

HELMUT NEWTON In Focus

“ICH BIN EIN PROFESSIONELLER VOYEUR” – HELMUT NEWTON

Jewish Museum of Australia,
Melbourne
Preview **KIM GUTHRIE**



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The inimitable Helmut Newton was a consummately skilled photographer, but his images are compelling for more than their opulent carefully chosen models and locations. Sometimes lush, sometimes a window into extreme wealth, and sometimes vertigo inducing – it’s the instantly recognisable psychology of his ideas that sets him apart.

If you want a biography of Helmut Newton, look at the Helmut Newton Foundation official website or Wikipedia. It’s all there and it’s fascinating, but given I’m probably talking to a marginally informed audience let me summarise: Newton is widely regarded as one of the greatest photographic artists and fashion photographers of the twentieth century. And that is why the Jewish Museum of Australia is staging a “must-see” exhibition for lovers of great photography, gentrified erotica, and perversity from the fertile mind of a master. “HELMUT NEWTON: In Focus is the first exhibition of its kind to be held in Australia . . . between the Helmut Newton Foundation in Berlin and the Jewish

Museum of Australia,” says Jessica Bram, director, Jewish Museum of Australia.

What is perhaps less known is that he was interned in regional Victoria as an “enemy alien” during World War II, having fled persecution in Germany as a Jewish man, and went on post-war to spend time in Melbourne where he met his Australian-born wife and lifelong collaborator, June Newton (née Browne) who used the pseudonym Alice Springs for her own photography.

Opening in late April and continuing in to early 2023, *HELMUT NEWTON: In Focus* promises to explore the work and life of Newton including these early years in Australia. Jessica Bram informed me, “Part of our curatorial and programming agenda . . . is in spotlighting Australian and international Jewish icons and revealing lesser-known aspects of their personal histories.” Eleni Papavasiliou, Senior Curator and Collection Manager, says the show will include Newton’s *Private Property*, 1972-83 – a body of

forty-five images – as well as a focussed and representative selection of Newton’s fashion, portrait and erotic subjects from the 1970s to 80s.

I asked American art critic Jerry Saltz what he thought of Newton’s work, he responded with, “Newton was great highbrow Euro-trash soft-core S&M and voluptuous T&A under the guise of ‘high art.’ All fine by me. Just never thought about it till I would see one, get a man buzz, and turn the page.”

I’m a fan. In 1978 during my wayward youth, I shoplifted his book *Sleepless Nights*, 1978, from a bookshop in Toorak, Melbourne. Ironic really, given my subject’s reputation for depicting international elites and Toorak’s reputation as home to the rich and famous. From that point on, his images were forever burnt into my brain. A perfectly proportioned giant semi-nude model with a perfectly proportioned tiny nude model in the garden of Château d’Aunoy. Or a sleeping Andy Warhol in black leather coat, hands clasped on his chest, looking like a corpse. Or the model on her hands and knees on a fancy bed in a hotel room wearing a black bra, jodhpurs, boots, and spurs, a saddle on her back, looking away to stage right of the picture plane. Images once seen . . . never forgotten.

What is left to say about a leviathan of photography that hasn’t already been said ad nauseum? I mean, this is the guy who had the wherewithal to produce the aptly titled gargantuan tome *SUMO*, 1999. Edited by Alice Springs and stylishly supported by a Philippe Starck-designed bookstand, the volume measures 50 x 70 centimetres, has 464 pages, weighs in at a whopping 34.80 kilograms and is priced at \$25,000 USD. It was a vanity publishing project at the extreme end of the spectrum. A book that might just require a back-brace to browse and a course of corrective physiotherapy post-examination. I wonder if this may very well be the point, given his somewhat hackneyed moniker as the “King of Kink.”



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Helmut Newton was much more than this though. His work possibly has its roots in the Hungarian born-French photographer Brassai's images from the 1930s of Parisian brothels, opium dens, absinthe drinkers and homosexuals. Or even the racy French pornographic images that have been around since the inception of photography itself (if you knew where to look). Movie star portraits, film noir and the cheesecake pin-up culture of the post-war period reverberate in the images too. It's my suspicion that Newton must have been aware of the work of the self-branded "Pin-up King," Irving Klaw and his business Movie Star News in Brooklyn. A collaboration between Klaw and his sister Paula, what started as an inoffensive movie star portrait service rapidly morphed into what fetish art historian Richard Pérez Seves termed "bizarre underground" photography. Made famous by the legendary model Bettie Page (among others), this highly lucrative and discreet shoot-on-demand mail-out picture service catered to fetish photography and the kinky bondage, heels, and underwear market.

Shot nearly always using available light, Newton's relatively low-fi images are elevated partly because of their production values that included featuring some of the world's most highly paid super models, movie stars and other celebrities, and were shot in locations such as high-end hotel



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rooms, swanky restaurants, and the holiday destinations and crash pads of the idle rich. A portal for us mere mortals to ogle, fantasise and dream about.

Perhaps what Newton is hinting at is that we are always observers, spying through the keyhole into private worlds that are most likely places we are not really supposed to be. Newton's mind perhaps? ■

EXHIBITION

HELMUT NEWTON: In Focus
29 April 2022 – 29 January 2023
Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne

- 01** *Arena Miami*, 1978, copyright Helmut Newton Estate, courtesy Helmut Newton Foundation
 - 02** *Shoe*, Monte Carlo, 1983, gelatine silver print, 52.8 x 42.5 cm, copyright Helmut Newton Estate, courtesy Helmut Newton Foundation
 - 03** *Rue Aubriot, Paris*, 1975, copyright Helmut Newton Estate, courtesy Helmut Newton Foundation
 - 04** *Chicken*, *French Vogue*, Paris, 1994, copyright Helmut Newton Estate, courtesy Helmut Newton Foundation
 - 05** *Crocodile*, Wuppertal, 1983, copyright Helmut Newton Estate, courtesy Helmut Newton Foundation
- Courtesy Helmut Newton Estate, Helmut Newton Foundation, Berlin, Germany, and Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne



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