

# CHRIS FELVER

PETER HALLEY

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Over the last twenty years, photographers have become art stars. Contemporary photography is now a big hit in museums. Photography has supplanted painting as the medium most talked about in art magazines. And the photos of a select few now sell at auction for hundreds of thousands of dollars. But this wasn't always the case. Not too long ago, the photographer was still a maverick, an adventurer with a camera, living outside the law of mainstream culture. Although on the wane today, this conception of the photographer's role is one of the most valuable bequests of twentieth-century culture.

As a maverick, the photographer could be many things, often at the same time: a gun for hire working for magazines and ad agencies, an impassive witness to public events, or a surreptitious recorder of the forbidden hotspots of the human body. But it's fair to say that before 1980, not too many of them made big money from their work.

Chris Felver is one photographer who has retained this maverick vision. He doesn't do Ralph Lauren ads and he doesn't do six-foot-tall prints: for the last twentyfive years he has just made black andwhite portraits of writers and artists.

Felver's credentials as an itinerant New Left portraitist are impressive. His passage into adulthood was marked by service as a technical photographer in a military hospital in Denver during Vietnam, where he looked at the worst cases of the war. From there, he was drawn to San Francisco and the circle of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He became a photographer of poets, especially Beat poets, attracted by their irreverence, their sociability, and by the funky human radiance that pervaded their work. A man of unstoppable enthusiasm, Felver's rambles have taken him over the years to London, Berlin, Rome, and New York — as well as to smaller spots like East Hampton and Sun Valley in fact, almost anywhere artists and writers are likely to gather.

Arena Editions of Santa Fe has just published *The Importance of Being*, a collection of over four hundred of Felver's portraits. The book is a friendly perambulation through Felver's self-crafted township of American arts and letters. It's full of portraits of figures whose names you know, but whose faces are probably unfamiliar.

There are many poets, some with household names like Ginsberg, Baraka, or Ashbery, others whose reputations are more cultish—like Clark Coolidge, Wanda Coleman, and Joanne Kyger. Felver is interested in other people as well. In this book, the iconic status of the poets Felver loves is transferred to his other sitters: musicians Bo Diddley and Bobby Short, writers Joan Didion and Grace Paley, and even film personalities Tony Randall and Steven Spielberg are set aglow in this context.

Felver presents creative accomplishment as enlightenment. In nearly every picture the eyes twinkle, the lips smile knowingly, gentle light and shadow sculpt the face and head. Somehow these tropes of "Being" do not appear false — Felver is sympathetic to individual physiognomy as well. The gift of knowing ness is a garland of thanks that Felver places around his subjects.