

on the taboo of the face

CHRISTOPHER FELVER

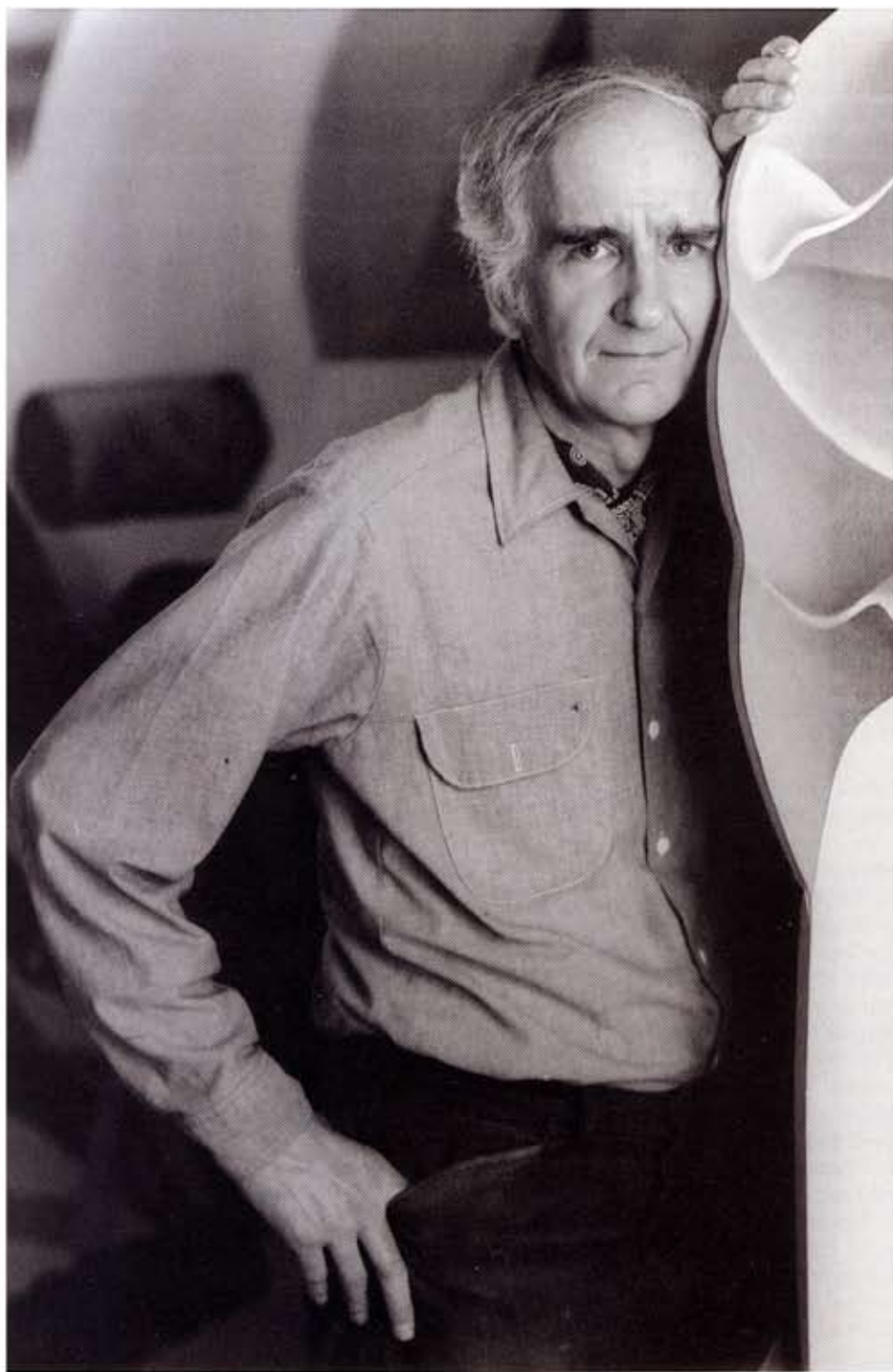
BY DAVID SHAPIRO

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he face is privileged.

