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Mapping gender. Old images ; new figures

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Review of *Images de star, Marilyn. La Dernière Séance, Bert Stern*

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- ¹ She was 36 years old, he was 33. She was a star, the *blonde*, a phenomenon, he was a fashion and advertising photographer, a portraitist at the height of his success. He plucked up the courage to ask for an appointment to shoot photographs of her. *Vogue* agreed, Marilyn agreed, Stern felt up to the task. It began on Saturday 23 June 1962, in suite 261 at the Hotel Bel Air in Los Angeles. This was the first time for Marilyn to appear in *Vogue*. This became the last time for a photographer to have a sitting with her. She was to live another six weeks, their encounter was to become *The Last Sitting*. She was found dead on 5 August 1962, the day before *Vogue* was ready with the layout for the publication of photographs Stern had shot. That sitting was the background to the superb, intimate and moving prints on view at the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi, France, between 26 September 2015 and 3 January 2016, organized with the punctual support of Chanel and the standing partnership with Pierre Fabre.

The publication and museum presentation history of the series

- ² *Images de star, Marilyn. La Dernière Séance, Bert Stern* was a selection of 54 photographs and 2 black and white contact sheets, in the company of 12 contemporary French posters of films starring Marilyn, on loan from the archives of the Cinémathèque de Toulouse for the occasion.¹ All the photographs were archival pigment prints, courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery, New York² and Dina Vierny Gallery, Paris³. Stephen Shore (2007: 26) points out that photographs, being physical objects, have their own existence, with their history and conservation, their cultural value and period of production, and are bought and sold. It is thus informative to look at the museum presentation and publication history of these photographs of the American icon. The story is relatively complex and there has been some noticeable blur in the title of earlier exhibitions and

publications of *The Last Sitting*. Are they a book or exhibition primarily about Marilyn, or is the work of the photographer Bert Stern in focus? Are they a presentation of a private or public collection of images, or of the work of the photographer, or of images of an icon?

- 3 The selection of photographs and the actual prints on view at the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi were identical to the material in the *Marilyn Monroe, La Dernière Séance* exhibition, presented at the Dina Vierny Foundation–Maillol Museum in Paris from 29 June to 30 October 2006; both put on display “Bert Stern’s favorite photos of an American icon”, as the subtitle read in 2006.⁴ That was the first time a monographic exhibition presented only Bert Stern’s photographs of Marilyn Monroe. Olivier Lorquin, then and current Director of the Maillol Museum, evoked in his Foreword to the 2006 exhibition that Stern had chosen to present a small number of photographs from *The Last Sitting* for public display: in 1982 only 59 were kept in an American museum⁵. 59 prints were made ten years later by Stern himself as a dedicated exhibition for the seventh edition of *Le Mois de la Photo* at the Galerie Atsuro Tayama, Paris, in November 1992.⁶ Those prints were then sold at Sotheby’s on 23 April 1994 and came in the possession of Michaela and Leon Constantiner, private collectors from New York.⁷ Finally, the selection was sold at auction at Christie’s on 16–17 December 2008, as part of *The Constantiner Collection of Photographs*.⁸ The prints presented now at the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum, Albi, are in copyright with Staley-Wise Gallery, New York. All in all, 54 images were hung now in Albi. The remaining five images, not presented in Albi, were in fact close-ups, enlargements, of five of the photographs on display. The material shown in *Images de star, Marilyn. La Dernière Séance, Bert Stern* comprised of the 54 individual images Stern had intended for public display since 1992.
- 4 The 2006 event at the Maillol Museum and the 2015 exhibition at the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi nicely illustrate the evolution of the different accents in the titles of the publications and exhibitions. To begin with, throughout the history of this series, there has been some inconsistency in using “The Last Sitting” sometimes to refer to the whole sequence of 2571 photographs, occasionally to the set of images first published in 1982, or specifically to some very restricted subset of prints such as the 1962 *Vogue* and *Eros* portfolios or the 59 shots Stern himself selected in 1992. While the title of the 2006 exhibition clearly identified Marilyn as the subject of the show (*Marilyn Monroe, La Dernière Séance*), the subtitle of the catalogue on the cover did not neglect the photographer either: “Bert Stern’s favorite photos of an American icon”. Curiously, while the cover of this catalogue thus read “*Marilyn Monroe. The Last Sitting. Bert Stern’s Favorite Photos of an American Icon*”, the title page inside read “*The Last Sitting. Bert Stern. From the collection of Michaela and Leon Constantiner, New York*”. In this respect, the show in Albi did a remarkable job of settling for a definitive title that paid its dues to both contributors of that last sitting: *Images de star, Marilyn. La Dernière Séance, Bert Stern*. This was all the more welcome since, to the best of my knowledge, this was the first time that this selection has been put on monographic public display since Stern died on 26 June, 2013. The exhibition in Albi thus appropriately brought out the idea that the subject of these images is an icon, while the photographic work also stands its own in itself.
- 5 Stern took 2571 photographs of Monroe during that photo shoot: portraits and nudes and fashion photographs. A five-spread, “carefully controlled portfolio”⁹ of the exclusively black and white fashion photographs appeared, posthumously, in the 15

