



# SAW

Photographs by The Douglas Brothers

B

etween 1986—1996, The Douglas Brothers produced a prolific body of photography that unsettled conventional expectations in both the commercial and art worlds.

While it was their darkly emblematic portraiture of leading cultural figures that secured The Douglas Brothers their reputation, their oeuvre was as broad as it was deep.

Moving fluently between genres, the British duo's collage, reportage, nude and abstract imagery sat as comfortably in transatlantic publications as it did in international art galleries.

Creative Review described them as “the most desirable photographers of their generation.”

SEE / SAW is a glimpse into a corner of The Douglas Brothers' prodigious universe.

# DOUBLE

## How The Douglas Brothers steered their art into the shadows.

In 1986 Andrew and Stuart Douglas squatted a studio space in Clerkenwell, East London. Andrew, a former assistant to Lord Snowdon and John Swannell, saw a future in deconstructing the photographic process. Stuart, a school-of-punk graduate, was keen to dismantle the prevailing gloss and perfection of image making. What resulted was an intense 10 year period of collaborative creativity that produced some of the most distinctive, influential and imitated photography to emerge in decades.

The Douglas Brothers combined 19th century Pictorialist tradition with a progressive contemporary sensibility. They relaxed focus and courted movement; marginalised light and celebrated shadow. Darkness illuminated their subjects. They tested the nuances of the lith print process

and, later, the stark permanence of platinum. Their work hung in galleries in London, New York, Los Angeles and Tokyo. Which brother pressed the shutter was never revealed. This was symbiotic productivity; a pure artistic collaboration.

The Douglas Brothers abandoned photography for film. Their stills archive was mothballed in a lock-up in London's Kings Cross. Their photography retreated quietly into the shadows until a demolition order re-opened the warehouse. As the Kings Cross re-development made way for the future, The Douglas Brothers' past was re-discovered. A maverick and distinctive body of work, the passing of time has not reduced its potency.

Fourteen Douglas Brothers' photographs now form part of the National Portrait Gallery collection. Head Of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, Phillip Prodger says: "This is work that has stood the test of time. Their pictures are still as fresh and exciting as the day they were made."

# V / S / O N A R / E S



The Douglas Brothers self portraits (top) 2017 and (below) 1990.

# T H / S A F F / N T Y

**The Douglas Brothers: a partnership that pushed the boundaries of perception and common sense. An essay by Sabina Jaskot-Gill, Associate Curator of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery.**

In his 1964 seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan discussed a painting by Hans Holbein that now hangs in London's National Gallery. In *The Ambassadors* (1533), Holbein pictured two learned men surrounded by books and instruments. Upon closer inspection, the seamlessness of the painting is interrupted by the appearance of a shadowy stain in the foreground that remains frustratingly difficult to decipher. It is only when a viewer moves to the side of the painting, and casts their eye across the scene from a different perspective, that a floating skull comes into focus. To see the skull, the painting must be approached indirectly. For Lacan, Holbein's anamorphic skull makes visible a blind spot in our visual perception.

The photographs of The Douglas Brothers also appear to be premised on this notion of looking awry. The two brothers, Stuart and Andrew, started working together in 1986 and were soon hailed as “the most desirable photographers of their generation.” Each brother brought their own personality to the partnership, and a different way of interacting with their chosen sitters. This dynamic worked because both brothers “had a complete trust in, and understanding of, each other.”

The presence of two photographers allowed a more collaborative approach to portraiture. One brother would take principle shots using a large format plate camera, with long exposures and considered compositions, while the other would stalk back and forth in the shadows with a smaller handheld camera, taking spontaneous shots that captured incidental details. Andrew notes, “we created an atmosphere in which we could take pictures. It was the opposite of the decisive moment.” Together with their sitter, the brothers formed a self-acknowledged “unholy trinity,” a unique working arrangement which allowed them to reveal the subject in ways that had not been seen or photographed before. It was by approaching the sitter indirectly that they could see their subject anew.

