

Helmut Newton *Private Property*

MAUDE JOANNA HÜRLIMANN

“I had found out earlier that I did not function well in the studio, that my imagination needed the reality of the outdoors.”

HEMUT NEWTON

Forty-five photographs, three boxes, one portfolio: the selection of images entitled *Private Property* forms an anthology of works by the famous fashion and portrait photographer Helmut Newton. The works brought together under this title were shot between 1972 and 1983 and reflect a sense of style distinctive to the development of fashion photography in the decades to follow. The three boxes contain fifteen photographs each and the *Suites* are numbered I, II, and III. Newton's emphasis in this portfolio lies on his areas of interest during his most productive years, a rich assortment of fashion and portrait photography addressing eroticism, elegance, luxury and—most elementarily—his legendarily fierce and hard-edged women.

Helmut Newton, born in 1920 as Helmut Neustädter, the son of a Jewish factory owner, grew up in the Schöneberg district of Berlin. After an apprenticeship in the studio of the German portrait and fashion photographer Else Simon, also known as Yva, Newton had to leave Germany in 1938 and fled from emerging National Socialism and the extensive powers of the Nazi regime.¹ Newton reached Singapore via China, with little money and only two cameras in his luggage. After a two years' stay, he emigrated to Australia, where he stayed for several years and met his future wife June Browne, professionally known as June Brunell and later—as a photographer—as Alice Springs. Newton recalled: “My years in Australia were wonderful. I met June, we married, but photographically ... it did not form me as a photographer nor did my work there amount to anything.”² In 1961, Newton travelled back to Europe where he worked for British *Vogue*. After another five years in Australia, he moved to Paris and set up his home in the world's capital of fashion. During the 1980s he lived in both Monte Carlo and Los Angeles where he worked for several major magazines such as French, American and German *Vogue*, *Le Jardin des Modes*, *Oui*, and *Stern*.

Newton's style was not to be defined by the theory of aesthetic superstructures that had shaped fashion photography until that time, but by the depiction of a luxurious and real outdoor world filled with beautiful women, sometimes naked, sometimes dressed in fancy pieces of clothing.³ Since starting to work in the field of fashion photography, Newton commented: “I had found out earlier that I did not function well in the studio, that my imagination needed the reality of the outdoors.”⁴ While looking for places to shoot his spreads and editorials, his campaigns and commissions, Newton found inspiration on the Côte d'Azur, in Paris and Monte Carlo, in marble hotel lobbies, up-market office rooms, and even underground garages. The surroundings and habitats which were usually reserved for the rich, famous, and notorious made up the backdrop for his imagery. As a photographic explorer and attentive observer, Newton's “photography was a never-ending and all-embracing process of investigation ...”, a study of *zeitgeist* and high society.⁵

Private Property, as the title implies, deals with something behind closed doors, with a specific insight that only belongs to the voyeuristic photographer behind his lens. As part of the *Suite I*, *Woman into Man*, shot in 1979, features two models dressed in Yves Saint

“To the question: ‘What people do you love to photograph?’ my answer is: ‘Those I love, those I admire and those I hate.’”

HEMUT NEWTON

Laurent and captured in the lobby area of a Parisian hotel. The photograph was later published in the French *Vogue*. Whilst staged in a classic hotel lobby, there is a private atmosphere to the elegant encounter. The role of the female model dressed in a black men’s suit is not obvious upon first glance. With her eyes closed and leaning forward slightly, she provocatively lights her cigarette directly from the glowing tip of a long-haired woman’s cigarette. The spark between them is not only coming from their cigarettes, but sizzles in the tense air between them. Crossing the boundaries of gender, moral concepts, and taboos, playing with fantasies and general conceptions of taste is imperative to Newton’s photographs. Even though the femininely dressed and posing model gives in to the dominant pose of her gallant counterpart, she is still in control, determining and dictating the distance between them through the gesture of her left hand. The empowerment of the female is distinctly identifiable and can also be found in many other images by Newton, as well as this compilation.