September 1962 issue of *Vogue USA*.¹⁰ Since eventually *Vogue* did not use the nudes, Stern published a colour portfolio across 18 pages in the autumn 1962 issue of *Eros*. Norman Mailer's 1973 book *Marilyn Monroe* did not contain many of these photographs, although it did contain "pictures by the world's foremost photographers", as the dust jacket claimed, and the cover photo came from Stern's series.¹¹ Stern published a sizeable selection of 36 colour and 207 black and white full-page prints, plus around 1300 images on contact sheets, only 20 years after Monroe's death, in the 1982 volume called *The Last Sitting*, published by William Morrow and Company (also by Orbis Publishing in the same year).¹² A number of further editions and translations followed the 1982 selection of Stern's images until Schirmer Art Books published the monumental *The Complete Last Sitting* in 1992 (republished, with a significant shift in the title, as *Marilyn Monroe: The Complete Last Sitting* in 2000, Schirmer/Mosel Verlag GmbH): it contains *all* the contact sheets and the largest number of prints ever produced of the sitting in one volume. Finally, the 2011 re-edition of Mailer's 1973 text¹³ came out with nearly 180 photographs, this time exclusively of Bert Stern's, from *The Last Sitting*, and a selection of many contemporary film posters. Visually speaking, this combination of film posters and Stern's photographs is a nice analogy to the presentation at the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum.¹⁴ Museum presentation has thus finally reached a consensus and has definitely established this selection, with an appropriate title, to stand for the whole series.

- 6 *The Last Sitting* clearly was *not* meant to be the last sitting and quite probably not as much would be known about the circumstances of this photo shoot, had it not *become* the last sitting. The fashion shots were a subset of the whole series of 2571 photographs, and the images that were actually published in *Vogue* (and *Eros*) in 1962 were even fewer. At the same time, no doubt Bert Stern would have significantly contributed to the further construction of the iconic status of Marilyn Monroe anyway. It was Stern that proposed a photo report to *Vogue* and Marilyn: he was not originally commissioned by either parties¹⁵ and Marilyn was known not to agree to many photo sessions any more (Stern 2006: 20). The intention to contribute to the (re)construction of an icon is clearly reflected in the wording of the introduction to the posthumous *Vogue* portfolio (text reproduced as an appendix in Stern 2006: 123): "These are perhaps the only images of the new Marilyn, a Marilyn who revealed the elegance and taste that she instinctually possessed." These considerations amply justify a close look at the *The Last Sitting* for its intrinsic quality, on its own terms, as a truly unique body of photographic work.
- 7 The difficulty in discussing this body of work is that viewers' attention oscillates incessantly between the connotations of the subject of the photographs and the appreciation of the photographer's accomplishment. It is precisely this difficulty that posed similar problems to Walker Evans in 1974 when he spoke in an interview about photographing celebrities¹⁶: "Celebrities are suspect. It's an impure thing to do—too easy. To begin with, people are more interested in the famous person than the photograph; a photographer can get away with anything." The viewer is definitely interested in Marilyn Monroe in these images, in great part precisely because Bert Stern was too. At the same time, it has to be recognized that Stern did not happen to get away with just anything: this is indeed a unique encounter between the icon, her representation in an iconic manner by an iconic photographer. This is the moment when a master of seeing matched a master of being seen.

