

Matthew Rolston, in Partnership with ArtCenter College of Design, Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles, Daido Moriyama Museum/Daido Star Space, and Leica Gallery, Los Angeles, Presents Multi-Venue Exhibition and Monograph for **Vanitas: The Palermo Portraits, A Photographic Meditation on Mortality**

Timed to this Exhibition, Matthew Rolston to be Awarded Lifetime Achievement Award by ArtCenter College of Design in September 2025

Exhibition run dates:

ArtCenter College of Design: September 20 to November 9, 2025

Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles: September 25 to November 8, 2025

Daido Moriyama Museum/Daido Star Space: September 30 to October 23, 2025

Leica Gallery, Los Angeles: October 26 to November 2, 2025



Matthew Rolston, Untitled (Long Face), Palermo, 2013. From the series *Vanitas: The Palermo Portraits*.

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LOS ANGELES, August 5, 2025 – Photographer and artist **Matthew Rolston**, in partnership with **ArtCenter College of Design, Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles, Daido Moriyama Museum / Daido Star Space, and Leica Gallery**, is pleased to announce a multi-venue Los Angeles exhibition of his latest series *Vanitas: The Palermo Portraits*, alongside the release of a special limited-edition monograph on Nazraeli Press. In production for well over a decade, *Vanitas* represents a cumulative effort by Rolston to aesthetically capture the fraught human relationship to death through the medium of photography, a profound narrative, as seen through the decaying

faces of mummified individuals in Palermo, Sicily's *Catacombe dei Cappuccini*. These vivid, painterly compositions bring forth an interwoven meditation on beauty, mortality and art through Rolston's uniquely photographic lens. Timed to this milestone, Matthew Rolston will additionally be honored at this year's ArtCenter Alumni Awards, receiving the College's highest honor, its Lifetime Achievement Award, as a leading cultural and creative force, educator and mentor. Rolston is part of a distinguished group of ArtCenter alumni, including Hiroshi Sugimoto, Doug Aitken and Lee Friedlander, who have been previously honored with the College's Lifetime Achievement Award for their contributions to the fields of fine art and photography.

Throughout his long career, Matthew Rolston has fundamentally questioned the truth of the camera lens, deploying it not so much as a documentarian's tool but rather an expansion of the human capacity for expression and perception. His earliest work was commissioned in 1977 by Andy Warhol for Warhol's groundbreaking publication *Interview* while Rolston was still a student at ArtCenter. This work would begin a career that was celebrated in 2017 with a mid-career retrospective entitled *Hollywood Royale: Out of the School of Los Angeles*, comprised of portraits from the 1970s and 80s that reframed celebrities in the guise of classic Hollywood glamour portrait photography.

Shifting to more conceptual personal projects later in his career, such as the fine art series *Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits* and *Art People: The Pageant Portraits*, Rolston would continue to interrogate the thresholds between reality and artifice. In *Vanitas*, his photographic inquiry contemplates a set of unanswerable questions about human existence on earth, actively putting himself and his lens in direct dialogue with death.

The last interment in Palermo's catacombs was in 1939, nearly three and a half centuries after the first of the *frati Cappuccini* were laid to rest there. Over time, the catacombs became less a marker of piety and more a symbol of status; the city's most distinguished families and individuals claimed it as their final resting place. Within these catacombs lie over 8,000 individuals in various states of decay, put there largely out of the belief that the crypt bestowed unique spiritual power to expedite one's entry into heaven.

Following months of careful planning and preparation, Rolston shot the entirety of the *Vanitas* series over the course of one week in 2013, creating portraits of over 50 mummified remains. He intentionally approached the series well outside of photographic tradition, pivoting instead toward a painterly use of color through a proprietary technique utilizing three different wavelengths of light. This allowed him to achieve what he terms "expressionistic lighting", giving these portraits a uniquely stylized beauty in marked and theatrical contrast with the disturbing choice of subject matter. The resulting images balance the decomposition of the figures with blue, ethereal lighting drawn from Marian symbolism in Catholic imagery, deftly teasing between the serene and the grotesque.

The monumentally scaled, richly hued *Vanitas* prints will be framed in patinated gold leaf, in a manner suggestive of and in tribute to the works of Francis Bacon, and, in a significant departure from typical edition practice, they will be offered as unique objects, more in the tradition of painting than photography.

