

Working with preeminent photography publisher, Gerhard Steidl, on her newly released *Bordeaux Series*, Kuhn said, “The thing is, I only have really wonderful things to say about Gerhard. He is indeed a genius of publishing.”

Mona Kuhn, born in São Paulo, Brazil of German descent, now living in Los Angeles, spends her summers in the beautiful countryside near Bordeaux, France. In a house nestled in the pine forest, lit only by oil lamps and candles, she’s been photographing friends, family and friends of friends, nude in a small room for the past three years to create her latest work. As a figurative artist, it’s said the people in Mona Kuhn’s photographs are nude, but not naked. About Kuhn’s work, Elisabetta Piatti wrote, ‘What distinguishes her photographs is the skilful mix of beauty, elegance and naturalness, the effect of the confluence of her own personal inclination, cultural bias and artistic vocation.’ Kuhn’s photographs are in the photography Collections of Sir Elton John, Paul Allen, Nicolaus von Oesterreich, Allen Thomas Jr., Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among many others.

Steidl has published four Kuhn monographs, *Photographs* (Steidl, 2004); *Evidence* (Steidl, 2007), photographed entirely in a nudist community in France; *Native* (Steidl, 2010), images taken in her native Brazil; and the most recent, *Bordeaux Series* (Steidl, 2011). I spoke with Mona about the making of this new series and her personal experiences working with the preeminent photography publisher, Gerhard Steidl.

Elizabeth Avedon: How did you begin working on your new portraits for the Bordeaux series?

Mona Kuhn: The portrait was not the first thing that came to my mind; what first came to my mind was the palette, a colorization. After all the labs closed, and not finding anyone to print my black and whites any more, to suddenly having the possibility of doing that again, I was very excited to shoot black and white again, which I was missing. I found some labs that were able to print large fiber prints once again. I thought since I’ve done so much color in the past, there must be something else. I will use only one color. So I thought for some time what is the one color that represents color to me and what does that color say. I chose this Bordeaux color. I thought it’s about sexuality and passion; and it’s antique, so it could be timeless. It’s a color that I thought would fit in with a certain circle of life.

With this idea of keeping the palette very classic black and white and red, I thought the portraits also needed to be kept very simple. Traditional portraiture was a little scary to do because suddenly I’m competing with all the portraiture done before. I said if that’s the route that it’s taking me, then let’s reduce it in one place and see how far I can take it. So I did the same work for three summers and I started feeling very good about it the second summer. I thought there were some interesting things happening.

This series is really about the richness of the people in them. I photographed all of the portraits in the same room and the light that would fall in the room was between 5 and 7 pm. I always had people come over, either staying with me or stopping by to visit. I would ask them to please come over around 4:00 or 4:30. We would hang out a little bit, then I would just tell them to go into the room and make themselves comfortable, so they would find their own body language. I wouldn’t tell them how to sit or pose, but I might ask them to move an arm or leg in a way that makes more sense to the composition. I reduced everything. The room had just that one chair. I shot two or three rolls of film of each person, carefully shooting slow and going one at a time. Some people I just photographed once, some people I photographed during the course of two or three summers.

EA: How did you meet the people who posed for you?

MK: It's all real people, so it feels more authentic. It starts basically by word of mouth by immediate friends. It keeps a certain intimacy, a certain control of who is coming. If it's someone's boyfriend, best friend or cousin or maybe someone's aunt, it's that feeling of it's a friend of a friend – we know each other. It adds the ambiance of an extended family, which to me was very important.

EA: Tell me about the lighting you've chosen for these portraits.

MK: It's all natural light. There was a double door to the room that opens up. I was in the middle of the double door, so it's all open shadow with just natural light.

In Europe, late summer days have light until ten at night anyway, but afterward we turn on the oil lamps or some candles here and there and it's enough light. We don't need so much more. I don't notice anymore, but friends of mine ask, "Isn't it really dark? Are you like Galileo?" Over the years I've collected a few oil lamps at the little estates around the area. Some are really really old and gorgeous, some are from friends in Amsterdam, rural French oil lamps, and maybe Dutch with copper bottoms and fragile glass tops.

I've used them before in the *Evidence* work. Towards the very end of the book there are a few images that are shot in the dark that have maybe a rim of light on the side of the person and that comes from an oil lamp. If I put two of them in the living room, by the time you turn on the third one, it's too much. If you don't have electricity to compare it with, it's more than enough, one or two.

EA: How did the idea of including landscapes fit into this series?

MK: They are landscapes I took of the region in-between the portraits, to inform a little bit about the area. When I had the beautiful light, I was photographing my friends. When it was raining, and there are a lot of summer thunderstorms that go through there, I would go out and photograph the thunderstorms. A couple of them are dramatic thunderstorms images and large clouds and high contrast, and some are of pathways that create this idea where this room is where all the people have gathered. So you have a little bit of a maze like feeling with the landscapes that lead somewhere, but you don't know where.

