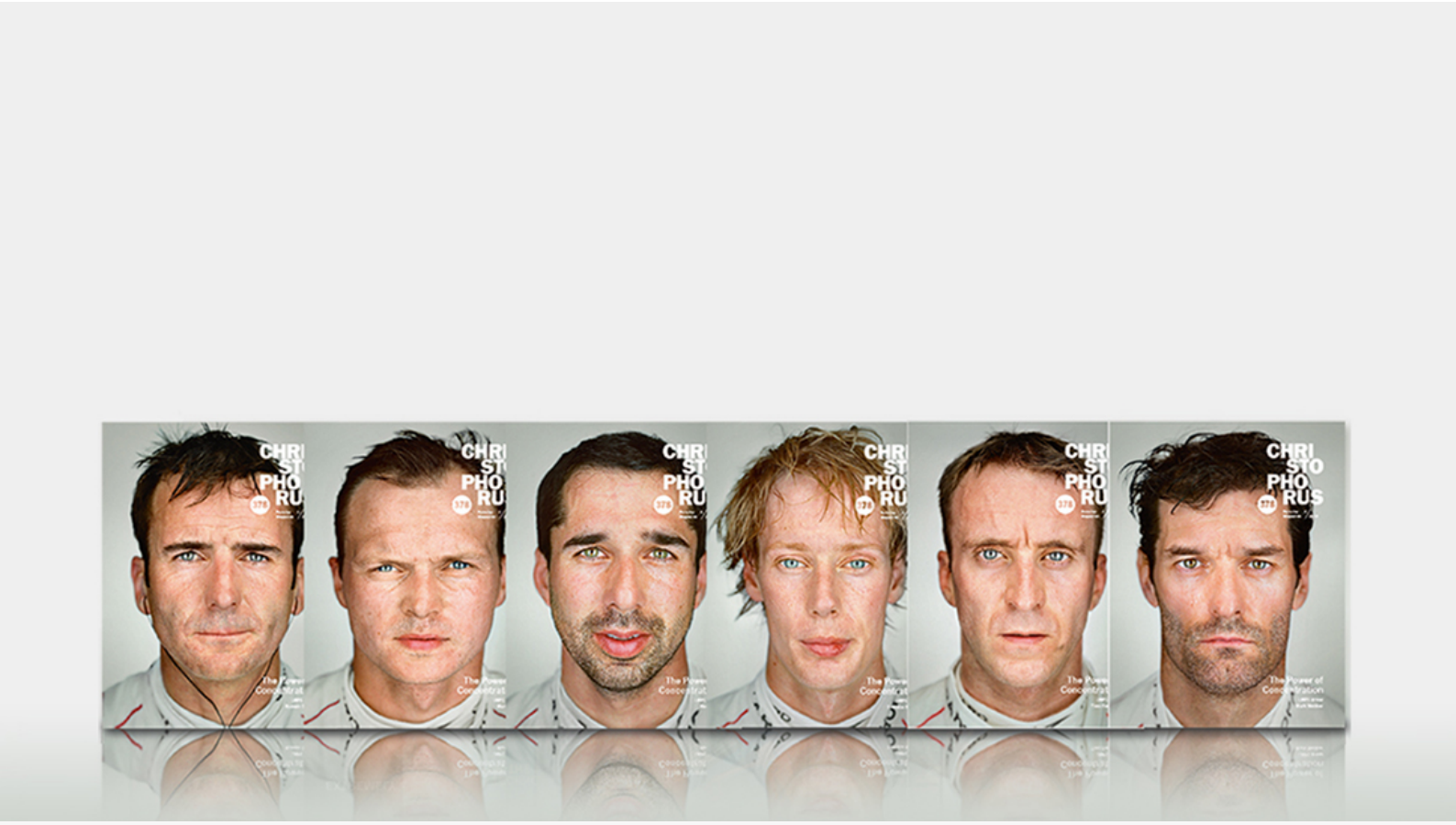


The Authenticity of the Moment

This article reflects the status at the time of its publication. The content may since have become outdated.

07/10/2016 Martin Schoeller is one of the most important portrait photographers of our time. His passion: faces. He took photos of Porsche's LMP1 drivers on the Nürburgring immediately after they arrived in the pit–when their faces spoke volumes.

Can a portrait capture a person's essence, or perhaps even their soul? "No," says Martin Schoeller. "In a sense, all portraits are fiction. A photo is just a fraction of a second chosen by the photographer–a person who doesn't actually know the person being photographed. A portrait usually has very little in common with the person it shows." However, Schoeller's portraits are very different. How does he do it? What drives him? "I'm always looking for that moment of authenticity. For the real face. I'm not interested in making people look good, necessarily, but rather in taking photos that are objective, or at least less artificial than others. So I work to find that moment when people are completely present and reveal something open and intimate about themselves. As such, I also see myself as a chronicler."

A "hardcore unmasker" is what the German magazine Geo calls Schoeller (48). He doesn't just take

photos—he examines his subjects with a magnifying glass. He reads their faces and creates photographic gems. His sessions are usually preceded by extensive research. He studies his subjects, watches them in movies and on talk shows, and reads interviews with them. He hopes this research will fuel his imagination, generate ideas for motifs, and give him plenty of topics for conversation. “If portrait photographers stop talking, they’re finished,” he remarks.

Motifs with a media impact

Often, he’s pleasantly surprised by what major celebrities and politicians will do in front of a camera. Bill Clinton played golf in the room next to the Oval Office, Quentin Tarantino wore a straitjacket, and comedian Steve Carell agreed to have adhesive tape wrapped around his head. Schoeller always has four or five motifs in mind, and he always starts with the most innocuous one. That’s his trick. If the atmosphere on set is trusting, then he makes more daring suggestions. And a lot of his subjects are happy to take them up, as they’re aware of the impact that one of Schoeller’s spectacular photos can have in the media.

