

PHOTOGRAPH >

Jonathan Becker, photographer of the rich and famous: “I told the Duchess of Alba: ‘Pose like the maja’. She replied: ‘But not like the naked one’”

After more than half a century immortalizing Hollywood stars, the jet set and royalty in the privacy of their homes and parties, Becker publishes 'Lost Time', a book that compiles his best portraits



44. The Duchess of Alba at home in Seville, March 2010
JONATHAN BECKER

MARTIN BIANCHI

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Jonathan Becker (New York, 1954) has been photographing the richest, most famous and most powerful people in the world in the privacy of their homes and parties for over 50 years. [King Charles of England](#) in his Highgrove House refuge; Donald Trump in his three-story penthouse in Manhattan; Argentine

President Carlos Menem at the Quinta de Olivos in Buenos Aires; [King Juan Carlos I](#) at the Fanjul family mansion in the Dominican Republic; Nicole Kidman, Tom Cruise and Gwyneth Paltrow at the *Vanity Fair* magazine party in Hollywood; or Madonna, Martha Graham and Clavin Klein at the City Center theatre are some of the names that appear on the almost endless list of characters immortalised by Becker. "I grew up surrounded by privileged people. I guess all these people have let me in because they know I am not going to betray them. "They know me and they know that I will never harm them," explains the photographer on the other end of the phone from his home in Bedford, a town of colonial-style mansions on the outskirts of New York.

The night before the interview with EL PAÍS, Becker presented his new book, *Lost Time* (Phaidon), at the Katonah Museum of Art, a visual arts museum a few miles from his home. "Most people look from the outside, but Jonathan is always inside looking at what is happening around him," said Robert Storr during the presentation. Storr, a renowned art critic and historian and former MoMA curator, spoke with Becker about this work that compiles more than 200 portraits of sacred monsters of culture, high society, royalty and the highest spheres of international politics. "This book is a visual narrative, it tells a story, the story of my life," says the photographer. "The title, *Lost Time* [*Tiempo perdido* , in Spanish] is a nod to [Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*](#) . It is a very appropriate and poetic title, because this is the document of a time that has disappeared," he says. Indeed, many of those portrayed have died - [Jackie Kennedy](#) , Gorbachev, Warhol, Mapplethorpe, Sinatra, Truffaut - and others have not been seen for years.

Lost Time begins at the beginning, with the black-and-white photos Becker began taking at the age of 19 in the kitchen of New York's Elaine's restaurant of celebrities such as Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Paul Simon and Ultra Violet. "I was determined not to go to university, so I started out on the street very early," he recalls. "My father was a Harvard-educated academic, an Oxford doctor, a theatre critic and distributor of classic films... He was competitive and critical, so I decided not to study. I felt I couldn't enter his field. What options did I have? I could play backgammon, which I was very good at, but I couldn't make a living from that. I always knew I could make a living from photography. It was more of an instinct than a choice, and I followed it."



Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman at the Vanity Fair Oscar party in West Hollywood in 2000. The year before, they had starred together in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*.
JONATHAN BECKER

Becker studied printmaking with photographer George Tice at Parsons and in the summer of 1973 took a course on Surrealism and Dada at Harvard. There he wrote an essay on [Brassaï's surrealist influences](#) that found its way into the hands of the legendary Hungarian photographer. The nearly eighty-year-old Brassai was so impressed with the work of the twenty-something American that he sent him a letter of congratulations. Thus began their epistolary friendship. A year later, Becker was in Paris learning photography from his idol. "My friends have always been older than me. Older people are more interesting, more complex and more generous," he reflects.

After a stint in Paris as a photo correspondent for the fashion magazine *W*, he returned to the United States. He worked for a few years in California and then returned to New York, where he combined his work as a party photographer for *W* with that of a taxi driver. "The city was already expensive at the time and I had to earn money." He also collaborated with *Interview*, [Andy Warhol's](#) magazine. "Andy was the center of society, he mixed the upper class with the lower class, transvestites with *socialites*. He let us do our job. For him everything was great. In fact, Bob Colacello was the editor and did everything. *Interview* was a great magazine, I miss it," he admits.

Bea Feitler, the legendary art director of *Harper's Bazaar* and *Rolling Stone*, noticed his work and hired him for the relaunch of *Vanity Fair*, a society magazine that had ceased publication in 1936. In the first prototype issue, in 1983, his photographs shared pages with those of Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Helmut Newton, Bill King, [Annie Leibovitz](#) and Dominique Nabokov. Forty years later, Jonathan Becker's name still appears on the masthead of *Vanity Fair*. "I've worked with five editors of the magazine and my name is still there. Last week I received the October issue, where they dedicated a page to me for my book. I was thrilled."

