

# Mona Kuhn

GALLERY

NAKED, NUDE OR NATURIST? MONA KUHN BLURS THE BOUNDARIES - AND THE FOCUS - IN HER STUNNING GROUP COMPOSITIONS.

TEXT MICHAEL NOLAN

042

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MONA Kuhn is blessed with some extraordinarily beautiful friends. This is especially helpful for someone whose serene photographs of nude people relaxing in idyllic tableaux require working - and living - closely with her subjects, creating an intimacy not possible with models.

When friends, and friends of friends, join the Brazilian-born photographer at the beach bungalow she rents in France each summer, they enter a relationship far removed from the world of models and studios.

"I create a place where people get along with each other, where there's respect, where people are welcome," the 35 year old says from her home in San Francisco. "I cook for everyone at night. We spend long hours together. There is a lot of talking and hanging out, and I spend a lot of time creating an environment where suddenly art and life are together, co-existing."

Needless to say, where art and life co-exist, clothing is optional. Kuhn's images from getaways like these have been collected in her first book, *Photographs*, a series of languid nudes she captured with a minimum of direction. She acknowledges that the idea of holidaying nude with your friends and family is a typically European one, founded in the postwar idea of naturism - of "getting back in nature, recognising the essence and going back to a sort of minimalism".

Kuhn's family hails from Germany, but she has found France to be the perfect location for her work. For the French, she says, ideas of nature, culture and the body are entwined. Even in "their nationalist military statures, they have women with a breast showing," she observes.

"It's a different culture, they're a lot more connected to a broader sense of what the body means to them. I'm not trying to sanctify it. Of course it's sexy, and of course it's sensual, and of course we're interested in

each other and all that stuff, but that little seed of information makes a lot of difference. That's why, for example, I don't find that the work that I do in Brazil is as successful. Because it is so quickly just sensual or just sexy."

It's telling that Kuhn more often cites painters (such as Eric Fischl, Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville) than photographers when discussing her work. Her early background in charcoal drawing led her to black-and-white photography, which shared a simplicity and directness. While *Photographs* includes some of these more carefully constructed individual studies, it is in the colour images that her painterly approach is most evident, with their soft focus backgrounds creating areas of colour with an almost pastel finish. "I do find a lot of my inspiration in painting, maybe simply because the nude in painting has a higher quality of expression than in photographs, or it reaches cultural elements that I find more interesting."

As for the uniform comeliness of her friends, Kuhn speculates that summer simply makes people feel good, and it shows. "Trust me, a lot of my friends are from Germany, and when they are in Berlin in the winter, they look quite different," she laughs. "People that feel good about themselves are more willing to be photographed, so it's one of those things where the medium finds itself with the people. But it never happens that someone comes over and I do not photograph them because they are not gorgeous." ©

Mona Kuhn *Photographs* (Steld) is distributed in Australia by Thames & Hudson, RRP\$85.00.



ABOVE: PHILIPP'S B-DAY 2002