

*The William Coupon
style has redefined
portrait photography.*

Mengucci: Face Value

FACE

Had you entered the New York City loft of William Coupon any time during the past three years, hundreds of trinkets—ceramic masks, wooden figures, and painted dolls—would have captured your attention. The objects, gathered on Coupon's trips around the world, were perched everywhere and hung on the walls. Alongside them, an electric guitar stood in a corner of the living room and a lap-top synthesizer rested on a windowsill.

Eventually, you would have noticed some of the more mundane objects: a teakettle on the stovetop and a child's booster seat on a dining room chair. Except for a few striking photos, sparse clues would have indicated that this contemporary loft doubled as studio space for a photographer—much less a photographer who, during the last decade, perfected and launched a genre of portrait photography now recognizable around the globe.

Anyone who has been remotely alert in the past 10 years has seen Coupon's work in print: arresting, salient, painterly portraits, ordinarily shot from the torso up, and set against one of Coupon's famous painted backdrops. In fact, beyond magazines, album covers, and print advertisements, one can find copycat traces of Coupon's signature style in television commercials and music videos.

Last month Coupon moved a few blocks across town, changing his address but little else. Photographic equipment—lights, wiring, and camera gear—remains out of sight. When the likes of Miles Davis, Donald Trump, or Mick Jagger arrive for a photo shoot, Coupon just pushes his living room couch and table aside, hangs one of his painted backdrops, adjusts a single light, and begins the shoot.

Coupon prefers to work simply. "My setup is so low-key," he says, "not as razzmatazz as people would think."

"I've tried to simplify the technical end of it," Coupon says. "It allows me to devote more attention to my subjects."

"For me, he does more than just provide a photograph," says Rudolph Hoglund, the art director at *Time* with whom Coupon often works. "The magic I find with William's work is the relationship he seems to develop with the subject. . . . He has the capacity to capture the spirit of the person



. . . and if you like the person, the portrait endorses that."

Coupon, who graduated from the Newhouse School in 1974 with a degree in advertising and broadcasting, has no formal training in his art. He began dabbling in photography in the mid-seventies while working at Ogilvy and Mather, the New York City ad agency. And, he says, "I just stuck with it."

Coupon has since photographed hundreds of personalities. His clients include Westinghouse, *Time*, Federal Express, Issey Miyake, *Rolling Stone*, Nike, and the *Washington Post Magazine*.

Not since the very start of his photography career has Coupon solicited work. What's more, the art directors and account executives let him do his own thing. "They just ask me to do what I do," he says. "It hasn't been a problem."

Photographing famous personalities, however, is but half of Coupon's creative work. He also travels extensively, orchestrating portraits of everyday people for a series he calls Social Studies. Altogether, Coupon has shot 15 Social Studies installments, the subjects of which included Haitians, Eskimos, Australian Aborigines, and Moroccan Berbers.

"I try to challenge myself to do projects that extend the range of my work," he says. "I always get the portrait work. These [Social Studies projects] are solely for

