

Finding Artist Purity in the Great American City of Dreams: Las Vegas

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Every autumn around this time I start spending too much time in the art section of my favorite bookstores, turning the luxurious pages of the season's latest photography books. There are way more to look at than there used to be, which isn't necessarily a good thing. Two decades ago, an art book might mark the career highlight of a major photographer, and some volumes -- Robert Frank's *The Americans*; Henri Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment*; *Paris de Nuit* by Brassai; *Sumo* by Helmut Newton -- have proven to be turning points in photography and become collectors' items.

These days, with fewer magazines around to showcase photography, books have become the art's primary print medium. Tangible objects smelling of ink on paper, books provide a sense of permanence and tradition in today's multimedia visual culture. Unfortunately, along with many finely produced and conceptually brilliant new books there has also been lots of paper wasted on volumes of poor quality featuring work by artists of questionable significance.

That's what makes a book like *Strip Search*, from the photographer Albert Watson, so intriguing. One of the leading fashion and commercial photographers in the world, Watson



has already published a number of big, elaborately made art books that have sold out their print runs. I expect that *Strip Search*, a

two-volume boxed set, will do the same. It's easily my favorite art book of the season.

For one thing, the subject is that shining spectacle of American cities, Las Vegas. As a visual symbol, Vegas attracts image-makers the way hold-em poker games attract guys wearing sunglasses and cowboy hats.

The city became a kind a laboratory for Watson, a master of many photographic

styles. You've seen his highly graphic work on *Rolling Stone* magazine covers, in advertising campaigns for Levis, and movie posters (*Kill Bill*, for instance). In Vegas he used his entire repertoire of camera formats and styles, shooting portraiture, landscape, sports, fashion, photo-reportage, panoramics, and still life.

Which was the point. At first, Watson told me recently, he headed to Nevada because he was looking for "somewhere interesting to shoot," where he could "find things that were strange or surprising." Vegas certainly would seem to be the place for that.

But he quickly found a problem--not with the city, but with his pictures. "After my first week of shooting, I went home and showed my pictures to my oldest son, and he said, 'They're great, they're very strong, but they look like *National Geographic*.'"

Not there there's anything wrong with that. It just wasn't strange, or surprising. *National Geographic* pictures tell stories, but that wasn't where Watson wanted to go with this work. As he put it to me, "I didn't want to do something that said, 'If you've never been to Vegas, I'm going to take you there.'" Perhaps a city in which reality is put on hold for the purposes of pleasure and profit simply resisted visual story telling. "It forced me into an almost pure photographic way of seeing," he said. "The book is not about a place; it's about me in a place. It's an experience."

That experience included male strippers, title fights, abandoned cars, showgirls, casts of Liberace's hands, palm trees, tattoos, and Goth tourists. There's a lush color shot of the Caesar and Cleopatra Room at the Oasis motel, and an entire sequence of black-and-white images, printed on pulp paper, focusing on Sandra Murphy, the woman accused of killing casino boss Ted Binion.

The star of the book, however, is a charismatic dominatrix named Breanna, who Watson described as one of the most natural models he'd ever worked with -- one of those rare

people with an "innate sense of light and body geography." He shot her over three 14-hour days, and the images appear throughout the two volumes. She becomes an emblem of the fantasy and desire that are the fabric of Las Vegas, the city where you can be whoever you want to be, because whoever you are there, and whatever you do there, stays there.



Or so we here.

Fantasy and desire are also part of the fabric of photography, of course -- certainly they are powerful aspects of many pictures Watson has produced over the years. Maybe that helps explain why he was drawn to Vegas, and why he saw the city as pure image rather than story.

In Las Vegas, and in Watson's book, it's the image that is real. The skyline of New York rising from the desert, the gondolas floating in the Venetian hotel, those may be fake, but the city is not, at least to Watson.

"On the contrary," he told me, "Las Vegas delivers exactly what it says it's going to deliver." Somewhere between the "God" sign off Route 15 and Connie Stevens's Christmas tree on the 11th floor of the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino, Albert Watson found a city of substance