



MODEL BEHAVIOUR

Ellen von Unwerth's *Bitch! Paris*, 2007
(main); Nadja Auermann wears a collar and
tie to play with conventions (top left)

A woman's touch

Fashion photographer and former model Ellen von Unwerth's erotic images benefit from something a man's rarely have – empathy with the subject

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THE camera loves you baby... make love to the camera." These aren't words you could imagine escaping from the lips of fashion photographer Ellen von Unwerth, yet the former model's brand of erotic photography arguably captures a more feminine sexuality than that of many of her male contemporaries.

The 55-year-old has immortalised some of the world's most beautiful women on film, and her latest showcase, *Fräulein* – which recently opened at London's Michael Hoppen gallery – features her own favourite images from the past 15 years of her career as well as some that have never been published. The exhibition takes place in collaboration with a hefty limited-edition monograph of the her work.

German-born von Unwerth's story is like something from a fanciful high-concept fashion spread. Orphaned at two, she joined the travelling Circus Roncalli when she was 18 years old after seeing them perform in Munich and falling in love with the ringmaster. She was discovered at 20 while working with the circus, and spent the next decade as a successful model.

Never entirely comfortable in the glare of the flashbulbs, however, as she entered her 30s, von Unwerth began spending more time experimenting behind the camera. She has no formal training, instead looking to her own →

→ experiences as a model which, she believes, allow her to empathise with her subjects.

Now one of the world's most in-demand fashion photographers, von Unwerth has captured everyone from a naked Britney Spears to a smoking Elizabeth Hurley scratching her crotch. She has worked on shoots for style bibles from *Vogue* to *Vanity Fair* and has shot campaigns for Diesel, Chanel and Miu Miu.

Her work is unapologetically erotic, often with a subtle performance theme – thanks to her circus background. Her subjects are usually scantily-clad, always beautiful but never objectified. Her version of sexy is relatively mainstream, with a dash of fetishism thrown in. Her models wear stockings and lipstick and smudged eyeliner. Their skin is dewy, their hair tousled and their eyes wild, as if they have just returned from a thoroughly satisfying roll in the hay. “I love women who are playful and fun,” says von Unwerth, speaking on the phone from her Paris home. “I love sexy, intelligent women. Sexiness is hard to define. Of course a woman can be beautiful, but I think it's something in the eyes. It's a woman saying something secretive, something in her eyes that's almost animalistic.”

Models have said they love working with von Unwerth, that they feel comfortable opening up to her and, perhaps most surprising of all, that their mothers always like the finished images. Supermodel Eva Herzigova describes her images as “sexy with a nice sense of humour”. She adds, “It's not vulgar, it's always funny. She was a model before, so she knows what it's like to be in front of the camera.”

“I think that, because I know what it feels like to be in front of the camera, I can be more sympathetic to my subjects,” von Unwerth says. “Being in front of the lens, you are very vulnerable. It's not a nice feeling, and I don't miss it. But it's very helpful to know exactly what it's like. When I was a model I hated when I wasn't allowed to move, so I love movement and I encourage my subjects to play around, to move and to be silly.”

Even that notoriously difficult-to-please devil in Prada, Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief of US *Vogue* and the most powerful woman in fashion, has sung von Unwerth's praises. “She has a much looser approach than the more standard photographers. And I think her wit and looseness are part of her charm.”

So what makes von Unwerth's images more than just

upmarket smut? The easy answer might be that they are shot by a woman, but there's more to it than that. Make no mistake, it's the women in her images who are in charge. They are the ones who are cracking the whip (metaphorically and, occasionally, literally) and they're not going to stand passively being admired like exotic birds in cages. They enjoy sex, they are in control and there's a relaxed playfulness about them that suggests no-one is taking any of it too seriously.

“I think that women open up more to a female photographer,” says von Unwerth. “It's like little girls playing around. You can be a bit naughty and do things you wouldn't do in front of boys. It's more relaxed somehow. I think it's an empowering experience – and no, I don't believe they are objectified.”

There's definitely an advantage for von Unwerth over the countless male photographers who dominate the industry yet often fail to capture the level of eroticism in their female subjects that she does.

Perhaps it's because she believes that women are not just there to be admired – “they are to be enjoyed” – where her male counterparts might see them as beautiful, untouchable objects to be gazed upon. But then perhaps it's just because while the camera may love her flawless subjects, a little bit of her loves them too. □

Fräulein will be published on 25 November (Taschen, £450), with a limited edition of 1,500 copies. The *Fräulein* exhibition is at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, London (www.michaelhoppengallery.com), until 21 November

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