

Of Helmut & Henriette

The story of a muse.

By: Billie Proffitt

Of the most iconic images of the twentieth century, Helmut Newton surely lays claim to a number of them. The social renegade, known for his glamorously confusing photographs of the *beau monde* – especially powerful women – altered the progression of pop culture. He brought a stark honesty and the simplicity of the black and white photograph to the grandest world stage and purveyed beauty based in human excess.

The most famous of all these images is titled *BIG NUDE III* and was part of the *BIG NUDES* series shot in his Paris studio between the late 1970s and early 1980s. This iconic image is the sole cover shot for *SUMO*, the acclaimed – and enormous – Taschen book spanning Newton's entire career. It is recognisable to every age, every culture, in just about every nation across the world today. We all know the photographer, but who is the woman?

It was 1978 when the 24-year-old Henriette Allais found herself tightly gripping the French waist of her new husband on the back of his Harley, as they raced southbound on California's infamous Highway 1 beneath the light of a full moon. They had just left Santa Barbara after sealing their nuptials and only had one thing on their minds at that point, which was waiting, (most comfortably & privately anyway,) in their Santa Monica apartment. As she describes the scene to me, I can only imagine a Helmut Newton photograph being setup by numerous studio hands: A young, gorgeous, international couple riding the wild, phallic motorcycle together, only dismounting to make passionate love above an illustrious beach on their wedding night.

By 1979, though, the itch of youth had set in already, their insatiable thirst for adventure took over and they had one-way tickets to Paris. He missed his family, desired to study the culinary arts, and she wanted more freedom and creativity in her budding modelling career. "Being with him set me free," she nostalgically states. "Even as my husband, he never judged me, nor allowed the space to feel guilty for the art I was partaking in. That was a completely new way of life for me." Their parallel aspirations seemed to be kismet, at least for a little while, and they moved in with his family friends outside of Paris in a house built by the remains of a castle named Champagne Sur Oise, boasting full panoramic views of Le Grand Paris. She spent her days driving into the city and wandering door-to-door inquiring for work in the modelling industry, looking for contracts, an agency, photographers and numerous other facets that had the potential to pay her bills. In the late 70s, it was a tough gig to be deemed beautiful enough to be a model. The pay was rock bottom, the hours were long, co-workers tended to be painful more times than not. You may have been drinking a bottle of \$500 Bordeaux in the basement of Maxine's, but you still weren't sure if you could pay your rent, or even if you would afford to eat come tomorrow.

Allais met Newton at a *Vogue* audition that her agency, Karin's, put her up for. Before he'd even finished interviewing possible candidates, Allais has landed not just the job, but also a clear indication of his converging attention. He reached out to her for work on many of his projects, following her as she signed with John Casablanca Elite Agency, and as is clear from the evidence left behind, it's understandable why. The pair's collective charisma beams into the viewer's psyche still today, as we feel the sudden realisation that we, in fact, need to question our own level of power and hold ourselves responsible to bring it into focus. She is both intimidating and inspiring – as many of the best things in life are – and she walks that strained edge of crazy-beautiful like a dancing ballerina on a tight rope, high above a dangerous street.

Newton was an abrasive perfectionist, making him difficult to work with for most. Many models couldn't handle his attention to their natural flaws, his long and exhausting working hours, his caustic demeanour, nor the patience that his obsession with obtaining the "right" feeling and capturing it with the camera required. Most girls walked off the mat mid-shoot, usually in tears; they'd leave the studio, never to have the chance to work with the photographer again. Unbeknownst to them, they also walked away from the memories and closeness that few special models, like Allais, were able to cultivate with him over time. She had what it took to keep his interest, remaining just as picky, creative and driven as he was.

Raised almost entirely by her mother alone, Allais was one of five children born in downtrodden rural Georgia. Her father, a coarse alcoholic when he decided to be around, never made himself available in fatherly ways. This left her mother running the house and rearing the children during her days and sewing to make money for her family at night. Allais accredits the strength and power captured in *BIG NUDE III* to her mother. She learnt from a young age that you just keep going until the job is done. Life takes strength and endurance, because the tasks don't end until you stop waking up.