The photograph entitled *Tied up Torso*, taken in 1980 and part of *Private Property, Suite II*, shows a heroic, bare-bosomed amazon with a fierce expression and striking pose. The tense muscles of her body together with the long-sleeved leather gloves and tightly wound cord give the impression of a suit of armor. “Nakedness as an expression of strength is possibly the most frequently overlooked quality in Newton’s pictures.”⁶ The expression of strength depicted by Newton predicted future emancipation which is explicit from today’s perspective but only had an air of fetishism, of violence, and brute sexuality forty years ago. Newton always strove to use the same models for his series of nudes as well as for his fashion campaigns. Through that, he stripped the images of their pornographic aspect and gave them an artistic, high-class context.

Emblematic for this idea is *The Naked and Dressed* series which is also a part of and quintessential to the *Private Property* compilation. It was originally published in the French *Vogue*. In the work *Sie Kommen (Naked)* from 1981, four striking women are walking straight towards the photographer’s lens, wearing nothing but their bare skin. The counterpart of this photograph with the title *Sie Kommen (Dressed)* depicts exactly the same composition, only this time the women are dressed in elegant two-piece suits. The dressed version, not actually part of the portfolio, as well as the naked version of the iconic image, are displayed in this year’s exhibition in a rare larger-than-life format and represent the highlight of the exhibited *Private Property* portfolio. “The Naked and the Dressed’ was probably the most difficult series of pictures I ever produced”, Newton remembers.⁷ Adding to these formative and famous fashion images are other nudes showcased in the portfolio, namely *Nude in Seaweed*, shot in 1976 on a beach in Saint Tropez, *Violetta*, captured in 1979, *Jenny in my Apartment* from 1978, as well as *Sylvia in my Studio*, taken in Newton’s Paris studio in 1981.

Self Portrait with Wife and Models from 1981 and part of *Suite II* subsequently opens up a new perspective of the aforementioned nudes and of the artist’s photographic intentions: Newton gave a lot of thought to interiors, backgrounds, and surrounding landscapes, to street scenes, buildings and possible shooting locations. The setting for his infamous *Big Nudes* provides the framework for his self-portrait. Through staging his large-scale nudes in front of white studio walls, thus visually decontextualizing them, the artist drew on the classical tradition of studio fashion photography. Due to the combination of the neutral studio background with the provocative and at that time shocking nudity of his models that replaced fashionable clothing, Newton added a humorous trait to the images. The slightly lowered positioning of the camera that can be seen in his self-portrait enhances the larger-than-life impression and the majestic attitude of his *Big Nudes*. In his self-portrait,

the unwaveringly posing model is shown twice in full nudity, using a mirror. The gracefully positioned and high-heeled legs of a second model enhance the sensual atmosphere. Like a voyeuristic observer wearing a long trench coat, Newton hides behind his camera but is unmasked through his reflection in the mirror. Contrasting the tension between photographer and model, June Newton sits—apparently bored—next to the mirror facing the whole scenery and observes the setup. Her beringed hand cups her chin and her expression seems to be one of tediousness and discontent. The concept of this self-portrait is meticulously planned. Overstepping and playing with prescribed conventions, stereotypical taboos and simultaneously provoking his audience, Helmut Newton was a master of the *peintres de la vie moderne* in the sense of Charles Baudelaire—a master of painting modern life. Newton stated: “The term ‘political correctness’ has always appalled me, reminding me of Orwell’s Thought Police and fascist regimes.”⁸ By choosing to depict the forbidden, the off-limit, and at the same time naming it his private property, Newton revolts against predefined conservatism and *political correctness*.

Complementing the photographs of Newton’s amazons are close-up portraits of some of Newton’s contemporaries. Newton explained: “To the question: ‘What people do you love to photograph?’ my answer is: ‘Those I love, those I admire and those I hate.’”⁹ The portraits of *Karl Lagerfeld*, taken in 1973 and *Charlotte Rampling* from 1967, *David Bowie*, shot in 1982, *Andy Warhol*, from 1976 and *David Hockney* from 1975, all show the blunt features of the captured faces and focus on the gaze of the sitter. The close-up style Newton sometimes chose again reveals the voyeuristic intentions the artist had in mind. The uncommon field of vision allows associations with a film still depicting a very private moment captured by Newton’s observing lens.