A breakthrough moment came when photographing the actor Daniel Day-Lewis. They found their negatives had been underexposed, but in the darkroom an extraordinary portrait coalesced in the darkness. The brothers pushed the print darker and darker, until his features were only just visible. This quietly unsettling image, and barely legible portrait, invokes comparisons with the Shroud of Turin. In both, facial

features have been faintly imprinted on a receptive surface. Presence evoked through traces.

The Brothers quickly settled into a recognisable style, harnessing their “experimental instinct” to generate atmospheric and enigmatic portraits. “We tested the boundaries of common sense,” admits Andrew. Photographing mostly indoors, using only the natural light available, their sitters emerge from dark interiors in images that celebrate the nuances of shadow. Attention is focused on the faces of the sitters, which the viewer is invited to scrutinise with psychological intensity. Long exposure times were favoured, sometimes four or more seconds, during which the presence of the sitters becomes inscribed into the negative material over time. Blurring gives a sense of the length of this process, as sitters adjust into the picture during the exposure. The sense of atmosphere is intensified by returning to historical printing processes, first lith and then platinum. Platinum printing was embraced by Pictorialist photographers at the end of the nineteenth century to create plastic, painterly images that betrayed the hand of the artist and countered anxiety over photography as a purely mechanical medium.

Almost a century later, The Douglas Brothers returned to this technique and sensibility, emphasising the hand of the artist in the final image. The brothers recall, “the more we were able to manipulate the print in a painterly or crafted direction, the more feeling it seemed to accrue.” The imperfections of the printing process were also embraced for the way they made visible the photographer within the frame: “we loved the artefacts of the process, the mistakes, the scratches, the traces of the hand.” Chance is openly courted in these images, with unexpected details registering on the negative during the exposure time, capturing information that we would otherwise fail to notice. By pursuing this style of photography, The Douglas Brothers moved against the grain of what was expected from commercial photography in the late 1980s. Their smudgy, indistinct and atmospheric prints constituted a rebellion that shaped the course of photography in the next decade.

Their work also stands in sharp contrast to traditional expectations of the medium. Since its inception, photography has been discussed in terms of its ability to present facts. In an often-quoted essay of 1857, in which the creative potential

of photography is debated, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake described the camera as “an unreasoning machine” whose “business is to give evidence of facts.”

Photography has long been celebrated for its ability to render objects in unprecedented detail and clarity, a medium associated with transparency and fullness of vision. Yet, it is the realm outside of facts and detail that appeals to The Douglas Brothers. They obstinately refuse to offer precise detail in their images, instead ushering those details towards the boundaries of indistinctness. Their photographs do not faithfully describe the world that we see, but evoke mood and atmosphere. Informational value is suppressed through focus, framing and blurring. Faces are turned away from the camera, features obscured through shadow, rendered indistinct through movement during the exposure time. The brothers acknowledged how they “were pushing blur to see how far you could go, to see how little information the brain needs to make a picture.”

The vision of the sitters is also compromised in many of these portraits. Eyes are masked, or closed; props placed in front of their faces. For the Surrealists, the eye possessed great significance. To avoid becoming a prisoner of external perception, André Breton advocated closing one's eyes and retreating into the subconscious mind. Rather than looking out onto the world, more illumination was to be found by turning away from reality and looking inwards, towards the imagination. For The Douglas Brothers, closed eyes are an invitation to interpretation: “There is another beauty to a face that is emptied of subtext,” says Stuart.

The photographs of The Douglas Brothers constantly oscillate between seeing and not seeing, revealing the sitter in new ways and frustrating our vision, allowing a glimpse of recognition and impeding identification. Just as the sitter's vision is compromised, so the viewer's gaze is also challenged. Much like in Holbein's painting, these photographs suggest that we do not possess complete visual mastery over what we see. Rather than picturing a recognisable reality, The Douglas Brothers invoke the presence of something ineffable.