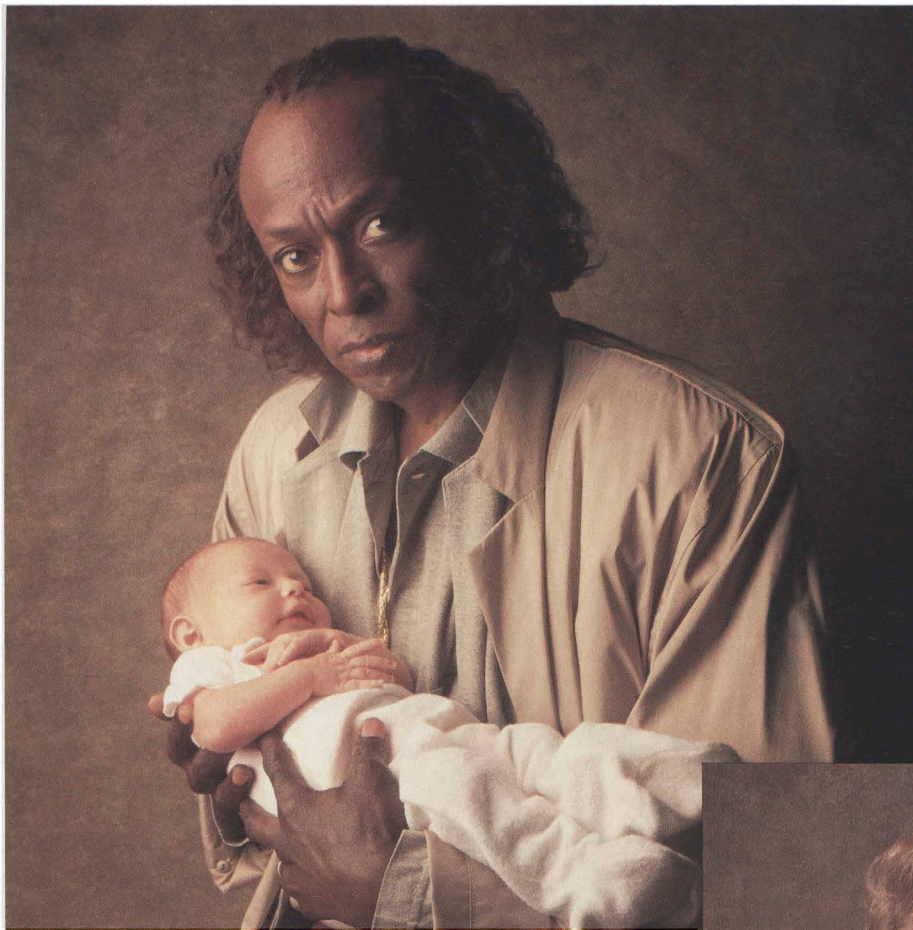
me—self-financed."

In addition, Coupon continues to develop other styles. "More playful, full-length portraits. More documentary, reportage, and environmental work," he says. Soon, he plans to publish a book showcasing much of his work.

Though Coupon's assignments regularly require unexpected travel (*Time* magazine sent him to Libya to shoot Muammar Gaddafi last August with a day's notice), the 37-year-old photographer remains unaffected by the amount and stature of work that comes his way.

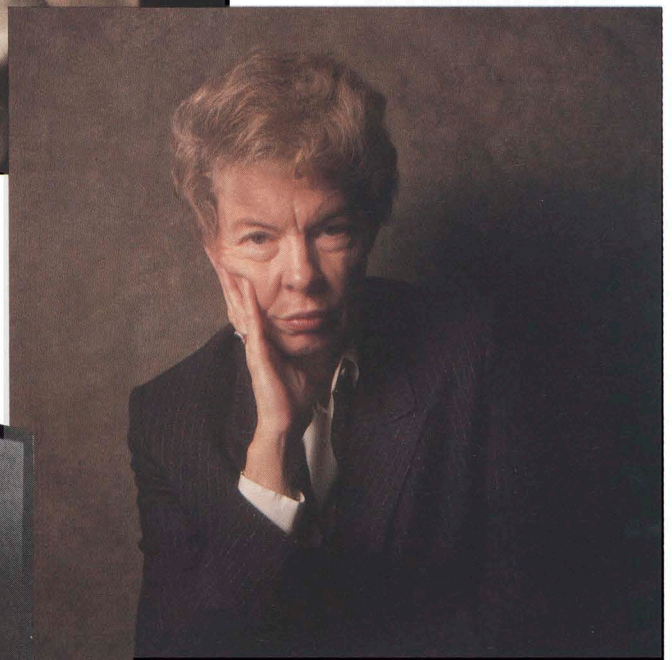
"It's been an amazing kind of journey," he says. "This job is not really a job."

VALUE



From top: *Miles Davis photographed with Coupon's daughter Hayley for the Issey Miyake Fashion Project.* • *Jeane Kirkpatrick, professor at Georgetown University and former United States ambassador to the United Nations, for Working Woman magazine.* • *Alaskan Eskimo woman from Social Studies 15.* • *Opposite: Self-portrait of photographer William Coupon.*

