

INTERVIEW:

# Martin Schoeller

By Charlie Fish - Photo by Markian Lozowchuk

Martin Schoeller's TriBeCa studio is in the same building as culinary staple Nobu. If that isn't enough to give you an indication as to his status, hanging just to the right of his studio entrance is an enlarged portrait of a female bodybuilder. Her hardened muscles protrude through her taut, spray-tanned skin. She presides over the communal area of the studio, her hyper-focused eyes keeping diligent watch over her creator's domain. Then there's Martin himself who, though dressed down in jeans and sporting thin dreadlocks, maintains an alert and seemingly cautious face throughout our entire conversation. It's enough to unnerve anyone who might set foot in his workplace. And if these same happenstances were applied to any other world-renowned photographer, they just might have. But the truth behind Martin Schoeller's persona, and ultimately his success, is all in the details.

Instead of a frigid and frantic environment, with phones clamoring for attention or the click-clack of hurried heels attending to some minute task, Schoeller's studio is—by the looks of the donuts on the common table, or the music that's playing in the background, or the many assistants and interns who individually greet me with wide grins—an open, inviting look into the personality of one of our generation's greatest photographers. But don't take my word for it. Martin himself would likely advise against taking anything at face value. Instead, he'd encourage you to look for the clues, to dig deeper for the particulars.

Martin recalls how he came to be a sought-after, respected celebrity photographer. As a teen, he worked odd jobs in Frankfurt, Germany, because he didn't know what career he wanted to pursue. For a while, Schoeller worked with a handicapped man who was suffering from Multiple Sclerosis. It has been a long, dedicated road for Schoeller, from signing up for photography school in 1989 on a lark (and upon a friend's suggestion), to having his work appear in *GQ*, *National Geographic* and *The New Yorker*, photographing Bill Clinton, Jack Nicholson, Colin Powell, Angelina Jolie and Barack Obama along the way.

Schoeller moved to New York in 1993 and landed an assisting job with Annie Leibovitz. He labored industriously for the celebrity photographer, always keeping his eyes open, adding real world practice to his photography school theory knowledge. Martin says that Leibovitz "didn't teach her assistants. You just did your job. She didn't even care what kind of pictures her assistants took. I learned by just watching her." The lessons she inadvertently taught him were many, but can best be summed up by Martin's own words: "If you're going to take a picture, really try to make it the best picture you've ever taken, every time. Always strive for the best you can do." This level of professionalism requires that you live, breathe and eat photography, and that every step along the way is executed with great attention to—what else—the details. "If you want to be a

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photographer," he advises, "Be a photographer ten hours a day instead of spending five hours retouching some half-ass picture you don't like in the first place."

His most recognized work is probably from his "Close Up" series, wherein subjects are all photographed under the same set up (including a medium format; Schoeller still prefers film) and in the exact same style, so as to create what Martin calls "a democratic platform. This approach allows you to compare and to juxtapose people from different walks of life with each other." In other words, if everyone's photographed the same way, you can spot the flaws, the scars, the eyes, the hair, the smiles, the wrinkles, the determination, the struggles, the nuances (the details) that make each person different, yet similar. In his world of close ups, Barack Obama and a Brazilian tribesman both offer a unique portrait to examine carefully and compare.

Inspired in part by fellow German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, Schoeller's "Close Up" series involves an intricate set up and demands full cooperation from his subjects. When asked how he put his subjects—many of whom included temperamental actors—at ease, Schoeller reveals, "If you want to do portraits, you have to be outgoing and be able to engage people. I always say a third is photography, a third is diplomacy, and a third is politics. By doing a lot of research and finding out what they have done in the recent past I know where their mind is at. I'm able to engage them in a conversation so they forget for a moment that they're being photographed." While this may be common practice to many photographers, Schoeller's research manifests itself in another way. "I always play music that I think they might like, or remind them of their childhood. We always have a little stereo with us."