*Sabina Jaskot-Gill also lectures in the theory and history of photography at Sotheby's Institute of Art.*

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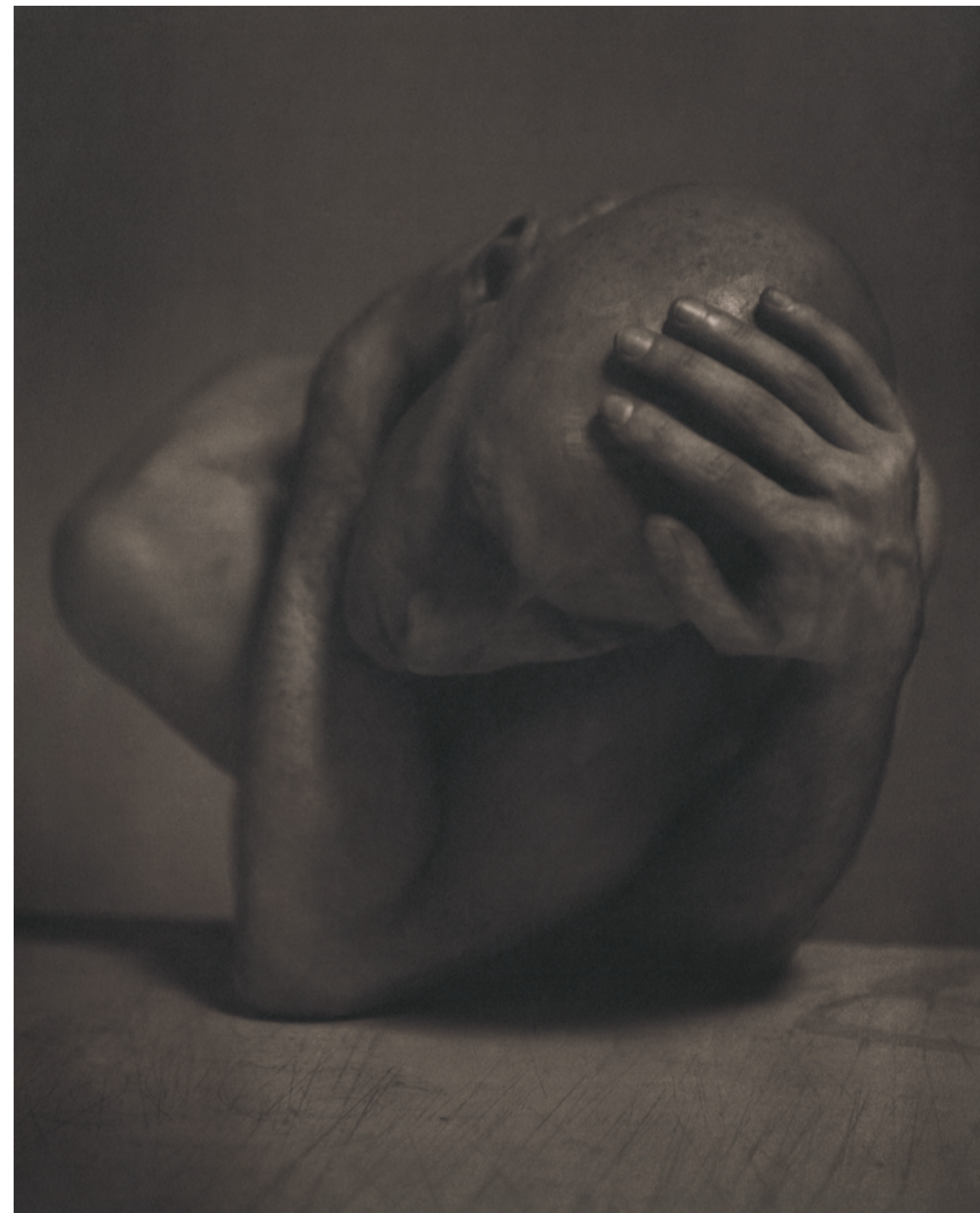




