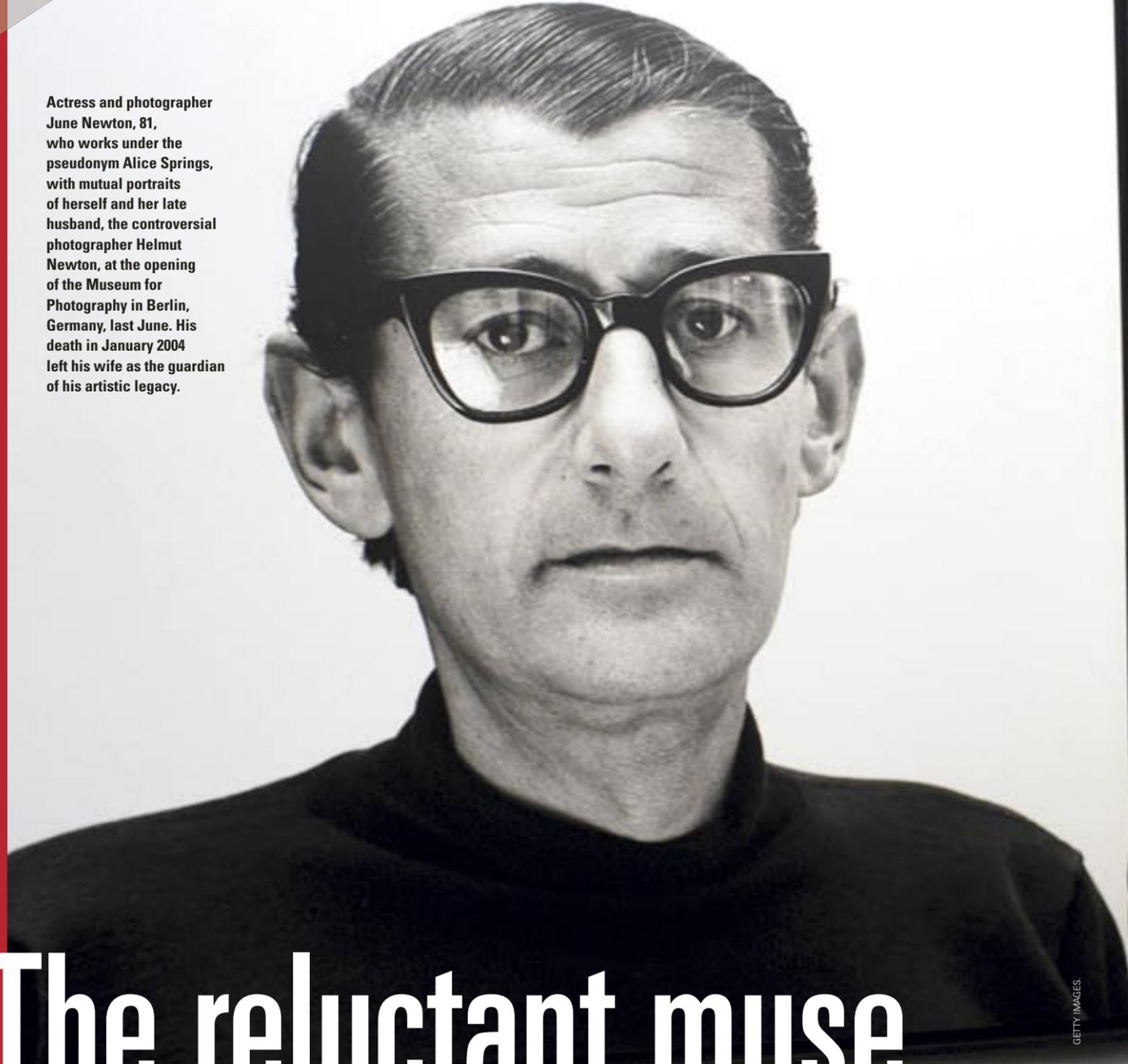


Actress and photographer June Newton, 81, who works under the pseudonym Alice Springs, with mutual portraits of herself and her late husband, the controversial photographer Helmut Newton, at the opening of the Museum for Photography in Berlin, Germany, last June. His death in January 2004 left his wife as the guardian of his artistic legacy.



