

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Life and death, put into perspective

Annie Leibovitz reveals a more personal side to her photography, writes **Joyce Morgan**.

Annie Leibovitz has spent the day photographing the actress Susan Sarandon. But before they began shooting, the photographer did what she has rarely done during her working life. She sat and talked with her subject.

"As I'm getting older, I'm enjoying talking more, especially photographing people I've photographed before. It feels good. It's coming naturally," Leibovitz says.

The world's best-known photographer used to play music as she worked, initially to camouflage her reserve. She has never seen it as her role to put a subject at ease.

Unlike Richard Avedon, with whose work hers has been compared, she has not used conversation to establish a rapport and get the shot. He once told the canine-loving Duke and Duchess of Windsor that he had just seen a dog run over in order to prompt a response – and a portrait of utter abjectness.

Has she ever done that?

"I wish I had the guts," Leibovitz says by phone from her New York studio. "I don't have that in me. I'm actually a push-over. I like to like people. I want them to look as good as they can but look like themselves. I wish I had a tougher edge to me but it's actually pretty soft."

For four decades Leibovitz, 61, has photographed the apex of power and celebrity. A naked John Lennon wrapped around Yoko Ono, a pregnant Demi Moore and Whoopi Goldberg in a bath of milk are among her best-known images. She has photographed the singer Patti Smith repeatedly, including with her children.

Leibovitz has also looked unflinchingly at life and death, especially in the personal photographs of her family. The two strands of her work – and life – are intertwined in her book *A Photographer's Life, 1990-2005* and the exhibition that opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art this week.

She began looking closely at her personal photographs after the death of her lover, the writer Susan Sontag, in 2004. Although



Coming to the MCA ... Patti Smith with her Children, Jackson and Jesse, St. Clair Shores, Michigan 1996. From *Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life, 1990 to 2005*. Photo: Annie Leibovitz

she had included some in an earlier book, there was nothing quite like these. There are joyful images of her elderly mother, high kicking in the surf, her wide-eyed infant daughter, her newborn twins, her dying father and Sontag, laid out after her death.

Birth and death were Leibovitz's overwhelming experiences at the time she worked on the book. Within the space of a few years she lost her partner and her parents and became the mother of three daughters.

"I began [the project] in that moment of heightened emotional feeling [prompted by] what was going on in my life. I was drawn and attracted to these personal pictures more than I was to my assignment work. I decided to mix them together in *A Photographer's Life*," she says. "I was drawn to Everyman's

story, what we all go through – we have birth, we have death, we have friendships, we have love, we have family."

She is proud of the book, describing it as the "closest to a perfect piece". But she doubts she would publish so many private images again. She is more protective of her family these days and less compelled to share such intimate images.

"At the time you couldn't stop me from publishing them because I felt I had news. Guess what? There's birth! There's death! There's life! I just figured it out!" she says animatedly. "Now I've figured it out I don't feel the need to broadcast it."

The book and exhibition roughly span the years Leibovitz and Sontag were together. Theirs was an unlikely yet enduring partnership and little known



until after Sontag's death. As a 20-year-old student Leibovitz had read the writer's influential work *On Photography*. Did it make much impact on her?

"No," she says. "I remember looking at it and thinking there weren't any pictures in it."

Leibovitz acknowledges she

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Annie Leibovitz

was nervous when she first met the public intellectual.

"The first time I went out to dinner with Susan, I remember reading *The New York Times* from front to back trying to prep myself. I sweated right through my clothes because I was just so nervous about sounding smart or something."

Perhaps Sontag sweated through hers?

"No, no, she was very confident and strong," she says. "I miss her

very, very much. She always knew the right thing to say."

The past year has been difficult for other reasons, since it was revealed she was \$US24 million in debt. She is confident these financial troubles are behind her.

"I'm very involved in the business. There's no going back."

Leibovitz, who will visit Australia in February, is completing a new book, *Pilgrimage*, of a lesser-known side of her work: landscape photography. "It is a book of places. It doesn't have people in it. I made a list of places I always wanted to go to," she says. "I'm enjoying it so much – no one's talking back to me."

Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life 1990-2005 opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Friday.