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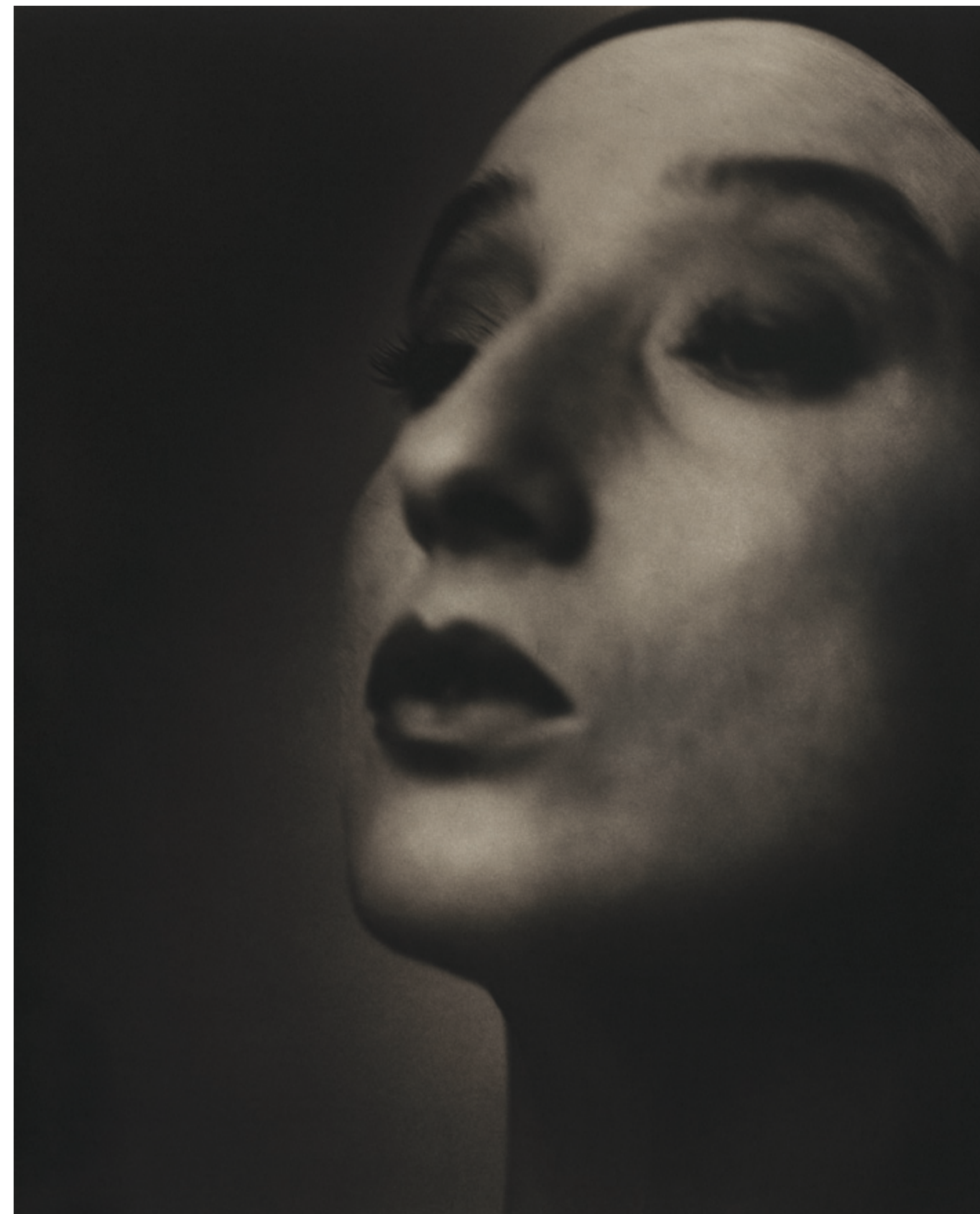