It started with a group of friends in France that go truffle hunting. I went two or three times and realized that I would love to photograph this path, kind of bringing them to my work. It's not that I want truffle hunting in my work, but I transferred that into the idea of almost a tale, a little like Hansel and Gretel. You're going somewhere, there's this house in the photograph, but no one knows where you are going. In a more philosophical way, I was looking at those pathways also as the passages of entering and leaving life. Not that's what you see in the images, just what was in the back of my mind.

To celebrate black and white, I made prints that are 38" x 72," very large black and white silver gelatin prints on fiber paper, for the show at the Flowers Gallery in London. They are like the most traditional black and whites you can possibly have. They are perfect. I am so excited about those black and whites. You know when you have the moment like "Whose are these?" They are more than me. I'm very proud of them. Then the color portraits are 15" x 15," very small and intimate.

EA: Tell me about your experience working on the book of these images with the legendary publisher, Gerhard Steidl.

MK: The thing is, I only have really wonderful things to say about Gerhard. He's a very fascinating person. Between us, I learn more and more every time I go back. I am more and more in awe of him. He is indeed a genius of publishing. He's incredible. In terms of the relationship with the artists, he really has a respect for the artist. He will say if things need to be changed, but at the core of his relationship to the artist is a respect for authentic voice. I think that is what makes him – I don't know if catalyst is the right word – but he is just letting the voice of the artist come through.

He doesn't have a lot of time for each person, but the time that he does allocate to each artist, is extremely productive and focused. He knows everything about the project, so the ten minutes that you have with him is basically worth a month of work. It's very concentrated. And he is very, very generous in multiple platforms.

He's seen the work of so many incredible artists that are constantly going through what we call Steidlville. There's a mix of artists, curators and museum director's always working there. It can be intimidating for me to show him a new series because I have been working, but I don't know how it contexturizes in the world out there. I don't have the horizon that he has in being able to look at so many bodies of work being developed all at the same time. It's always a moment of respect when I show him new work. First, he's looking to see if the work deserves to be published. Second, it can happen that there is more than one person working on something very similar to each other. I'm afraid he's going to tell me someone is doing similar things. So when he says this is worth a book and I haven't seen something like this, it's interesting, you have again captured my attention, and it looks different than before, I feel this huge relief, almost like a fatherly acceptance. From being afraid, I just want to hug him and thank him so much! I have those emotions, but I don't think he's even very aware of it. I think a lot of artists probably go through that, where you feel a little insecure when showing a series for the first time to someone you respect a lot, and then when there's acceptance – everyone's happy.

EA: Would you describe your own experience beginning when you first brought your work to him until the book is actually printed?

MK: Each book has been a different experience. Let's just talk about this last one. I was preparing myself to select and make all the prints to show to Gerhard in Germany. I'm thinking I'm going to Germany within two weeks and then I got a call on Sunday at 6AM in the morning. When the phone rang, I thought it must be someone in my family died or something. I jumped out of bed and it's Gerhard. He works 24-7. And he says, "Mona, I'm coming to Los Angeles. Can you meet me tomorrow?" I'm like, "Monday? Are you in the right time zone, because you're calling from Germany?" He said, "Yes, I've already calculated that." He's very direct and I, coming from a German background, actually appreciate it. So I ask where to meet him and he said he'd let me know. He calls Monday around 9:30 in the morning and says, "I'm sorry I'm calling so late. Can you come to the lobby and meet me at 2 PM?" He does a lot of things, but he doesn't put a lot of words to it.

I came to see him in the lobby. He was meeting with a photographer, James Welling. He's part of the UCLA group of professors; I think he has a book coming out. I recognized James and I didn't want to intrude, so I waited in a different area of the lobby. Gerhard saw me there and waved for me to come over and sit down with them while he is finishing up with James. I said I didn't want to intrude, is it OK with James because each artist is a little different from each other. Gerhard said he has no secrets, he never has secrets, so I sat there discretely looking at my own papers.

I was a little worried because I had a lot of prints of nudes to show him and we were in the lobby of this hotel. I was thinking this is not going to work so well. In the past I have always shown him the work in a sequence, instead of showing in a box that you flip, flip, flip. I like sequencing it on a long table so you can look at each image and you can see how they communicate with each other. I talked to someone at the hotel to see if they had a conference room with a table we could just use for ten minutes. They didn't!

We were sitting in the lobby in a living room kind of ambiance. There were two or three couches with a coffee table in the center. I said goodbye to James and turned to Gerhard, because he is usually someone who is squeezing a lot of appointments into a limited amount of time, and I asked him, "How much time do we have together because I can tailor it?" I was expecting him to say we have twenty minutes and he said, "Well that was my last appointment, I have the whole afternoon." I was very disconcerted [laughing]; I didn't know what to do. I didn't have that much to say!