Infinite are the situations in which Newton depicts the body, especially the female one: pure, empowered, shackled, luxurious, carefully de- or contextualised, heroic, sexualised, sometimes even pornographic. No other photographer had ever put the female body through such diverse tests, “nor conjured up so many imaginary situations, stories and desires, all of them evoking and expressing life.”¹⁰ Newton’s sexually freed women do not always appear in the role of the stronger sex. In *Saddle I*, shot in 1976, a model is on all fours, dressed in riding boots and trousers and wearing a saddle on her back. Even so, her fierce glance makes the observer think twice about whether approaching her is a wise decision. A similar atmosphere is present in *Hotel Room*, Paris, from 1976. By referring to the Place de la République in the photograph’s title, Newton linked this image to the famous allegorical female figure perched on top of the square’s fountain which embodies the French republic itself. The contrast between the proud female bronze and the chained-up woman in the hotel room could not be greater. What all these images still have in common is the honest message Newton always stayed loyal to: “Fashion is nothing but a wrapping for the power that exudes from bodies.”¹¹ In this sense, *Office Love*

from 1976 or *Woman being filmed*, captured in 1980 and both part of *Suite I*, appear in a new light. The body of the female protagonist is not objectified but celebrated by the artist. The luxurious production of the setting underlines and intensifies this glorification of femininity.

With *Woman examining Man*, added to *Suite III*, Newton created an image of womanhood that would evolve during the following decades. The photo shoot for the American *Vogue* in 1975 created a violent backlash, as Alexander Liberman, editorial director of Conde Nast Publications, remembers. The models, both dressed in Calvin Klein, were captured in a hotel room in Saint Tropez. The image of a woman taking the lead and creating a vibe of erotic possibilities is carried to extremes in this photograph. "Here is a woman looking very suggestively at a man only suggested by the pants and back of torso."¹² Her pose and gaze are ambiguous and overtly suggestive.

The variety of female characters displayed in Helmut Newton's *Private Property* is as diverse as it is ahead of its time. For Newton, photography was a method of charting his ideas and perceptions. After Helmut Newton's death, Pierre Bergé declared: "People often mistook him for a fashion photographer, but he was an artist in the classical sense: only classical artists have the right to describe themselves as truly modern, as they're the only ones who work with modernity and keep it at the appropriate distance."¹³ A distance that was created by Helmut Newton through the lens of his camera.

1 June Newton (Ed.), *Helmut Newton – SUMO*, Taschen, 2009, p. 3

2 Ibid.

3 Helmut Newton, *Helmut Newton – The Stern Years 1937–2000*, Stern Gruner + Jahr AG & Company, 2011, p. 2

4 Newton (see note 1)

5 Philippe Garner, *Helmut Newton – Sex and Landscapes*, Taschen, 2004, p. 4

6 Newton (see note 3)

7 Newton (see note 1), p. 5

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Manfred Heiting (et al.), *Helmut Newton – Work*, Taschen, 2000, p. 14

