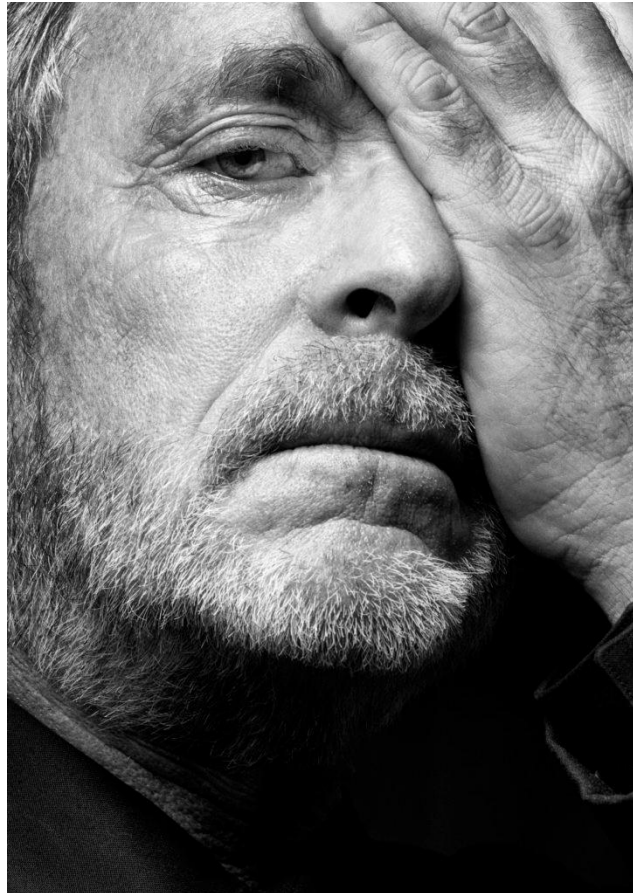


*Interview*

# GREG GORMAN



He's the man behind the most captivating portraits of the greatest icons of our time. Whether it's taping tarantulas to Michael Jackson's face or Andy Warhol personally requesting him to take his portrait – Greg Gorman has been there, done that.

TEXT Sarah Osei



**SARAH OSEI:** You took your first photograph in 1968 of Jimi Hendrix in concert, and much of your early photography was of rockstars. When you envisioned your career then did you already dream of working with such renowned celebrities?

