

Iconic to the end

A new book blends Marilyn Monroe photos shot weeks before her death with a 1972 Norman Mailer essay.

LIESL BRADNER

The suite at the Hotel Bel-Air where Bert Stern photographed Marilyn Monroe for her famous "Last Sitting" in 1962 no longer exists. It is now part of the elegant La Prairie Spa — rather apropos, as the often difficult star was well known for making people wait while relaxing in a hot bath. In 1972, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Norman Mailer took refuge a few steps away in one of the secluded bungalow-like rooms to soak up the ambience while writing his biographical essay on the tragic celebrity.

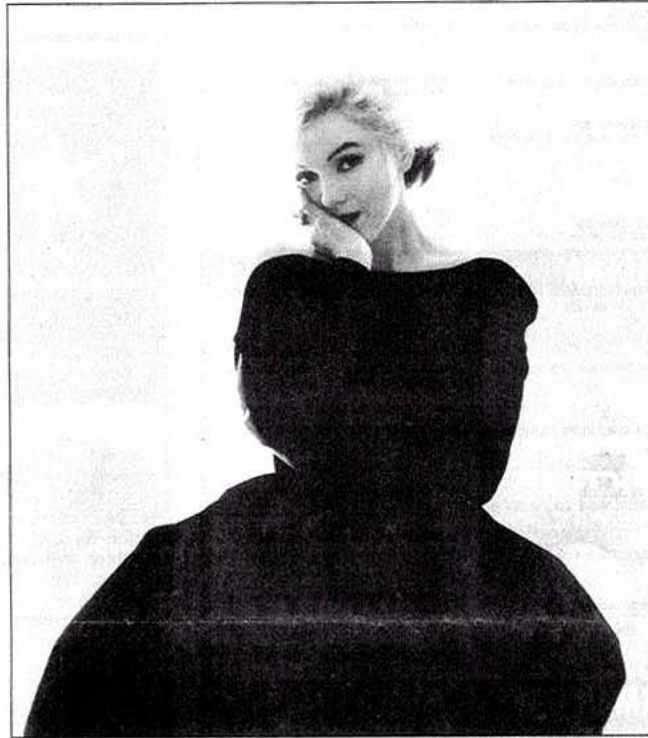
Mailer, Monroe and Stern have been brought together by producer, director and screenwriter Lawrence Schiller in 278 grand, glossy pages for "Norman Mailer, Bert Stern: Marilyn Monroe" (published by Taschen, a limited edition signed by Stern starts at \$1,000).

Mailer's original text published in 1973 has been edited here and accompanies Stern's historical photos taken just six weeks before the star's death on Aug. 5, 1962. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of her passing next year, Schiller, who photographed the skinny-dipping Monroe on the set of "Something's Got to Give," pitched the idea to publisher Benedikt Taschen, likening Mailer's words and Stern's photos as two interlocking gears coming together.

"I told him we could illustrate Mailer's text in a very unique way and bring out something in Bert's pictures that had been there before but not showcased properly," said Schiller at the book's lavish launch party last week at the recently renovated Hotel Bel-Air, where guests included Quincy Jones, Chris Tucker, Julie Newmar and Penelope Ann Miller.

"It feels weird," said Stern, 82, on his return to the lush, hallowed grounds. "The ghost of Marilyn coming back 50 years later." His last visit was in 2008 to photograph another troubled actress, Lindsay Lohan, for New York magazine. They re-created several of Monroe's nearly nude photos from that famous portrait sitting.

"I didn't want any clothes. I wanted things — jewelry, scarves, objects," said Stern of the Monroe session. As usual, she showed up three hours late but thinner than he had expected. The 36-year-old Monroe sipped on her favorite Dom Pérignon champagne, picked up a few scarves from off the bed and giddily danced around while Stern snapped away.



Photographs by BERT STERN/Taschen

BACK IN BLACK: In "Norman Mailer, Bert Stern: Marilyn Monroe," the actress as captured by Stern at Hotel Bel-Air in 1962.



SULTRY: Monroe wore more jewels than clothes at the shoot.

"She was in a terrific mood, a lot of fun," Stern said. "She wanted to be in Vogue."

Stern sent that first set of provocative images to the editors, who thought her hair looked too messy and wanted more fashion shots, so Stern and Monroe met again. Marilyn dressed in more sophisticated evening wear including a black Dior gown and impersonated Jackie Kennedy in a brunet wig and pearls at one point. Jackie's hairdresser, Kenneth Battelle, even styled her hair appropriately.

"She got fed up with the dresses and wanted to go back to less things," recalled Stern, who didn't want a glitzy showbiz photo. An admirer of Edward Steichen's black and white portrait of Greta Garbo, he wanted something more intimate, that definitive, immortal picture.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime event. I knew I'd never shoot her again."

Marilyn died while the Vogue layout was going to press. They edited out the fashion copy and ran an obituary for the September issue.

Considered one of the original "Mad Men," Stern got his start on Madison Avenue in the 1950s with his revolutionary "Driest of the Dry" campaign for Smirnoff vodka, inverting an Egyptian pyramid in a martini glass.

"I don't consider myself a photographer," he said. "I'm a designer with a camera."

When asked if any actress today could compare to Monroe, Stern immediately responded: "Naomi Watts. I thought she should've played Marilyn in that new movie. [Michelle Williams] was Marilyn-ish, but she didn't have that kind of freedom and naturalism that Marilyn had. She was a free spirit. She was full of ideas, sexy, funny and clever."

calendar@latimes.com