Article by Mary Ellen Mengucci
All photographs by William Coupon



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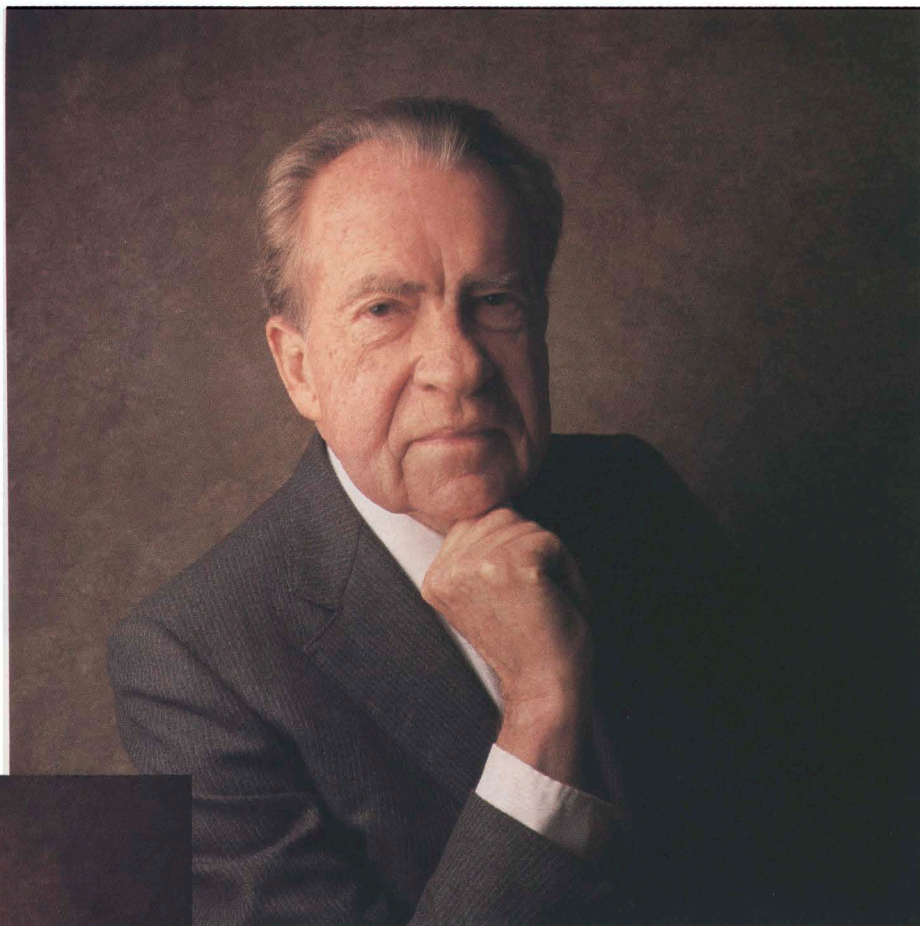


One of more than 300 punk portraits Coupon created at New York City's Mudd Club in the late seventies. • Opposite, from top: Richard Nixon, for the April 2, 1990, issue of Time magazine. "He was pretty charming. Chatty and very agreeable. Took direction well." • Yassir Arafat, photographed for a 1988 Time cover. "It was very brief," says Coupon. "It was very rushed, frenetic, exciting, and historic. I only got two rolls." • Yoko Ono for the cover of Rolling Stone, "She seemed kind of guarded, I guess. But yet she was also chatty and very gregarious. She is sweet and demure."

Coupon's photography career got off the ground in the late seventies after he began photographing punks at New York City's Mudd Club. His haunting black-and-white portraits, which were on display at the club, captured the attention of record company executives who then hired Coupon to shoot the cover for Bette Middler's album *Thighs and Whispers*—his first color project. "I wasn't nervous," says Coupon. "I guess I wasn't aware that I should be."

In no time, magazines and advertisers, drawn to Coupon's direct style, began sending portrait jobs his way. Shooting a luminary or two each week became part of his life.

Today, Coupon generally uses two cameras on each assignment (a Hasselblad and a Rolleiflex) and shoots both color and black-and-white. But, he says, "Black-and-white has a magic I prefer." Coupon prints his black-and-white portraits on bowed paper to create a "video futuristic effect. It's