11 Newton (see note 3)

12 Marshall Blonsky, *Helmut Newton – Private Property*, Schirmer Art Books, 1989, p. 9

13 Florian Kobler, *Helmut Newton – A Gun for Hire*, Taschen, 2005, p. 7



Shoe, Monte Carlo, 1983
Gelatin silver print



Sie Kommen – Dressed and Naked, Paris, 1981
Four gelatin silver prints



< *Violetta*, Paris, 1979
Gelatin silver print

<< *Père Lachaise*, Paris, 1977
Gelatin silver print

<<< *Nastassja Kinski*, Los Angeles, 1983
Gelatin silver print



> *Nude in Seaweed*, Saint Tropez, 1976
Gelatin silver print





< *Office Love*, Paris, 1976
Gelatin silver print

> *Elsa Peretti*, New York, 1975
Gelatin silver print



Suite I



< *Woman into Man*, Paris, 1979
Gelatin silver print

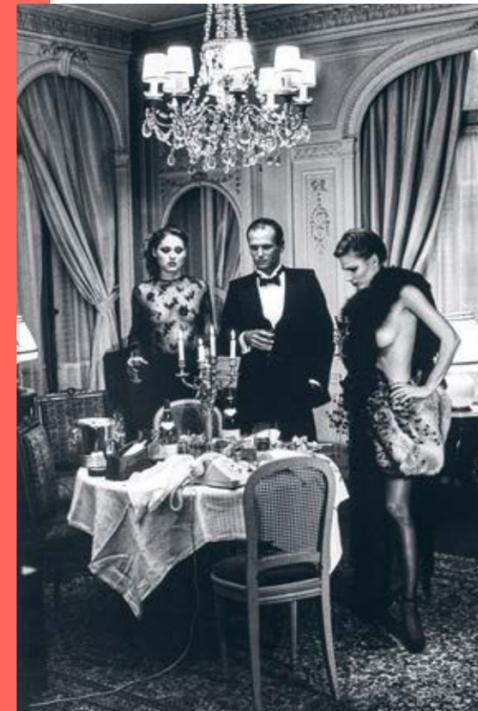
> *Woman being filmed*, Paris, 1980
Gelatin silver print

>> *Winnie at the Negresco*, Nice, 1975
Gelatin silver print

>>> *Jenny Kapitan*, Berlin, 1977
Gelatin silver print

> *Hotel Room*, Paris, 1976
Gelatin silver print

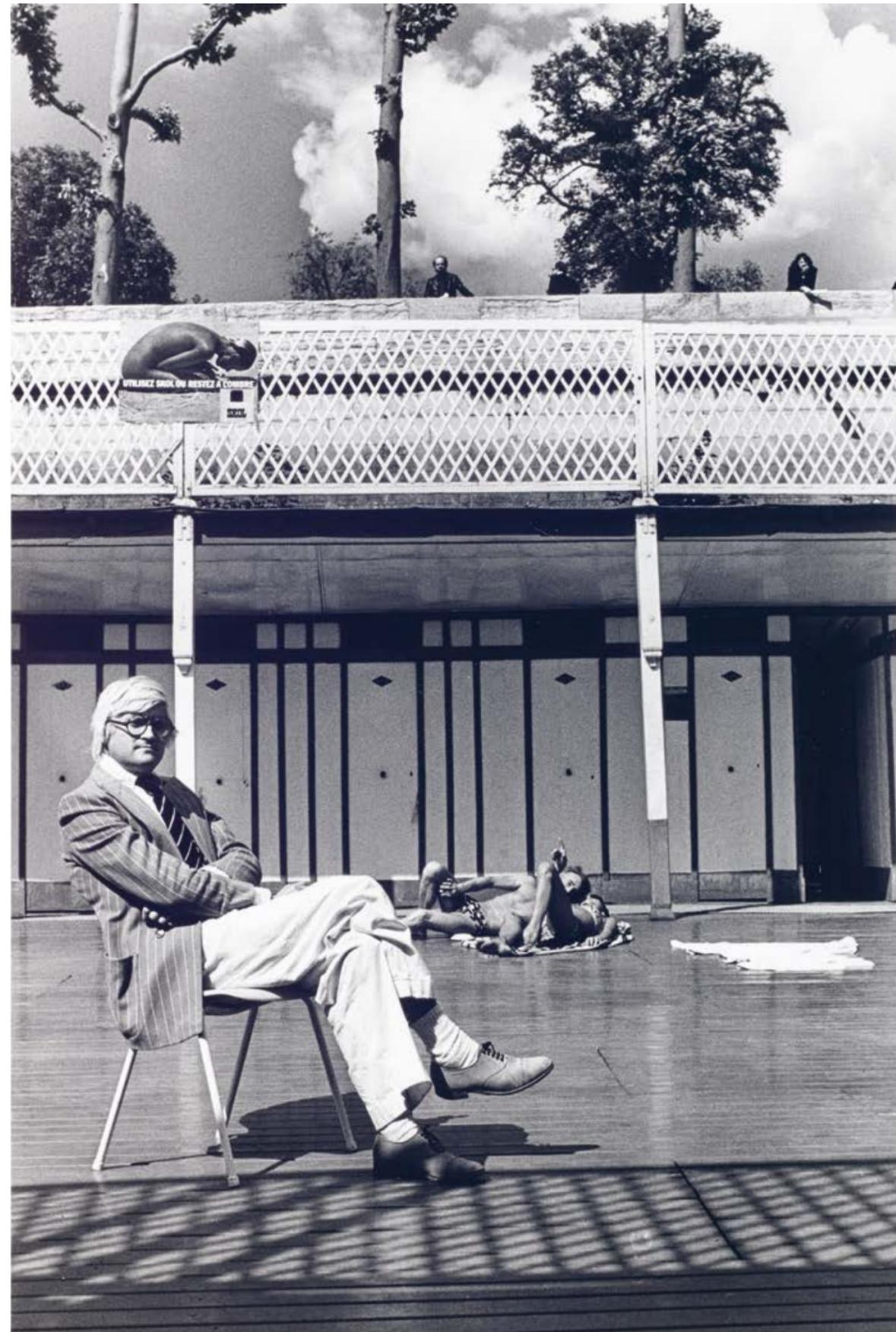
>> *After Dinner*, Paris, 1977
Gelatin silver print

