



Self-Portrait with Wife and Models, Vogue Studio, Paris, 1981. Chromogenic print / © Estate of Helmut Newton

the edge of decadence
was his own imprint



Villa d'Este, Lake Como, Italy from the series *White Women*, April 1975. Chromogenic print / © Estate of Helmut Newton

To radical feminists, Helmut Newton was the antichrist

Porno Chic

Helmut Newton

► Images Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Rose Mary Salum ▶

A Conversation with Anne Tucker, Curator

The first large-scale U.S. exhibition of Helmut Newton's work premieres at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston on July 3. *Helmut Newton: White Women • Sleepless Nights • Big Nudes* encompasses the entire contents of his first three groundbreaking books. Newton (1920-2004) survived Nazi Germany as a self-supporting, nomadic teenager to emerge a world-renowned photographer. He first cemented his international reputation as the supreme recorder of female identity with his early books. More than 200 photographs from these publications will be displayed for the first time in their entirety at the MFAH. Manfred Heiting, an Amsterdam-based collector and friend of the Newtons, with Anne Tucker, the MFAH's Gus and Lyndall Wortham curated this event. Literal had the opportunity to talk to Anne Tucker.

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How did Newton transform fashion photography from a mere photographic report of current styles into art?

Newton introduced erotic subjects and content into fashion photography, and then, often used the same models, clothes, and settings (with alternations) to make "a more Newton version" of the picture. Thus, both of his major concentrations of picture-making—fashion and nudes—were connected in his admiration of a certain type of woman: tall, often Germanic, self-confident, with an "I am available" way of dressing, stance, and expression. As Newton wrote, "I think the woman who gives the appearance of being available is sexually much more exciting than a woman who is completely distant."

His women were not passively available. In one of his more controversial pictures (at least controversial to the magazine's subscribers) a fully clothed woman eyes a shirtless male in the same estimating way that was traditionally the prerogative of the male. Newton's women stride, tease, and reach for what they want. While contemporary work is more explicit than Newton's, his work opened the path for other photogra-

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In *White Women*, Newton pays homage to the naked female form, showcasing beautiful models provocatively photographed. How and why he chose to mix luxury and decadence at this period of his artistic carrier?

Newton needed to work for a living. It was only late in his life that he was truly financially secure from both his commercial work and the sale of his prints. He believed that his best fashion work was done for French *Vogue* between 1969 and 1983, when editor-in-chief Francine Crescent would publish photographs too risqué for other magazines. Newton wrote that French *Vogue* "let us photographers loose in the streets of Paris like wild dogs to bring back the most outrageous pictures that only French *Vogue* would ever have the courage to publish."¹ These are also the years when the photographs in his first three books were made. The fashion work fed his personal work and working for fashion magazines, particularly French *Vogue* dictated the presence of luxury in the pictures. The edge of decadence was his own imprint.

Newton was audacious indeed. So, when he proposed to go to the streets and once his books were published, how did the readers, and the art critics respond?

One can't discuss a single response to Newton's work. Regarding readers, his books have gone into many reprints and the three books from which the featured works in the exhibition have been drawn continue to sell well, as do his prints in auctions and galleries. He

had commissions to work until his death. So, the demand to own originals or books has been steady, and magazines were confident that work from new commissions would be a positive component in their magazines.

On the other side, here is a passage from one of his obituaries:

His aesthetic was branded 'Porno Chic'. To radical feminists, Helmut Newton was the antichrist. His work outraged many and they protested one of his exhibits by throwing paint on his photos. (Helmut Newton, *Autobiography*, New York: Doubleday, 2002, 184.)

His retrospective a few years ago in Europe broke records of attendance in the many museums on the tour.

In his book *Sleepless Nights*, he explores bondage culture and fashion. What in his life and art made him conjugate these opposite characteristics?

I can't answer this as it would only be speculation on my part.

But I would mention how often he referred to other works of art. He did a fashion shoot inspired by James Bond and another where he had a bi-plane chasing the models based on the famous scene with Cary Grant in North by Northwest. According to Karl Lagerfeld, the pictures with women wearing medical implements on their legs and necks was inspired by the neck brace worn by Erich von Stroheim's character in Jean Renoir's *La grande illusion* (1937). He wanted to break open what could influence fashion pictures and he did.

In *Big Nudes*, the artist presents pairs of black-and-white images of powerful models



Saddle I from the series *Sleepless Nights*, 1975-1978. Chromogenic print / © Estate of Helmut Newton

photographed both clothed and then clad only in high heels. Is this when his art became more sexually aggressive? Why?

I can't speculate on "Why" specifically for Newton but that series impressed me as Newton doing what many men do which is mentally undress women. But again, Newton's women are not passive. They are confident, assertive. The high heels are purely Newton.

All the works that will be exhibited at the MFAH established Newton as the definitive modern photographer of women. Do you think women still want to be portrayed that way?

Only some women ever wanted to be portrayed that way and those numbers were higher in Europe than in the US. I have talked to women who found his work liberating and it affected the way that they dressed. I think that is still true. As many women have told me that they are looking forward to the exhibition as men, but only women have also been expressively negative about the show. There is little neutrality about Newton's work. Both women and men have said "I have every one of his books." But to my knowledge only men have built large collections of his photographs.

June Newton, the artist's widow, first conceived this show. But this is only an expression of her marriage. Can you talk to us about their relationship?

By all accounts by Helmut Newton and by the Newtons' friends and collaborators, June Newton was an integral part of Helmut's career. They discussed his fashion assignments; she edited and sequenced some of his books; etc. She is still today the protector of his reputation and guardian of his work. She had her own career as a photographer after she stopped acting, but she was still a vital part of his career.



From the series *Sleepless Nights*, 1975-1978. Chromogenic print / © Estate of Helmut Newton

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Foot, 1994. From the series *X-Ray*