The reluctant muse

JUNE NEWTON was an actress and a painter, who became famed provocative photographer Helmut Newton. Now, some 16 months after his

portrait photographer Alice Springs. She was also the muse and wife of death, June talks to DAVID LESER about love, sex and her life after Helmut.

“He left magnificently,” says June Newton of her husband, Helmut, the internationally celebrated – and controversial – photographer who died in January last year after crashing his car into a retaining wall outside the landmark Hollywood hotel, Chateau Marmont. *“He lived a marvellous life and he went out magnificently ... he didn’t hit anybody, he didn’t take me with him, he just went out all alone – in usual Newton style.”*

We are standing in the driveway of this impossibly romantic replica French chateau and June is recreating the scene of her husband’s death.

“His last words were, ‘Follow me, Junie,’” she says, pointing to the garage and the driveway leading down onto Sunset Boulevard. Helmut was at the wheel of a big SUV Cadillac – on loan from General Motors – while June was in a rented car behind. They were taking June’s car back to the rental office and then heading to Mel’s, a favourite diner of Helmut’s, for lunch.

“So he puts his foot on the accelerator,” June adds, “and then he slumps over the wheel and goes from zero to 35 miles an hour in three seconds.

“There’s a woman photographer coming around the corner. He misses her. There’s a guy up here on a ladder painting the wall. He misses him. Had the car been in a different position, he would have gone out onto Sunset Boulevard. Look at all this traffic. Bang. But instead he hits this wall where the ivy hasn’t grown since ... It was perfect. He did it in style. He had somebody choreographing it for him I think ...”

For such an extraordinary life as Helmut Newton’s one might have expected such a bravura performance. Yet consider now the performance of his 81-year-old wife.

On the day of his death – January 23, 2004 – as Helmut was rushed to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center having suffered a fatal heart attack, June was joined at the hospital by some of their dearest friends, among them Philip Pavel, the general manager of Chateau Marmont, Joan Juliet Buck, the former editor-in-chief of French *Vogue*, Jan Sharp, the film-maker and wife of Australian director Phillip Noyce, and Anjelica Huston, the actress.

They assembled in what turned out to be the children’s waiting room, sitting on seats designed as *Alice in Wonderland* characters. “Look, June,” said one of the friends, “look where you’re sitting” and June examined her seat to discover she was sitting on the Mad Hatter. A shudder went up her spine.

In Paris, they’d been calling June “Alice” for 35 years – ever since she’d filled in for her sick husband on a photo shoot for a Gitanes commercial. June had said to Helmut that day, “Give me the camera, show me what to do and, if I don’t succeed, you can do it the following week.”

So she’d taken the shots and a new career had burst forth, except that Helmut hadn’t liked the idea of her working as June Newton. “He didn’t want me using his name. It wasn’t a family affair. We weren’t going to be a couple of photographers: The Newtons!”

So, not long afterwards, June and Helmut had gone to dinner with friends, the actress Jean Seberg and her

Spanish boyfriend, Ricardo, and Helmut had asked June what byline she intended adopting. Ricardo, sensing she was not going to use her own name, asked June for an atlas, which he opened at a map of Australia. He then asked for a pin and told June to shut her eyes. The pin landed right in the centre – on Alice Springs. “There’s your name,” he declared.

And it was as Alice Springs that she earned an international reputation in her own right, shooting fashion for the revolutionary French hair stylist Jean Louis David and magazines such as *Depeche Mode* and *Elle*, and, at Helmut’s urging, then turning to portraits. “You know, Junie,” he told her one day, “your pictures of people are better than your fashion pictures. Why don’t you concentrate on portraits for a while?”

“They will end up in drawers,” she retorted.