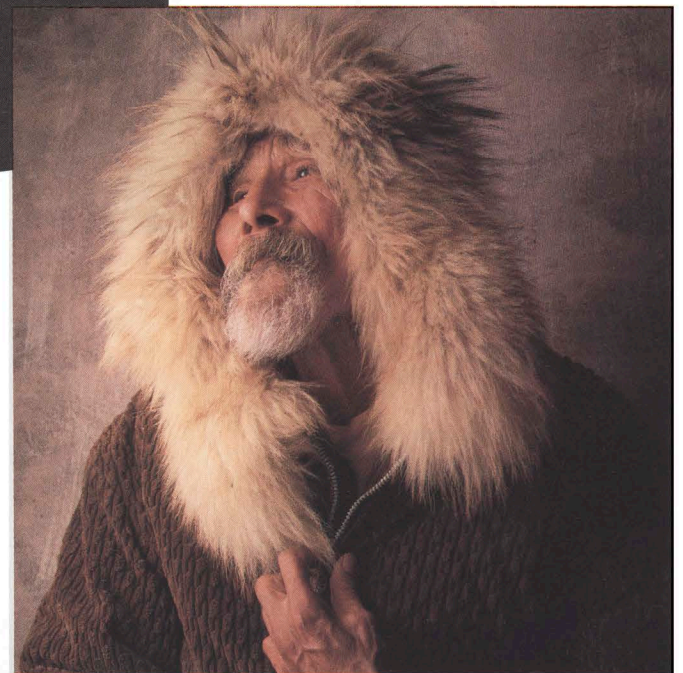
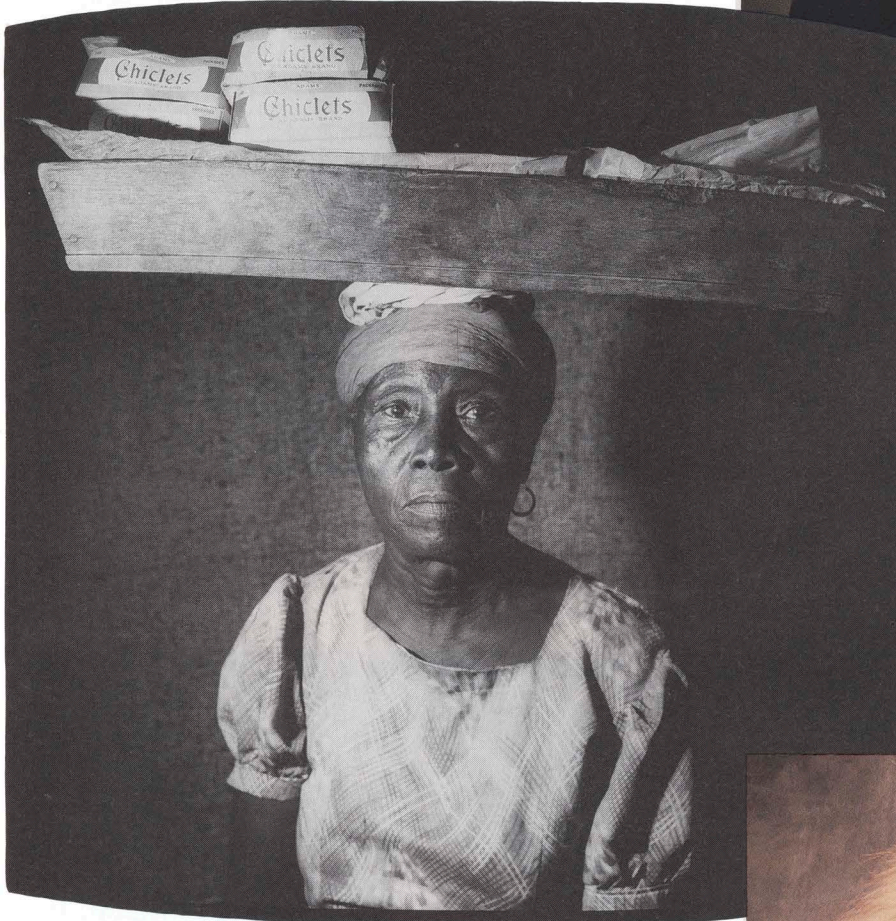
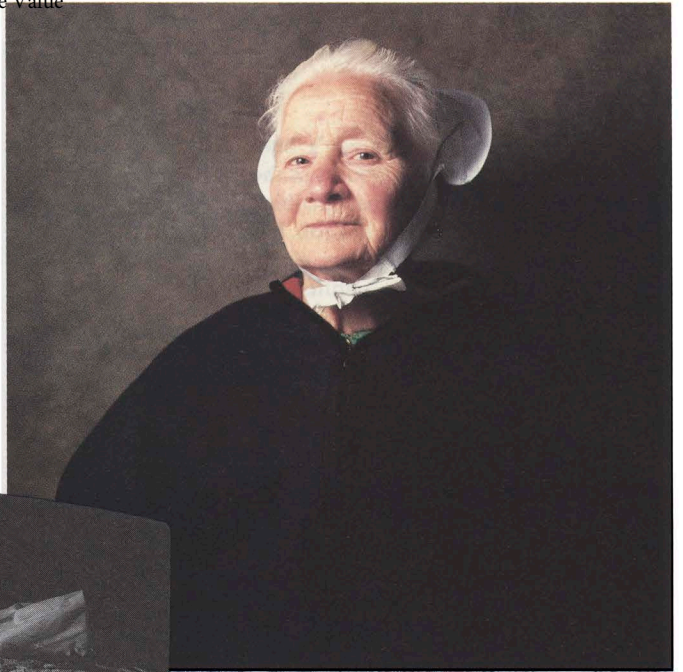


