

L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

What's new, Mark Arbeit ? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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Portrait by George Holz, Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam, 2019



Grand Central Station, NYC, Harper's Bazaar Australia magazine, 1988, copyright Mark Arbeit



Atelier André Barel, Paris, 75015, 2001, copyright Mark Arbeit



King Composition, King Arthur Orchid, Paris, October 8, 2003, copyright Mark Arbeit



Man Ray Men's fashion Editorial for GQ Japan magazine, Paris, 1997, copyright Mark Arbeit



Gong Li, At home in Beijing, French Marie Claire Magazine, 2002, copyright Mark Arbeit



Kawela Banyan, Claire, 8 x 10 Deardorff camera, August 22, 2002, copyright Mark Arbeit



Leaf Chayanne, Palolo Valley, 8 x 10 Deardorff camera March 23, 2003, copyright Mark Arbeit



Nicole Scherzinger, Hollywood, Cal. HiLuxury magazine, April 2020, copyright Mark Arbeit



Thailand, French Cosmopolitan magazine, 1991, copyright Mark Arbeit



With Helmut and June, Monte Carlo Beach Hotel, 1990



With George Holz and Just Loomis in Paris at the Grand Palais, March 2012



With Pierce Brosnan, Kauai, Hawaii, for HiLuxury magazine, June 2013

Mark Arbeit is one of the most fascinating photographers I have ever met. A gentle soul, with a sunny character combined with a sharp sense of style, a brilliant eye for photography, and with a killer-portfolio. Modest and kind at all times.

Having worked with Man Ray, Irving Penn, and Helmut Newton, you can talk with him for hours, while marveling at his multifaceted approaches to the genres of portraiture, high fashion, and editorial photography.

After having collaborated with him twice – for his 2009 and his 2019 shows at the Helmut Newton Foundation – it was high time to do a thorough recap on his past and share his latest news. Thank you, Mark, for allowing us to take a deep dive into your oeuvre, and for sharing some of the finest examples from your portfolio!

Nadine Dinter: You grew up in between the continental US and Hawaii, moving to Oahu at the age of 16. Then, after studying art at the University of Hawaii, you decided to focus on photography and moved to California. Which time and place influenced you the most?

Mark Arbeit: Growing up in Hawaii in a multicultural society had a strong influence on the exotic women I've featured in my photographs throughout my career. Art Center College of Design was also key in shaping my photography. The more I learned, the more I realized how little I knew in both technique and experience. All the teachers were professional photographers, showing us real-life experiences; shooting cars, product still-lives, and people photography. During the third year at Art Center, we began to have a good idea of which type of photography we were best suited for. An important school assignment called "The Industrial Book" changed my life, when I choose fashion as my subject. For the assignment I borrowed clothes from a boutique in Beverly Hills on Rodeo Drive, called LINA LEE. Lina loved the pictures from my school project so much, she asked me to shoot her first fashion advertisement, which was featured in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine. It was the beginning of a working relationship that continued for the next ten years.

After your third year studying photography at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, you met Helmut Newton. How did that happen?

MA: I began shooting and traveling for Lina Lee while still attending Art Center. One day, Lina mentioned that Helmut Newton would be stopping by the store the following day. I called up my friend George Holz to join me to meet the master! We waiting from early morning, and finally that afternoon, Helmut walked into the boutique. We told Helmut we were Art Center students and asked if we could show him our portfolios. He said to stop by the Beverly Hills Hotel later and he would meet with us. George called Just Loomis and the three of us headed over to Helmut's hotel. At the end of the meeting, Helmut asked if we would like to drive him location hunting for an upcoming fashion shoot with *Stern* magazine. YES! We drove up and down the California coast, location hunting. The following week, Helmut invited us to come along on the *Stern* shoot. It was an incredible two-week experience, watching Helmut use the locations we scouted, constructing each frame in balanced perfection; using five weightlifters, eight surfers, and six male models – all as accessories or play things for his two female models.

I heard you became Newton's assistant a short while later. Which shoots did you assist him with, and do you have any fun stories about that time you could share with us?

