

P O R T F O L I O

ART AND COMMERCE

Helmut Newton sold his vision to whoever would pay. But it was *his* vision.

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Helmut Newton, *A Gun for Hire*

(Taschen, \$40), 216 pages, 9x12 inches

There may be no greater indication of a photographer's artistic achievement than the work he or she does for commercial clients. Helmut Newton, for instance, was eagerly sought after by commercial clients seeking his particular "vision." It didn't matter that Newton was instinctually and habitually subversive and perverse. He was hired to create just the kinds of images that another photographer might be fired for even suggesting. Provocation was his art.

Not that Newton himself viewed what he did in such lofty ways. "Some people's photography is an art. Mine is not," Newton told an interviewer shortly before his death from a heart attack in January 2004. "If [my pictures] happen to be exhibited in a gallery or a museum, that's fine. But that's not why I do them. I'm a gun for hire."

For hire yes, and often for good money. But the real price to be paid was the creative allowance made to Newton. In *A Gun for Hire*, a wonderfully enlightening collection of Newton's commercial work ranging from early fashion shots to later editorial and advertising pictures, one can find the essence of Newton's worldview on every page. Even the most basic catalog image is suffused with mystery and obsession. His ad work for Blumarine in the 1990s (such as the shot of film star Monica Bellucci at left) is filled with Newtonian archetypes, and fashion editorial work for *Vogue* made after 2000, such as the shot at right, is typically layered and elusive.

Newton was certainly not the only photographer to elevate commercial work into the realm of art. But perhaps no other photographer loved the paid act of creativity more. As he once said, in his inimitable fashion, "I was quite ready to prostitute this precious talent that God had given me to make my living." —JEFFREY ELBIES