kind of my trademark."

He rarely sets up more than one light source. He places it on his left side, casting a distinctive shadow on the right. "Mainly I use common sense with the lighting," he says.

His painted backdrops serve two purposes. They transport easily ("just roll them up and ship them off") and they don't compete with the subject. "I get a lot of criticism for that backdrop," says Coupon. "But it invokes a painterly image and allows me to create something new each time." With it, he says, "I try to capture the personality and soul of the subject."





From top: A Dutch woman from Scheveningen, Holland, one of the few Dutch communities where traditional clothing is still worn by older women. ♣ A Haitian woman who peddled Chicklets gum at a market. ♣ An Eskimo man from Kotzebue, Alaska. ♣ Opposite: An aboriginal boy from Arnhemland in northern Australia. ♣ All photographs were taken for Coupon's Social Studies series.



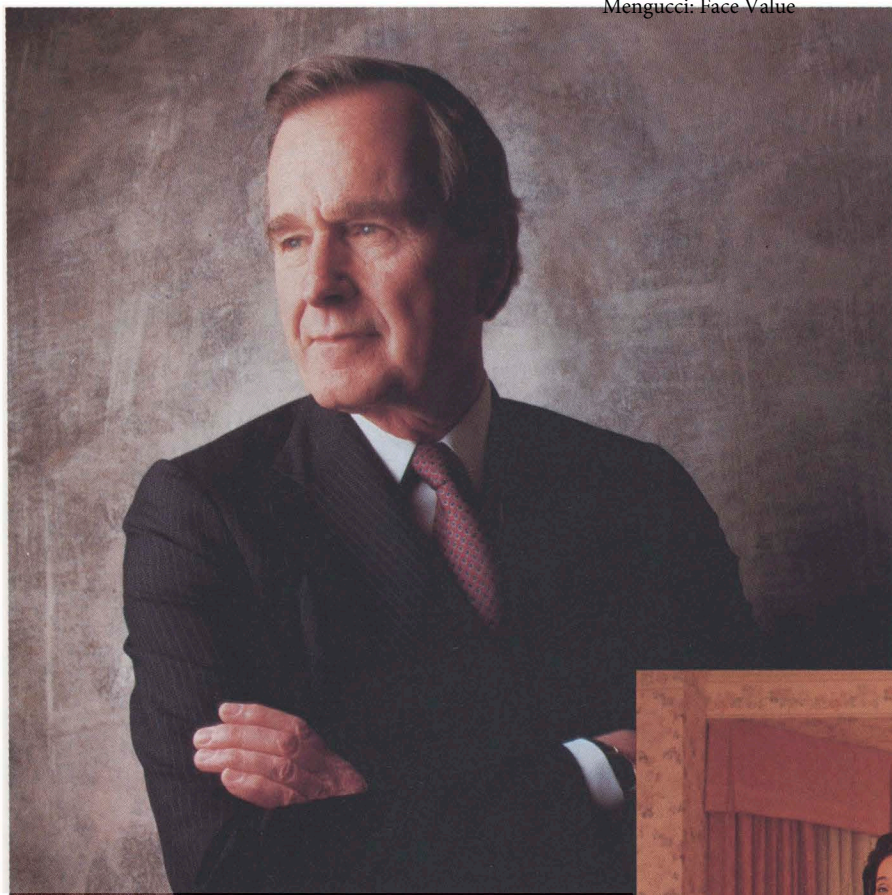
Though Coupon is best known for his portraits of famous personalities, he began his career photographing little-known members of society's subcultures. "I thought there would be enough photographers handling celebrities. I didn't really have that as my interest," says Coupon. "Once I started, I realized that if I was going to make any money and pay my rent, then I was going to have to shoot people that were more recognizable than Aborigines."

