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Man in the High Castle

by Katherine Oktober Matthews

January, 2004. Pulling out of the driveway of the Chateau Marmont, the (in)famous hotel of celebrity antics in Los Angeles, Helmut Newton crashed his Cadillac SUV into a wall and died at the age of 83. A photographer renowned for his controversial images of beautiful women, Newton's inexplicable death somehow both fulfils and confounds our sense of order.

There's a rhetorical question that goes: why is it that we park in a driveway and drive in a parkway? It's a silly play on words but it prompts reflection for the way we expect a word to represent what something is used for or, at the very least, not express the exact opposite.

Toying with opposites and expectations is precisely what gave Newton's images their punch. He had a devilish need for subversion and an almost obsessive, albeit playful, need for redirecting meaning. The stance and expressions of the models in his photographs create a certain Newtonian form: confident and confrontational, assertive bordering on aggressive, an ambiguity about who is dominating whom. It is the sort of obscurity of intention – dubbed “pornography for the bourgeois” by writer Zoë Heller – that fuels the desire of some, and the vitriol of others.

His style is immediately identifiable – and ultimately imitable, though many have tried. Photographing for glossy magazines like Vogue, Elle and Playboy, he produced work that he knew would push buttons, and the controversy certainly worked in his favour. Newton belongs to the limited royal household of photographers who are not only known by name for the artistry of their images but also, more elusively achieved, wildly commercially successful. Spending his winters at the Chateau for many years, Newton even shot one of his most famous series, Domestic Nudes, with the characteristic rooms serving as a backdrop, featuring beautiful women in the nude, posing in various fantasy-icons, on a bed, under a desk, next to industrial laundry machines.



© The Helmut Newton Estate

Yet, the danger for any person who creates icons, or manages to make an icon of himself, is the tendency to disappear into legend, making the myth appear more than the man himself. It's the double-edged sword of celebrity, that base urge that has our fear of mortality clawing its way into remembrance and legacy. It couldn't be more true for Newton, who spent so many years in an imitation French chateau at the top of a hill, overlooking Sunset Boulevard, the same place where he met his end. The embodiment of the man in the high castle.

Yet, the art is something different from the artist. “If I were to live like my photographs, I'd be dead a long time ago”, Newton said in a 1994 interview with *The Independent*. It's true that we expect celebrities to live as loud as their art, and to end life in beauty and tragedy, preferably young so we can lament the loss of art that could never come to be. Ever defiant, Helmut Newton survived his youth and died at the dusk of his life. Yet the tragedy of his passing is cold-comforted with the thought that he has died to our expectations, unexpectedly – while driving in a driveway.

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I'd be dead a long time ago”



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