At ArtCenter College of Design, Rolston will present a triptych of the *Vanitas* work as a wall-sized installation at the College's South Campus, curated by Julie Joyce, Director, ArtCenter Galleries and Vice President, Exhibitions. This presentation will be the only triptych on exhibition; the central panel appears on the clamshell cover of the forthcoming *Vanitas* monograph, a signature of the series. These three works, hung in the Mullin Transportation Design Center, comprise two images of mummified children flanking one of an elderly adult, brought together in the style of an altarpiece, where the sacred and mundane, youth and elder age, collide. Four further individual works

will be on view in a solo exhibition at Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles, which will display the most extensive presentation of the *Vanitas* series, including the monograph's cover photograph.

A single work will be shown at a solo exhibition that will open with a private book launch and artist signing at Daido Star Space in downtown Los Angeles on September 30, 2025. Organized in collaboration with the Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation in Tokyo, the presentation echoes the institution's interest in cross-cultural approaches to photography. Leica Gallery, Los Angeles, will present another solo exhibition of an additional single work from *Vanitas*, accompanied by a public artist talk and book signing. At a venue rooted in the technical and material traditions of photography, this presentation will highlight the painterly, craft-driven aspects of Rolston's *Vanitas* project.

Together, these four distinct presentations introduce *Vanitas* as a 'mostra diffusa', an exhibition intentionally distributed among multiple venues. This multi-venue presentation across Los Angeles reflects a conscious departure from the contemporary conventions of exhibition production, recalling art historical traditions in which singular works were presented in isolation.

These works, and the Palermo catacombs themselves, are densely referential. As the lore of the crypt grew, it attracted painters and photographers alike including Otto Dix, Peter Hujar, Sigmar Polke, Richard Avedon and many others. Dix's 1924 watercolor series *From the Catacombs in Palermo*, which served as Rolston's first exposure to the crypt, was made during a period of intense focus on loss and death in the wake of the First World War, while Hujar's 1963 foray to the crypt, with painter Paul Thek, became integrated within a later body of work musing on his circle of friends set against this backdrop of death.

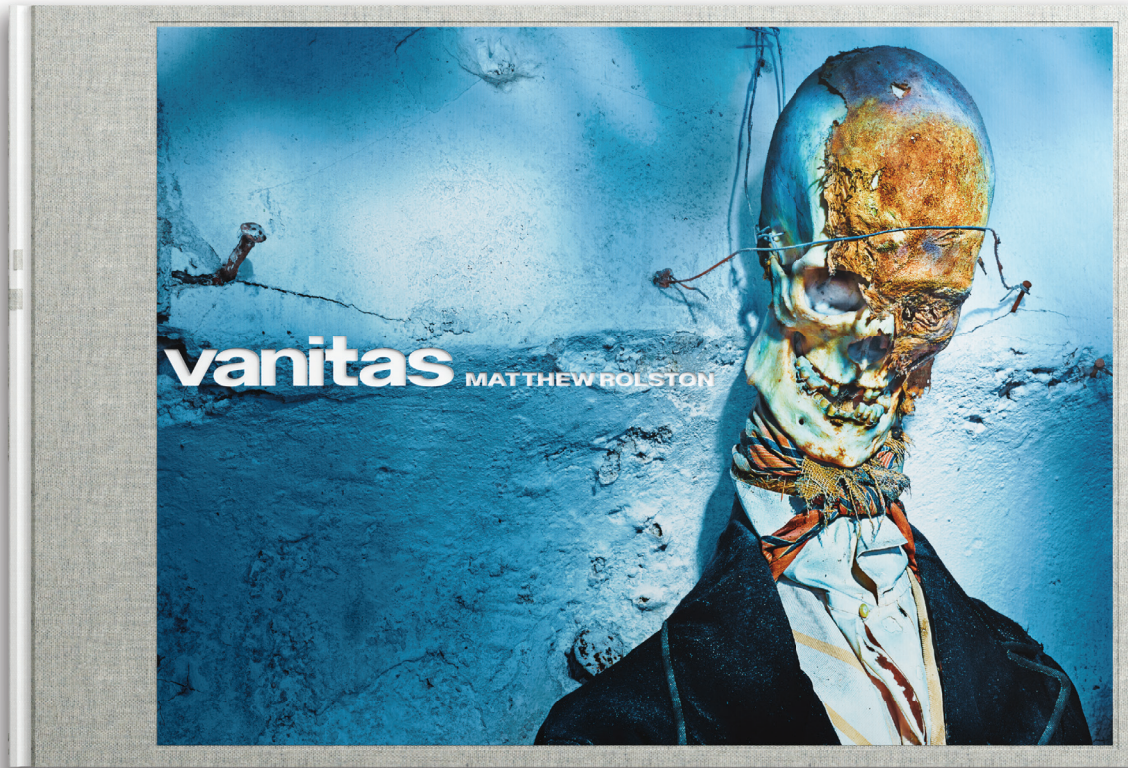
Rolston's *Vanitas* draws from a wide range of art historical influences, including but not limited to the painterly traditions of 17th century Dutch 'vanitas' still-life painting, as well as the visceral figuration of Expressionists Egon Schiele and James Ensor, and the School of London painters Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. A particular influence is drawn from Avedon's images of his father Jacob's final days, showing not just his father's compromised health, but how the idea of death itself is fundamentally rooted in the world and the minds of the living. Rolston follows in these precedents, and reconciles his own past within the greater lineage of photography, to portray essential truths that go far beyond the framed image.

