

PORTFOLIO

Mona Kuhn

UNDERSTANDING OF BEAUTY

Abigail Landi

As I walk through the framed photographs shown under the gallery's spot lights and read related articles before our interview, it becomes evident that Mona Kuhn is up for something. With her slender figure and sharp posture, Kuhn strikes a defiant pose as collectors surround and engage her on conversations about her work.

In real life, Kuhn is considerably more fragile and surprisingly humble. Her tall figure seems dwarfed by the newly finished prints she has hanging in her studio ready to be shipped to her next show in Atlanta. In a studio located in a small side street in the Mission District in San Francisco, Kuhn apologizes with a sensual accent as I walk in, "Sorry about the prostitutes out there, I don't mind them, I just don't like running into their pimps. Welcome in, could I make you some tea?"

Born and raised in Brazil, of German descent, Kuhn calls herself jokingly a mutt! She lived her childhood between the beaches of Brazil, the crowded streets of São Paulo, and frequent visits to close relatives in Germany. "Growing up in different countries opened up my mind and horizons, but it also made me a bit melancholic at times."

Since moving to San Francisco, eight years ago, Kuhn has been working non-stop. Mona Kuhn refers to herself as a traditional figurative artist, but her work goes beyond that, it blends elegance with a subtle edge that is puzzling to the mind. "Sometimes I think about the body as a blank canvas, as my first medium, and photography the second." In one way or another, Kuhn has been involved with figurative art most of her life, and at times that devotion to the oldest of subject matter has caused her frustration and the sense that she was out of tune with her times. "I wanted the ultimate challenge, I wanted to work with the nude, because in a way it is one of those 'High Art' canons. You inevitably read a nude in comparison with all the other nudes that have existed before. So my challenge is to add new words to a fairly intransigent language."

In the last three years, Mona Kuhn has been spending some time in Los Angeles, researching and studying art forms related to the figure in the vast stacks of The Getty Research Institute. "Art school is all about what you get out of it. I've learned some from it, but I am learning a lot more from my own studies. It is probably the German in me that gives me the discipline to spend hours and days between book stacks and a desk filled with open pages of research material. It is all too fascinating to me, maybe I am just a nerd," comments Kuhn.

Kuhn's subjects are her close friends, people she has known well over the years.

Heather Snider, director at Scott Nichols Gallery in San Francisco, recognized unique traits in her work early on. "I was going to a lot of the art openings and hanging out with other artists and friends, when Heather asked if I could show her some work. She came to my apartment; I didn't have a living room, so I remember spreading the proof sheets all over the bed. Within a month she included some of the work in my first group show" explained Kuhn.

Since then, her work has drawn the attention of collectors in the US and abroad. Kuhn has had solo shows in San Francisco, Seattle, New Orleans, and New York. She has also exhibited in her hometown São Paulo in Brazil and in Berlin, Germany. Snider explains, "Nobody is doing anything similar to her work right now. Mona Kuhn weaves together gestures taken from traditional iconography with the natural body language of her subjects while creating a visual narrative that is uniquely her own."

In the last six years, she has managed to spend a couple of months a year in France, where she does most of the work. "In my opinion, France is the place to be if you are interested in working with the figure. It is everywhere, in their museums, in public sculptures and monuments, in their fashion and film; it is part of their culture and collective unconscious. People are very comfortable with their bodies and their innate sensuality, so the images reflect this natural understanding of beauty."

Kuhn's subjects are her close friends, people she has known well over the years. "I am reluctant to photograph someone I do not know yet, why would I?" Kuhn explains with a certain dose of displeasure, "there are enough images of naked people out there, my interests go beyond the nude itself." Kuhn points out, "For me to make a meaningful image, I need to know the person first, and in a way, something in them has to feel special to me. I work collaboratively, so the images end up being a product of our friendship and mutual respect." With the closeness—both physically and emotionally—between Kuhn and her subjects, Mona is able to portray surreal and psychologically driven gestures of the human form, resulting in an intriguing work from an evolving artist.

•Mona Kuhn can be reached at mail@monakuhn.com. Her work is represented by the Scott Nichols Gallery, www.scottnicholsgallery.com, and the Yossi Milo Gallery, www.yossimilogallery.com. Her next solo exhibit will be at the Scott Nichols Gallery, opening November 1, 2003.

