

Bert Stern & Marilyn Monroe: "The Last Sitting"



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After obtaining the Marilyn Monroe biography by Norman Mailer, in 1982 I spotted the paperback "Bert Stern - The Last Sitting" in a bookstore in Stuttgart (the German title being "Marilyn's Last Sitting" by Bert Stern). I bought the paperback and took it back home. When I started reading it, I was fascinated. Not only that the book is surprisingly well-written, it also tells the story of a renowned photographer meeting the sexiest woman in the world.

When the sitting described in the book took place, Bert Stern was already an established photographer. He describes how he took a - now famous - photograph for Smirnoff vodka ("Driest of the Dry") in 1955 that was shot in Egypt, showing the Giza pyramid twice: once in the background, and then - upside down - inside the glass.

In 1962, Bert Stern went to Rome to work as a photographer for 20th Century Fox & to shoot actress, Elisabeth Taylor as Cleopatra. It was during this trip that the idea of taking pictures of Marilyn Monroe for Vogue was taking shape. Had Vogue published any photographs of Marilyn's previously? Where they

interested at all? And: Would Marilyn agree? So Bert Stern called his assistant in New York & got a positive response: Vogue was interested, and Marilyn was interested as well. Only Marilyn had one condition: That the shoot would take place in L. A.

Now, the question of an appropriate studio arose, and Bert Stern decided to use a suite inside the Bel-Air Hotel in Los Angeles, not knowing that this was one of Marilyn's favorite spots in L. A. He booked the suite & ordered, upon a request from Marilyn's secretary, a case of 1953 Dom Perignon champagne.

After Bert Stern and his staff had waited for five hours, Marilyn finally arrived. Not being sure how much time Marilyn would have, Bert Stern was delighted when she responded: "As much time as we want."

Thus began what was to encompass two sessions, all taking place at the Bel-Air. At Bert Stern's suggestion, Marilyn agreed to use only very little make-up. In addition, Stern had brought for this first session semi-transparent, colored scarfs with him. When Marilyn spotted them on the bed, she asked: "Do you want to take nude pictures?" Bert Stern affirmed. They asked George Masters, the hair stylist, and his response was: "Oh ... a divine idea!" Bert Stern had brought his stereo with him, and now, accompanied by the sound of the the Everly Brothers, he and Mariyln went to work. One of the problems was to light the scarfs properly, so Stern first took several polaroids to make sure he got the lighting right.

Now, what was it like to work with Marilyn? Bert Stern describes Marilyn as being "... real, like a child. Real in her sexuality, and real in her reservation." And: "We didn't fall in love, we were taking pictures." Marilyn was laughing, Bert Stern was smiling, the music was playing. Marilyn got going. When this first session was over, Bert Stern took the photographs, mostly color photographs & a few black & white films, to Alex Lieberman of Vogue. "Wonderful", Lieberman said, "fabulous". But, after Bert Stern had left and came back home, he got a phone call from Vogue. Lieberman was on the line, and he wanted more. This time, it was supposed to be black & white shots only. That meant fashion pages. No nudes anymore.

After Marilyn had agreed on a second session that should last three days, this time Bert Stern booked an entire bungalow at the Bel-Air and, in addition to Dom Perignon, he ordered a box of Château Lafite Rothschildt, a very expensive red wine. Vogue had supplied various - and mostly black - dresses, an expensive chincilla fur coat, and - for some reason - a black wig. The black hat was - according to Babs, the Vogue editor in charge - not fancy. Since daylight was not available in this impromptu studio, Bert Stern had to use flashlights, which he regretted somewhat.

The photographs of this second session were, as a look at "The Complete Last Sitting" shows, mostly shot on black & white film. Bert Stern shot Marilyn, wearing the - mostly black - dresses that Vogue provided for this session. He wrote: "Her magic was transferred to everything that she wore." And, while

Vogue wanted Marilyn dressed, Stern's goal was apparently to undress her. One thing he had in mind was something similar to Edward Steichen's portrait of Greta Garbo, a classic black & white shot.

But after hours of work, Marilyn got tired of all those black dresses. They took a break when Marilyn discovered a lace valance. Bert Stern had mixed feeling about it, but Marilyn was determined to wear it. Then Bert Stern spotted a couch in the corner of the room, and after dragging it into the middle of the room where the lighting was better and shot a series of pictures with Marilyn wearing only the white duvet. There was this very intimate moment when Bert Stern had the desire to touch Marilyn, but he didn't. What would have happened then? We will never know.

When the sitting was finally over, Bert Stern took a collection of the photographs personally to Vogue, and Alex Lieberman agreed that they were all very beautiful. Then, Bert Stern mailed part of the contact sheets & slides to Marilyn for approval, but when he got the photos back, he realized that Marilyn had marked the photos she didn't like with a transparent orange felt pen. In addition, she had crossed out the slides she didn't like with a hairpin. At first, Stern was very angry. He would have discussed the pictures in question with her.

When Vogue had finished the layouts, Bert Stern was confronted with the fact that they had only used the black & white photos and none of the nudes. Vogue wanted to publish eight fashion pages. Bert Stern agreed to have the pages published. What neither of them knew was the fact that Marilyn had only less than two more weeks to live.

When the pages were finally being printed and the news got out that Marilyn had committed suicide, Vogue stopped the printing machines and held a meeting. There was a discussion if the black & white fashion pages were still appropriate, but in the end the series was published as intended.

Addendum: During this sitting, a total of 2571 photographs were shot & finally published in full in "Bert Stern: The Complete Last Sitting".

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