Coupon hasn't forgotten his first passion, though. Several weeks each year, he travels—Bolivia, Israel, Alaska, Australia, Norway, Africa, Haiti—to photograph ethnic groups as part of his Social Studies series. Usually he sets up a makeshift studio in a barn or spare room. "Any enclosed space that I can rent, use, or borrow," he says.

Prior to making the trip, he researches the history and culture of the people he plans to photograph. Often the subjects represent a dwindling population, or they practice ancient, dying customs. The Social Studies subjects, many of whom have never been photographed before, flock to Coupon

to have their portraits taken. "Generally I am received well because they know what I am doing. They know I'm there for portraits and they are acquiescent and agreeable. It's not like I'm walking down the street stealing their pictures." Coupon says his Social Studies subjects particularly enjoy the Polaroid shots he gives them.

Already, Coupon has plans to photograph Social Studies 16: a small tribe of Indians in the jungles of Mexico now facing extinction. Earlier this summer he scouted out the location and made some contacts in the area.



Coupon's ability to set his subjects at ease shines through in nearly all of his portraits. During the 1988 presidential campaign, for instance, he shot George Bush for the cover of *Time* magazine. Though Bush appeared tired and a bit beleaguered by the press that day, Coupon managed to create a relaxed formal portrait of Bush, says Rudolph Hoglund, *Time's* art director, who observed the shoot.

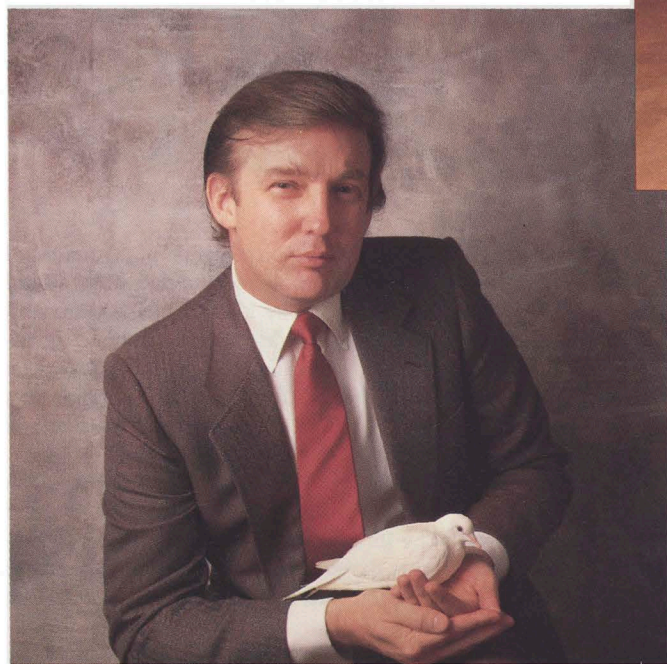
Calmly and briefly, Coupon explained what he was about to do. "He said, 'I want you to be comfortable. I want you to sit here.'" Then Coupon talked about baseball and his daughter, because he knew Bush was an athlete and a family man.