MA: After the *Stern* shoot, Helmut asked if I would like to assist him in photographing an ad campaign for Prince Egon von Fürstenberg, which I totally messed up. Helmut was photographing Egon for close to an hour on one roll of film (Helmut would direct his subject with each detail before clicking a single picture). When I went to change the film, when opening the camera back, to my surprise, there was no film inside. I had forgotten to load the camera! Helmut didn't say a word, and began shooting Egon all over again. Later back at the Hotel Helmut said, "Mark, there are assistants and photographers, and you're not an assistant." A few weeks later, Helmut was shooting Jaclyn Smith (from the TV series *Charlie's Angels*) for *American Vogue*, and asked if I would assist him again. I messed up less, but somewhat, leaving his Louis Vuitton camera case and film in the sun, and got a tongue-lashing from Helmut.

Another time, Helmut asked if I'd like to start working with June [Helmut's wife], and like an idiot, I said no. It wasn't until later on that I realized what a brilliant portraitist June was – that was one of my biggest mistakes in my life.

After I moved to Milan, Italy, in 1980, whenever Helmut was in town he would call to have dinner, or we would go see an exhibition. Once, Just Loomis and Helmut were location hunting and stopped by my apartment in Milano. I was shooting a beauty story for *Linea*

Italiana, an extreme close-up of the model's eye and lips and had a long lens with close-up rings about a foot long, inches away from the model's face – we were creating a variation of [Erwin] Blumenfeld's Vogue cover from the 1950s. Helmut was sitting on my couch watching, a smile on his face. He said, "You sure know how to make life difficult for yourself."

The following week, Just was assisting Helmut on a fashion shoot for Italian Amica magazine, and I came along and helped out. The following year, Helmut invited Just and me to Verona and Venice for the printing of his book, *World without Men*, and see his upcoming show in Venice. In 1984, I went back to Venice with Helmut and June to hang his exhibition at the Fortuny Museum and assist in a workshop Helmut gave to a handful of photographers, with Jenny Capitan as his muse. Another photo shoot I worked on with Helmut was in Rome, photographing the Valentino ad campaign with Patty Hansen at Valentino's home. Watching Helmut and Patty work together was amazing, as she listened to Helmut's every word as he sculpted her body into an iconic Helmut Newton pose. After the shoot, I had a beer at the hotel bar with Keith Richards! Back in Paris, I assisted Helmut shooting the cover for his film, *Frames from the Edge*, with Helmut photographing himself in a mirror, surrounded by five models clad in shiny leather and a riding crop! Afterwards, I pulled out my Leica M4 and shot portraits of Helmut and June at Hotel Raphael and the Arc de Triomphe.

At the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena you had two classmates you became close friends with, and who also assisted Newton. Can you tell us a bit about that?

MA: George Holz, Just Loomis, and I have been close friends since our days at the Art Center and our first meetings with Helmut in 1979. In 2009, June came up with the name "Three Boys from Pasadena" and gave us our first group show at the Helmut Newton Foundation. June once wrote to me, "You three were the only ones who became photographers in your own right. You three complement one another and you all had a unique relationship with Helmut, and you've become his offspring, you have your own voices". It's been a blessing for the three of us, having this strong bond and friendship.

After graduation, you moved to New York City and became Irving Penn's platinum print retoucher. Do you see his influence in your photographs? What was the greatest lesson you learned from working for him?

MA: Penn was a meticulous perfectionist. Everything he did was so perfect, it took me years to break away from his style. The platinum print retouchers (usually two to three of us) were given an hour lunch break, and as soon as Penn would start shooting for *Vogue*, I

would sit in the back of the room and watch the master work. I studied his lighting and the way he directed his model, how he spoke with editors, the stylist, make-up & hairdressers. Except for lighting, Penn and Newton took a similar approach to fashion shoots. Other times, Penn would work at the first assistant's studio, where Penn would shoot his fine art work. I watched him compose and shoot the image *The Spilled Cream*, and Penn explained to me how the bowl and pitcher had broken during shipping and he turned into a positive thing. During this same period, Penn was working on his book, *Flowers*, where proof pages would come in every day from the printing press for his approval. This had an influence on my *In & Out of Focus* series. Penn also introduced me to the north-light studio, its magical light used by painters and sculptures for centuries. While living in Paris, I began seeking out Parisian artist ateliers, turning those private, magical spaces into my *Artist Atelier* series.

