

Helmut Newton: Work

Newton's work is rooted in fashion photography. It is commissioned work; that is to say, it imposes restrictions from the very outset which go far beyond what editors normally require.

Fashion photography goes back to the early years of the 20th century. It creates an image of society and of the role that women play in it. Its aim is to sell what it depicts, using the powers of seduction and the desires they awaken.

In the beginning – which was marked by such early fashion publications as *Vogue* (1892), *La Mode pratique* (1892) and *Les Modes* (1900) – fashion photography had close affinities with portraiture, and the dividing line between the two categories was still very blurred. Not until 1909, when Condé Nast took over New York *Vogue*, did fashion photography come into its own. The credit for this must be given primarily to Baron Adolf de Meyer, the inventor of the staged fashion shot. He placed his models in domestic settings and photographed them in natural and comfortable poses.

A mere glance at the history of fashion photography suffices to show that Helmut Newton inherited a tradition in which he was at home from the very outset – as though it were the most natural thing in the world, as though he had been carrying within him, unaware, a collective memory in which the yearnings of his youth, his apprenticeship with Yva and the atmosphere of Berlin, that great historic capital of the intellectual world, had lived on until then.

The decades from the sixties to the eighties were years of extreme creativity and productivity. It was during these years that the unique originality of Helmut Newton's vision took shape. Many have described the world of Helmut Newton's photography, but none better than Philippe Garner: It is the world of the plutocracy and the jet set, peopled by glamorous celebrities and women wearing immaculate make-up and laden with jewellery.

In Newton this world has found its 'masterful image-maker', the acute observer who is forever in search of a new concept of beauty. At once provocative and aggressive, Newton exacerbated the difference between the sexes to such an extent that the feminists accused him of misogyny and made a united stand against him.

Whilst all this is true, the actual essence of Newton's work lies elsewhere, namely in its profundity and innovation, qualities which today, at the turn of the century, can be more easily recognized and evaluated than hitherto. Nowadays we are far less likely to be shocked by Newton's work, for our knowledge of history through television has accustomed us to a more immediate and realistic representation of violence and thus permits us to adopt a more profound, less superficial approach to his work.

It was from his formidably profound study of society (and here we have yet another affinity with the work of Brassai) that Newton developed a vision based on constantly recurring themes, creating a unique style and anticipating the image of womanhood as it was actually to evolve during the second half of the 20th century.

Newton's contribution to the history of 20th century photography lies not merely in his extremely provocative approach but also, and more importantly, in his prescience and intuition, in his ability to imagine and visualize women exactly as they are today, at the dawn of the third millennium: women who take the lead rather than follow it; women who love and desire whenever and whomever they like, and in whatever way they like; women full of health and vigor, enjoying the resplendence and vitality of their sinewy bodies, bodies over which they themselves have sole command; women who are both responsible and willing.

Anticipating the sexual revolution which came with the advent of the birth-control pill, the women of Helmut Newton's world are women who know and get what they want; they are far removed from the weak, compliant sex-object dominated by the misogynist macho. And this is the reason why Newton's work has been found so shocking, for his staged photos thematize the discovery of this new kind of freedom and the fantasies which this freedom engenders.

Helmut Newton's photographs identify with this revolution which has gradually yet radically changed women's mentality, for this is the very first time in history that women have been able to control their own sexuality, a woman's sexual behavior having hitherto been inseparably bound up with motherhood.

The taboos of Judaeo-Christian morality collapsed forthwith. Moreover, it was a revolution which coincided perfectly with what the talented Helmut Newton had long foreseen. Such is the true creator: anticipating and expressing developments well ahead of his time, developments in which everyone recognizes their own story, developments which reflect a collective, universal idea. Paul Eluard's wonderful expression holds true for Newton's photographs as it does for any work of art: "Elles donnent à voir."

Fashion, Nudes, Portraits – these are the three categories into which Helmut Newton divides his work. But it is not quite as simple as that, for a fashion photo can be a nude, and vice versa, and a nude can also be a portrait.

Newton enjoys this interplay of genres, covering his tracks by assigning an image to one rather than another of these three categories which he likes to shuffle. In the end, however, he falls into line with this self-imposed system of classification, seemingly anxious to make his work as easy to grasp as possible, not wishing to overload it with futile interpretations and often quoting the maxim "less is more", meaning that only through a minimum of means is it possible to achieve maximum visual and narrative impact.

Women dressed and undressed, in the same situations and poses; nudes, large-format nudes (from 1980) executed in series ("Big Nudes", "Naked and Dressed", "Domestic Nudes"), distorted nudes, walking nudes – his repertoire is infinite.

Infinite, too, are the situations in which the female body is shown: shackled, confined, maltreated, sometimes even mutilated, sometimes fitted with false limbs. No other photographer has ever put the female body to such grueling tests, nor conjured up so many imaginary situations, stories and desires, all of them evoking and expressing life – his life and ours. In an artist – whether painter, sculptor or photographer – style develops through creative repetition. It is precisely the artist's unconscious reflection on recurrent themes which makes for the richness and diversity of his world. The resulting series may assume any of countless possible forms: a series of aesthetic explorations, repeated subjects or situations, the use of the same lighting situation (the bright glare of the midday, preferably Mediterranean sun), recurring scenarios (doors locked or ajar, mirrors, staircases, hotel foyers, landscapes, nudes in domestic settings). A closer look at these series shows, for example, how Helmut Newton has since 1960 been using the theme of the door as a means of situating his subject or narrating a story. Endless overtones are played out here: plots are woven and truths exchanged in these openings barred by bolts and chains and through which desires are whispered, fantasies reciprocated or, occasionally, all attempts at communication fail.

Other themes, too, invite detailed analysis: the mirror, the representation of the recumbent figure (featured just as much in his fashion shots as in his nudes and portraits), the female body in a restful, meditative pose, the use of wax dummies.

Both through his consistent use of repetition and through his freedom of inspiration, a freedom which is boundless, for it draws purely upon a world of fantasy and desire, Helmut Newton brings to light what would otherwise remain obscure, forever locked away in our subconscious minds.

Helmut Newton's photographs also afford us immeasurable scope for our dreams, our maddest desires, the fulfilment of all that was hitherto impossible or forbidden. In Helmut Newton's world of photographs we become another person, our own double; we become part of the dream and poetry evoked by the stories he narrates, stories written in the states of tension that exist between his protagonists, between their desiring gazes and their desirable bodies.

Imagination and reality merge: bondage is condoned, aggression and eroticism are now compatible, individualism reigns supreme, and there is forever a touch of humor to help us keep our distance. Newton invites us into an alien world, affording us access to the obscure and the surreal.

It is certainly wrong to speak of Helmut Newton as a surrealist photographer as, from a historical perspective, he did not belong to this movement, yet it is informative to approach him from this aspect.

Helmut Newton shares his preference for observing the female and for working under lights at night with Brassai (who also lived in Berlin in 1921).

He has the use of recurring themes and depiction of the woman as a dummy in series in common with Hans Bellmer (born in 1908 in Berlin), and like him, uses the dummy figures as the image of doubled femininity, showing a desire for misshaping the body.

With his kinship to these two great artists, each of which contributed to surrealism in his own way, it can be assumed that the spirit of Helmut Newton's art has sympathised with this movement.

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