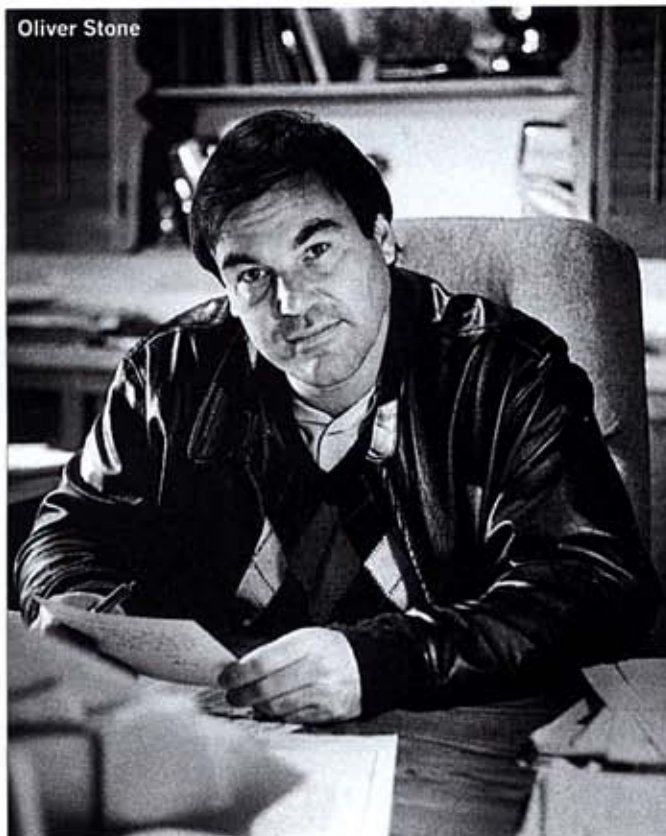
In between these polarities, one finds a whole range of dueling, victory going

sometimes to the shooter and sometimes to the shot. There have been the portraitists who imposed their own props and choreography: Irving Penn backed artists and writers into a claustrophobic V-shaped corner, a kind of vanishing-pointed humiliation, and Philippe Halsman once asked everyone from Richard Nixon to the Duchess of Windsor to jump up in front of the camera so he could snap them in midair. Their obedience should have disarmed them, forced their expressions to lose self-control and give up the goods of revelation; but of-

appropriate to a medium that will never be more than half art or less than half craft), can yield its own dividends. In Michael Evans's *People and Power: Portraits From the Federal Village* (Abrams, 1985), the famous players of the early Reagan era were not praised but simply validated—photographed, with a sort of casual formality, against blank backgrounds (muted, not stark white) and allowed, it would seem, to do whatever they wanted with their faces and hands. Most chose quiet smiles, the sort one offers an acquaintance. They were permitted, within

limits, to be themselves; if they wanted to be their images, they had to accomplish that without the props politicians have been using for generations. (Was it an accident that little Tad Lincoln just happened to be around and dressed up in what looks like a soldier's tunic when Alexander Gardner photographed the president in 1865?) Evans's results were solidly characteristic and, on occasion, quite revealing. There are Senator Paula Hawkins of Florida, going for a decidedly in-the-minority big smile and looking too hot not to cool down (she lost reelection in 1986); Interior Secretary James Watt, appearing mug-shot, telltale, though he was lit and arranged no differently from anyone else; and the late society walker Jerome Zipkin, whose hands seem to be involuntarily fumbling for Mrs. Reagan's coat check.

In some ways, Evans's pictures



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ten the exercise made Halsman look sillier than they. The great literary photographer Rollie McKenna once recounted how Robert Frost performed his own kind of trick photography: "[His] farm in Ripton, Vermont, was the perfect scene in which to take the 'rustic bard,' and he played the part—posing in a field while twirling a long walking stick, roughhousing with his dog and walking on a dirt road. Backing into bushes and trees, he asked, 'Will the leaves show?' 'Don't you want them to?' I asked. 'Yes, yes, I'd hoped they would!'"

A prearranged truce, an agreed-upon in-between style (perhaps the one most appro-

are a better antidote than Felver's to the robotically heroic imagery we'll soon be served through the tube. They belie the truism that photography defeats time by snatching something from its relentless passage. Active collaboration with time's ravages is more like it ("after's" punch depends on "before"), and if you don't believe that, turn to page 178 of *People and Power* and look at the slender young fellow identified as Newton Leroy Gingrich (R-Ga.). ♦

Thomas Mallon is a GQ writer-at-large. His most recent book is Henry and Clara (Picador).