It was here though, in this quintessential small town outside of Atlanta, that her life took the first of many rather abrupt and unexpected turns. One day, an 18-year-old Allais walked out of the local Laundromat, barefooted with a basket of clothes on her hip, she was suddenly witness to a commotion at the end of the street. As her family could never afford a television or tickets to the cinema, she had no idea what a film set was like, or even the concept of a famous movie star. Intrigued, she soon discovered that this was a scene being shot as part of the 1974 film *Conrack*.

She propped herself up on a nearby brick wall to watch what was happening, when a man appeared, extending his hand and his name – it was John Voigt. After a patient conversation filled with explanations, he invited her back to meet the crew. Three months later, when they wrapped, she moved to Los Angeles with her adored, yet relatively new, cameraman boyfriend. “California has got to be the wildest, freest place I've ever lived to date because you are encouraged at every intersection to be creative,” she says.

While in search of a new exercise class, she happened into Richard Simmons' Beverly

Hills program. There, Simmons suggested Allais meet with a friend of his whom he thought would be a good contact for her and he was right. His comrade turned out to be Marilyn Grabowski, *Playboy*'s long-time photo editor and recruiter, who signed Allais on as Playmate. The life as one of Heffner's girls shot models up the ladder to be treated as if instant celebrities – they lived in the Mansion, had their hair appointments and other activities paid for, enjoyed a driver to negotiate the traffic of Los Angeles, not to mention their first-class travel schedules. “Back then, I believe the Playmates carried a torch for the feminine,” she proposes. “We weren't very accepted, actually frowned upon in church communities. During interviews, I'd have to face feminists who weren't so kind either and explaining what I did to my own mother was hard because her concern laid in what her friends would say.”

Allais appeared a number of times in the pages of *Playboy* and travelled extensively through the US promoting it. But after a while in that clique, was when she felt the European industry was calling. She and her first husband believed that it had the potential to provide the context for stronger art and more freedom, for stronger women.

Allais had one foot in either end of the modelling spectrum. On one hand, *Playboy* would regularly fly her back to the States for expensive tours and events, yet in Europe she worked for little or sometimes nothing a day. In her gratis alliance with Newton, though, she didn't fear disagreeing with him and, in retrospect, found that it produced better work: more passionate, more stimulating and, eventually, more infamous.

Her fearlessness of such an influential and respected man came from her state of mind at the time. "I had nothing to lose," she says in her Southern American drawl. She possessed big insecurities, often felt unworthy to win out over the girls next to her for jobs, but refused to allow that to turn into an ugly or defensive ego. Instead, she says, she reached deeply toward her inner voice, which time and again gave her the strength to continue advancing on a highly competitive journey. “Here I was, with a knowingness inside me, expressing itself.”

Her work and decree ultimately brought her to the position that allowed the two of them the consent to push and eventually break one another's emotional boundaries. The photographs we refer to today are the proverbial reptile skins of her spiritual evolvment in life, and the collaboration that gave birth to them has been instigating more change and growth across the entire world ever since. From an impromptu night shoot on a beach in the South of France to Andy Warhol's studio, the pair discovered parts of themselves and the camera that were the most unrefined, organic and human.

Suffice to say, they resonated with others too. Some of the most expensive Sotheby's auctioned photographs ever sold were from this collaboration, including *BIG NUDES* and *TIED-UP TORSO*. Allais and her husband went to Saint-Tropez for a couple months one summer and while she was there, she met up with Newton to “catch up and have a chat”, she laughs, as if this was one of Newton's common phrases (which actually meant he had a vision and the meet and greet was, no question, going involve work). That particular tête-à-tête quickly turned into a makeshift photo shoot where Allais did her own hair and

makeup while sitting on a picnic bench not far from Newton's summerhouse. They used harsh sunlight until it faded and the only lighting they had after dusk was a single flashlight. It was the rawness of the series that would garner them great respect for their boldness.

