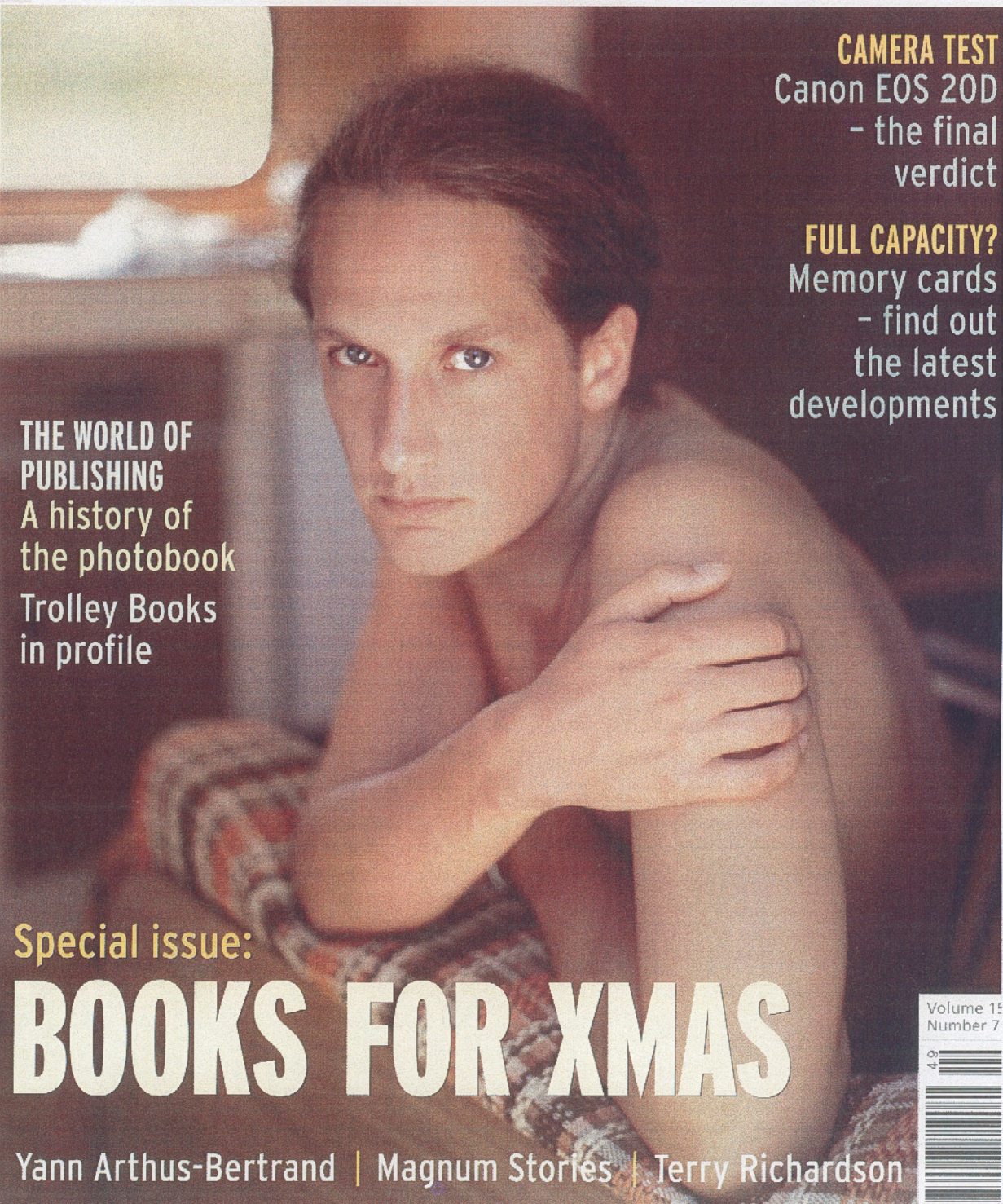


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# Going solo

A monograph of their work is the photographer's ultimate accolade. **Diane Smyth** reviews three books from photographers whose success is already established, but who had yet to publish a major book in English – until now

Mona Kuhn is well-established in her native Germany and her adopted American home, collected by the likes of Elton John and one of an exciting stable of artists at New York's hottest photography gallery, Yossi Milo. It's surprising then that *Portraits* (published by Steidl, priced £30) is her first major monograph.