I brought another coffee table close to us and started laying down the images. I was looking at his expression because you never know. He is very reserved, very non-judgmental when he's looking at work. I always get a little nervous. It's my fourth book with him, but it could happen that he could say, "You know what, I don't actually like this series." I think it's good to have a little bit of that insecurity, it's normal, and it's good to be on your toes.

He then looked at it and every five to ten images he does a little nod "umhum" and I was echoing him "umhum, umhum." Then he looked at me and said, "When do you want the book?" This was in January of this year, 2011. I was taking into consideration usually there is a waiting period to work with Steidl. There's always people waiting and waiting and with my other books I have also been in the waiting period, it all depends what's going on in the schedule, so I was expecting I'd have to wait one or two years before we print it. I was a little naughty and I said, "Well if you ask me, I'd love to have it by the Fall." And then he looked at me point blank and said, "We can do it." I was not expecting that, I was just being a little fresh with him and he took that seriously.

I asked if he would change anything in the sequence. Did it lose the momentum at any point because in this series all of the portraits were photographed in the same room, with the same chair? My concern was, do you lose interest at some point, and does it sustain a certain momentum; is it interesting throughout, because it's a very reductive approach to the project. He said, "No, no no. I think it's fine. I think it's good. I like the landscapes in between. I think they add a lot. The portraits are wonderful, they are once again different. I have to learn you are doing something a little different than before. I like it, I think it's important, and I do see you in the work, so it does deserve to be in a book and we can do it in the Fall. You come in May, we'll do the design, the layout, and the colorization, then you come again in June and we'll print it."

It was crazy because I have done this process with him before and somewhere along the line something delays or his schedule gets messed up and he calls and apologizes because it has to be pushed back six months, but his time it's really the fastest.

EA: When you went to Steidville, how was it different than your meeting in L.A.?

MK: I went to Germany in May and I brought with me all of my own scans and all of the proofs to go along with the scans. The first day he directed me to work with a designer. We put together the sequencing on the computer on their software and then he also had someone in the scanning department looking at my scans to make sure they are all good quality compared to what they would do and to do a color proof before we go to press. So half of the day I would work with a designer and then the other half I would start looking at color proofs from the scans I supplied and we would make adjustments if necessary. The second day would be the second batch of color adjustments and a little more finesse with the designer because now I've slept over and there are a couple of things I want to revisit in the layout. On the third day is when Gerhard would say he wants to see what we worked on at 8 o'clock in the morning. We show all the proofs together with the color expert there, and then we also look at the design. He says, "What is this? Why is the text here?" He just changes a few things, not much, but a few things that make a big, big difference.

In terms of color, most of the time if I'm ok with it, he's ok with it, and then he translates that information technically. In this case we had a black, like a Bordeaux color curtain, and the skin tonalities are mostly very light. I printed them lighter than in real person. He then carried that technically to say maybe we need to do a fifth plate that is just a black skeleton, for the background. The more I learn about printing, I realize how incredible he is. He does those kinds of things, just like that, very casually. The first time I had a book with him (Photographs, Steidl, 2004), I really didn't realize. I knew he was my number one choice that I approached because I researched and I knew the other books he had published. I knew it would be an honor to be among those published names. I knew he was special, but I had no idea that technically Gerhard is so incredibly generous, so up to the latest of what's possible. When we're choosing paper, he puts four or five papers for me to choose from and each one is more incredible than the other. There's never a second quality; it's always high quality. In this book, all of the portraits have this cloth background. He said, "I

think the book should be hardbound and it should be cloth.” It’s more expensive, so I would never think of asking for that. The beginning and the endpaper he decided to print on the manual press and it’s a close-up of the curtains. It really looks like this very theatrical opening of a story inside.

Once the inside is designed, the pages and the layouts, then Gerhard likes to do the cover – once you understand the whole project, he leaves it towards the end. So we had a few options, but it was quite obvious for him and for me that we did not want to have a nude for the cover, we wanted maybe just the whole idea of just having the room and the chair. Let people be surprised once they open the book. Now days the book industry has it’s challenges, there’s a lot of e-books out there, most publishers would like to have a nude on the cover just because it sells. Gerhard was like, “We don’t have to do this. I think we shouldn’t do it. I think the concept is the chair in this room and you can imagine whatever you want and that is what the cover should be.” He doesn’t really compromise.

I went back in June for the printing. The thing with Gerhard that is so insane, is that I dreamed of a book and that book is 100% of what I was dreaming. Then when I go to Steidlville in Germany and I show him what I’m thinking about, he always adds another 50% that I could not have seen before, envisioned or dreamed, which is really incredible.

Paris Photo: Nov 12 Book Signing, Steidl Booth, 16:00 to 18:00 and Flowers Gallery, Booth D54.

Links

<http://www.steidlville.com>

<http://www.flowersgalleries.com>

<http://www.elizabethavedon.com>