

Snapshots from the life of an 'artist'

Arnold Newman captures the rich, famous and bizarre

By Hunter Drohojowska

Arnold Newman has photographed John F. Kennedy, Alfred Krupp, Ayn Rand and Igor Stravinsky. He is considered one of the foremost portrait photographers in the world, sought after for his piercingly perceptive studies of the rich, the famous, the charitable and the Machiavellian. But he is best loved for his portraits of artists.

The first retrospective of Newman's portraits has been organized by the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego. About 160 prints, mostly in black and white, show the range of Newman's work, from his picture of surrealist artist Max Ernst in Peggy Guggenheim's apartment in 1942 to portraits of L.A. artists Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis and Dan McCleary featured in last month's Town and Country.

Jackson Pollock, photographed in 1949, stands before a table filled with pots of paint and brushes. On a shelf behind him rests a human skull. The haunting image seems to foretell the artist's death in 1956, but Newman photographed what he found — he didn't add the drama to the picture. "I would not fake it. The question is, 'What is honest?' A lot of great pictures are composed by putting things together because they belong together. In the long run, you have to be judged as honest or dishonest."

Newman, 68, walks around the exhibition with a visitor and seems slightly lost in reminiscence. His reputation is based on creating the psychological portrait, of using a person's environment to symbolically complete the picture. "I pick people I want to experiment with," he says. "I have ideas for something I want to do and these people fit the concept."

Along the way, he established a rapport with many of these personalities: Carl Sandberg and Marcel Duchamp, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Marilyn Monroe.

Portly and bearded, wearing thick glasses, Newman has a congenial, even humble manner. His face is as much a study in character as any of the artists he has photographed. He would have been a painter if the Depression hadn't interfered with his education at the University of Miami. Instead, in 1938, Newman went to work in a chain of commercial photography studios in Philadelphia. There, at the School of Industrial Arts, he met Alexey Brodovitch, art director of Harper's Bazaar, and many art students with whom he became friends. At work, Newman was photographing 70 subjects a day for \$16 a week, but he was so taken with the medium that he took pictures in his spare time, working in the darkrooms after everyone else had gone home.

His first efforts were copies of other photographic styles, such as abstraction, or that of Walker Evans and others working for Roy Stryker's Farm Security Administration. In 1939, Newman accepted a more lucrative job managing a photo studio in West Palm Beach, Fla. By 1941 he moved to New York City, where he was born. There he was encouraged in his photography by Alfred Stieglitz and Beaumont Newhall, then curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. Newhall and Ansel Adams bought a picture for the MOMA collection from Newman's first exhibition (with photographer Ben Rose) at the A-D Gallery. He began to attract attention for his portraits of people in their natural surroundings, what came to be called environmental portraits. Also in 1941, he photographed his first artist, Raphael



Arnold Newman sees what life is like from the other end of camera in self-portrait.

Soyer.

During the war years he returned to Florida and ran a successful photography studio, but repeatedly made trips to New York to photograph artists. In 1945 these pictures were included in a show called "Artists Look Like This" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The show was purchased by the museum and reviewed in Life and the New York Times. In triumph, Newman moved back to New York in 1946 and lives there still with his wife, Augusta. His first major clients were Brodovitch at Harper's Bazaar and Life.

Newman points to a portrait of Eugene O'Neill, staring darkly from the surroundings of a library. "This was my first assignment for Life in 1946," he says. "I wanted to capture the black moods of the Irishman. He was doing 'The Iceman Cometh'

at the time. I was in awe. He was very warm. I thought he was just being polite until I read his biography. Then I realized how rarely he did this and that he really had liked me."

The same year, Newman did one of his most-celebrated portraits, the highly stylized image of Stravinsky, nearly overwhelmed by the soaring top of a grand piano. It was also his most-celebrated rejection, from his friend Brodovitch who feared it was too radical.

Newman walks over to a photograph of J. Robert Oppenheimer, seated at a desk with papers covered in neat drawings and numbers. "That was an assignment for Fortune. Oppenheimer told me he worked with pencil and paper. You can see by the composition that I was instinctively drawing on old Japanese prints there.

"It's so exciting to have known



Newman photographed Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, who helped his career.

so many people over a long period of time. I photographed Jack Kennedy for the first time as a junior senator from Massachusetts known primarily as a playboy. Picasso, Stravinsky, I photographed many times. Not because they were celebrities, but because they were interesting people. I photographed many of the painters before they were well-known. I'm interested in what they do with their lives and how they affect others. That's more important than celebrity."

Newman has also taken classic shots of some very difficult subjects. "I've said no to presidents of the United States, explaining that standing a certain location would be a waste of their time as well as mine. If you are uncertain, they'll eat you alive."

Newman says his least favorite assignments are photographing actors, actresses and fashion models.

"I hate that artificial world," he says. "When I photographed Marilyn, I waited until a candid moment. I didn't want her to pose."

The man whose photographs have been published in a book titled "Artists" refuses to call himself by such a label. "I consider myself as much of a journalist and a professional as an artiste. (sic) I'm proud to have done stuff on assignment that other people think is art. I make statements about how I feel about a person. If I were a writer I'd put it in words. I got into photographing artists because they were my friends. It never occurred to me that I should worry about whether it was art. I think art photography is a pompous phrase. I believe in doing the best, most exciting, creative job I can do."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.