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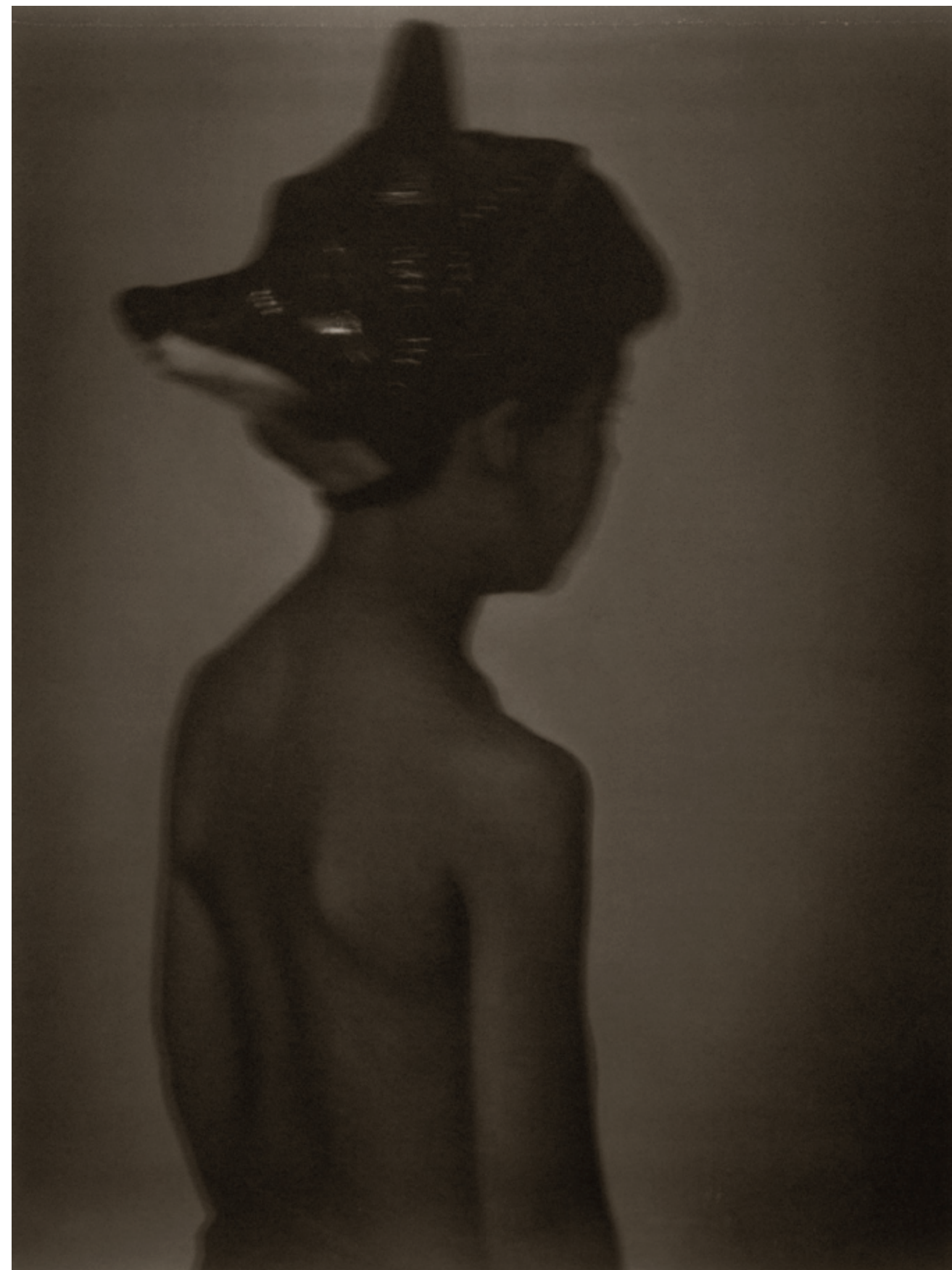