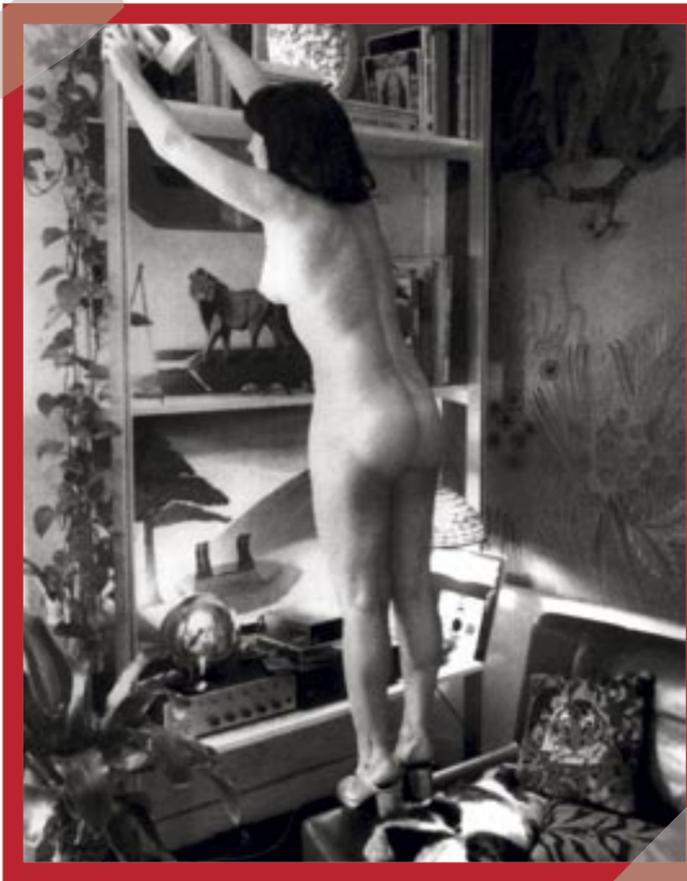
They didn’t. They ended up in catalogues, books and solo exhibitions around the world, many of them beautiful and unadorned black and whites of the rich and famous – actresses such as Charlotte Rampling, Raquel Welch, Catherine Deneuve and Nicole Kidman; Princess Caroline of Monaco and her son, Andrea; the couturiers Yves St Laurent and Hubert de Givenchy; writers Lawrence Durrell, Gore Vidal and Graham Greene; and, of course, her husband. Helmut in shorts and high heels. Helmut greeting the dawn in their garden near St Tropez. Helmut in intensive care after his heart attack in New York in 1971. Helmut with Pavarotti. Helmut with his naked models.

And now, 34 years later, in this “City of Angels”, the doctor is squatting before Alice-in-the-waiting-room, telling her that her life’s partner, the man described as “the other side of her”, has gone.

June stands up and, accompanied by Philip Pavel, walks into the room where Helmut is lying dead in a minerve or neck brace. What kind of bizarre parody is this? It was Helmut – with June’s encouragement – who once scandalised society by dressing his semi-naked models in surgical corsets, casts and neck braces. (“I’ve gone too far,” he had told June one day after photographing a model in a tight harness. “I’ll have to stop, look at what I’ve done.” “You’re mad to stop,” June had replied. “It’s just the beginning.”)

“And there he was,” June says now, “as if he was asleep, lying with this enormous minerve and his beautiful hair looking like a silver fox, and so I said to Phil, ‘Shit, I haven’t got a camera’ ... and so he drove me back to the hotel and I got the camera, loaded it and, as cool as a cucumber, I went back and photographed the most beautiful portraits I have ever, or will ever, take. ▶

Opposite, clockwise from bottom right: Helmut’s picture of June on the beach during an “illicit” weekend at Inverloch, Victoria, in the early days of their relationship in the 1940s; June plays Joan of Arc in George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne in 1954; June waters a plant in the couple’s Paris apartment, circa 1970; Self-portrait with Helmut, Chateau Marmont, Hollywood, 1991.



COURTESY: JUNE NEWTON. ALICE SPRINGS/MACONCHIE PHOTOGRAPHY.





fashion, art and high society, and out into the slipstream of two extraordinary people's lives.

Helmut Newton's was the one the public came to know more about – the product of prosperous German Jewish parents who fled the Nazis before the outbreak of World War II and ended up in an Australian internment camp in 1940 for two-and-a-half years, before being drafted into the Australian army.

Born in Berlin in 1920, he had been a sickly and fearful child, spoilt rotten by his mother, who often dressed him up in girls' clothes and never discouraged him from the belief that everyone else's needs were less important than his own. By his own admission, he was "insufferable", but "cute".