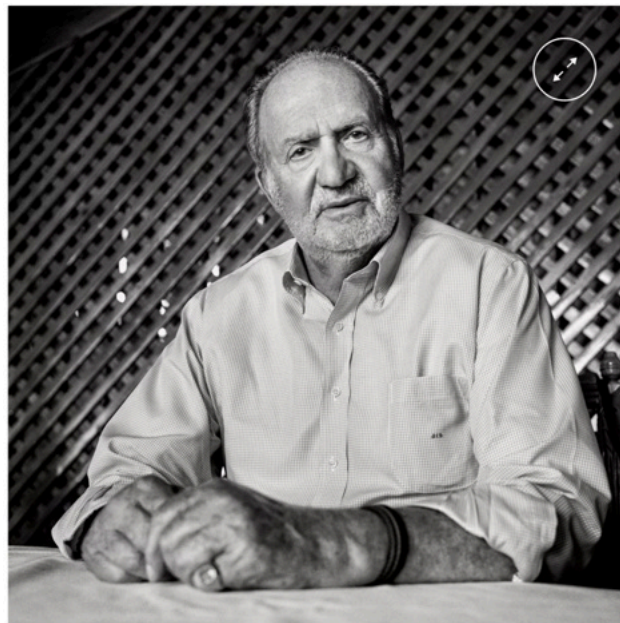


Jonathan Becker in an image provided by the photographer:
JONATHAN BECKER

Becker has been the official photographer for Vanity Fair 's Oscar parties for decades . He has also photographed all the "swans" of high society, aristocracy and royalty - Gloria Vanderbilt, Carolina Herrera, Gloria von Thurn und Taxis, Bianca Jagger - and the "beasts" of the business, art and culture world - Baron Thyssen, Arthur Miller, Hunter S. Thompson, Peter Beard, Ed Ruscha, Basquiat. He seems to have an anecdote about everyone. Donald Trump? "His penthouse is like the house of the president of Ukraine, all gold and white. That's how someone from Queens would decorate Versailles. Trump doesn't worry me, I'm very American and I have a lot of faith in our Constitution." [The](#)

[Duchess of Alba](#) ? "She had a great sense of humor and a lot of energy. She wasn't a great beauty, but she liked to flirt. I liked her from the first minute. I said to her: 'I pose like Goya's Maja.' And she replied: 'But not like the nude.' She liked to be photographed." [Isabel Preysler](#) ? "An intellectually powerful woman. I was seated next to her and Mario Vargas Llosa at a dinner. I told Mario that I admired his books and she asked me: 'Yes? Which is your favourite?' I didn't know what to answer. I still feel ashamed of that. She is very intelligent, very quick."

The photographer has included an unpublished portrait of Juan Carlos I in *Lost Time*. He took it during one of the visits that the emeritus king made [to his friend José Pepe Fanjul in the Dominican Republic](#), in 2017. He looks relaxed and informal just three years after his abdication. “I didn’t photograph him the first time I met him, several years went by,” Becker explains. “There is power in his face. When you are in front of him you feel that you are in front of someone who was an absolute monarch, who could do what he wanted and who chose to do good things for Spain. When I finished, he said to me: ‘That’s it? Are there no more photos?’. He was dedicated and wanted to do it well. I really admire him,” he admits. “King Juan Carlos has made mistakes and has gone through difficult times, but he created a modern nation. He was the last absolute monarch on the planet. He inherited an absolute monarchy and turned it into a modern country. People think they can *cancel you* because you have made mistakes, but nobody should be shooting themselves in the foot.”



King Juan Carlos I, in a photograph taken in the Dominican Republic in 2017.
JONATHAN BECKER

It would seem that there is no 20th-century figure who has not posed for the American portraitist, but he disagrees. “I always wanted to photograph Fidel Castro. I was close to doing it several times, but it didn’t work out.” Now he does private commissions for rich people. “Magazines have a new word: budget. They don’t have the money to pay me. That’s the mistake of the media: they don’t want to spend money anymore. If they did, readers would go back to the newsstands,” he laments. He is very critical of the current press. “Magazines still interest me, although they have made many mistakes. When the Internet came along, they got scared. Instead of using the Internet to attract subscribers, they gave away their content, offered it for free. They decided to pay more attention to advertising than to readers, and that was a fatal mistake. Readers ran away because they didn’t want to pay to read advertising. And then the advertisers ran away. So many magazines have been left with nothing.”

He is also scathing about Instagram. “I don’t see the point. Before, in magazines you would find well-edited stories and verified, first-hand information about contemporary culture. You don’t find any of that on Instagram. There is no editing or fact-checking. It’s all promotional rubbish, a huge distraction,” he concludes. However, he does have a personal account on the social network. “I don’t post anything. I’m there as a *voyeur*, observing.” As Robert Storr said: “Most people look from the outside, but Jonathan is always inside, watching what’s going on around him.”

ABOUT THE SIGNATURE



Martin Bianchi

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