

Marilyn always a savvy nude

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you can see in some shots



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Marilyn Monroe's image is omnipresent, so much so it's as if she hasn't been dead for the past 50 years. And maybe it's time to stop feeling guilty about this.

She was the official icon of the recent Cannes Film Festival, her puckering lips appearing everywhere and kissing everybody. This week Brad Pitt, who knows something of icons, announced he's producing *Blonde*, a Monroe-themed drama.

The current issue of *Vanity Fair*, which loves to put Monroe on its cover, splashes an exclusive photo essay titled "The Lost Nudes." It's a cover story about Monroe's last on-set photo shoot, mere weeks before her overdose death on Aug. 5, 1962.

The piece is based on images and memories by photographer Lawrence Schiller, who was 25 when Monroe disrobed for him at a swimming pool on the 20th Century Fox set of *Something's Got to Give*, a movie the actress didn't live long enough to finish.

I bought the magazine at the Nice Airport to read on the way home from Cannes, feeling a bit complicit in still more exploitation of someone no longer able to defend herself — and who perhaps never could.

Yet Schiller's story and photo spread

were revealing in ways I didn't expect. Far from being a case of voyeurs manipulating Monroe, it was Monroe manipulating voyeurs.

She knew what she was doing and what she wanted to show the world: how good she still looked and how sexy she still was at the age of 36.

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Monroe was also keen to one-up Elizabeth Taylor, whom she considered her chief rival. Taylor that year was to earn \$1 million for starring in *Cleopatra*; Monroe would get \$100,000 for *Something Got to Give*.

"This was a smart woman," Schiller said, when I contacted him at his New York apartment. He's compiled more photos and memories for *Marilyn & Me*, a new book by Doubleday that Taschen is releasing in a deluxe volume.

"When I said to her, 'You're a smart woman, you're already famous, and now you're going to make me famous,' she looked up and said, 'Why are you so cocky, Larry?'"

Why indeed? Schiller had photographed Monroe once before, on the set of 1960's *Let's Make Love*, so he was familiar with her. But the only reason he was back for the second session was because he'd passed muster with her.

"She'd been run over by so many trucks in her life, by the time you get to 1960 or 1962, this woman had to be savvy," Schiller said.

"She didn't have a business manager."

Rare for the time, and even rarer now, Monroe had absolute last word on any photo snapped of her. The paparazzi phenomenon hadn't yet started, and digital photography, cellphone cameras and the

rapacious Internet were still decades away.

Monroe insisted that photographers audition for the right to photograph her. She would then demand they show up at her office or home with contact sheets that she'd examine with a small magnifying glass she kept with her.

She would "X" out the photos she didn't like, and then take a pair of pinking shears to destroy the negatives. A shoot of 100 or more pictures might result in only a few photos that Monroe approved. Those were the rules.

"With Marilyn Monroe, photographers were like a sponge preserving or soaking up what it was that she had," Schiller recalled.

"Put Marilyn in front of a camera, and she did it. She knew what she wanted to look like. You might suggest the clothes or arrange the lighting, but you didn't tell Marilyn what to do. That's why she was different with every single photographer. She knew what was right for her."

There was also much more public respect for private lives back in 1962. Gossip mags whispered of illicit affairs involving Hollywood stars, but the stories were often designed to enhance legends, not to tear them down.

If you didn't give Monroe what she wanted, Schiller said, you didn't get invited back into her intimate circle.

"Somebody asked me yesterday, why did she trust me? I said Marilyn Monroe didn't trust me; I don't think she trusted anybody. I think she gambled with Larry Schiller. She gambled with me that I was young enough and had enough chutzpah and was able to deliver."

There was no TMZ or other such sites to show stars at their worst, as we so often see today: *sans* makeup, with puffy eyes and splotchy faces, every excess ounce displayed as a high-def horror show.

There was also no Photoshop or

other digital sorcery, making it harder to hide the tiny roll of tummy that you can see in some of Schiller's shots.

Monroe still had tricks to make her nude form look as good as possible. One frame from *Marilyn & Me* shows makeup man Whitey Snyder dabbing something onto her naked back at pool's edge, a powder or some shiny gel to hide or enhance something.

"Fox should start paying as much attention to me as they are paying to Elizabeth Taylor," Monroe said to Schiller during the shoot.

She got all the attention she wanted, and then some, but she didn't live to enjoy the career surge her calculated move brought. She appeared on the cover of *Life* and *Paris Match* magazines soon after the pool session, and she was the talk of newspapers worldwide. More explicit photos would appear in *Playboy*, but not until more than a year after her death.

She's a bigger star today than she was in her brief life, as the recent flurry of Monroe projects and tributes show.

Schiller, who would later go on to become a movie producer and author (with friend Norman Mailer), says he can't imagine how she'd cope with today's 24/7 media environment.

"In those days, you could control the media. Sadly, I don't think Marilyn Monroe could exist in today's world. She's a product of her time, just as Lady Gaga is a product of her time.

"I think there's another reason (why she succeeded). I think Marilyn didn't offend women. Women were never insulted that their husband and boyfriend were looking at a picture of Marilyn Monroe. You can offend a man and get away with it. You cannot get away with offending women.

"She was instinctively the kind of woman that women understood. She was a sympathetic figure to them, because of her miscarriages

and husband problems. Her sexuality didn't offend women."

But Monroe was also incredibly canny about her image and used it to further her immodest ambitions. She wanted attention and she got it, and shall forevermore.

She also went to her grave with at least two secrets people have long speculated upon: did she have affairs with president John F. Kennedy and his brother, Robert F. Kennedy?

Schiller got to see a lot of Monroe and the people she kept company with, and he knew that RFK numbered amongst them. He would later become one of RFK's official photographers. Schiller has suspicions, but no proof.

"I wasn't in the bedroom of any of them. I think she desired John F. Kennedy but I don't think she got near him. I don't think she desired Bobby as much, but I think she got near him. But you can't prove a negative. It's not for me to say."

Even in death, Marilyn Monroe has the final say about who she really was.

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LAWRENCE SCHILLER/COURTESY TASCHEN

Marilyn Monroe on the set of *Something's Got to Give*, 1962.