By the time he was 13, he had developed a sleek but powerful swimmer's body and a lurid imagination. He was besotted with photography and obsessed by sex. By the time he arrived in Australia in 1940 as a 20-year-old, he'd spent much of the previous two years as a self-described "gigolo" for an older woman in Singapore.

Helmut was, of course, to become – in the words of American *Vogue* – "fashion's infamous provocateur". He pushed all the boundaries, broke all the taboos. Nothing was beyond his bold imaginings – Amazonian

women wearing chains and dog collars, models in wheelchairs and neck braces, women with saddles on their backs ... He carried accessories in his car – false nipples, handcuffs, whips, leg irons ... Little wonder that over the years he was denounced as a deviant, pervert and peeping Tom.

He didn't care. "The right

girl at the right moment has always been my inspiration," he once wrote.

And who better to find for a lifetime of inspiration than the actress June Browne (later to become known as June Brunell because of another Melbourne actress called June Brown).

As a little girl growing up in rural Victoria, June had been enchanted by the box office and had written to stars such as Claudette Colbert and Gary Cooper, letting them know how talented she was and asking whether she could come to Hollywood.

As a star-struck teenager, she had been told by a reader of tea leaves that she would be surrounded by cameras all her life, only she would "never be in front of them". Later, as a young actress in Melbourne, her obsession with movies had grown to the point where she would often leave a theatre pretending to be Greta Garbo or Bette Davis.

She was attractive, sexy and funny – and had numerous admirers, as evidenced by the names of many of them embroidered on her white sweater.

One day in 1946, June walked into Helmut Newton's penthouse studio in Flinders Lane, Melbourne, hoping to get some extra modelling work, but expecting to find an old man behind the lens. Instead, she found a sophisticated, handsome young European who, ►

And they are very unique, because not to my knowledge has anyone ever photographed their spouse or lover on the death bed."

Not only that, but somehow she also thought to cut off some of those silver locks. "I said to the nurse, 'Find me a pair of scissors' and I said, 'You won't be needing this, Helmut'. And I took a big snip of his hair and it's in the museum [in Berlin, where the biggest collection of his photographs is displayed]."

Helmut Newton died at the age of 83, four days before he was to shoot a deodorant commercial for Soft & Dry. Models, hairdressers, his agent from Milan, the production manager, two clients, everybody was at the ready in Los Angeles. What to do?

"Let's have lunch," said June, and with that a few of them headed to Mel's for a hamburger, where June announced she would be filling in for Helmut on the ad campaign. "Here was this incredible scenario," Philip Pavel tells *The Weekly*, "of the widow in this moment, on the day [of his death], saying she was going to do this job ... And we went to the set and I saw what a great thing it was, because she channelled some energy from where I don't know, but it was so strong and controlled and in charge."

"And I've never lost it," June adds. "I haven't lost it since that day ... I have become more aggressive and assertive since Helmut's death. I have lost the other side of me, but I never knew the side I had was so strong."

Which probably helps to explain why, when she and I arrive at Mel's for lunch shortly after our first meeting, June lets it be known she's in charge – ordering the tuna melt to share, the Santa Fe salad, the coleslaw on the side and the glass each of chardonnay. I am completely at her mercy.

THIS IS ONE OF THOSE FABULOUS head-spinning tales that gathers you up in its wake, hurtling you from one side of the world to the other, into the currents of

"I have become more aggressive and assertive since Helmut's death. I have lost the other side of me, but I never knew the side I had was so strong."

Above: Helmut, then 76, and June, 74, at a fashion show in Paris in 1997. She always encouraged his more outrageous photography.

CORBIS/APL



judging by the photographs on his walls, was also an exceptional talent.

They began dating, with Helmut playing the role of “stage-door Johnny” to June’s rising theatrical star. Every night after work, he would sit in the back row to watch her perform. He was fascinated.

“I’d never met an actress [before],” Helmut wrote in his autobiography, published two years before he died. “[And] she always made me laugh. She still does today. She was very amusing. She was a great singer, too. I remember driving for hours ... and June singing all these wonderful songs. Australian songs. English songs. Stuff from Shakespeare. It was a totally different affair from any I’d had with any other girl. Because all the other girls were really only about f***ing. With her, there was another dimension.”