As renowned American author and photography historian Philip Geffer writes in an essay that opens the *Vanitas* monograph, "Rolston's *Vanitas* series – his photographs from the Capuchin Catacombs – is a confrontation with death as potent and mystifying as the truth itself can be when it is so unabashedly revealed. 'Vanitas,' the name derived from a genre of Dutch painting from the 17th century, is associated with memento mori still-lives that symbolize the shortness and fragility of our time on earth. 'Memento mori,' a Latin term, is a reminder of our mortality that translates, 'remember you must die.' In the *Vanitas* series, the fragility of the mummies is a leitmotif throughout, their petrified skulls given a ghostly cast, their facial structures contorted into life-like expressions from the protracted violence of centuries-old decay, their skeletal limbs mangled from advanced stages of decomposition into gestures that appear almost animated, as if by the individuals who once inhabited these bodies, their corporeal remains the only residue of their existence."

In *Vanitas*, Rolston gathers together these influences while also putting forward his own self-reflection regarding his early career in Hollywood celebrity imagemaking. Through his lens, *Vanitas* seeks to transcend the boundaries between the living and the dead, and to demonstrate that the human experience exists in a long, borderless, fragile yet miraculous continuity. While he leaves open whether these mummies have indeed found salvation, he firmly establishes a symmetry between photography and the human desire for immortality, just as easily seen in his

timeless vignettes of Hollywood icons. With *Vanitas*, Rolston challenges the limits of death and decomposition to find elegance within the human form, probing to assert that beauty may yet be found even within strands of crumbling bone and flesh.

PUBLICATION



Vanitas: The Palermo Portraits by Matthew Rolston. Monograph, front cover, Nazraeli Press, 2025

In conjunction with this multi-venue exhibition, Matthew Rolston will release a limited-edition monograph of *Vanitas*, presented as a deluxe volume within a protective clamshell case and offered by fine art photography publisher Nazraeli Press. The publication includes texts from the artist in addition to an introductory essay by American author, photography critic and journalist Philip Gelter, as well as a foreword excerpted from cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's seminal 1973 work *The Denial of Death*. In addition to lavishly printed images from the series, the volume includes a range of reference photography and artworks that ground *Vanitas* in a rich art historical context.

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ABOUT MATTHEW ROLSTON

Matthew Russell Rolston an American artist, photographer, and director known for his signature lighting techniques and detailed approach to art direction and design. He has been repeatedly identified throughout his career with the revival and modern expression of Hollywood glamour.

Born in Los Angeles, Rolston studied drawing and painting in his hometown at the Chouinard Art Institute and Otis College of Art & Design, as well as in the Bay Area at the San Francisco Art Institute. He also studied illustration, photography, imaging and film at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California, where in 2006, he received an honorary doctorate. While still a student at ArtCenter, Rolston was 'discovered' by American artist Andy Warhol, for Warhol's celebrity-focused *Interview* magazine, where he began a successful career in photography. Over the last four decades, Rolston's photographs have been published prominently in numerous magazines, including *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and over 100 covers of *Rolling Stone*.

Rolston's photographs have been exhibited at museums and institutions. Selected group shows include Beauty CULTure (with Lauren Greenfield, Herb Ritts, Andres Serrano, and Carrie Mae Weems, 2011), The Annenberg Space for Photography, Los Angeles, California; The Warhol Look: Glamour, Style, Fashion (curated by Mark Francis and Margery King), The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1997); and Fashion and Surrealism, FIT Gallery, New York, 1987 (traveled to the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK, 1988).

In 1998, Rolston endowed the "Matthew Rolston Scholarship for Film and Creative Direction," at ArtCenter. Rolston remains actively involved in this program as a mentor and lecturer on the subjects of modern communication techniques, fashion aesthetics, luxury brand strategies and social impact messaging in the public interest.