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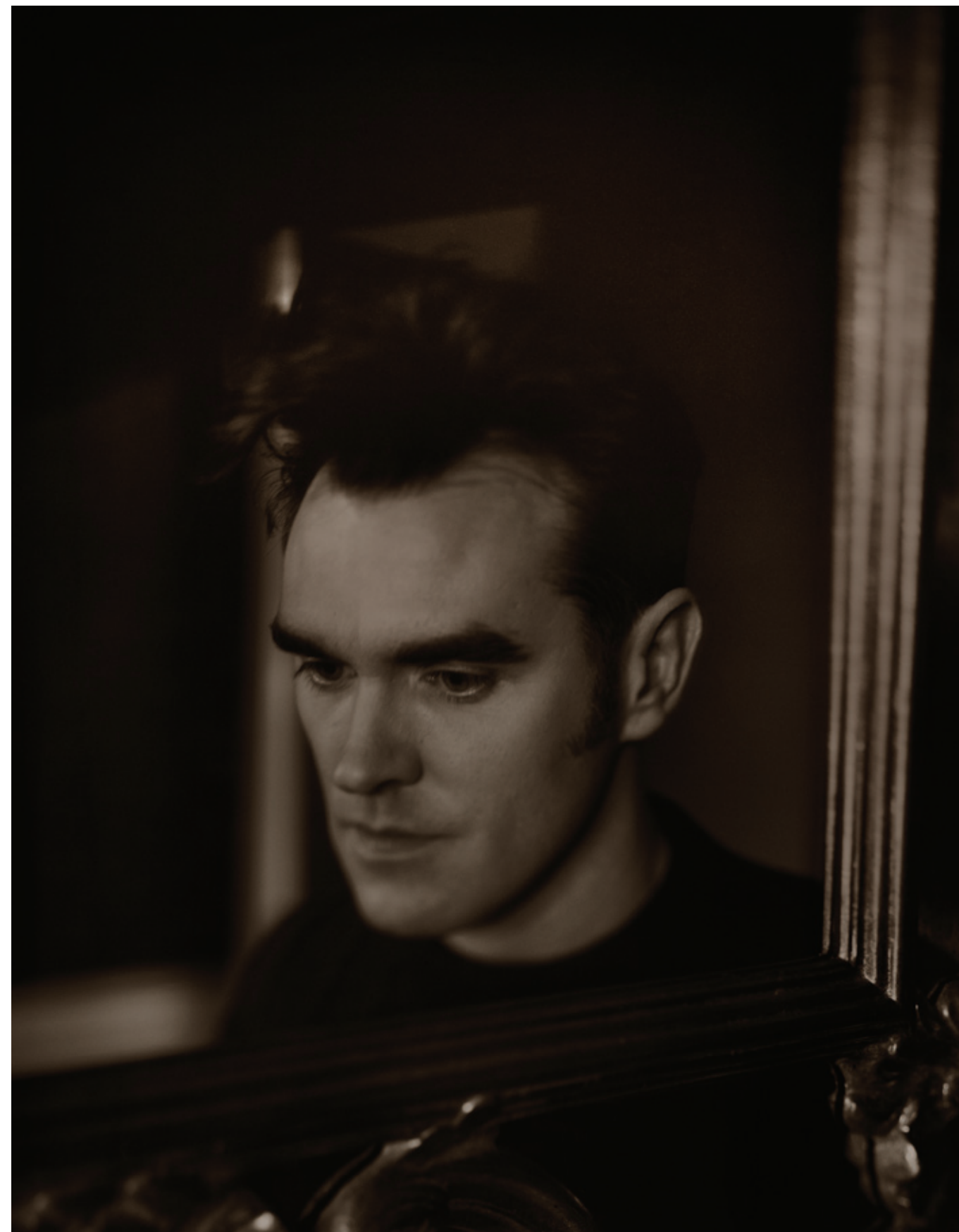




