The National Portrait Gallery Presents

“Harry Benson: Being There”

“Harry Benson: Being There” opens Friday, April 27 at the National Portrait Gallery and will run through Sept. 3. The exhibition highlights the renowned photojournalist’s knack for being in the right place at the right time—a skill that has served him well for the past 50 years.

Benson, who has photographed every U.S. president since Dwight Eisenhower, was just feet away from Bobby Kennedy the night he was shot and was in the room with President Richard Nixon when he resigned. He was next to Coretta Scott King at her husband’s funeral and on site shortly after the second of the Twin Towers fell on Sept. 11, 2001.

The exhibition draws together nearly 100 of Benson’s most iconic images, together with work that is rarely seen and little known. Some of the highlights include the legendary shot of the Beatles arriving at JFK airport in 1964, the Reagans dancing at the White House and the Clintons kissing. The exhibition also includes jarring images, such as those of the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Organized by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, “Harry Benson: Being There” spans five decades of Benson’s photojournalism.

“Harry Benson’s remarkable photographs give us a front-row view of history,” said Ann M. Shumard, the National Portrait Gallery’s curator of photographs.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Benson started out as a wedding photographer and honed his skills working for a variety of London newspapers and eventually Life magazine and Vanity Fair. Soon after...
his first arrival in New York on the flight that took the Beatles to America, Benson became a resident of the United States, where he has lived and worked ever since.

“Benson’s unique perspective as a Briton living in the United States has enabled him to chronicle America from the 1960s to the present,” said Marc Pachter, director of the National Portrait Gallery. “Through his photographs, he has captured our time and our country – in happy and unhappy times.”

Renowned amongst his peers for his stealth, Benson has moved almost invisibly around the offices and parties of public figures, from President Ronald Reagan to Elizabeth Taylor. He also has photographed some of the most defining moments in recent political history, from the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall to crises in Israel and the West Bank.

Commenting on his career, Benson said, “What am I proud of most? There are a few things, but covering the American civil rights movement and marching with Martin Luther King Jr. in the South is certainly up there at the top.”

The National Portrait Gallery

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the stories of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists who speak American history.

The National Portrait Gallery was established by an act of Congress in 1962 and opened to the public in 1968. The museum’s collection of nearly 20,000 works ranges from paintings and sculpture to photographs and drawings. The National Portrait Gallery is housed in the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000; TTY (202) 633-5285. Web sites: npg.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

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