Gallery

But some resist the close proximity and the resulting intensity that Schoeller cultivates in his studio. Singer Mariah Carey and actor Tom Cruise, for example, declined to be photographed. By contrast, former James Bond actor Pierce Brosnan called Schoeller up to request his services. Schoeller often has to contend with his subjects spending hours with a makeup artist and then having only a few minutes for the actual session, which was the case with Lady Gaga, for example, and Uma Thurman.

The results are not his best work. Sometimes Schoeller does not succeed in breaking through his subjects’ veneer. “George Clooney is a great example. He’s unfailingly courteous, humorous, and helpful, but I never managed to get anywhere near his real self. Because he just can’t stop posing.” But Schoeller succeeded in surprising Hollywood’s charmer. He took one of his earlier portraits of Clooney, tore out the section between his nose and forehead, and affixed it, like a mask, to the actor’s face with a rubber band. Clooney found the photograph amusing, and the image (see page 4) spread across the world. Schoeller’s amazingly simple mini-studio with its black curtains has seen an array of Hollywood notables as well as musicians such as Taylor Swift, Justin Timberlake, and Iggy Pop. And politicians too, including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Angela Merkel. Schoeller knows what power can do to the play of expressions on a face.

Even top-notch athletes, including Pelé, German soccer legend Franz Beckenbauer, sprinter Usain Bolt, and soccer world-champion Lionel Messi, know how it feels when Schoeller’s camera peers at them from an arm’s length away. But he had never photographed athletes during or immediately after a competition, with all the tension, relief, joy, or frustration written on their faces. He is convinced that adrenaline brings out these expressions more sharply.

Glimpse behind the mask

Schoeller, who was born in Munich, grew up in Frankfurt and studied photography at the Lette Association in Berlin. He has lived in New York for nearly 25 years. He spent four years in New York as an assistant to Annie Leibovitz, who may well be the most famous photographer of our age. And he spent twelve years on the staff of The New Yorker. He continues to work regularly for The New Yorker, as well as for Time, National Geographic, Rolling Stone, GQ, and Forbes. Schoeller uses soft fluorescent lighting for his trademark close-ups, which gives a characteristic catlike quality to the eyes. The perspective is always the same—from below, at a slight angle. It has made him one of the leading portrait photographers of our time.

He went to the 24 Hours of Le Mans this year, his first time at a racetrack. "I wanted to feel, understand, and experience what happens there. How exhausted the drivers are after their run. How dejected when they lose. And how euphoric when they win." What do the drivers look like when they remove their helmets? What do their eyes reveal? What do tension, stress, and concentration do to the 43 muscles in their faces? How do the colors of the face change? The interior of a Porsche 919 Hybrid with more than 900 hp is subject to extreme acceleration forces and extremely high temperatures. The drivers lose about two liters of water every hour.

Precision, professionalism, and speed

The legendary Circuit de la Sarthe, where Porsche celebrated its eighteenth overall victory at Le Mans on June 19 of this year in front of 250,000 spectators, is where the idea for this project was born. Schoeller would take portraits of the six LMP1 drivers at the following race in the World Endurance Championship (WEC) series on the Nürburgring, right after each driver switch—when the sweat runs, the heart races, adrenaline soars, and faces speak volumes.

The six Porsche race-car drivers and the star photographer have a good deal in common on this day: precision, professionalism, and speed. They also share the struggle for those fractions of a second that will give the drivers victory and the photographer an authentic shot. In front of nearly 60,000 spectators, Timo Bernhard starts the six-hour race for Team 1, and Neel Jani starts for Team 2 in the car that won Le Mans. After each switch, the drivers are weighed, and then they go straight into Schoeller's studio box in front of the Porsche racing truck just a few meters away.

The process is always the same. Take off the helmet and hood. Look right at the camera. Nobody wipes off sweat; nobody smooths his hair. Mark Webber has a serious look. "I've just driven an hour on a roller coaster—and suddenly the world is standing still. It's more intense than anything I've ever experienced," he says. Brendon Hartley, with a red face and disheveled hair, agrees. "I braked from 250 km/h down to 0—you can't decelerate any more than that." Le Mans winner Marc Lieb runs his index finger across his left eyebrow and looks pensive. "It isn't as smooth as in France. It's a restless race." In the end, Team 1 (Webber, Bernhard, Hartley) races to victory; Team 2 (Jani, Lieb, Dumas) takes fourth place.

The looks show the intensity of the race

The drivers are completely present and open, and do in fact show something intimate to the camera. “They have a look that is curious and questioning, but one that is also resolute and reflects the intensity of the race. You can trace its course on every one of them,” says Schoeller, who watched the action at a monitor in the racing truck between sessions. “One of them is annoyed because he got a time penalty from a collision. Another is quietly jubilant about a successful passing maneuver and the four-second lead he built. And just a few seconds after handing the wheel over to Bernhard, Webber's exhausted face shows the flicker of a triumphant smile.”

Engines roar from the circuit. Autograph hunters wait at the pit wall for their heroes. After his second photo session with Schoeller, an exhausted Romain Dumas wants to know, “But now it’s for real, right? We’re done?” Schoeller smiles, shakes his hand, and claps him on the shoulder. “Yes, it's for real. And it was good. Very good.”

Link Collection

Link to this article
https://newsroom.porsche.com/en/christophorus/porsche-christophorus-martin-schoeller-photographer-lmp1-mark-webber-art-nuerburgring-12993.html

Media Package
https://pmdb.porsche.de/newsroomzips/e0594eac-727a-480d-a5fe-004acf4bce0f.zip

External Links
http://www.porsche.com/usa/aboutporsche/christophorusmagazine/