

Helmut Newton's latest work, *SUMO* — a 30-kg politically incorrect book that comes with its own coffee table

BY CONSTANCE DROGANES

SUMO, the titanic retrospective of Helmut Newton's work, proves that big really can be better. It weighs 30 kilograms. It measures 50 by 70 centimetres. It is 480 pages and costs \$2,400. It even comes with its own sleek stainless-steel table, designed by Philippe Starck. Only 10,000 copies were printed, and most of them have been sold.

"It took a year of sleepless nights and a thousand worries to get this thing done. But it was all Benedikt's idea and it's been a most adventurous undertaking," the 79-year-old Newton told *Weekend Post* in a telephone interview from his home in Monte Carlo.

Benedikt is Benedikt Taschen, the renowned German publisher who, inspired by his love of Newton's work, has created an unprecedented visual record, celebrating the artist's revolutionary fusion of eroticism and fashion photography. It showcases the powerful over-the-top nudes, the opulent *mise en scènes* and the piercing, politically incorrect images that have made Newton one of the most emulated photographers of the 20th century.

To lure Newton and his wife of 40 years, June, into doing this risky project, Taschen put together an oversized mock-up of the proposed book. It worked. "Newton was convinced the minute he saw a dummy of the book in its original size," says Taschen, who is arguably the world's best-known publisher of art books. "So at the beginning, there was no need for arm twisting at all, but later I needed the tentacles of a whole bunch of octopuses to go on and really finish it."

Size was important. "The size of an image is an important choice for a photographer or an artist. I'm very preoccupied with this problem," says Newton, the German-born son of a wealthy Jewish button manufacturer. The budding photographer bought his first camera at a five-and-dime store at age 12. After getting himself kicked out of school at 16, he began his career in Berlin as a photographer's apprentice in 1936. "I think this book is exciting. I've watched people leafing through *SUMO* and it certainly has produced very different reactions from a person looking at a traditional book."

With June Newton doing most of the editing, the couple made as many as five or six collections of new prints for the images included in the book, among them portraits of Salvador Dali, Catherine Deneuve, Charlotte Rampling, Prince Rainer and Princess Caroline of Monaco; still-life shots such as the barred exterior of Sigmund Freud's front door; a grotesquely fat, bejewelled hand swimming in American dollar bills at the casino in Monte Carlo; and, of course, Newton's most memorable fetish-inspired fashion shots and sexually charged nudes.

"Looking back at these images, maybe I would have done things differently if I had a second chance at it. Different, yes, but not further," says Newton, who found his inspiration in B-grade Hollywood horror flicks and film directors such as Eric von Stroheim and Alfred Hitchcock — movies and moviemakers with a dark edge and a twisted sense of humour.

Newton's appeal is no less fascinating now than it was in the '70s and '80s when he was changing the look of fashion photography while working for top European magazines as well as American *Vogue*. Yet, ask Newton why his work and his life still command such interest today and he says, "Does it? If so, that's wonderful."

His rise to prominence began in the 1960s when he began producing elegant, sophisticated images that were often more daring, inventive and sexual than the usual fashion photos of the time. He caused a scandal in 1963 by using the Berlin Wall as a fashion backdrop, posing a model on a wooden podium overlooking the wall from the West Berlin side.

But in 1971, he experienced the crisis that changed his life and his work forever. After suffering a major heart attack while shooting for *Vogue* in New York, Newton's work took on a more overt and unnerving sexual quality. Suddenly the women he shot became bolder and more aggressive; he threw himself into society's dark underbelly, where prostitutes, fetishists and cross-dressers began to influence his work. It was also at this time that Newton's use of sumptuous châteaux, showy hotels and ancient midnight streets, all of them saturated with an atmosphere of decadence, luxury and

privilege, began to mesh with his signature photographic style.

So what will Helmut Newton do next to top Helmut Newton? "There are always new ideas running around in my head," says Newton. "But the real trick is that I just keep on trucking." □

SUMO, understandably, is not available in bookstores. It can be ordered through Prologue Canada at 1 (800) 363-2864.