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Helmut Newton in Berlin

by Susan Paterson

He was widely imitated, and we would have loved him forever just for contributing the images that appear throughout our favourite fashion movie of all time, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*. Ten years after fashion photographer Helmut Newton died – while driving away from the Chateau Marmont in L.A. – Susan Paterson explores his work at Berlin’s Museum für Fotografie



X-Ray, Van Cleef & Arpels French Vogue, Paris 1994 © Helmut Newton Estate

He caused scandal in Berlin in 1963 for photographing a model dressed as a spy being arrested at the Berlin Wall. His shot for a hosiery billboard, of a model naked bar stockings, was banned in New York in the '80s for being too explicit.

Despite this public profile, I confess I was only vaguely familiar with the German-Australian photographer Helmut Newton until my visit to Berlin’s Museum für Fotografie. Once a casino for Prussian officers, two floors of a restored and rather stern neoclassical building are now filled with works by the prolific and often controversial fashion photographer.

Newton was a self-described “gun for hire”, who claimed his photographic work was not art, but whose provocative images stylistically and thematically pushed boundaries. In the context of this museum, however, his creative presentations cannot help but be viewed as art, collated as they are under the one roof.

His images are saturated with power and sexual politics; they’re daring and subversive. His models exist in a nexus of strength and vulnerability. Newton’s work is as much challenging as it is unfailingly fascinating; his commitment to bold expression invites interpretation, and, at times, reveals an ability to find a kind of beauty and humour in unlikely places.

Helmut Newton was born in my adopted city of Berlin and raised in Shöneberg, in what was the city’s former West, in 1920. A Jew forced to flee the city and its pre-World War II terror in 1938, he eventually touched down a hemisphere away, in Australia, where he met and married actress June Brunell, and spent (on and off) the next twenty years learning the fashion photography ropes. The 1960s saw the couple back in Europe, with Helmut working for the biggest names in magazine fashion – *French Vogue*, *Elle*, *Vanity Fair*, just for starters – and growing into a world-renowned shooter with an erotically charged style.

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The first floor of the museum houses the permanent exhibit, *Helmut Newton’s Private Property*, which allows you a voyeuristic walk through the private life of this public photographer: personal snapshots of his years in Australia; a replica of his office in Monaco, where he and June lived for many years; a collection of his cameras and props (which include bondage apparatus and prosthetic limbs); and awards attesting to the global recognition of his work.

As interesting as this is, it’s the second floor, which presents rotating temporary exhibits of Newton’s work, that steals the show. The current installation, *Paris-Berlin*, is a comprehensive retrospective of more than 200 black-and-white and colour images previously exhibited in 2012 at Paris’ *Grand Palais*.



Tied-up Torso Ramatuelle, 1980 © Helmut Newton Estate

The collection features magazine covers and spreads as well as large format images of mostly nude models, some of which are carefree, some of which are confronting, and many of which are both astonishingly beautiful and riveting in their composition.

Often he captures movement – a jump in the air, the coil of cigarette smoke, the luminous swirling of water over a body in a swimming pool – which defies the static nature of a photograph. In one whimsical image, a photographer leaps in the air alongside a staunch and striding model. A leaping paparazzo, perhaps; the lengths taken to capture the perfect image.

His work in the sixties shows stylistic influence from the space exploration of the time, and the historic moon walk. In one series for *Elle* magazine in 1969, women with fantastically coiffed hair walk into a room that is empty apart from would-be space rocks, dotted over the bare wooden landscape, and the open door behind them looks out to a round, papier-mâché-like moon suspended in the air. The whole set is just that: an obvious staging and stylisation; a self-conscious nod to the orchestration of fashion photography.

Some of the most fascinating pieces involve multiple gazes. One of my favourites, and also one of his most famous – *Self Portrait with Wife and Models* – is of Newton photographing a model in a mirror while his wife, now June Newton, also a photographer, looks on at the side of the shot. She, apparently, didn’t realise she was in the frame. There are also the legs of a never-revealed second model positioned mysteriously before the mirror, and a view through in the background to the street outside.

Newton’s photographs are provocative, and often disturbing, with bold images that sometimes reflect his confessed fascination with crime reportage and murder scenes, and which understandably offended, and still offend, many viewers. They are not spontaneous images, but carefully styled and constructed stories.

In a fascinating biopic that plays in a room on the second floor, Newton describes his preparation and planning of each shoot. He displays notes and drawings. He also describes his childhood hatred of the local park where he was taken for hours each day by his nanny, in sun or knee-deep snow, to give his mother rest. He returns years later to comment on the beauty of the “blue-white” skin of sun-deprived Berliners lying in that same park, viewing the scene as if through a lens.



Fat hand and dollars Monte Carlo, 1986 © Helmut Newton Estate

To be truthful, I found myself saturated with images of naked women by the end of the collection, and welcomed every sight of a clothed form. In particular I was drawn to the gorgeous and now-familiar black-and-white shot taken for *French Vogue* in 1975 of a female model in an empty alley, dressed with androgynous ambiguity in Yves Saint Laurent’s “Le Smoking” lady’s tuxedo suit, and smoking a cigarette. A simple conceit perhaps, yet sumptuously moody and sexy in its understatedness.

Adjoining the Newton collection in “June’s Room”, a second special exhibition shows the work of American portrait photographer Greg Gorman. Collated by June Newton, large format black-and-white male nudes line the walls in various poses. These figures are sinewy, balletic, variously slight and muscular; they are handsome. I found it reinvigorating to change the focus to the male form; and never have the differences between the male and female body felt so acute nor fascinating in their contrast.

Yet I, and also my male companion, found myself not quite knowing what to do with these images; I realised how unfamiliar an act it is to witness full male nudity on public display, and how commonplace on the other hand it is to be confronted with female undressing at every turn, every day. The latter we are used to seeing; the range of poses are perhaps more predictable; the sexualisation of the feminine form more established; but the former, the male form, was unfamiliar and confusing in a way, and it all felt slightly awkward.

Nevertheless, what is left after a visit to the Museum für Fotografie, despite a sometimes confronting journey, is a refreshed eye for the beauty of lines and light, and for the human body. I glide home on the U-Bahn, as though everything were a stylised set in black and white. **c**

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The temporary element of the exhibition runs until 18th May, 2014

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