Not long after the couple first made love, Helmut proposed. It was under a full moon by the lake in Albert Park. “I can’t offer you anything,” he told her. “You’d be crazy to say yes – I wouldn’t if I were you – but think about it.” June said yes immediately.

The Newton marriage was to last from May 1948 until that day in January last year when Helmut suffered an electrical storm in his heart and drove his Cadillac into the hotel wall. More than a marriage, it was a collaboration, a conspiracy, a communion of ideas, photography, fashion, people and places that spanned more than half a century.

“I don’t like being called a muse,” June tells *The Weekly*. “A muse means that you haven’t got a career yourself, that you’re an appendage to somebody else. But even though I had my own life, I *was* his muse. He knew he could call on me for anything and I always came up with something.”

This was particularly so before Helmut’s heart attack in 1971, after which his journey towards becoming the

“Even though I had my own life, I *was* his muse. He knew he could call on me for anything and I always came up with something.”

Above: June with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (front) and Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit at a memorial service for Helmut in the photographer’s native Berlin last June. A funeral director (right) holds the urn containing Helmut’s remains.

king pin of stylish erotica was largely self-determined.

“In the days when collections were happening twice or four times a year, prêt à porter came in, haute couture ... If you weren’t a studio photographer, you had to have ideas, something to hang them on.

“So we would sit up to all hours in the night, smoking and drinking Scotch, until I would get something for Helmut to hang it on.

“He knew that I admired his work ... and could help him and criticise it, and pull it apart and talk about it. It’s wonderful to have somebody to talk about your work with, who understands you so well ...”

No true assessment of Helmut Newton’s extraordinary life and body of work can, therefore, be made without factoring in this crucial element. Not only did June hatch some of his earliest and wildest visions – models and fighter planes, models and mechanical bears, models and store dummies, models in manacles, plus a collection of nudes called White Women – she also curated his exhibitions, edited his books, played to his camera, naked or semi-naked ... and on one famous occasion dressed up for him as Adolf Hitler, while Jerry Hall posed as Eva Braun.

Helmut Newton’s grand ambition had always been to work for *Vogue* and he realised this in the mid-to-

late 1950s, when he began working for the Australian supplement of English *Vogue*. Later, he worked for the English and Australian editions, but it was only in 1961, when he joined French *Vogue*, that his career really began to soar.

“Helmut never tried to develop porno chic. It was always there in him. But he had to be in Europe for this to grow, for it to blossom,” she says.

Once in Paris, June soon realised she had to make a decision – to keep acting and commute to London, where she had worked in 1958 playing Nurse

Jane in the BBC radio series *The Flying Doctor*, or to remain with Helmut. “I realised that I was happiest with Helmut and ... that’s the road I chose.”

Yet there was clearly a void to fill. “I knew that as a wife, just as a wife, it wasn’t going to work. He wouldn’t have liked it and I wouldn’t have liked it ... So that’s when I decided to paint.”

Initially, it was of the sheets hanging out to dry from the window opposite their apartment, then later paintings of her song-and-dance-man father, Tom, whom she’d only known as a small child, and her old draught horse, Darkie – beautiful, poignant, almost naïve renderings of characters from her rural Australian life.

The actress June Brunell had suddenly become the painter June Newton, as she would eventually become the photographer Alice Springs.

IT WAS A JOKE THAT FINALLY HELPED persuade June Newton to agree to an interview with me in Los Angeles. In a list of advance questions, I included one about her adopted name. “What would she have done if that pin

Continued on page 232.

THE RELUCTANT MUSE *Continued*

had fallen on Wagga Wagga instead of Alice Springs?" June had dined out on it for weeks. "When I'm introduced, I want to be introduced as Wagga Wagga," she told friends breezily. "But people who know me, well, they can just call me Wagga."

And here she is now – June, Alice, Wagga – a diminutive but sprightly figure with a bob of brown hair, standing at the door to her suite at the Chateau Marmont with a look of bemusement on her still-youthful face.

This hotel is where Helmut and June spent their winters every year for the past quarter of a century, away from their apartment home in Monte Carlo and the biting cold of the mistral. It is where they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary seven years ago – a glamorous sit-down black tie event with friends such as directors Billy Wilder and Robert Altman, and British artist David Hockney. It is where Helmut photographed his 1992 series "Domestic Nudes"; it is where June did some of her best photographic portraits – Terence Stamp on the bed, Dennis Hopper against the back wall ...

