

BETTINA RHEIMS/TASCHEN/KEN GOFF



Feel free to ogle my Olga

A RUSSIAN BILLIONAIRE IS CELEBRATING HIS WIFE'S BEAUTY BY PRINTING A BOOK OF EROTIC PHOTOS OF HER

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Paris

FROM private jets to luxury mansions, Russia's super-rich enjoy flaunting their toys. Sergei Rodionov, a banker, has taken this habit to new extremes by publishing a book of photographs dedicated to the carnal appeal of Olga, his wife.

The Book of Olga is largely the work of Bettina Rheims, the French photographer whose previous assignments included Jacques Chirac's official portrait. The former French president might blush at her latest efforts.

Rheims has photographed Olga, 34, in a variety of erotic poses, none of them involving much in the way of clothing. Her husband initially wanted to keep the photographs for himself, but liked them so much that he decided to share them with a global audience.

1,000 Copies printed of The Book of Olga, each numbered and signed by Bettina Rheims

"He loves the photographic art," said Olga. "He loves me. He likes to call me Galatea in reference to the Greek artist Pygmalion, who created a statue so lifelike that he fell in love with it [Galatea]."

Olga, a business school graduate and chat show host with a 13-year-old daughter, sounds just as pleased as her husband about her physical attributes.

"I'm not an exhibitionist," she said. "My body is the result of hard work. I want to show that having kids, a marriage and work are not excuses for a woman to stop taking care of herself."

It was not the first time she had stripped off for the camera. She has posed for Russian Playboy and Penthouse magazines as well as for Helmut Newton, the late photographer famous for his provocative nudes. "I see no problem with showing off a beautiful naked body," said Olga.

It could start a fashion. Russia's new billionaires — there are 110 of them in the country — are always looking for creative ways to spend their money and glossy books about their wives could be the answer.

Some Muscovites, however, might be shocked at the latest exposure of Olga: in Russia she is remembered for having posed naked with a stuffed bear and lying on a Soviet-era propaganda banner surrounded by Russian police officers.

The latest pictures, taken in a French country mansion, are more daring. In some she is seen as a dominatrix. In others she cavorts with women and men other than her husband. Conservative business associates have told Rodionov that his wife's pictures add up to adultery, but he has shrugged off the criticism.

"I took her first nude pictures myself," he once said. "Then she started posing for professional photographers. I told her the gossip will fade, whereas the pictures will stay for ever and when she is 90 she will look at them and say, 'Look what a beautiful woman I was'. I am proud of her."

Such tolerance marks him as unusual in the upper echelons of Moscow society which, despite the free-wheeling image, has its conservative streak.

"A beautiful young wife is a must for a rich Russian," said one Moscow socialite. "It gives

status, just like having a villa in the south of France, luxury cars and bodyguards. But their wives are meant to look good and spend their time buying expensive clothes, not taking them off as a career.

"Wealthy men here have mistresses, but they are very conservative when it comes to their spouses. The last thing they want is for their business partners and rivals to pore over pictures of their naked wife."

Olga has complained of the new puritan morality replacing the anything-goes mentality of the post-communist epoch, even if "the level of awareness and knowledge of the population has vastly increased" since the demise of communism.

She has fallen foul of broadcasting authorities for allowing herself to be seen on air with a whip, which resulted in accusations that she was advocating violence.

Olga has complained that she has been "insulted" on the internet. "Some men cannot tolerate that women are as free as I feel," she said.

The Book of Olga and works like it seem well on their way to becoming the new samizdat, the name given to the distribution of subversive works under the communist system.



Some business associates of Rodionov have criticised the pictures of Olga, top left