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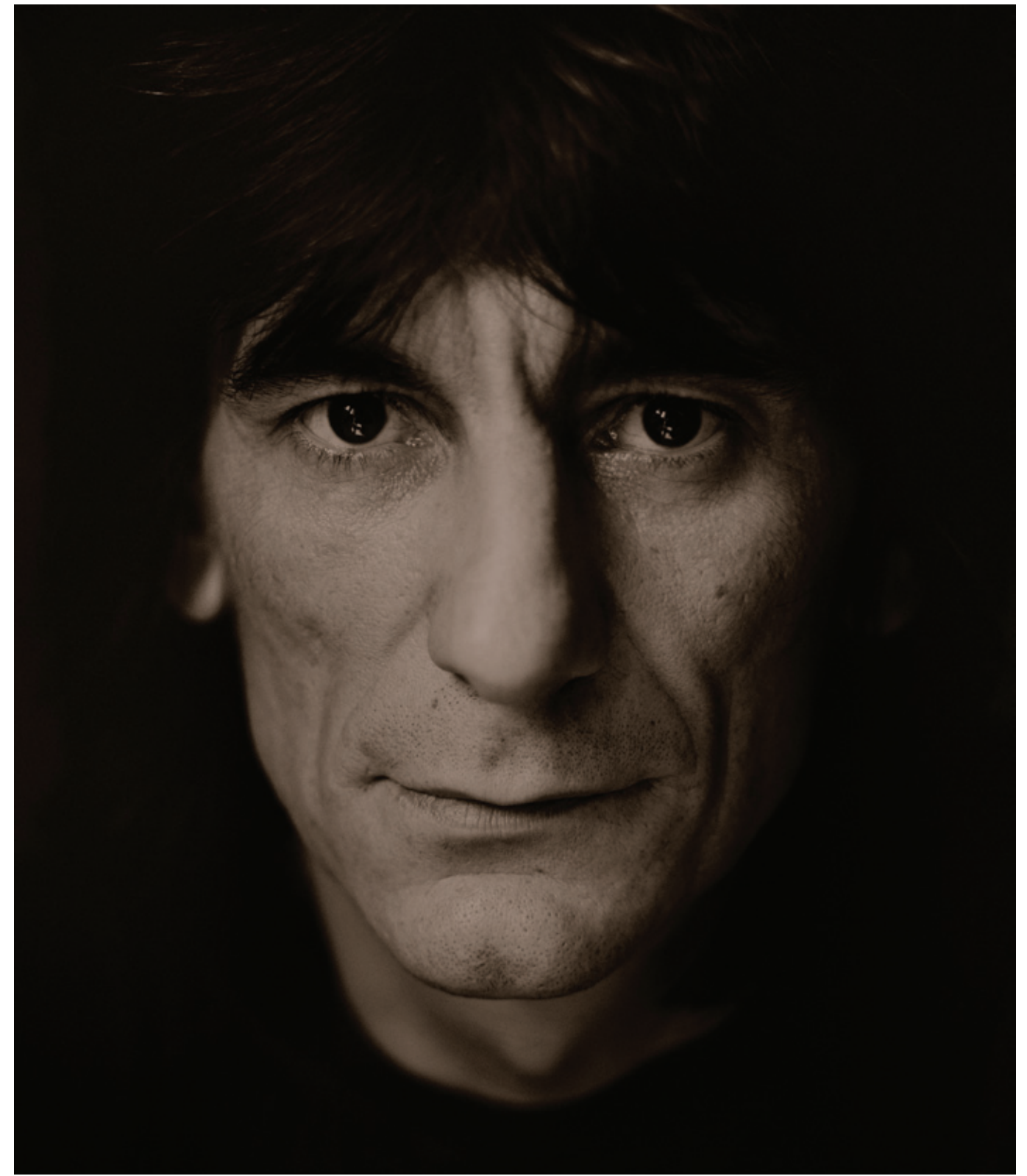