"It was very difficult to come back here," she admits, "but we were told when we were kids that, if we fell off the horse

we had to get right back on it, otherwise we'd never ride again. So I knew I had to come back here and face it ... especially for the first anniversary. I had to be where it happened."

And so on January 23 this year, June invited 60 of her friends to dine in the penthouse overlooking the canyons of Hollywood. And there she was, the perfect hostess, clinking her glass ... "let's hear it for Helmut" ... and a video with Helmut's voice reducing the room to a reverent silence.

There had been so many memorable evenings here. Two years earlier, June had stood and sung *Home Sweet Home*, which Nellie Melba had once made famous, and as she'd hesitated before the high notes, friend Mel Brooks, the grand master of movie satire, had urged her on, "Go for it June, go for it". And then a year later, at a memorial luncheon for Helmut, June had caused a collective shiver with her moving rendition of Irving Berlin's *What'll I Do?*

She was always singing for "Helmie", in the kitchen, in her sleep, but especially at his funeral in Berlin in June last year, where she trilled the words to Schubert's *Ungeduld (Impatience)* in front of a packed congregation that included the German

Chancellor and the mayor of Berlin.

"Thine is my (mein) heart

And shall remain forever more ..."

Yet, as June says now, without a trace of self-pity, the music has stopped. "I'll never have fun again. The light went out when Helmut left ... The difficulty is that I didn't realise how much time we spent together in Los Angeles just hanging out with one another. The days were filled with movies and coffees, and conversation. So that's the most difficult thing – not realising how much one took these mundane little things of happy married life for granted."

This of course begs a multitude of questions about "happy married life". How did one maintain such a state of union with a man the Americans liked to call the "king of kink"? Did she share his lifelong fascination with vice or twisted sexuality? "He didn't have any," June scoffs. "It was all a game with him ... he wasn't obsessed with sex. He was obsessed with work and sex was a lot of his work."

"As he said, 'If I'd lived the life of my photographs, I'd have been dead long ago, from exhaustion.' He could never be seen without a camera. A lot of men can't be seen without a woman, but cameras mattered to Helmut more than anything."

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Did he get turned on by his models? "You have to get turned on by whatever you're doing," she replies. "You have to fall in love with them, but you don't have to do anything to them ... He always said, 'Never, ever think about having sex with the model because that will destroy the picture. You either go to bed with them or you photograph them.'"

Of course, sometimes Helmut did both, but it seems never to have threatened their relationship. "No affair would have split us up," she says matter-of-factly. "Our marriage was never in jeopardy with people."

"But we never had an understanding – nothing like that. I would never have lived with a person where you had to have an understanding. If things happen, well ... This marvellous French philosopher once said, 'For the perfect harmony and happiness, learn how to let the wind blow freely between the cypress and the oak.'"

I suggest to June that she held more sex appeal for Helmut than most women; that, in fact, she was quite a dish in her time. "I was never beautiful and I've never regretted not being beautiful," she says. "Beauty ages very fast. It must be awful to be a great beauty when you're young and to see time melt it away ...

"[As for the] sex ... that is something that happens if you're lucky between you and it's very rare that it happens all through 56 years, the same sex. It would be a very dull and boring life if it was the same sex through all that time."

"The marriage was not based on sex appeal. I hope you understand that sex appeal is a very ephemeral thing. What you see in his work was not Helmut. There was another man behind the work and that's who I was with."

June won't reveal exactly who that man was, but there is enough on the public record to suggest he was utterly dependent on his wife. When in 1982 she fell seriously ill, Helmut became suicidal with despair, going so far as to play Russian roulette with the trucks outside their Monaco apartment.

During her recovery, he would go to a park bench and cry. "I had no powers of concentration," he was to admit. "I was never going to pick up a camera again. When I was in the apartment, I followed June around like a dog. She was my tower of strength."

And she knew it, only she was wise enough to allow Helmut the public adulation he craved. "I knew who the leader of the pack was and I never usurped his position. I never spoke out of turn. It was Helmut's show."

