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# Small Girl, Big Nudes: Helmut Newton and the Voyeur

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Catalina Ouyang

Small Girl, Big Nudes: Helmut Newton and the Voyeur

In 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade we were required to keep a log of all the books we read. We were to record the dates that we started, the number of pages we read daily and the dates we finished. I was already a voracious reader by then; since 6<sup>th</sup> grade I had been making weekly trips to the public library, where I would return the seven or eight books that I had finished reading, and I would check out seven or eight more. In this way I entered a competition with myself, pushing the number of novels I could finish. Sometimes I got through as many as ten a week. These were mostly historical fiction and fantasy and mysteries and “chic-lit,” as I believe the genre is termed: rom-com books. So my literary tastes were indiscriminating but my commitment to them was vigorous. This had been cultivated, probably, by my elementary school’s weekly participation in the SSR program, Sustained Silent Reading. Between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade we were required to sit at our desks and read in silence for forty-five minutes every Friday, any book of our choice.

The point of all this being: I do have a history of actual reading, which I have since cultivated into more sophisticated and expansive territory, with samplings from Baricco, Saunders, Carver, Hempel, Bynum, Paley, Gary Lutz, et al.

But now I am going to talk about my picture books.

The thing about those Friday SSR sessions: I do not remember any of the books I read (apart from *The Da Vinci Code*, for which I was harshly chastised by my Roman Catholic teacher and told to put the book away). What I remember, to be blunt, is masturbating, though at the time I did not recognize the activity for what it was. Hardcover books worked best. I levered the front and back covers against the bottom of my desk, and pressed the spine of the book downward into my groin. For forty-five minutes every Friday I did this silently.

Children do these kinds of things. I think we (specifically in America, perhaps) do not give children enough credit for how sexually curious and aware they are. Or else we shame them into silence—for the stigma of sex! Which is to say: though I felt like I was in it alone, I doubt I was unique in my early and public onset of sexual exploration. But in my case, a causal logic can be traced back to my home and the things inside of it. Specifically: in our third house, the big one in New Jersey with the brick façade and sprawling lawn, my father’s study boasted a library of Helmut Newton, David Hamilton, Nobuyoshi Araki and other erotic monographs. I remember marveling, when I was seven or eight, at two Newton books. On the cover of *White Women* was a woman’s bare ass and garters, lying sideways on a sofa; on the cover of *Sleepless Nights*, a woman

with a flapper's bob, huge fake eyelashes and a feather boa framing her pale left breast. The images inside were of women in various states of undress, sometimes in the process of being undressed, touched by faceless males: scenes fraught with sexual tension, sparking with overtones of violence.

My father—chronic cheater, undiagnosed sex addict—had moved years before to China, but he still had these books shipped from Amazon to our house in Jersey. I would bring in the packages upon arriving home from school and would open the shipping boxes with a kitchen knife, always resealing the boxes when I was done looking so my prudish mother wouldn't know. Apart from the steady stream of Helmut Newton editions, I distinctly remember three other volumes. One was dedicated to portraits of the vagina. It was shrink-wrapped so I could not explore its contents, but the synopsis alone excited me. Another was titled something like *The Dinner Party*—I can't recall exactly—and, unable to restrain myself, I removed its packaging and thumbed through the photos of people in Louis XV-era dress engaging in wet-looking orgies.

This imagery was appealing and unshocking to me; since I was six or seven, I had been filling notebooks with my own clumsy X-rated illustrations. There were Crayola approximations of phallic impalement, busty pregnant women getting suctioned into oversized test tubes, and crotches, lots of crotches in various stages of masturbatory distortion. There were misshapen dinosaurs humping lopsided unicorns and images of Zeus in bull form nailing that lady Europa who didn't actually birth the Minotaur, but in my mind she did. I can't say what motivated all this, but I suppose I had always been inclined to push myself to certain extremes: in the number of books I read, and in my sadistic sexual obsessions, before I even understood the mechanics of sex.

