

COVER STORY

THE KING OF KINKY

Feminists hated him. Critics called him a genius, whose use of Amazonian models and fetishistic imagery embraced sex and Surrealism. Now, with her new book celebrating Helmut Newton's 70-year career, his widow Alice Springs tells **Sean O'Hagan** how her husband redefined fashion photography



In 1966, just as the Sixties started swinging, Helmut Newton shot a series of photographs for the now defunct high-fashion magazine, *Queen*. As the images were being laid out for publication, Jocelyn Stevens, the owner of *Queen*, paid a surprise visit to the office. In his lively memoir, *Autobiography*, Newton takes up the story.

'Jocelyn sees the layouts... picks them up, throws them on the floor, and screams: "What are these masturbating women doing in my magazine, lying on the floor, while phallic symbols are exploding outside the windows?"'

So incensed was Stevens that he tore a telephone out of the wall and hurled it through the window. 'One never knows the reaction pictures will provoke among the higher echelons at magazines,' writes Newton dryly, his Germanic poise as unruffled then as it was in the decades that followed, when his consistently sexual provocations constantly made him the photographer that feminists loved to hate.

Looking now at the cream of Newton's fashion photography, collected in a new book by his widow, June, and called, with typical Newtonian candour, *A Gun for Hire*, it is difficult to see what all the fuss was about. Until, that is, you realise how far ahead of his time the cavalier snapper was in his depiction of style as an expression of ritualised sexuality, and fashion as a fetishistic pursuit.

Way back before the likes of Terry Richardson blurred the lines between fashion and hardcore pornography, making explicit the link between the two, Helmut Newton was doing a similar kind of thing for soft porn, albeit in a more stage-managed and highly symbolic way. For nigh-on 40 years after he outraged his employer at *Queen*, Newton remained the undisputed king of kinkiness. Right up until his sudden death last year, aged 82 – his car slamming into a wall on Sunset Boulevard after he suffered a heart attack while leaving the Chateau Marmont Hotel – he specialised in a kind of obsessively stylised sexual voyeurism that he constantly refined, but never diluted.

Newton was a photographer who never saw the point of not overstating the obvious: in one infamous shoot, he placed a horse's saddle on a beauty posing in riding jodhpurs on a bed on all fours; in another the women sported medical corsets and braces as Cronenbergian sexual accessories. 'I hate good taste,' he once famously remarked. 'It's the worst thing that can happen to a creative person.'

And yet, for all his provocation, his photographs were seldom vulgar. Sometimes, though, there is something oddly old-fashioned about Newton's fashion-fantasy world, something a bit James Bond, and, sometimes, even a bit Milk Tray. It seems no accident that he ended up living in Monte Carlo, that semi-mythical haunt of playboys and gamblers.

'Like all truly great photographers, he sometimes took bad pictures,' attests David Bailey, who knew and admired Newton. 'Many fashion photographers today are just illustrators, who illustrate someone else's ideas. It's photography by committee. I call it perfected mediocrity. The great fashion photographers would never work like that; they need to take risks, to push the boundaries, and Helmut was always pushing the boundaries.'

Newton, however, never made any great claims ▶



◀ on behalf of his work. 'Some people's photography is an art,' he once said. 'But mine is not... I'm a gun for hire.' Later, he told an interviewer: 'Art is a dirty word in photography. All this fine-art crap is killing it already.' And yet, the strictly formalised nature of his best images meant he was more often compared to Surrealist painters than to other photographers.

Over five decades, Newton created a recognisable world of the imagination, a kind of Newtonian universe peopled by Amazonian women engaged in odd, often seemingly meaningless pursuits against backgrounds that belonged in a Bond movie. Invariably, the women wore little or no clothing, tended towards the Teutonic in stature, and fetishistic in demeanour. Perhaps because of his relentless objectification – and worship – of the female form, feminist critics viewed his work with contempt, while art critics avoided it all together.

Revealingly, certain like-minded obsessives saw in it a dark, perverse imagination unbound by either good taste or aesthetic elitism. His photographs were best described by the dystopian novelist JG Ballard, as 'stills from an elegant and erotic movie, perhaps entitled 'Midnight at the Villa d'Este' or 'Afternoons in Super-Cannes', a virtual film that has never played at any theatre, but has screened itself inside our heads for the last 40 years'.

