

EMERGING GALLERY 38

Mona Kuhn



Gallery 38

**Mona Kuhn,** recognized as one

62-73

of the important new voices in contemporary photography, her recent works are sensual, vigorously rendered nudes combining elements of traditionalism with an edgy contemporaneity.

**Mona Kuhn has steadily developed an international following over the past eight years of her nascent career. With the recent release of her first monograph *Mona Kuhn* (Steidl, 2004) and a string of exhibitions in both Europe and the United States, she is well on her way to becoming recognised as one of the important new voices in contemporary photography. Since Kuhn's first solo exhibition in 1998 at the Scott Nichols Gallery in San Francisco, her work has grown methodically in breadth and ambition. She has consistently pushed her vision to new levels, producing an ever strengthening body of work and continuing to exhibit regularly at a host of international galleries including Yossi Milo Gallery (New York), sm.ART/Galerie Charles Schumann (Munich), Camerawork AG (Hamburg), Photo-Eye (Santa Fe), and G Gibson (Seattle).**

Most of Mona Kuhn's recent works are large-scale, colour photographs taken of friends as they lounge and pose in tastefully sparse, anonymous environments. Her sensual, vigorously rendered nudes combine elements of traditionalism with an edgy contemporaneity. The uncomplicated appeal of Kuhn's pictorial world is inviting yet teasingly chimerical. Her work bears comparison to the dream-like imagery of English photographer Sam Taylor-Wood, whose mid-1990s work depicted a posh world of interiors populated with nude figures indulging in unlikely orgies of sexual pleasure and gratuitous beauty. Kuhn's photographs are similarly dreamy without being scandalous; her narratives are not fictionalised but rather present a fantasy derived from real life.

Whether these beautiful people, so naturally comfortable in themselves, depict an idealised fantasy or are simply at home within a culture of the body, depends entirely on the viewer and the social context in which the photographs are seen. The corporeality and openness are a step too risqué for the average American viewer while those same qualities might arouse no more than Houellebecqian apathy from certain Europeans. This bridging of American and European social idioms is no surprise given Kuhn's background, which swimmingly incorporates a triangular foundation connecting distant points from Europe to South America to the United States. Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil to German parents, Kuhn has lived for the last ten years in California but takes most of her photographs in Europe. She brings qualities from each of these cultures to her work. The fluid sensuality of Brazil, the formal precision of Europe, and the san-

guine sincerity of California's photographic tradition all come together in Kuhn's aesthetic romanticism.

Kuhn began exhibiting based on the strength of her black-and-white figurative work. While she has not entirely abandoned the black-and-white medium, Kuhn has spent the past three years expanding her voice into colour photography and developing the series of which a selection is presented here. With the introduction of bright cinematic colour, Kuhn is able to evoke a tangible realism that was tempered by the black-and-white classicism of her earlier work. Her eye for highly focused selections of the nude form now gives way to the flesh and individualism of real-life subjects. Kuhn steps closer to the quotidian while simultaneously stepping back to allow more information into her picture frame. Her figures interact with one another and within a select environment of purposeful colour, texture, and form. Meticulously rendered personal gestures – always a central part of Kuhn's work – spell out the dynamics of relationships between the figures. Subtle references to time and place make playful suggestions while avoiding specific explication.

The formal appeal and graceful nudity in Mona Kuhn's photographs are an enticing veneer but not the core of what her images are really about. While on the simplest level, they appear to be a glorified tribute to the physical, they slyly communicate through an intuitive symbolism about far more elusive human qualities. Kuhn uses beauty to lure the viewer into an engagement with her work and then slips out of the room leaving us on our own to interpret an undefined narrative of emotions. She asks us to confront and decipher a range of glances, gestures, and alliances taken from real life and literally stripped down to their essence. What initially seems to be about the purely physical is in the end the embodiment of relationships and emotional communication. The viewer is a voyeur in Kuhn's investigation of how people interact with one another and use their physical selves in social contexts. People watch each other and pose for each other; they emulate and subconsciously echo one another in mood and movement, playing out a complex mix of emotions and needs that are the infrastructure of friendships and interpersonal relationships.

Kuhn appears to inhabit a world similar in many ways to that of painter Elizabeth Peyton, whose work Kuhn has said she admires. There is an autobiographical subtext to both artists' work and like Peyton, Kuhn depicts the sinewy, androgynous people who are in

her close social or emotional sphere with a vision that is both personal and slightly larger than life. Though Kuhn never appears directly in her photographs, her subjects are friends and they mirror her emotions, relationships, and betray her social demographic. Kuhn creates a distinct mood with genuine warmth of spirit that unifies her work and gently reveals a layer of humanity that normally remains hidden not only under one's clothes, but also within people's social patterns and busy lives.

In making the transition to colour, Kuhn has entered into a broader dialogue with a contemporary art world now awash in colour photography. Kuhn's immediate challenge will be to declare her place and the relevancy of her Western-centric vision within an expanding pool of international artists and a predilection of the art glitterati that is heavily skewed towards conceptualism and post-modernism. Perhaps Kuhn's lack of self-conscious irony or precise social commentary will itself become scandalous in such a milieu, but more likely, her work will continue to mature outside of the pop trends within her generation as she develops her artistic identity slowly and takes her time to respect the formal challenges leading to a deeper, more influential oeuvre.

TEXT BY: HEATHER SNIDER

© All Pictures: Mona Kuhn, 2004  
[www.monakuhn.com](http://www.monakuhn.com)

Courtesy: Sm.ART/ Sibylle Mueller  
[www.smartcurating.com](http://www.smartcurating.com)  
[mail@smartcurating.com](mailto:mail@smartcurating.com)

Exhibition: G. Gibson gallery  
514 East Pike street, Seattle, Washington, 98122  
[www.ggibsongallery.com](http://www.ggibsongallery.com)

Publication: "Mona Kuhn Photographs"  
published by Steidl  
ISBN 386-521-0082  
Düstere Strasse 4 D-37073 Göttingen  
t +49 551-496060  
[www.steidl.de](http://www.steidl.de)

Book signing: Sm.Art hosted by Munich  
Photogalleryf5,6  
[www.f5komma6.de](http://www.f5komma6.de)

Book design: Steidl Design