Newton's popular friendship with Andy Warhol entered Allais's life in a quirky way one afternoon in Paris while she and Newton were using Warhol's studio. Warhol had been out, but upon returning and being introduced to Allais, he requested a Polaroid be taken of them together – not a surprising solicitation for those who knew the man. She was being photographed on one of his sofas in a trench coat, but stood to greet the host and pose for the photo with him. Right before Newton snapped the boxy instant camera, she dropped her coat exposing her naked body, which sent Warhol into wild and excited laughter. “In Europe, I feel like I had to break walls and force the eyes open there...I do believe I was ahead of my time, and honestly, it was the biggest buzz I have ever felt in my life.” These are the stories that are retold beyond their participants, the ones filled with wild artistic energy that inspire and captivate the upcoming generations. However, they arise from the fringes, which are wrought with the darkness of pain and difficult decisions: high highs and low lows. It takes a lot of courage and stamina to live out there.

And eventually, the stamina would run out. Allais had refused the sex/mistress card for her career too many times and after her husband took a long trip to South America, before they knew it, it had all become too hard. Their lifestyles had grown so different in their years since getting married. She says in retrospect she knows which day it happened, before he left with his friends for his trip. She was in one of the most highly-regarded hair studios having bangs cut for an upcoming campaign when he walked in wearing his tattered old jeans after working long hours in a restaurant kitchen. “He felt out of place, or maybe even unworthy, and I didn’t find the time. You don’t see those things in the moment. It comes much later.” She travelled to Central America and the Caribbean before returning home to America in hopes of recuperating emotionally and finding her inspiration once again. She was instead hit with the harsh reality of poverty, which extended far beyond that of her own childhood. But she did eventually find the cure she needed. During four months in Tobago, she lived with a group of people who “took me in...and never once asked me any questions. They accepted me just as I was – broken – and they healed me.”

Her creativity returned in its typically artistic guise. As the photographer Ken Marcus once said about her: “Henriette is a body artist. What she does with her body in front of a camera is her art.” But it was brief. All the travel, change, makeup and financial instability that had once driven her soon drained the last of her visionary energy. When she met her second husband, it was clear right away that she now desired “a house with a cat, a fence and kids”.

As much of an arc has ranged in Allais’ life, her twenties have always remained the most vivid and tangible for all to see. There has been controversy over Newton's relationship with women, some questioning his respect of the female sex. But Allais' feelings are that he adored women and, in actuality, found their natural flaws to be the most beautiful

things about them – a commendable trait, most women would agree – but a lot of people were intimidated by that, or didn't understand it. She always felt admired and honoured in working with him, no matter the circumstance, apparel or position. Above all, he gave her the opportunities she was so eager for, and her work with him plastered her face and body all over billboards and magazine pages, not to mention lifted her timeless beauty to sheer infamy along the road less travelled and to where these images reverberate today.

The components of *BIG NUDE III* are hard to pinpoint. Most of it was based in the creative camaraderie mentioned above, but the individual aspects were the root cause even before that. When Allais set out from her hometown, she was already in the zone and there was no stopping her. Her friends used to refer to her as a hurricane, as if she could do no wrong in her quest for something more. "The biggest you can possibly be in the physical form is when you find that magic, tuned-in energy inside yourself and in living from there you hit the mark every time," she says.

When asked about the making of the image, she explains that it took hours upon hours to get that photo the way Newton wanted it – numerous film prints, nearly identical, were all hastily discarded. But in the one millisecond that the shutter closed on what would become the picture, she stated this: "Everything that ever happened leading up to the moment he snapped that photo of me happened for that moment, and everything since has been a reminder of it. I wish I could bottle what it was and sell it. It is so hard to explain what it was, or even the feeling of it, regardless of the fact that I was right there in it."