I ask David Bailey where he would place the late photographer in the grand scheme of things. 'He was really important because he redefined the nude. He was the first person to do that since, I suppose, Edward Weston, who did the nudes in the sand.'

What, though, of the purely commercial work, the fashion photography which he seemed to approach with the same seriousness of application as his personal projects? In her introduction to *A Gun for Hire*, June Newton, a renowned photographer herself, working under the name Alice Springs, insists that: 'The same creative process and energy have imbued all aspects of his work. He welcomed and respected the restrictions and requirements of his clients.'

The model and erstwhile Mrs Bailey, Marie Helvin, who was once tied to the mast of a sailing

ship by Newton, also attests to the crossover between his commercial and personal work.

'A lot of the shoots he did progressed from a fashion shoot to a nude shoot,' she laughs. 'He would finish taking the fashion shots then make the model strip and do a nude shoot in the very same set of poses. You can look at several of his nude photographs side by side with his magazine work and all that is different is the absence of clothing. The poses are exactly the same. He worked an idea for all he could get out of it, and they were such great ideas to begin with that he always got away with it.'

Though he genuinely seemed to hate the very notion of art photography, Newton was indeed a master of the high-concept idea. In the Eighties, his commercial work came into its own, a shoot for Thierry Mugler nodding to the Surrealists, film noir, German expressionist cinema and the ever-present iconography of S&M. 'He was so knowledgeable and such a storyteller,' continues Helvin, 'and he possessed an old-fashioned charm which immediately put you at ease. He had none of the aggression that often goes hand in hand with the job, but he was a master of the highly stylised shoot, where you had to hold a pose for ages, keep your fingers in exactly the same place. It is easy for that sort of photographer to forget that the person they are shooting is not simply an object, but he was never unpleasant or hectoring. A little gruff, maybe, but that's all.'

June Newton, though, who Helvin insists was the real agent for provocation in their romantic and professional double act, remembers 'the absolute torture' some of the girls had to go through for his art: 'There was one model who had to stand in stiletto heels with one foot on a car for ages. She was in agony, and, all the while, Helmut is shouting: "Don't dare move!" The models were the raw material he worked with, the bodies he moulded into the images he saw in his head. That's why he seldom worked with well-known models. He needed his own raw material in order to transform it into something unique.'

One wonders, of course, what unconscious forces were at work in all this manipulation and provocation. Newton's very first photograph, taken on a cheap box camera bought in Woolworths in 1932, when he was just 12, was of a local Berlin radio mast, toweringly phallic. His highly entertaining and beautifully written *Autobiography*, published in 2003, is a veritable cornucopia of sexual adventures – at least until he meets June.

As a youth, he was a keen swimmer and an even more keen masturbator, and writes with relish of the 'great roundness' and 'great beauty' of the taut swimmer's body. Likewise in his pre-pubescent fetishising of the girls' 'regulation black swimsuits', which he describes as 'not revealing at all, but that didn't stop them from being seductive. The suits were made of thin wool, which clung to the girls' bodies and dried very slowly. Because the suits stayed wet for a long time – particularly across the chest where there was an extra thickness of wool – the girls' nipples would stay erect.'

Even a cursory leaf through *A Gun for Hire* reveals a man in thrall to his formative desires. Here is an oiled Amazonian model in a shiny PVC swimsuit and what looks like a mourning veil. She is shot, like many of his subjects, from below, her bare thighs as taut and toned as any Olympian



swimmer. Here is a blond, pigtailed Heidi in shiny black stilettos, sheer stockings and fitted black minidress, towering above the tower blocks in the middle distance. The models are implausibly fresh-faced, but Amazonian in their dimensions and Aryan in their hauteur. Even at their most innocent, they are strikingly sexualised. Was he, I ask June Newton, as diplomatically as possible, a sexual obsessive, a voyeur with a camera?

'Oh no, he wasn't nearly as dark as his photographs suggest,' she laughs. 'But he did have a dark side. We all do. But he was also quite thoughtful about his work. When he did the medical portraits, the models in surgical corsets, he thought that maybe he had gone too far. I was the one who said: "No, you must finish it."'