Then came Milan, and shortly after that, Paris. What were the highlights for you in both cities – workwise, experience-wise, and with regard to the magazines you did all those brilliant photo shoots for?

MA: I left New York and moved to Milan, Italy in October 1980. George Holz came to Italy around the same time and we shared a room at a *pensione* near Milano Centrale (a night location Helmut loved), with a model agency on the top floor and strippers on the floor below us – always an interesting place! It took about a year to get my first jobs, shooting beauty for *Linea Italiana* magazine. Guy Bourdin was working with the same magazine and editor, so I was in good company. I was able to work with the best make-up artist & hairdressers. I continued shooting and living in Milano for four-and-a-half years, working with *Vogue Belleza – Gioiello – Sposa, Donna* magazine, and *Amica*, until my work reached a level that I was asked to come to Paris to shoot for the French magazine *L'Officiel*. I would catch the night six-sleeper *couchette* train (always an experience with the grandma with her salami, grandpa snoring, the young couple making love) Milano–Paris, Paris–Milano. I began shooting regularly in both cities, eventually having enough power to begin living and working full time in Paris. It was during my early years in Paris where I started my personal work: the *In & Out of Focus* series, *Artist Atelier* series, and *Polajunk*.

In 1994, you created a stunning series of the people on Oahu Island, working with a Deardorff camera. How growing up on the island help you capture the spirit of the place and the people for this series?

MA: I was living in Paris at the time, but Hawaii was always in the back of my mind. I decided I wanted to cover my walls in Paris with pictures of Hawaii's landscapes and people. What better way to accomplish this, than following in the footsteps of Edward Weston, shooting with a large-format Deardorff 8×10 inch camera. I like the challenge and discipline of shooting single sheet film, thinking out every detail (lessons from Newton and

Penn) before clicking the shutter. Having grown up in Hawaii, I already had good idea of where I wanted to shoot and my subject matter. Each year during the holidays, I would visit my brother on Oahu and work on this series, developing film in his bathroom at night. I would also travel to other Islands: Kauai, the Big Island, each with a unique look and personality.

When looking at your photography throughout your career, it seems you were always drawn between your independent work, like *In & Out of Focus*, *Artist Atelier*, and the *Polajunk Constructions*, and your high-fashion shots for magazines like *French Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *InStyle*, *People* magazine, *Forbes*, etc. Did one serve to balance out the other, or how did you feel about working in these two different genres?

MA: I learned from both Newton and Penn the importance of creating personal work, separate from all the editorial and advertising photography. My personal work gave me an excuse to call a magazine editor or art director and to show something new; they appreciated seeing personal pictures. I would watch how Newton or Penn shot an editorial or advertising campaign one day and then photographed a more personal art picture the next day. So, I worked at accomplishing the same: shooting an editorial or ad, only out for a month at the magazine kiosk and then shooting a picture to be sold in a gallery and mounted on a wall for years. Everything is interconnected, it's two sides of the same coin.

Does your work for Helmut Newton still resonate with you? Is there something that still inspires you from that time – professionally and privately?

MA: When working on a fashion shoot, posing my model, I still remember Helmut saying, "Remember why you are here: to show the clothes." Helmut ingrained in me to always to pay attention to details. What really stuck with me is that Helmut was dead serious, concentrated and tough when working, but also one of the most down-to-earth, coolest guys I've ever known. Helmut would tell me "never shy away from shooting in too little light, put the camera on a tripod and take a long exposure." Another part of Helmut I witnessed was how much he loved June, his partner in crime and soulmate.

Any advice for the latest generation of photographers?

MT: Wow, difficult question. I use to tell young photographers that if you really love photography and show some talent, go for it! But now, in the digital age, everything has changed. The new generation probably understands how to play the game much more than I. But I would suggest they buy a film camera and experience the whole process from

shooting and processing. I would suggest to take a darkroom class and experience mixing chemicals, exposing a negative, and developing a photographic print. It's important to understand and have this tool if you ever need it! I still shoot all my personal work on film.

Curious for more? Follow Mark Arbeit on Instagram at [@markarbeitphotography](#) and check out his website www.markarbeit.com. Stay tuned for his presentation at The Lyons Gallery in Sydney, Australia.

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