JUNE NEWTON HAS NEVER LOST HER childhood love of acting and during the three days I was to spend with her in and around Hollywood, I saw a masterful performance of her in the role of widow. Not the grieving widow – although there were times when she nearly allowed her desolation to surface. Nor the merry widow – although once again she was uproariously funny.

No, in this incarnation she was more the tough, cranky, unyielding and deeply driven widow who was now filling the space her husband had left behind, making it her life's purpose to see his legacy flourish.

Five months after Helmut died, his remains were interred in a small cemetery in the German capital. He'd been given an honorary grave by the mayor of Berlin, a few metres from where film legend Marlene Dietrich was buried.

Two days later, the Helmut Newton Foundation had opened across the road from the train station where Helmut had said goodbye to his parents in 1938. It is this museum and permanent exhibition space for Helmut and June's work, to which June is now dedicating her life.

"I can't let Helmut down," she says. "We didn't come all this way together for one of us to let the other down. [My life] is bound up with Helmut ... and I'll only see the tip of the iceberg in my life because his fame is going to grow far beyond the fame he knew in his lifetime."

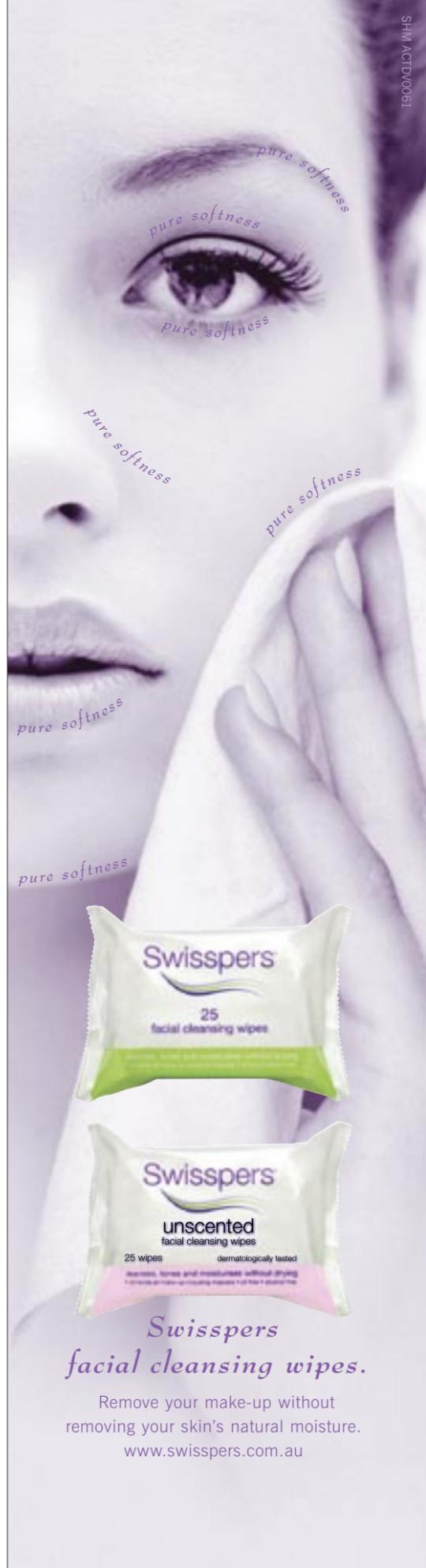
Was she in any way drawn back to Australia? "No, the only thing I was ever drawn to was Helmut ... I loved my life in Australia, but ... home was always where Helmut was and, now that he's not here, I keep the happy home fires burning."

So where then, I ask her finally, would she like to be laid to rest? "I thought you were going to ask me whether I'd like to be laid," she says, a gleam in her pale-blue eyes. "But no ... I haven't thought about it."

What she has thought about is whether Helmut's spirit might now be somewhere out there in the ether. "You didn't see a black butterfly flying over the pool at Chateau Marmont?" she asks me. "His wings are tinged with gold and he has this little fluttering white butterfly after him ... which is not me, of course, because I'm still here."

No I didn't see it, I tell her. "Well, I wonder who it is," she says with a devilish laugh. "I don't think it's his guardian angel, do you?"

Mrs Newton: June Newton a.k.a Alice Springs, an autobiographical collection of diary entries, portraits and photographs, is published by Taschen, rrp \$85.



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