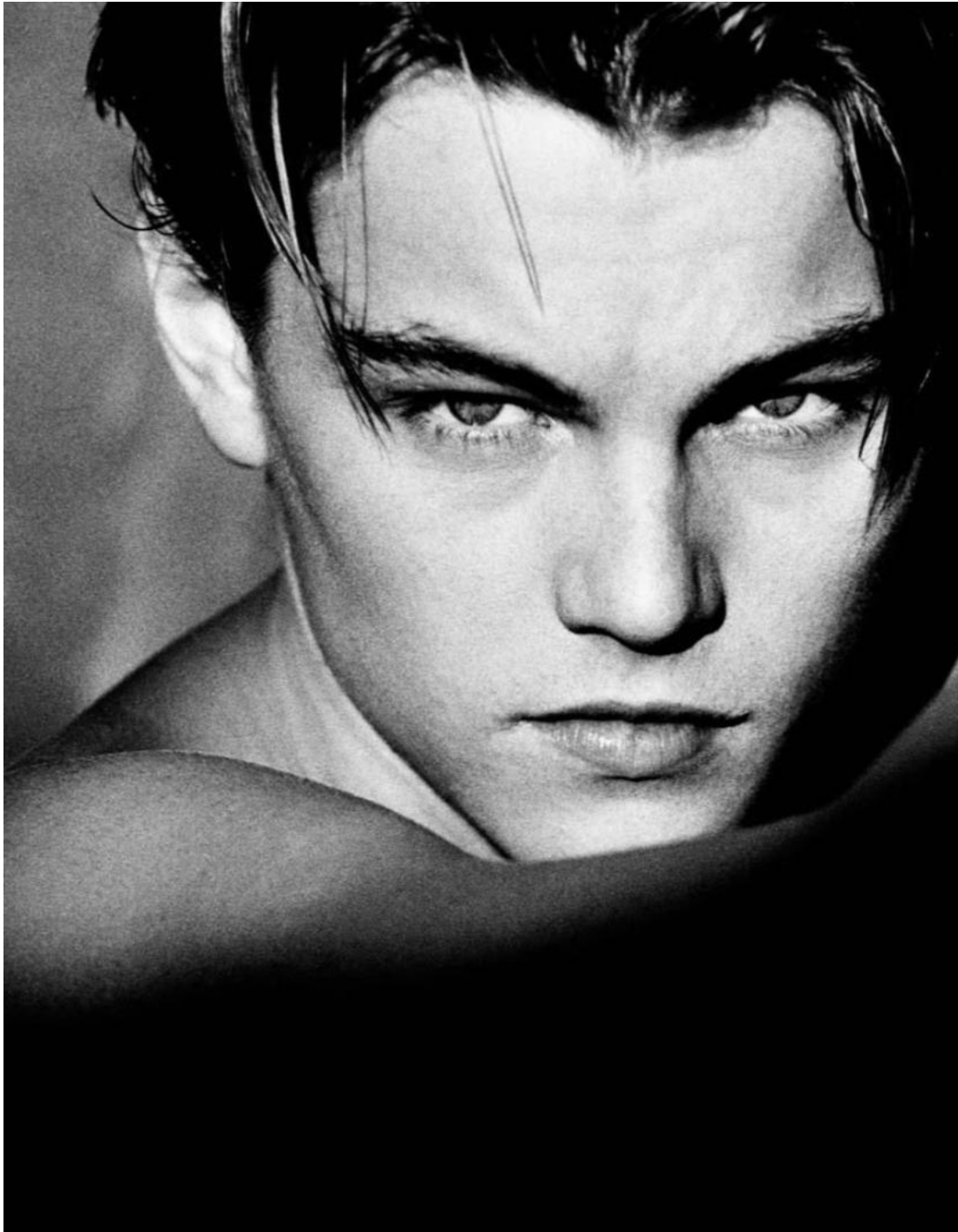
**GREG GORMAN:** Honestly, I had no idea where my career was going to take me. I just knew I loved all aspects of photography dealing with people, of course. When I began my studies, the only courses offered at the University of Kansas, where I did my undergraduate degree, were in photojournalism.

**SO:** You actually studied cinematography. What was film lacking in artistic expression that made you pursue photography instead?

**GG:** In the world of cinematography, the studios will always go for a better acting take than a camera take. I was realizing that I was way too much of a control freak and far more preferred the one on one relationship with the talent that still photography afforded me.



Sophia Loren by Greg Gorman, 1994



Leonardo DiCaprio by Greg Gorman, 1994

SO: What was your big break?

GG: I feel my very first really big break came when I was asked to work with Dustin Hoffman on his film, 'Tootsie'. We worked together for almost six weeks and that gig helped put me on the map. However, 'The Big Chill' and 'Scarface' followed which helped immensely as well.

SO: What's your main objective when you get behind the camera?

**GG:** My main objective is always to capture as honest and true a portrait of my subjects by respecting who they are as individuals and not step over the line; as well as presenting them in the best light (not always what editors wish to see!).

**SO:** You've shot some of the greatest icons of our time, from David Bowie and Diana Ross to Michael Jackson. I imagine there are some exciting stories from these shoots. Could you tell us one?

**GG:** David Bowie – We worked together for many years, more than 15 times I would say. He always had the best sense of humour about life and never took himself too seriously. We loved working together and created a lot of magic due to our mutual collaborations.





David Bowie by Greg Gorman, 1984

**GG:** When I worked with Diana Ross, it was decided that we would work in this beautiful daylight studio. I had three or four separate sets built for the occasion. Miss Ross was a bit late in arriving and unfortunately all of the beautiful natural light was gone. We had to rush in a bunch of lighting gear, which was not planned, to quickly recreate what was originally going to be natural light. A bit challenging but everything worked out in the end. Michael Jackson was one of my all time favorites. We worked together on many occasions and got some tremendous imagery, all thanks to his creative genius. When we would shoot together, Michael would give me a call about two weeks out to discuss the shoot and what he hoped to achieve. For one example, Michael told me that he had pet tarantulas and that they had just shed their skin. And their molten skin looked exactly like the spiders themselves. He brought along a couple of them and I decided to gaffers tape the spider to his forehead. Thus came about that photo.

