



# Returning to His Roots

## The Helmut Newton Foundation Opens in Berlin

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On June 4<sup>th</sup> the Helmut Newton Foundation opened in Berlin with two exhibits curated from his wide body of controversial photographs. Tucked behind the Bahnhof Zoo in a massive building erected in 1909 for the Land Defense Club (Landwehr-Kasino), the building will hold not only the Foundation, but also a soon to open Museum of Photography. Newton and his wife had inked a contract with the Prussian Cultural Property Foundation in October of last year, not long before his tragic death at the age of 83, outside the illustrious Los Angeles hotel Chateau Marmont this past January. In the agreement, the Newtons permanently loaned nearly 1000 photographs to the foundation for revolving exhibitions and conservation. In response to the generous gesture to the City of Berlin, Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder deemed the decision a "sign of reconciliation". At the news conference he read from a letter Newton had written about the donation, where the photographer joked: "You can chase a man out of his home but you can't rip his home out of his soul".

Helmut Newton was born in Berlin to Jewish parents in 1920. It was an economically volatile time in German history. The deflation scenario he toddled through only exacerbated an already teeming prostitution and drug culture in Berlin that had developed during the First World War. An ongoing series of unruly post war negotiations had left the country in a financial downward spiral and by October of 1923 the German currency was valued at 4.2 billion Marks to the Dollar – financially wiping out most of the country. Newsreels showed once wealthy Burgers carting wheelbarrows of cash to pay for bread while children used stacks of bills as toy building blocks.

Eventually Germany's currency was stabilized with the Reichsmark in 1924 – paving the way for the decadent "Golden Twenties". With estimates on the number of prostitutes at this time in Berlin ranging from 5,000 to the frequently published figure of 120,000, flagrant, often-brutal sexuality was an inescapable vision on the streets of Berlin. Tourists flocked to the city from all corners of the globe in search of affordable illicit pleasure; with guidebooks being published specifically catering to various sexual interest. Looking at his photographs in this light it is hard to deny that Newton's youthful years in Berlin must have been influenced by these visions of Aryan streetwalkers in all manners of erotic dress – presenting their talents for anyone to see. Grotesques of desire and power filtered through the imagination of the Jewish boy coming of age in a country of steadily growing intolerance.

At the age of 12 Newton bought his first camera, busily snapping pictures of girlfriends dressed in his mother's clothes. In his autobiography he relates a story about how his father told him at 15, "My boy, you'll end up in the gutter. All you think of is girls and photos." At 16 he arranged to have himself thrown out of school as a hopeless pupil, wanting to be a paparazzo. Instead he found an apprentice position with a German theatrical photographer called Yva, who's studio, ironically was located not far from where the Helmut Newton Foundation now sits.

As Nazism raged across the German landscape it became evident that it was no longer safe to remain in Berlin. Fleeing the city in 1938, Newton first headed to Singapore, then Australia where he met his wife, June Brunell in 1947. Eventually they hopped from London to Paris where, in 1961, he began shooting for French Vogue. It was through this outlet he was first able to capture the images that catapulted him to the forefront



of fashion photography. In the 70's, supported by his wife's encouragement, his work turned overtly sexual. Exploring countless avenues of eroticism, Newton has looked deeply into his own obsessions which included taking photos depicting strong female figures in acts of prostitution, violence, sado-masochism and countless other illicit activities.

Entering the cavernous entry hall of the Helmut Newton Foundation, several giant, black and white photographs of tall, blonde and very naked überwomen from his "Big Women" series capture you in their gaze. Their eyes stare out coolly, standing with stoically stiletto'd stance as you climb the staircase past them to the galleries. The first two selections of Newton's photography to be featured are titled "Sex and Landscapes" and "Us and Them" – investigating two very different aspects of his work.

"Sex and Landscapes" addresses many of Newton's fetishes, including a few that originate in his Berlin upbringing. In one gritty black and white photo he captures a darkened old world alleyway lined with lanky women, luminous in the streetlight. Another depicts a group of people in leather and latex posing in the headlights of a car. Many of his images push the boundary between editorial and porn, so much so that his "porno chic" aesthetic has been subject of attack by outraged feminists. So, perhaps to play with contrasts, a series of landscape images have been scattered in with the sea of nudes. For as fuzzy and carelessly blurred as

Newton's landscape are – of moonlit ocean horizons or cliché desert highway shots, his photos of women are sharply focused and expertly staged.

Again tinkering with the concept of comparison/contrast, "Us and Them" pairs the more candid photographs of Newton with photographs by his wife working under the name Alice Springs. Where Newton's approach is theatrical, projecting a fantasy onto his subjects with fur and ropes, Springs' photographs have a loose, almost documentary, point and shoot style. Newton's vision allows only a highly focused, dramatized aspect of his subjects personality to shine through the image, where Spring's vision allows for the subject to emerge from the picture – speaking of their own personal narrative.

Newton's own legendary story has finally led him all the way back to his roots, just minutes from the studio where he first began his career in 1936. Having finally reconciled with the past he has come full circle, presenting Berlin with a legacy of important images from a lifetime of work. A final honor for his hometown, having so inspired his creative trajectory and influential role in the history of photography.

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