To recognize the significance of Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, another key Southern California institution in Rolston's artistic development, he established the "Matthew Rolston Scholarship Fund for Product and Fashion Design at Otis College" in 2024. This fund supports the education of students in product and fashion design at Otis, with a particular emphasis on communication and creative direction practices. Rolston participates actively in this scholarship program as a mentor and lecturer.

Rolston's works are in the permanent collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, NY, and the National Portrait Gallery (The Smithsonian, Washington D.C.) among others.

Concurrent with the *Vanitas* exhibition, select works by Rolston's may be seen on view as part of the group exhibition *Queer Lens: A History of Photography* at the Getty Center, curated by Paul Martineau, Curator of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

For more information about Matthew Rolston and *Vanitas: The Palermo Portraits*, please visit: <https://www.vanitasproject.com>

ABOUT ARTCENTER COLLEGE OF DESIGN

Founded in 1930 and located in Pasadena, California, ArtCenter College of Design is a global leader in art and design education. ArtCenter provides focused and relevant programming, and offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in a wide variety of industrial design disciplines as well as visual and applied arts. Renowned for both its ties to industry and its social impact initiatives, ArtCenter is the first design school to receive the United Nations' Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) status. Throughout the College's storied history, ArtCenter alumni have had a profound impact on popular culture, the way we live and important issues in our society.

For more information about ArtCenter College of Design, please visit: <https://www.artcenter.edu>

ABOUT FAHEY/KLEIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

For nearly 40 years, Fahey/Klein Gallery has championed fine art photography, showcasing artists who define, challenge, and expand the medium. Founded in Los Angeles in 1986, the gallery is known for its thoughtful curation, long-term artist relationships, and pivotal role in shaping the contemporary photography market. From the elegance of Irving Penn to the raw energy of Peter Beard and the empathetic lens of Agnès Varda, its exhibitions explore identity, culture, and the human condition. Representing key estates and living artists, Fahey/Klein Gallery publishes monographs, organizes traveling shows, and places work in major collections, affirming photography's power to record, reveal, and reimagine the world.

For more information about the Fahey/Klein Gallery and Matthew Rolston, please visit: <https://www.faheykleingallery.com/artists/matthew-rolston>

ABOUT DAIDO MORIYAMA MUSEUM / DAIDO STAR SPACE, LOS ANGELES

In collaboration with the Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation, Tokyo, the Daido Moriyama Museum – also known as Daido Star Space, Los Angeles – is an exhibition venue devoted to the work of the legendary Japanese photographer and writer. Located in DTLA's "The Reef", the space features rotating exhibitions curated by Maya Ishiwata, including original photographs by Moriyama and important, one-off art objects produced in cooperation with the Foundation. The space also hosts works by other artists that may be in dialogue with Moriyama. Born in 1938, Daido Moriyama is widely regarded as one of Japan's most influential living photographers; his work has been the subject of over 150 monographs and honored by numerous solo exhibitions at major institutions worldwide.

For more information about the Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation, please visit: <https://www.moriyamadaido.com/en/>

ABOUT LEICA GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

The Leica Gallery Los Angeles, currently led by photography curator and gallery director Paris Chong, opened in 2013; it was designed to celebrate photography and provide unparalleled access to compelling exhibits. The first of its kind for Leica Camera, it serves primarily as a hub for photographers and Leica enthusiasts. The lower level of the gallery is a well-appointed retail space, offering the full range of Leica Camera products, as well as a curated library of photography books. The upper level gallery features rotating exhibitions of established and up-and-coming photographers and a multimedia space for book launches and artist talks, providing opportunities for fine art photography enthusiasts, and photographers themselves, to connect with one another.

For more information about Leica Gallery, Los Angeles, please visit: <https://leicagalleryla.com>

ABOUT NAZRAELI PRESS

Founder and publisher Chris Pichler began Nazraeli Press in 1990, and has since produced over 600 titles on the fine and applied arts, with a particular focus on fine art photography. Pichler personally edits and designs many of Nazraeli's titles, and has worked closely with some of the most important living photographers: Todd Hido, Alec Soth, Robert Adams, Edward Burtynsky, Stephen Shore, Martin Parr, Michael Kenna, and Daido Moriyama, among many others. Complete holdings of Nazraeli Press publications are in the permanent special collections of many leading institutional libraries, including those of Stanford University; University of California, Los Angeles; Yale University Art Museum; The Huntington Library, Pasadena; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

For more information about Nazraeli Press, please visit:
<https://www.nazraeli.com/complete-catalogue/matthew-rolston-vanitas-the-palermo-portraits>