**SO:** Do you have a favourite photo you've taken?

**GG:** I guess one of my favorite images is that of Andy Warhol, which came about through him. I had been photographing a celebrity endorsed campaign for l.a.Eyeworks in Los Angeles for five or six years, which appeared monthly in Andy Warhol's 'Interview Magazine' – as you probably know if you were old enough back in the early eighties. Andy signed a deal mid-eighties, I believe, to model for Ford. One day out of the blue, he called me up and asked if he could be in one of their ads and the rest is history, with that image becoming one of my most iconic photographs.







Grace Jones by Grace Gorman, 2015

**SO:** Is there anyone you really wanted to photograph but never got the chance to?

**GG:** I always wanted to photograph Brigitte Bardot and have tried, but it is not something that I feel she entertains these days, even though I feel she would make a great subject.

**SO:** How do you work with a subject who isn't comfortable in

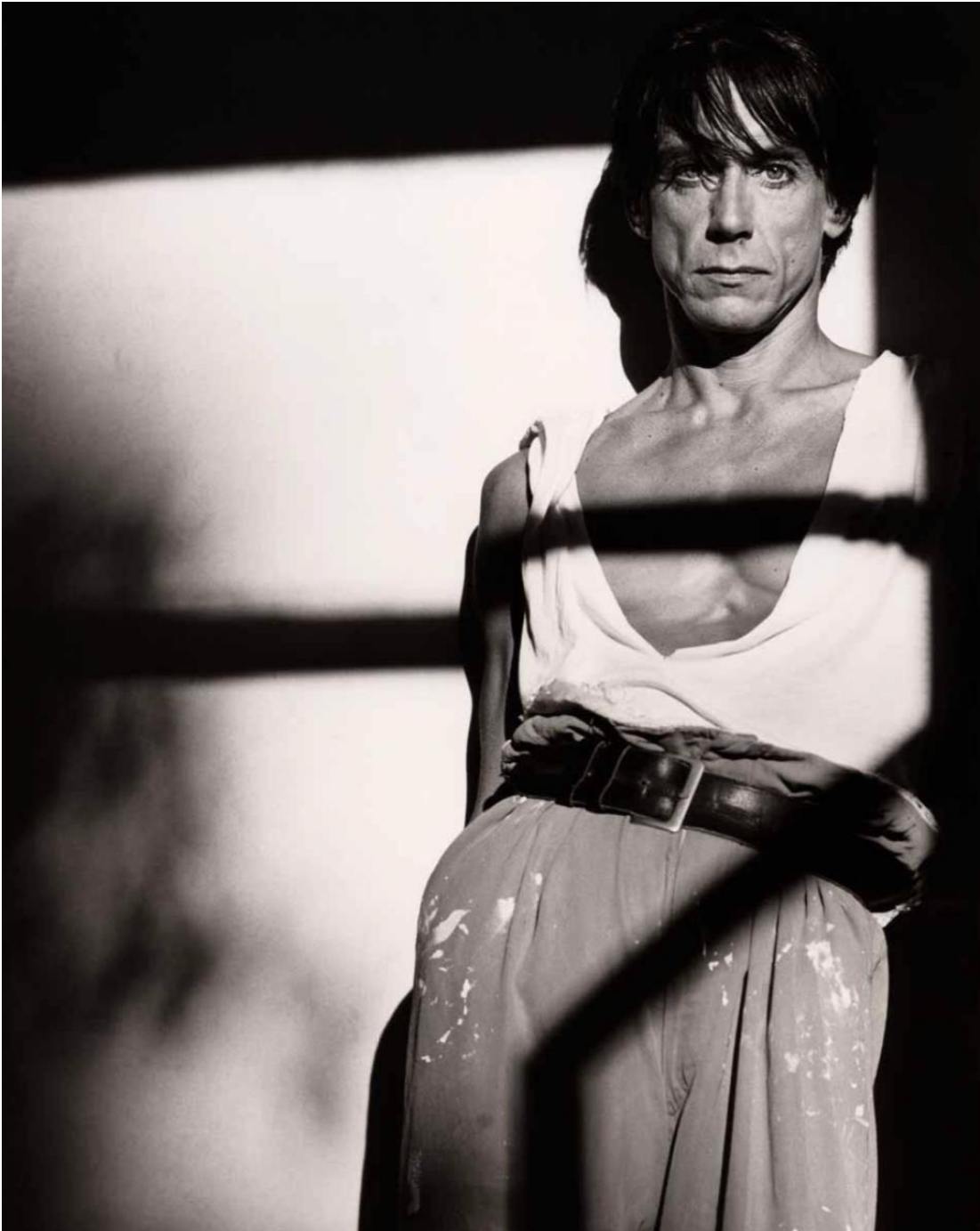
front of the camera?