The book is made up primarily of intimate nude studies, on which Kuhn has focused for most of her professional career, but here shows more recent work taken in the past couple of years.

She quotes Victor Tupitsyn's comment that 'to undress before a camera or an easel is to don the garments of representation', but Kuhn favours the nude precisely because of

what she perceives as its neutrality – its ability to move beyond the ephemera of fashion and style.

This timelessness extends to her images, which show a world more languid and considered than most of our own and in which prelapsarian innocence allows people to gather together simultaneously without clothes and without sexual pretext.

As most of the subjects are known to the photographer, rather than professional models, the world into which we see is a deeply personal environment. At the start of the book, Kuhn writes that her peripetetic childhood made her keen to create an intimate environment in her adult life – a theme that perhaps comes

across in her photographs.

It's a theme that also comes across in her technique, with the shallow depth-of-field maintaining the central figure firmly in the foreground and blurring everyone else out of the close circle. Kuhn favours film, shooting these images with a Hasselblad then printing them herself by hand. She says that the subtle range of mid-tones she wants to achieve cannot be achieved any other way – an approach that, again, hints at a willingness to work slowly rather than impatiently push for quick results.

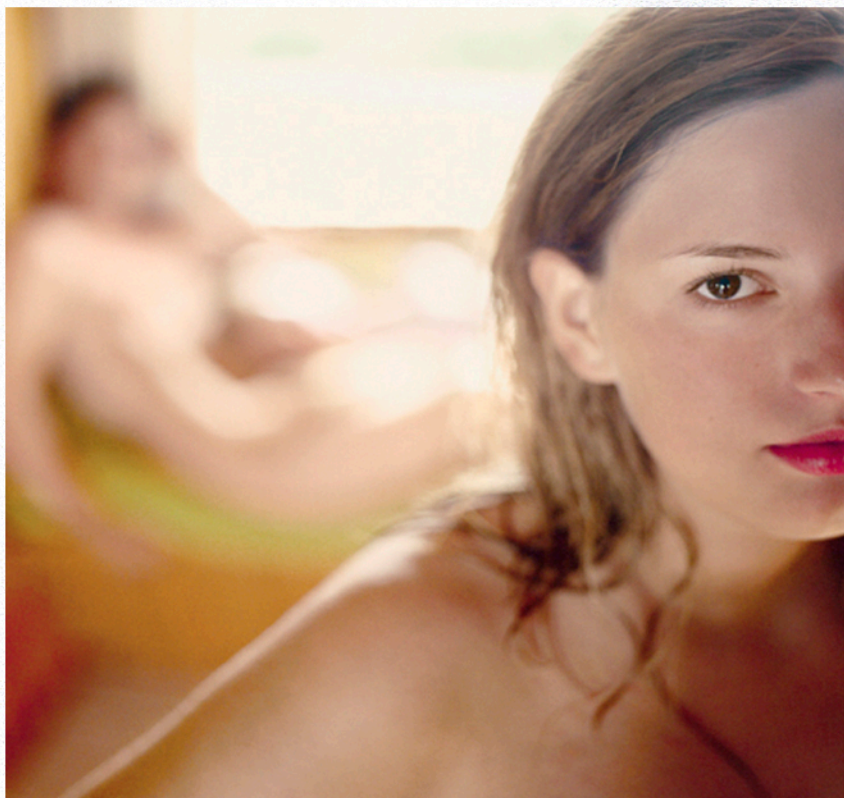
Kuhn mixes both colour and black-and-white photography, and this mix is reflected in the book. She argues that the black-and-white boasts the best mid-tones while the colour

has an immediate attractiveness, and that both therefore have their place.

But though both equally alluring, I found the mixture a little jarring. Interestingly, a quick look at Kuhn's website shows that many of the galleries have exhibited her work separately as either colour or black-and-white shows.

And incidentally, Kuhn's website is [www.monakuhn.com](http://www.monakuhn.com) – and it may be useful to take a look if you want to find out more about her work because other than the short quotes mentioned, this book does not include any text.

'I wanted the images to speak for themselves,' she told me on a recent visit to the UK, 'and I wanted people to be able to interpret them for themselves.'



Above: Mona Kuhn creates an intimate world in her book of portraits.

'Kuhn favours the nude precisely because of what she perceives as its neutrality – its ability to move beyond the ephemera of fashion and style.'