

Helmut Newton

14.12.2002 - 27.02.2003 *Welcome to Berlin*

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"Helmut Newton - Welcome to Berlin". The simple title understates the ties that bind Helmut Newton to the city of his birth. Los Angeles, New York and the Cote d'Azur are the places most prominently connected to Newton's work. But Helmut Newton is the survivor of a pre-war generation of Berlin-born artists, a compulsive cosmopolitan with torn feelings towards a torn city. Welcoming him back now is Rudolf Kicken, whose Cologne-based gallery has been representing Newton's work throughout the world from 1987 through 2000. The long term relationship between Kicken and Newton dates back even longer and earned the gallery owner a considerable number of personally signed memorabilia. Like a running gag, 'to Rudi' keeps reappearing on the flip side of prints, on the white part of a snapshot and even on a coaster recalling a night out in the eighties. This rare intimate touch between the artist and his agent has inspired this exhibition, and it sheds some light on the otherwise underexposed space between artist and audience. The eerie presentation of some of the signed knickknack provides Rudolf 'Rudi' Kicken with a status halfway between groupie and mentor. Or what else is to be made of a birthday dedication 'to Rudi' from 'your artist Helmut' on the backside of 'Cathy as Nurse, I, Bel Air'? Already seduced by the extravaganza of Helmut Newton's work, the visitor might feel invited to a menage a trois or more. But let us not mistake the proverbial tongue-in-cheek for an obscenity. The vaguely phony way in which 'Rudi' and Helmut are starring as frivolous party hosts should not spoil this extraordinary occasion. Through Feb 27th, the main exhibition room and the two informal back rooms of the gallery space provide a refreshingly wide and surprisingly funny selection of Newton's oeuvre, spanning a period from the early '70s to the late '90s. Selected works of Dieter Appelt, Joel Meyerowitz and Rudolf Koppitz loosely accompany the exhibition, underlining its unique touch.

Newton's nudes long ago made it into the collective memory as representations of postmodern femmes fatales whose fatality is their self-containment and strength rather than their seductiveness. They are the objects of a desire totally controlled by the object itself. The towering icon of 'Big Nude III' greets the visitor with an unmistakable look, more like a bouncer than a seducer. The fist that hides, highlights, and protects the sex comes as a reminder that these Eves can perfectly do without any Adam. The semiotic density in some of Newton's iconic nudes is neatly balanced by the more blatant version of a femme fatale in his 'Mordserien/Murder Series', a series of staged murder scenes, where always the same woman puts a gory, technicolor end, always to the same man. Each scene consists of three to nine postcard-sized pictures hung vertically so as to suggest a cinematic narrative. By their difference in style and format from Newton's better known work, the 'Murder Series' suggests that even his most sinister domina probably had a good laugh after the spanking.

The selection presented here shows that along with the polemic content of Newton's work goes a generous serving of fun and vanity. The sex, the fantasy of satisfaction, is only secondary to the omnipresent desire for perfection in framing and capturing. In one of Newton's blatantly pornographic pictures, 'Cocktail Hour, Downtown Los Angeles', it is the obvious priority of elegance over indulgence which provides the kick of the moment. A man in a suit is standing in front of a woman lounging in a chair. The woman's left hand elegantly holds the man's erect penis sticking out from his zipper, while her right hand balances the cocktail glass. Both hands are perfectly relaxed in the same gesture of 'ennui', of bored leisure. His penis a prop in her hands, the man's eventual satisfaction seems to depend on when, and if, the woman feels the need for another sip of her cocktail. Let's say that Newton's perfectly measured prose is best taken with the same amount of understatement that it is served up with: accompanied by a Martini and a smile, both equally dry. [TOBIAS HERING]



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