The child knows the mother's face immediately. The lips, have more muscles of expression than any other part of the body. And of course, the artist knows how to make any part of the body into a face: thus the emphasis on an almost Lavater-like physiognomy of style in the aesthetics of Mayer Schapiro. The pluralist Lucio Pozzi once reminded me that the face had been restored in much new so-called neo-expressionist portraiture and cadenzas, but not "the psychological or particular face." The interiority of the psychic has been tabooed for a few decades as regressive and transcendental and sentimental. Only a few tenacious eccentrics have been pursuing that field. When one begins to name them, however – Freud, Moynihan, Kitaj, Dine, Rivers, Hockney, Porter – one realizes that one has a roll-call of the brave. And when one thinks of the photographers of this *realia*, one realizes how often such portraiture slips into the world of the celebrity, the erotic, the exotic inane.

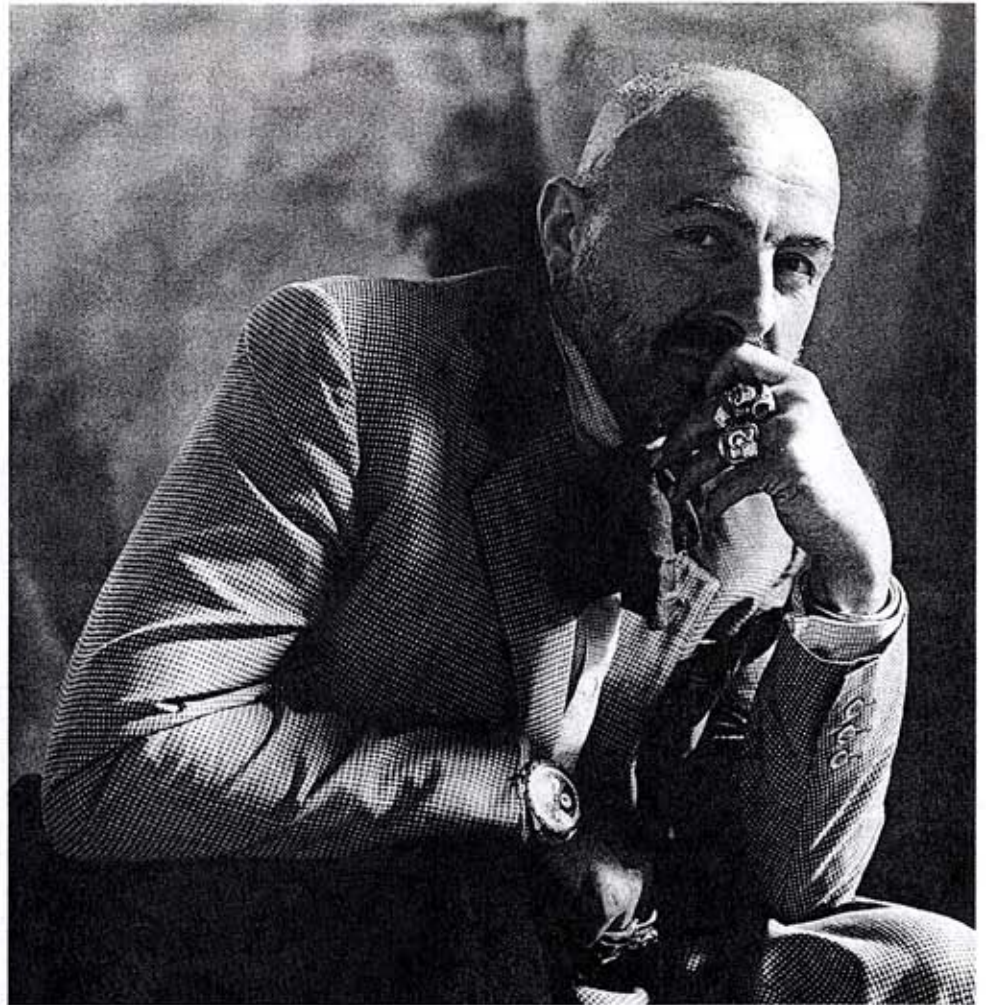
Felver's endeavor has been to use a stubborn sympathy to depict the face without introduction, fussiness, or false elegance. He has previously rendered a fairly *encyclopedic* array of poet, and that project alone distinguishes him from those involved in celebrity, when one considers the truth of John Ashbery's remark that poets are not even very famous when they are famous. Another corollary to this remark is to



