

# HELMUT NEWTON KISS KISS, BANG BANG!

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“I’m a gun for hire!” This is a statement that Helmut Newton, legendary fashion and portrait photographer, often made. “Some people’s photography is an art. Mine is not. If they happen to be exhibited in a gallery or a museum, that’s fine. But that’s not why I do them. I’m a gun for hire.”<sup>1</sup>

It wasn’t until the 1980s that Helmut Newton photographed his first nude. After twenty years of shooting for *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and other glossy fashion magazines, he executed his leadoff series celebrating the undraped, female body in short order. First, he shot his *Sie Kommen (Dressed and Naked)*, also in the Nicola Erni Collection, which was succeeded by the series *Domestic Nudes*, photographed in Los Angeles. In 1989, Helmut Newton was commissioned by the Italian magazine *Max* to shoot its first ever calendar. Nearly a decade after *Sie Kommen (Dressed and Naked)*, Newton decided to use a panoramic camera for this purpose. The resulting vertical panoramas—his interpretation of the panoramic view—marked the beginning of his iconic series *Panoramic Nudes*.

During this project, Newton laid his emphasis on two things: sex and landscape<sup>2</sup>—the pure, empowered female nudes and the luxurious and rich scenery surrounding them, namely the stunning Mediterranean lakeside of the Lago di Como. The two versions of *Panoramic Nude with Gun* are paradigmatic for this compilation and both images were published within the context of the *Max* calendar production. In the 1989 issue of the calendar, a fierce nude points a gun directly at the spectator whereas in the edition from 1990, the same nude points the gun to the ground. Now, placed next to each other in the current show at the Nicola Erni Collection, these

two photographs start an open dialog, telling one of Helmut Newton’s visual stories using the consistent clarity of his formal language.

Newton’s lens captures its motif in the photographer’s emblematic style and with the artist’s voyeuristic intentions in mind: a graceful woman, wearing nothing but her polished high-heel shoes, dark sunglasses, a net veil and carrying a gun, is smoothly climbing the stairs of the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni, one of the most exclusive and prominent addresses on Lake Como, then as it is now. Suddenly, she directs her gun towards the startled viewer whilst an alluring but dangerous air surrounds her. This dominant gesture suggests the unfolding of a double-edged narrative of intrigue and seduction.

The woman’s elongated figure and the tall trunks of the palm trees in the backdrop serve to intensify the verticality of the composition and accentuate the imposing attitude of the model. In Newton’s universe, the fierce and shockingly nude models presented in a striking pose are quintessential. Alexander Liberman, editorial director of Condé Nast Publications, once described an image by Newton as follows: “Her pose, her gaze imply erotic possibilities. It seemed Newton was able to catch a moment of a reality about to happen. The adventure could go on, or not. He starts imagination—the spectator is left with desire to pursue the narrative, complete the scenario.”<sup>3</sup> Even though Liberman was talking about a specific photograph, this description can be applied to Newton’s imagery in general, and especially to *Panoramic Nude with Gun*. The narrative surrounding the visual content articulates a surreal and oscillating moment which needs to be completed by oneself. Helmut Newton is said to be “the genius of artifice” with no patience

for amateur realists.<sup>4</sup> Newton portrays women as hard-edged, heroic, and dangerous, but also as alluring and mysterious phenomena—contradictory and at the same time persuasive, but always highly artificial. In his series *Panoramic Nudes*, he investigates the essence of femininity in the form of the stylized *femme fatale*. José Alvarez formulates the appeal of these images from an outward perspective: “[...] to put it differently, she overcomes her fears, does not flinch from danger, surrenders herself for pleasure, is wary of causing annoyance ... but above all, she is herself, she rejects every idea of imitation.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1992, four images from the series, including the picture with the gun pointing downward, were shown in the exhibition *Archives de Nuit*. Newton’s triumphant *Panoramic Nudes* seamlessly integrate into the oeuvre of the photographer, even though they explore and push the boundaries of photographic possibilities at that time. “Nakedness as an expression of strength is possibly the most frequently overlooked quality in Newton’s pictures.”<sup>6</sup> Nakedness—a vogueish style that never went out of fashion in Helmut Newton’s universe.

*Panoramic Nude with Gun*, Lake Como, 1989  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 147 x 48 cm

*Panoramic Nude with Gun*, Lake Como, 1989  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 151.5 x 49.5 cm

