

One photographer's view of Marilyn Monroe



A contact sheet of images of Marilyn Monroe taken by Lawrence Schiller. (CBS)

(CBS News) *The body of work of one photographer is something to behold - not surprising, considering Schiller was on assignment for Look magazine.*

When asked to describe the first time he met Monroe, Schiller said, "Well, I was 23. And I was scared - am I allowed to say scared s***less?"

And who wouldn't be? After all, she was one of the biggest stars on the planet. Schiller was a relative newcomer, with more guts than experience.

"I start shooting her from the dressing room," he recalls. "And she says, 'You know, you're not going to get a good picture from there. But if you go over there you're going to get something really nice.' And so I go over there and she turns over her shoulder, and she looks at me and she's just a different woman. She's Marilyn Monroe.

"But basically I lifted another camera and I shot just one frame. It's just an extraordinary first real portrait I ever did of her."

The Xs on Schiller's proof sheet are from Marilyn's own hand. Of all of his shots that day, she only approve done. "That was the moment that I knew that Marilyn knew more about photography at that moment than I did," Schiller said.

But he would learn.

By 1962, Elizabeth Taylor was riding a global tidal wave of publicity, and Schiller says Marilyn Monroe worried that her own star was fading.

"She felt she was unappreciated. Studios didn't take her serious," Schiller said. "She's a tremendous, insecure person."

At the time, Monroe was shooting the never-finished film "Something's Got to Give" with Dean Martin. Schiller, again on assignment, says Marilyn had an idea for the pool scene that would make waves (and magazine covers).

"When you get right to the point, she was thinking about jumping in the swimming pool but coming out with nothing on," he recalled. "We didn't know if she was really kidding. At one point I realize that she's kind of serious. And I say, 'But Marilyn, you know, you're already famous. You know, now you're going to make ME famous!' I was very cocky in those days."

"And what did she say to that?" Smith asked.

"Well, she just looked at me and said, 'Don't be so cocky, Larry. Photographers can easily be replaced.'"

While shooting this scene, the star wore a skin-tone suit. But between takes, she slipped it off. Standing poolside, Schiller caught it all on film. Risque, yet somehow still innocent. The images, as Schiller put it, show nothing - and say everything.

"She said, 'If you release those pictures, I want to make sure in the same issue I don't see Liz Taylor anywheres,'" he said. There was NO mention of Liz in the issue of Life magazine.

Smith asked about suggestions from Monroe's press agent that Schiller was exploiting the actress. "Well, there's no question that the pictures were exploiting her," he said.

"Did you feel like you were exploiting her?" Smith asked.

"Well, let me say this: Marilyn needed the exploitation for her own purposes. And I was the instrument. She wanted to deliver a message to that studio, all right. Now, therefore I don't think I was exploiting her. Because in essence, you might say you were in partnership with her, an unspoken contract, an unspoken agreement."

In any case, the images are as hot as ever.

The June edition of Vanity Fair will devote a section to Schiller's photos. They'll appear in two editions of his upcoming book, including a signed, silk-bound coffee table version by Taschen.