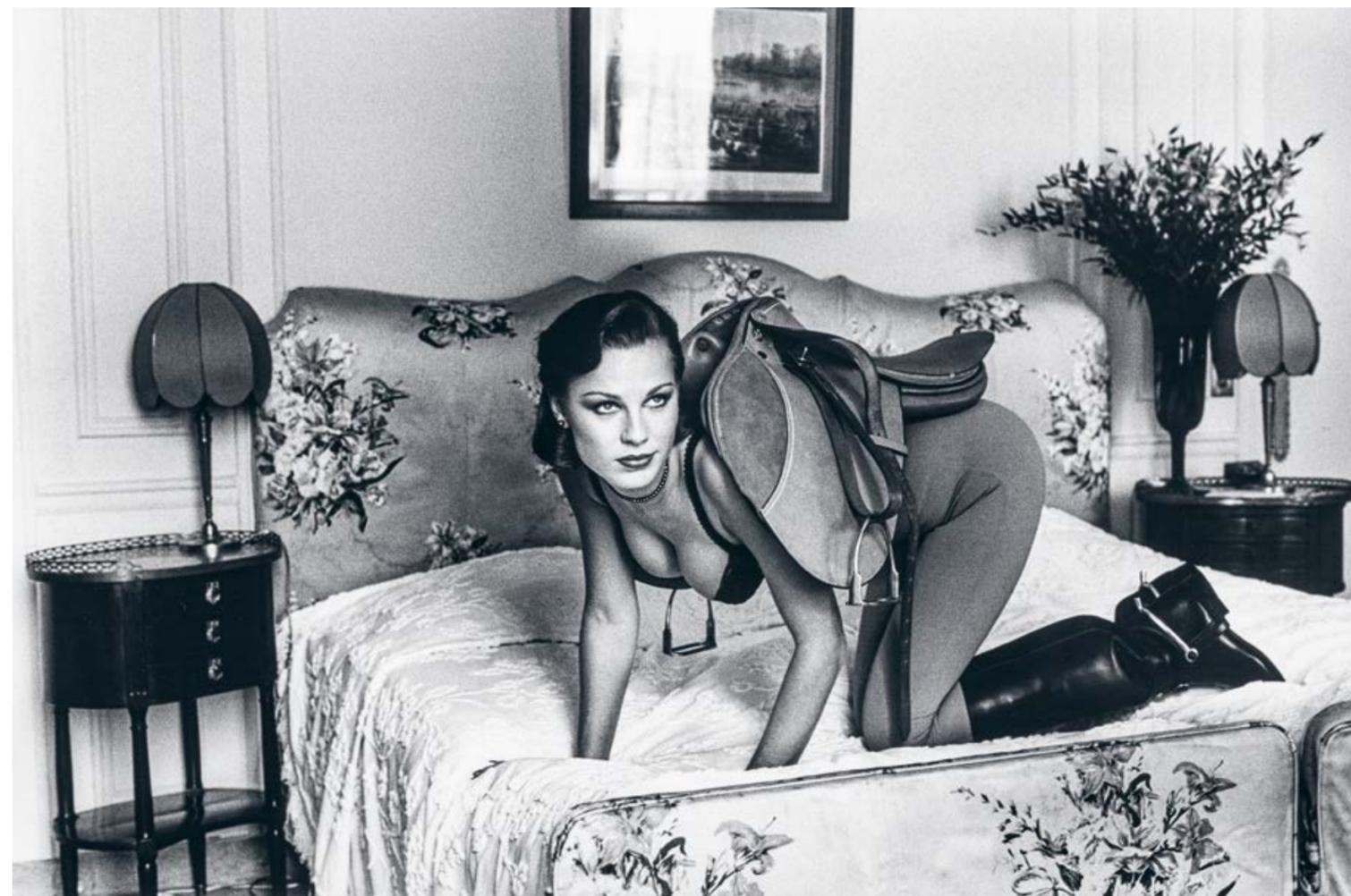




< *Karl Lagerfeld, Paris, 1973*
Gelatin silver print

> *David Hockney, Paris, 1975*
Gelatin silver print





< *Upstairs at Maxim's*, Paris, 1978
Gelatin silver print

> *Saddle I*, Paris, 1976
Gelatin silver print



< *Paloma Picasso, Paris, 1978*
Gelatin silver print



<< *Sigourney Weaver on the Warner Bros. Lot, Burbank, 1983*
Gelatin silver print



^ *Tied up Torso, Ramatuelle, 1980*
Gelatin silver print



> *Viviane F., New York, 1972*
Gelatin silver print

∨ *Rich Girl, Detail, Bordighera, 1982*
Gelatin silver print





< *Diving Tower, Monte Carlo, 1982*
Gelatin silver print

^ *Veruschka, Nice, 1975*
Gelatin silver print

∨ *Fashion Model in Chains, Paris, 1976*
Gelatin silver print





^ *In the Grunewald*, Berlin, 1979
Gelatin silver print

v *Woman with Snake*, Berlin, 1979
Gelatin silver print

> *Self-Portrait with Wife and Models*, Paris, 1981
Gelatin silver print





< *Charlotte Rampling, Saint Tropez, 1967*
Gelatin silver print

> *David Bowie, Monte Carlo, 1982*
Gelatin silver print



< *Sylvia in my Studio*, Paris, 1981
Gelatin silver print

> *Violetta at the Bains-Douches*, Paris, 1979
Gelatin silver print

>> *Jenny in my Apartment*, Paris, 1978
Gelatin silver print



< *Woman and Gardener*, Lake Como, 1979
Gelatin silver print

> *Roselyne behind Fence*, Arcangues, 1975
Gelatin silver print

>> *Woman in Fur Coat adjusting Stocking*, Paris, 1975
Gelatin silver print



< Andy Warhol, Paris, 1976
Gelatin silver print



> Régine at Home, Paris, 1975
Gelatin silver print



- < *Two Pairs of Legs in Black Stockings, Paris, 1979*
Gelatin silver print
- > *Bergstom, Paris, 1976*
Gelatin silver print
- >> *Mannequins reclining, Paris, 1977*
Gelatin silver print
- ✓ *Roselyne in Arcangues, France, 1975*
Gelatin silver print



< Raquel Welch, Beverly Hills, 1981
Gelatin silver print

> Woman examining Man, Saint Tropez, 1975
Gelatin silver print