In one of his favorite assignments, he brought his "little stereo" to the White House during the Clinton administration for an assignment from *The New Yorker*. As Schoeller played Miles Davis on his stereo, President Clinton was curious as to what he was listening to. "No, that's not Miles Davis," said Clinton during the time. "Yes, Mr. President. It's Miles Davis," Schoeller countered. "No, no, no. I don't believe it," Clinton asserted. "I didn't want to disagree with him anymore," Martin laughs, "So I was like, 'OK' and moved on," Schoeller tells me. But it wouldn't be long before he was correcting the President again. "Clinton kept on doing the three-quarter turn with the smile, where he knows he looks good. So I constantly had to correct him. 'OK, Mr. President, nose to me, chin



up, look straight into camera, a little more serious, not too much of a smile.' At some point I was like, 'I can't keep telling the President what to do over and over again,' and really aggressively too, because he just wouldn't listen and kept doing his own thing. That was nerve-wracking." Needless to say, it takes a lot of passion for your craft to be aggressive enough to give directives to the Commander in Chief. Martin Schoeller (unknowingly) did it twice. (He played Al Green for Barack Obama in 2004.)

Martin's current series of photographs are jarring portraits of female bodybuilders. It's a touchy subject for the world at large to handle, as is evidenced by the very few fans of female bodybuilding, the little money involved for the women who practice it, and the social stigmas that arise when a woman undergoes such an extreme body transformation.

"I think nowadays everybody is so streamlined into looking the same," Martin explains, discussing what drew him to spending close to three years observing these women and capturing the striking images. "As soon as you're a little bit different you're kind of an outcast. That's why I had a lot of sympathy for the women bodybuilders, for just having the courage to be different." The resulting portraits rightfully lack any indication that they were done by a photographer looking to exploit a subculture or niche. Indeed, Martin Schoeller grew to know these women and their often-heartbreaking stories. When Schoeller does his research, he immerses himself in that world. It's evident in the way he speaks of his subjects: "By the time the women go onstage, they're basically starving. They look for the right point before the muscle tissue gets too eaten up for energy by the body. They just have to find that fine balance so they know exactly how many calories they need to eat to keep their brain functioning. Sometimes they under-eat, so often times they're spaced out, or they start to get slightly delirious or have a hard time speaking during competitions. The brain only needs 140 calories a day to operate, so according to that, they eat two, three, maybe 400 calories a day for the last couple of weeks before a competition. They have, sometimes, 1% body fat, which is completely unhealthy. You get

liver, kidney failure from it. And they're completely dehydrated on top of it! Then they sometimes take laxatives to get rid of the last food from their body, or they spit in buckets like boxers to get rid of more body fluid. These extremes are what drew me in. They think it's feminine; they think it's beautiful while everybody else thinks it's ugly. That discrepancy is fascinating."

What makes Martin Schoeller a great photographer is not just that he picks up a camera and documents life, whether it is a celebrity, a politician, or a tribe in an undeveloped country. It is fair to say Schoeller is more an astute observer who meticulously captures the intricacies behind the subject's story. Undoubtedly, others recognize his level of professionalism and unique style. This year marks Schoeller's tenth year of working with *The New Yorker*. When asked what it is that drives him to continue to deliver such high-caliber work, he replies, "Sometimes I ask myself the same question. I guess it is the fear of failing and coming back to a magazine with a bad picture."

Yes, even Schoeller—with his TriBeCa studio, ten-year magazine stint and worldwide acclaim—second-guesses himself. "I'm always nervous," he says about shoots. "There are always so many things that can go wrong. Often times, as soon as the subject leaves I'm sitting there thinking, 'Shit! I should have done this or that.' You're always on hyper alert and a bit nervous. At least I am." And therein lays the secret to Martin Schoeller's success: he is as determined to produce extraordinary work as he is attentive to his subjects. Along the way, he has retained humility, a trait that someone of his stature could easily have discarded.

At the end of our meeting, I thank him for his time and he says, "That's it? That was painless." He moves to a stack of books in his office and scribbles something in one of them. He hands me a copy of his latest book, *Female Bodybuilders*. The inscription, though short, is still appreciative. "To Charlie: Thanks! Best, Martin Schoeller."

Martin Schoeller - [www.martinschoeller.com](http://www.martinschoeller.com)