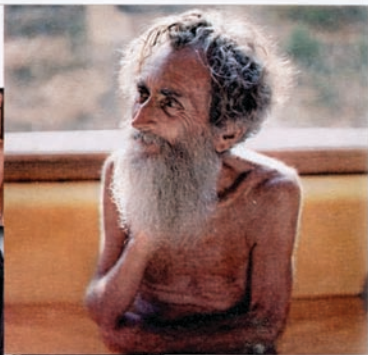
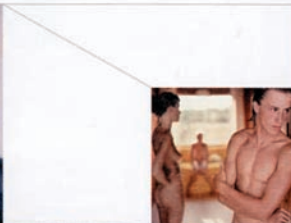


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Images by Mona Kuhn taken at a remote naturist colony in France.

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GRIN AND BARE IT

Getting naked, family style. By Rachel Brown

ona Kuhn is a hard woman to pin down. In the last two years, the Brazilian of German descent hasn't spent three months straight in her adopted home of Los Angeles. At her latchkey apartment, unhung picture frames lay against the fireplace, and the walls are curiously bare for an unabashed admirer and devourer of art.

Being tagged an emerging talent in contemporary photography brings mounting demands. There are several trips a year to New York for gallery openings, museum exhibitions and hobnobbing; teaching commitments in Mexico and Los Angeles, and showings at Paris Photo, the esteemed annual photography fair that ended Nov. 19, where Kuhn, 36, was nominated this year for the prestigious BMW prize.

"Once I'm in the different places, I'm happy," she insists, "but the traveling itself has become a nightmare."

Good thing, then, that Kuhn's work for the last 12 years has required her to spend summers in one place, a remote naturist colony two hours from the nearest airport in Bordeaux. There, the frenzy passes, and she is totally unplugged: no news, no e-mail—in fact, there's not even electricity or digital cameras.

"I like that because your mind can get into a vacuum in terms of a reality check, and it just expands," she says. It seems appropriate that as Kuhn shoots people in their most exposed state, the accoutrements of modern culture are likewise stripped away. But she is the restlessly thoughtful type—her conversation is a whirl of big ideas—and perhaps the isolation has increased her tendency toward acute awareness of her field and the metaphors of her imagery.

Nakedness, it turns out, has a lot of baggage. Kuhn is a keen student of art history, although she majored in international studies and minored in economics at Ohio State to complete a parent-pleasing curriculum before gaining the confidence to take up photography full time. Enrolling at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1996, she was drawn to the body at a time when the trend toward abstraction made the human form passé.

Conscious of being an iconoclast, Kuhn mulled over the contribution her photographs and the nudity within them would have to the art form. "How do you do it so that it doesn't fall into erotica? How do you do it so it doesn't get too soft?" she asks. "I was trying to find my own voice."

High-gloss photos with oiled-up hard bodies didn't resonate with Kuhn, who rarely wears makeup or sculpts her tossed-about hair. She looked for a certain ease with nudity and found a great quantity of it in the naturist—she emphasizes they are not nudist in the voyeuristic American sense—colonies on the coast of France. While becoming comfortable with her own body and art, she also befriended naturists who would repeatedly play roles in her art.

"It's very respectful," she says. "It's a family place. Right now, it's already the third generation of families who own beach bungalows there. They have seen their parents naked, their grandparents naked. So it's ingrained."

Friendship is essential. The rawness of Kuhn's photographs is dependent on a personal relationship between "collaborators," the term she prefers for the artist and subject. She has become a part of the community, coming back year after year, reconnecting with the same people (Philipp, one of the first naturists she met, is a fixture in her images) and marrying another frequenter, film composer Boris Salchow, the reason she lives in Los Angeles for now.

"The fact that I know them, that we're friends beyond photography, I need that to create a more informed image," she says. "I talk to people about their first relationships or their divorces. All of that I try to bring visually."

In the naturist community, Kuhn explains, sexuality is neutralized in the nakedness. She has matured artistically by being freed a bit from the complicated issue of oversexualizing subjects. Her first book, *Photographs*, focuses heavily on small gestures, light and shadows, and is more literal than her latest one, *Evidence*. In the new book, which highlights photographs from the last three years and should hit U.S. shelves early next year, Kuhn says she "got a little more narrative and pensive."

The work aims to clear the stigma from nudity. It is not about orgies, a topic she is commonly quizzed about, or simply about body parts. "You meet each other and you're already naked—I don't know her dressing style, I don't know what kind of jewelry she wears. All of that is erased, so you can't really classify people other than [by] who they are," says Kuhn. "If you're photographing the nude or the figure, for the work to be good, it has to dig deeper. Otherwise, it's just another erotic shot."