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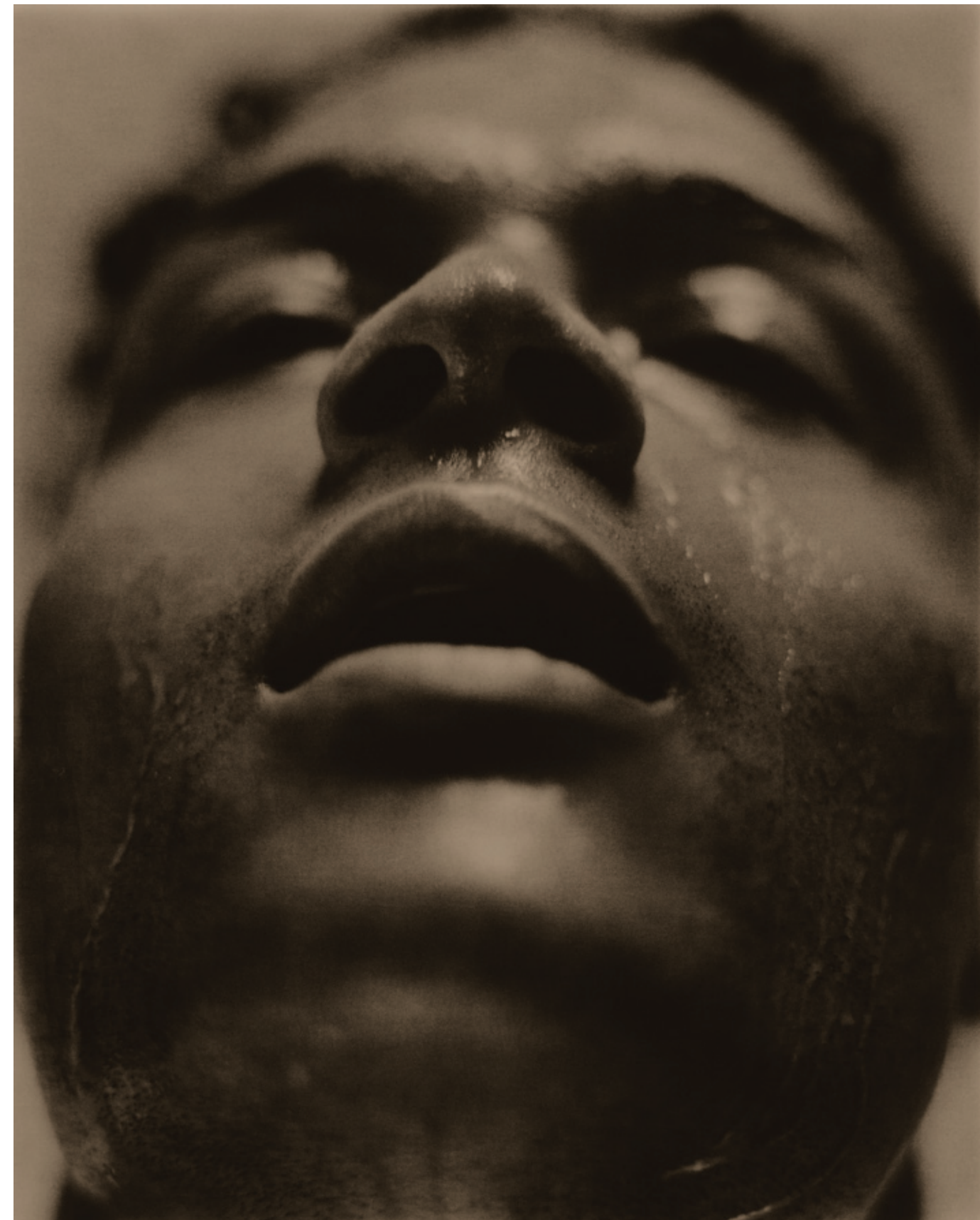
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/ Grateful thanks to:

Tim Fennell at Bon Abattoir. Vince Frost at Frost\*collective.  
Lisa Baker at Lisa Baker Associates. And Maisie Faulkner.

Phillip Prodger, Clare Freestone and Sabina Jaskot-Gill  
at The National Portrait Gallery.

Archival printing by Hempstead May.

Temple Smith Richardson, Liz Jobey, Frances Coady,  
Peter Dyer, John McAlley, Jo Levin.

The Douglas families.

Nice Shirt Films  
Reset Content.

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