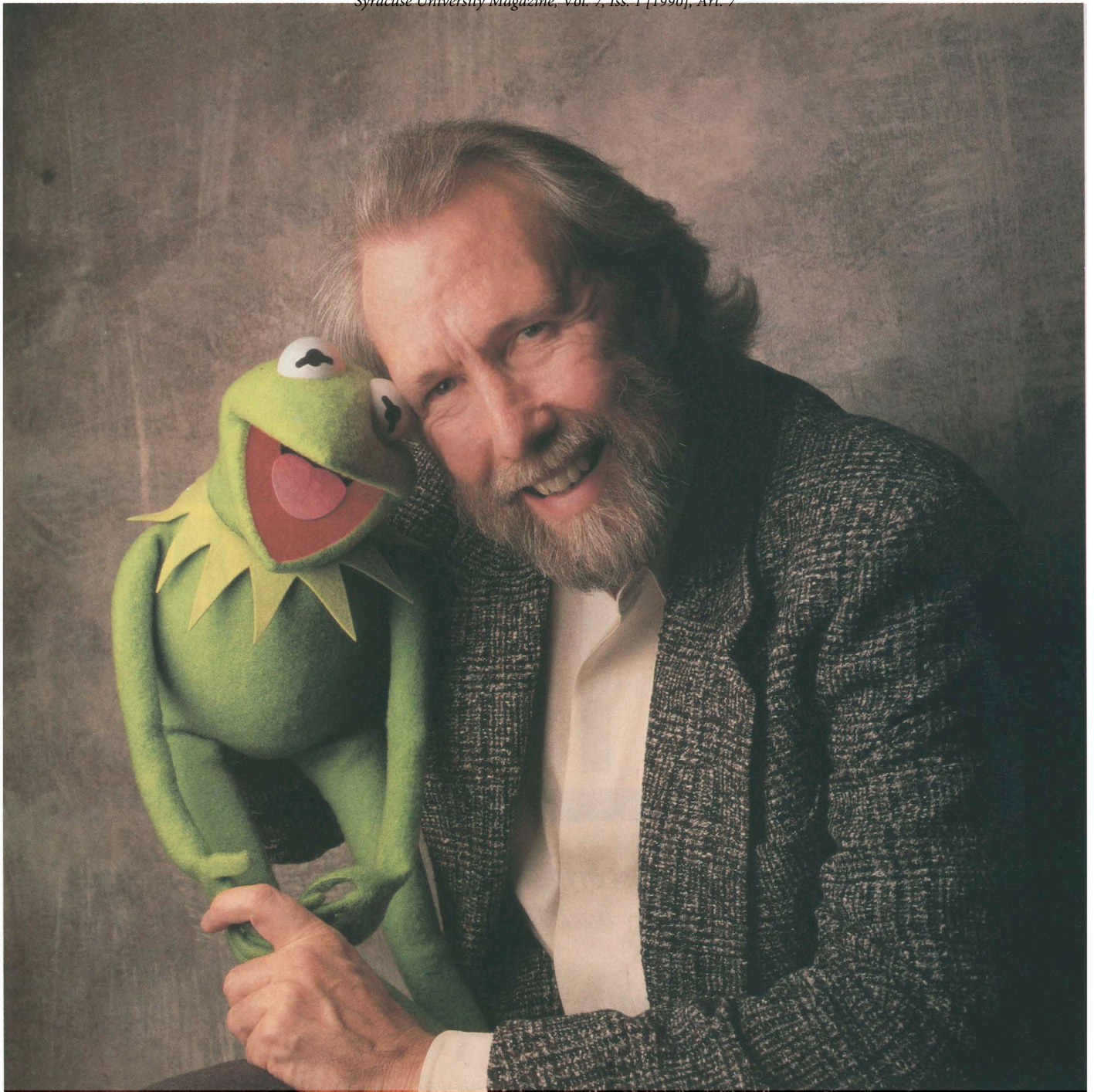
Hoglund says the session went on for about 20 minutes—10 minutes longer than



the time Coupon was initially allotted. "Then Bush said, 'Gee, is it over? Is that all you need? Are you sure you don't want me to do something else?'" And he said, 'No.' So Bush said, 'Well come on over here. Let me show you my desk.' . . . And he started talking with Coupon about the tradition of this desk. He pulled out some cufflinks with the vice presidential seal on them and handed them to him."

Coupon says every photographer has to be a psychiatrist. But he enjoys that part of his job. "There's a certain joy in photographing someone," says Coupon, "and capturing a certain essence about them." ■





The late Jim Henson with alter ego Kermit the Frog ♣ Opposite, from top: George Bush during the 1988 presidential campaign. ♣ Coretta Scott King photographed for the cover of the Washington Post Magazine. “Very maternal. I remember her being very warm and very friendly. You kind of get a feeling that you knew her.” ♣ Donald Trump shot for the cover of Manhattan, inc. “Private. He wasn’t the most at-ease guy. He was pretty edgy.”

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