**GG:** I always try to involve them in the shoot sharing my captures with them as we go. I also had a full time chef and we usually had a good meal every day prior to our shoots. It is important to gain the trust and confidence of the person on the other end of the lens if you hope to achieve a connected portrait.

**SO:** You have a very distinctive style, mostly black and white portraiture with an extreme relationship between light and dark. How did you actually discover your signature style?

**GG:** My very first assistant, David Jacobson, who is now a big club entrepreneur in Bangkok, but a great photographer as well, turned me on to spot grid lighting very early on. I became fascinated with the relationship between light and shadow, and I enjoyed the mystique behind less light rather than more, as well as its sculptural effects.





Iggy Pop by Greg Gorman, 1987



Kevin Costner by Greg Gorman, 1988

**SO:** You give back to young photographers by doing a lot of teaching. What's the best piece of advice you received that you can pass on?

**GG:** Never feel like you've taken the perfect portrait – there's always room for improvement. Be open, honest and listen!

**SO:** At the end of the day photography is still a job for you. How do you keep the love alive for what you do?

**GG:** Funny you should ask! My main passion for photography began dwindling in terms of the commercial world around 2006-2007. At that time, I realized that if I wanted to keep my passion alive, I needed a different outlet, so I turned to teaching which drives me, keeps me current and alert and attentive to others' needs. I truly love sharing what I've gotten so much out of for all these years.

**SO:** Your nudes are more personal works, where it seems you're much more expressive and have more creative freedom. Do you prefer these kinds of projects over photographing celebrities?

**GG:** Well back in the early eighties, when my career was really taking off, my late dear friend, Antonio Lopez, told me that if I wanted longevity in a field like photography, I needed a personal outlet outside the realm of commercial photography, where I could create images that were inherently mine. Thus was the birth of my nudes. Photos I had no one to answer to but myself.





Brigitte Nielsen by Greg Gorman, 1988

**SO:** It seems that celebrities, and people in general, are too self-aware now, and it has a lot to do with this new world of social media where everything is about image. Consequently, how has portraiture changed for you?

**GG:** Selfies have certainly taken over the role of celebrity portraiture in many ways. I am not the biggest fan of social media. Call me old-fashioned. I do like Facebook because it is more a social platform keeping in touch with friends and all. While Instagram obviously is the much more preferred platform for widespread social media, but it requires constant attention and for me that is not interesting at this point in my life. I have a small presence there with help from friends, but it is not my main focus at this stage of my life. I am not trying to win friends and influence people at 70! I can assure you that!

**SO:** Do you like to be photographed?

**GG:** I tolerate being photographed because I respect what photographers have to go through (being one) to get a good portrait. So consequently I respect photographers when being photographed and try my best not to interject criticism when I know they are not lighting me properly or the like. I try and respect their efforts as best I can.

Greg Gorman's photographs will be on display in the exhibition "The Outsiders: Best of and beyond", at Munich's IMMAGIS Gallery from 14th March to 11th May, 2019.

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## INTERVIEWS.....



PATRICK SCHWARZENEGGER



ERIC AVAR