Sometimes, though, there is something altogether spookier in the scenarios these implausibly beautiful mannequins act out – a kind of deadness. The French philosopher Roland Barthes saw the photograph as a little death, a still life that freezes the present moment into an eternal past, and prefigures the stillness of the corpse. Even in Newton's most sexual images, you can catch glimpses of this lifelessness. Here is another towering beauty, her eyes glazed as if sleepwalking, her face and breasts veiled in diaphanous white silk, her curves constricted and exaggerated by a tight white corset. A doomed bride? A sacrificial virgin? A drugged plaything?

Interestingly, Ballard places Newton firmly in the Surrealist tradition of Delvaux or Magritte

rather than August Sander or Cartier-Bresson, and certainly his models constantly seem lost, surprised, or entranced, his exotic backdrops oddly incongruous, as if we are suddenly being afforded a glimpse of a bigger narrative whose contours we can only guess at. That narrative, as Ballard points out, takes place first of all inside Newton's head, and is then passed over to the viewer, who transposes their own version on to it, the process of association as mysterious as the unconscious itself.

'Helmut always had these often complex ideas long before he found his people,' elaborates June, 'and he would carry the ideas around as if letting them gestate in his head. I remember him discussing the Arthur Schnitzler novel *Dream Story*, on which Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* is based, and saying, "Don't forget, everything that happens is in the head." That, I think, was the key to how he worked.'

I ask June if she has a favourite Helmut Newton photograph. 'I suppose it has to be *Self-Portrait With Wife and Model*,' she says, though I was hoping she would choose my own personal favourite, which is an effortlessly erotic portrait of her, baring her breasts and exhaling a cloud of smoke. His erotic photographs of his wife often possess a tenderness that is absent in the more Teutonic nudes. Was she ever jealous of his models or his extravagant sexual fantasies that they enacted? 'No. Not at all. He always said: "You can fuck the models, or you can work with them, but not both at the same time."'

Would it be fair to say he was in awe of the oppo-

site sex, and that is why they invariably appeared as Amazons, as larger-than-life creations?

'No, I'd say they were in awe of him on the whole. The only woman he was in awe of was Margaret Thatcher. There are always exceptions,' she laughs.

He was, attests Helvin, a very funny guy, though disarmingly vague at times, as if his thoughts were constantly elsewhere. 'Once he was dining at Mr Chow's in LA, where all the hip people hung out, and I walked in with Warren Beatty. He shook hands with Warren, and said: "I can't place you, but know your face from somewhere." I mean, of all people...'

Bailey, too, attests to the humour. 'He never bloody paid for anything. It was a standing joke, like that awful little white scarf he wore. It became part of his act. He reminded me of Billy Wilder, the great director, in that he was great fun to be around but you always learnt so much, and heard such great stories.'

The funniest series in *A Gun for Hire* is a shoot for *US Vogue*, where he couples a towering and statuesque blonde with a diminutive, nerdy-looking guy, perhaps poking fun at himself. 'He was intrigued by what he called "the upset of scale",' says June, 'and he loved stuff like the Doctor Cyclops film, where an evil scientist shrinks people. His sense of humour was always there in the photographs, though the critics never seemed to pick up on it. At one point,' she laughs, 'he wanted to call the *Domestic Nudes* series "Housewives in Bondage". That was pure Helmut.'

It sounds, I say, like they had a lot of fun together. 'Oh, yes, we had fun,' she laughs, 'and we truly enjoyed being together, just as we enjoyed our solitude. I'm not enjoying it any more, though,' she adds, and you can sense the absence that this larger-than-life man left behind. 'The thing is,' she says, getting close to the essence of Helmut Newton, and his self-styled role as photographic provocateur, 'he never stopped to consider what he was other than a photographer, and as a photographer, he was free to do whatever he wanted to do.' OM

Helmut Newton: A Gun for Hire is published by Taschen at £19.99. To order a copy for £18.99 with free p&p, call the Observer Books service on 0870 836 0885 or go to observer.co.uk/bookshop