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witness the lack of poets in Andy Warhol's oeuvre as he "matured". (I mentioned this to the artist once, who demurred and said he missed going to poetry readings!) Wallace Stevens said the young poet was a god and the old poet a tramp, but somehow Felver caught most of them without divinity or beastliness, that is, human and even political in an Aristotelian sense. He is neither a flatterer nor a satirist.

He has sympathies with the projects of Ugo Mulas and Robert Frank. Felver has said that he is searching for the "presence" in each person, and this fairly conservative, genial, humane, and even moderate approach distinguishes him, say, from the cold formalism of a Mapplethorpe. Lopate has recently commented on the celebrity-oriented aspects of Mapplethorpe's last collection of women, and I did sense throughout Mapplethorpe's portraiture an unconvincing insistence on complete artifice combined with an about-to-be-bitten comedy of the vulnerable vampire. All this is eschewed by the empathies of Felver, who has averred that "Even a beggar looks good for a moment." And, one might add, this was exactly William James's wonderful point that we are most known to those who love us. A Tolstoyan roundedness and lack of villains does not distinguish many portraits today, and Felver is aware that he can "fail, and fail miserably" in the quickness of his art. But he has trained as a film-maker and I think this sense of the cinematic has helped him in individual shots and their activism. The dynamics of the older face appeal to him: "Secretly, no one has a face until after say 45". But he is attentive to the beauties of the youthful Clemente, and was able to find the expressive smile of Roy Lichtenstein. To be interested in the "truth of faces" is almost comical in the epoch of encyclopedic truthlessness. We know from the effluence of masks in primitive cultures, so-called, how dangerous the truth of the face is and how it must be covered up incessantly to be borne. So Felver has been involved in the doubly difficult task of piercing the so-called "public" face of the near-celebrity artist Rudy Burkhardt once told me that he thought photographers had to be young and active to get to the most exploratory angles. While Burkhardt is a good counter-example and has produced extraordinary stills and films at seventy, Felver does have this phallic-locomotive sense.



MARCUS LUPERTZ. 1988

His portraits, he says, are meetings and he wants faces "to shine". In Venice, he found the melancholy of Johns, who seems poised and ready to lament or depose. Threnody aside, he has caught the sensual intelligence of Rebecca Horn, though I am beginning to tire of the verb "to catch" for this shadowy past-time and obsessive mimesis. While he avoids the usual clichés of painter with work, he permits aspects of this venerable convention and gains some freedom with it, as in the monumental *Vedova*, one of the earned faces of a stoic. There is a sense of ordinary unhappiness and threat in the *Cucchi* that is painterly and vivid, and Tony Cragg's whole upper torso is a very jocular "face".

Must we save the face from the faces that we make against them in an art critical pose that denies "presence", "the subject", and all but the imaginery. Let us remember that Lacan begins his theory with the realia of the *Mirror-stage*, and that event a skeptic such as Jasper

Johns, my preferred poet of absence, has returned to the silhouette and has so many particular profiles of Duchamp and others in recent work. There is a privilege to the face, and one finds it in George Segal's ghostly work and in his own genial portrait with its tactful curios: DeKooning's madly beaming face has never been more wild and concentrated. It is DeKooning used to say flesh was that oil was invented for, but we might add, the face. It is not for nothing that Clemente, with his seductive sense of his own and his wife's face, has subdued a wide audience with his feeling-tones "the internality of the body". Schilder's formulation reminds us that for art, the appearance of the expressive body is a foregrounded zone. The shameless faces of Felver are his contribution to the baboo. The puckish face of Louise Bourgeois – one of our most resolute investigators of psychic taboos and the body – smiles over this essay. □