

REVIEW / Books

Big Is Beautiful

SUMO

By Helmut Newton
(TASCHEN, 480 PAGES, \$1,500)

By ELIZABETH BUKOWSKI

I HAVE TO remind myself that the man sitting next to me is the legendary photographer Helmut Newton, known for his amazonian nudes and fetishy fashion images. We're in the café of Manhattan's Mercer Hotel, and somehow this affable octogenarian in sneakers just doesn't seem, well, *edgy* enough to be the man who took a picture of a woman wearing nothing but a saddle.

Mr. Newton is in New York with his wife, June, to receive a prestigious Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography for "Sumo," a giant, 66-pound collection of his photos that was published last year. This morning his focus is elsewhere, though; specifically, it's on breakfast, which he is eyeing with obvious delight.

"This poor waffle, I'm burying it," he says as he pours syrup on top of the bacon on top of the blueberries on top of the waffle.

"Junie, do you want to try this?" he asks his wife. "Hand me your plate."

As dishes are passed back and forth, Mr. Newton explains that "Sumo," the largest, most expensive book printed in the 20th century, was the "crazy idea" of publisher Benedikt Taschen. "When he unveiled the maquette [in 1997], I almost fainted."

He agreed to the project, "very much to my regret for about a year of sleepless nights." The book was so unusual—and difficult to manufacture—that he feared it would be a failure. "It's the kind of thing that, if it goes wrong, you never live it down."

June selected the 400 photos in the book, a "quirky" mix of nudes, celebrity portraits and fashion photos, many taken during Mr. Newton's years at French Vogue, where he made his name. His favorite shots include a portrait of Catherine Deneuve clutching her chest and another of New York Mayor Rudy

Giuliani and Police Chief Howard Safir leaning against a desk ("They really look tough," he says).

One copy of "Sumo," which comes with its own Philippe Starck-designed stand,

was autographed by many of the celebrities pictured inside and auctioned in April in Berlin for \$304,000. Now another copy is traveling the world getting signatures—from Cindy Crawford, Luciano Pavarotti and David Bowie, among others—and will be sold in the fall as a fundraiser for the International Center of Photography.

"It's an honor," Mr. Newton said of the ICP award, which has gone to books by Irving Penn and Robert Frank in the past. But don't call his work art. "I take a picture, produce a negative, it gets printed, it's hardly ever cropped and it doesn't get retouched. Artists add on, they manipulate after they take the picture. I manipulate before," he argues. "There's this new-fangled idea that photography can be art. It probably can. But mine isn't."

To those who call his work sexist, Mr. Newton says, "I wouldn't spend my life photographing women if I didn't love them." And whether he looks the part or not, he is still a *provocateur*. "As I get older, I want to get more and more politically incorrect."



Benedikt Taschen, Helmut Newton and 'Sumo' on its table designed by Philippe Starck, Cologne, July 7, 1999.

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