It was a compulsion cloaked in the shame my mother had bred in me, and these monographs felt like a serendipitous exoneration of my perplexing perversions. So these volumes became my companions and educators. These contradictory—and undeniably beautiful—images of objectified women, empowered women, violent carnal appetites and unabashed, celebratory sensuality made me feel less like a flawed or deranged person. The monographs told me: celebrate, do not shame, this unfettered enthusiasm for the fetishistic and erotic.

Helmut Newton had made his name as a fashion photographer. He had—how many?—Vogue covers through the 70s and 80s, he revolutionized the fashion photography industry, introduced an elevated standard of artistry and the risqué. I always had the sense that Newton earnestly believed that he was celebrating the women he photographed; perhaps the women felt it, too. In the photos, they are looming, ferocious, aloof: in charge and in touch with their sex. Yet at the same time, they are stripped down to their erotic appeal, “no longer persons but *personae*”

behind Newton's cold, exacting lens (*White Women*). And here the monographs had ended up in the library of my pervy, middle-aged father. You wonder at the (male) demographic who buys Newton monographs: who is in it for the art? Who is in it for the porn?

Eventually I inherited the legacy of this problematic culture, became its participant. The ethical questions in Newton's work came to be reflected in my own life, as I have tried to reconcile my feminist worldview with my permissive, self-objectifying attitudes toward men and sex at large. Newton's work is a contradiction; I am a contradiction. My library today includes *White Women* and *Sleepless Nights* as well as a more recent volume titled *Pola Woman*, which—true to its name—is a compilation of Polaroids taken throughout Newton's career. The monographs contain accompanying texts—some written by Newton, some written about him—as problematic as his work. Newton writes in *White Women*: “There must be a certain look of availability in the women I photograph. I think the woman who gives the appearance of being available is sexually much more exciting than a woman who's completely distant.” In this statement, Newton reduces a woman to a useable prop: in the name of art, in the name of titillation, in the name of images that I find myself inexplicably—and increasingly, reluctantly—drawn to. The other monographs in my collection, from Araki, McGinley and Teller, also straddle this line between erotica-and-something else: whether that be fashion or photojournalism or vernacular photography. All of them feature the nude—or rather, the naked—and a pervading quality of voyeurism.

I know I am complicit in perpetuating a toxically casual attitude toward the exploitation of women; I know also that erotic images' extending horizon of sexual possibility has been invaluable in my gradual acceptance of what felt like born inclinations, which I had otherwise been taught by mother and media to guard with confusion and shame. They helped me accept myself—a self which, put through two decades of male-centric conditioning and media inundation, turned out problematic. In the past few years, as part of my art practice, I introduced into my library the likes of Barthes and Sontag. In a roundabout way, I have found these texts helpful in navigating the context of the imagery that has shaped me. Sontag writes in *On Photography*:

In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images.

Do I have a right to observe Newton's nudes, Araki's nudes, McGinley's nudes, to possess them in my mind? Does my father? Do any of the other multitudes of men who thumb through the

same books in their own homes? Sontag and Barthes speak of the violence of photographs: a photograph as an act of forcible *taking*, as a thing that pervades your sight and lays claim to the subject, a colonization of power.

I collect erotic monographs because I take pleasure in this ownership, this ambiguous power dynamic, even as I recognize it as problematic. I collect erotic monographs because my father did, because they have been essential to my understanding of self. I find them tantalizing, titillating and undeniably disturbing. I see their cruel sexual attitude reflected in my own behaviors. For better or for worse, I owe them an unquantifiable fraction of my development. I owe them an unquantifiable fraction of my self-acceptance. All these images of beautiful people, plain people, frank in their nudity, slightly wild-eyed, high on drugs or lust. I cannot remove my gaze from them. Am I in it for the art or the porn? I still don't know how to answer.

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