

Book Review

When Sex Was Innocent, Sweet and Seductive

KEVIN THOMAS

BERNARD OF HOLLYWOOD
The Ultimate Pin-up Book
By Susan Bernard
Fletcher: 360 pp., \$40

As evanescent Marilyn Monroe, her white pleated skirt billowing up to her face in a blast of steam from a New York sidewalk grate, is one of the most indelible images of the 20th century, shot during the production of Billy Wilder's "The Seven Year Itch." The photo was taken by the late Bruno Bernard, who through his lengthy and glittering career was known as "The King of Hollywood Glamour" and "The Virgin of Pinup Photography." He was also called "The Discoverer of Marilyn Monroe," and though others have made that claim in various contexts, Bernard recalled that while he was shooting Monroe on "The Seven Year Itch" set in 1954, she said to him, "Remember, Bernie, you started it all."

Considering that he had started photographing her when she was still Norma Jean Dougherty, it could be true. Of gregarious and ambitious unknowns like Norma Jean, Bernard once remarked, "The best kind of these young girls had next to a diamond, was a glamour photographer."

Early photos of Monroe—easily seen before—are some of the many delights of "Bernard of Hollywood: The Ultimate Pin-up Book," a superbly produced 350-page book by Bernard's daughter, Susan Bernard. She spent four years culling 30,000 negatives to make her selections, which in many instances are accompanied by captions from their subjects, remembering what Bernard and his photo sessions were like and what impact they had on their careers. (Actress Mamie Van Doren remembered the handsome, silver-haired Bernard as a gentleman.)

Bernard has written a thoughtful essay, tracing her father's life as a refugee from Hitler's Germany to his success in Hollywood's Golden Era and surveying his major contributions to it. In 1984, Bernard was the first still photographer to be honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Bernard's tribute to her father's art has arrived at the right time for it to be fully appreciated. At the height of the women's liberation movement, many were tempted to dismiss chaperone as merely sexually exploitative. Enough time has also passed so that the obvious posing, come-hither looks and physical perfection of the models and their sometimes kitschy décor and accessories are more easily seen as period

Kevin Thomas is a film critic for The Times.



Marilyn Monroe and Bruno Bernard (1955)

Photographs from "Bernard of Hollywood"

conventions, allowing the subjects' timeless beauty and glamour to shine through.

No less than Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower praised Bernard's pinups, and when—incredibly—Bernard had to fight an obscenity charge all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court in the early 1950s, he submitted in his defense a letter from the Secretary of Defense thanking him for the morale-building effect of his pinups. Bernard makes the common-sensical case for seeing her father's work and that of other pinup photographers and artists, including her father's friend Alberto Vargas, as celebrating and empowering women rather than exploiting them.

Caecilie Kismaric, curator of the Museum of Modern Art's "Fame After Photography," wrote in its catalog, "Bernard had a way of making his subjects seem more human (than other pinup photographers). When you see his pictures, you want to stop and look at them because of the obvious connection between the subject and the camera."

Bernard believes her father "divined his insights into the human condition partly from his astonishing courage in facing the huge challenges of his early life." There is in Bernard's pinups an evanescent serenity that is both innocent and mischievous, seductive yet sweet. Surely, it was the rapport that Bernard had with movie stars and models alike that yielded these wonderful combinations.

Bernard rose above the more prurient obsessions of his contemporaries and did not believe in arousing. Only one photo in this book—that of a naked model holding a sly grin of lightning between her legs—seems over the top. But this is the amusing exception to the rule, even in the most obviously censored photos. Bernard's subjects look like real women.

Though Bernard was a photographer of stars and stars, he also worked with dancers, strippers and professional models, and was a celebrity portrait photographer, shooting men—Garry Peck, for one—as well as women. His artistic muse was the late, legendary stripper artist Lili St. Cyr, a willowy long-stemmed beauty of wit and elegance, a stunner with a sense of humor. St. Cyr was one of Bernard's more spectacular subjects and, along with Monroe, has a chapter of the book devoted to her. Among many other starlets, the book features shots of Laurette Luez, bringing back fond memories of her as one of the loveliest brunets on the screen in the late '40s and early '50s.

At the height of his career, Bernard added to his landmark Sunset Strip salons studios in Laguna Beach, Las Vegas—just as it was becoming an entertainment capital—and in Palm Springs at the Racquet Club, then the favorite retreat for Hollywood's top stars. At the Racquet Club he



Lili St. Cyr (1955)

was able to photograph such stars as Lucille Ball at play, and in Las Vegas, he had a special arrangement with fellow Belinee Maureen Dietrich, who declared, "Only Bernie is allowed to shoot me in Vegas."

Bruno Bernard Sommerfeld was born in poverty in Berlin in 1911. While his father, although he had acute asthma and poor vision, was serving in World War I, his mother got up at 5 every morning to sell shoes, soap and chocolate in prisoners-of-war camps in a losing struggle to support her four children. When her health collapsed, her children became welfare cases. It took her six months to regain custody of them, yet her fading health and that of her husband, now returned from war, caused Bruno and his siblings to be sent off to different orphanages.

Yet his parents instilled in their eldest child the importance of striving for a university education, and Bernard in 1934 was one of the very few Jews who received a doctorate at Kiel University, where he studied criminal law but was drawn to the

arts, to acting in particular.

But Bernard's activism in a Jewish youth organization after the advent of the Third Reich landed him on a Gestapo blacklist and forced him to emigrate. It was agent Paul Kohner, who helped so many Europeans flee the rise of Hitler and establish themselves in Hollywood, who took notice of Bernard's work when Bernard opened his first studio in 1940 on Robertson Boulevard. Kohner sent him clients, thus bringing him to the attention of the motion picture industry.

According to his daughter, Bernard considered the suicide of Marilyn Monroe in 1962 as the end of an era for Hollywood glamour and closed shop. He returned to Berlin and embarked on a radically different career in photojournalism, a highlight of which was covering the trial of Adolf Eichmann for Der Spiegel. From this experience, he published his "Brazil: Bernard's Photographic Impressions," after which he retired to Palma de Mallorca, where he died in 1987. □