The photographer: Bert Stern

- 8 Bert Stern was well-known at the time as a portrait photographer, along with Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus and Mark Shaw.¹⁷ His breakthrough came following the visual success of his shot for his very first professional assignment¹⁸, the advertising campaign for Smirnoff vodka, “Driest of the Dry”, in 1955, for which he used photographs resembling photo reporting rather than conventional aggressive commercial photographs (Stern 2006: 125). He worked on various campaigns for companies like Canon, Volkswagen, Pepsi-Cola among others and he had become a regular collaborator with *Vogue* by this time: he even shot the covers for their November 1960, July 1961 and March 1962 issues, and, as he wrote in his 1982 book, he had a contract with *Vogue* that landed him with about 100 pages in the magazine in a year and offered him an additional 10 pages per year to publish his work at his entire discretion¹⁹. He had already photographed Catherine Deneuve and Brigitte Bardot in 1961, and Elizabeth Taylor (with Richard Burton) earlier in 1962 in Rome on the set of *Cleopatra*. Stern said (2006: 20): “Now in 1962, I had enough confidence and self-respect as a photographer to tackle [Marilyn Monroe].” Throughout his career he photographed Louis Armstrong, Marlon Brando, Gary Cooper as well as Sophia Loren, Audrey Hepburn, Drew Barrymore, Kate Moss, and Madonna among others.²⁰ He even revisited the context of *The Last Sitting* for *New York Magazine* with Lindsay Lohan as model in 2008, to divided critical acclaim.²¹ Finally, since Stern photographed advertising campaigns, and Marilyn wore Chanel N°5 to go to bed (Chanel even paid tribute to Marilyn in using a voice recording of hers in their 2013 campaign), it is little surprising that Chanel accepted to support the exhibition in Albi.
- 9 Stern’s photographic style is known for the graphic simplicity of his compositions and the close rapport to his subjects, both aspects clearly visible in *The Last Sitting*. This closeness is visually expressed by his use of the image frame: his images are not fragments of a vaster reality, there is really nothing outside the frame that would add to the meaning of the image because the structure of the image starts at the frame and progresses inwards. (This is what Shore calls an “active frame”, 2007: 62.) Walker Evans, in his review of *The Decisive Moment* by Henri Cartier-Bresson²², also wrote about photographing celebrities: “I happen to think that if you must photograph personalities, this neo-newspaper style [of Cartier-Bresson’s] is the way to do it.” This style involves taking a shot at the “decisive moment” when a particular expressive gesture arises or a posture is taken during the session that “gives odor full and high to a photograph” (*ibid.*). This is exactly what Stern accomplished with *The Last Sitting*: Marilyn is captured in acting out expressive gestures and intimate postures with a graphic simplicity within a minimalist setting.
- 10 He took those 2571 shots of Marilyn in order “to turn her into tones, and planes, and shapes, and ultimately an image for the printed page”, as Stern later recalled (2006: 34; also in French translation on the wall in the exhibition space in Albi). He chose a suite in an isolated hotel in the hills of Bel Air that provided for much more privacy than a session in a studio because “[s]he would never take her clothes off in a rented studio”, Stern felt (2006: 28; 2011: 14). However, he did convert the hotel room into a studio on location, with white paper, strobe lights, and accessories such as diaphanous scarves with geometrics, and jewellery and beads, taken from *Vogue*’s accessory department in

New York. Everything was in place when Marilyn arrived and these “familiar props of a photographic sitting seemed to set her at ease” (Stern 2006: 38).

Images of *the* screen icon

- 11 *The Last Sitting* was in fact two occasions, and involved three sittings altogether. The first began around 7pm on 23 June 1962 and ended around 7am the next morning, as Stern recalls (2006: 36, 54). The second began a week later and resumed with a final sitting after a day off.²³ At first sight, it might seem a philological matter which sets of images came from which sitting (their precise order within the sessions can be seen on the contact sheets). However, they do reveal different stages in the interaction of model and photographer. The first sitting used the accessories like the scarves and jewellery: the aim was shooting nudes, essentially. The second sitting began with the long day of fashion shoot with diamonds and the various clothes²⁴ that his assistants in New York had sought out for him directly from Dior, Chanel and Pucci, among others (later informally referred to as “the white dress sitting”, “the black dress sitting”, etc).
²⁵ This first long day finished with the most intimate shots of the whole series, in the bed, after Stern had asked the assistants “Why doesn’t everybody just leave the room and let me shoot her alone?” (Stern 2006: 72). After sleeping this one off, a final sitting produced the images of Marilyn with the Nikon camera and with the diamonds, among others.
- 12 The prints selected for the *Images de star, Marilyn. La Dernière Séance, Bert Stern* shown in Albi were carefully balanced between the two occasions. 26 photographs and the 2 contact sheets came from the first, 28 from the second time Stern shot Marilyn. The exhibition space was a big room with four partition walls in the middle that loosely divided the space into four compartments that did not break the visual flow of the images hung on the four walls of the room. The compartments enclosed the fashion shots and the bed shots, while the outer walls showed the portraits. Quotes from Stern were pasted on the walls and the film posters were displayed on the mezzanine floor overlooking the photographs.
- 13 The eight portraits with a weighty-looking necklace matching Marilyn’s skin type, all colour photographs, represent Marilyn’s face from a frontal viewpoint, Marilyn looking straight into the lens, sometimes her bust turned to the right. Diffuse lighting comes from behind and above the camera minimizing shadows but accentuating textures. The results are close-ups revealing the texture of her skin: her freckles, her mole, her hair on her arms, very thin lipstick and eye-liner. These are truly troubling images because they express extremes of emotion. She is sometimes the diva, sure of herself, smiling or sipping champagne, sometimes she is the diva of a cinema poster of a film with a sad storyline (which was not at all the atmosphere of her actual cinema poster images on view). She is the ordinary anonymous woman now looking provocative and seductive with one arm raised above her head, now looking pensive and melancholic or with an empty gaze that puts the viewer ill at ease. Sometimes she is the confident Marilyn smiling her captivating Marilyn smile. But essentially this set of images reveals fragility and flowing in and out of moods. These are thus the images where she is looking her most brutally honest and versatile but also the images where she is beginning to show her age and the fatigue from her recent deceptions.

- 14 There were multiple sets of nudes from the first occasion. One set of seven photographs, with red scarf, was shot from her waist up sometimes revealing a scar from her recent gall bladder operation. The diffuse lighting coming from behind Marilyn, sometimes with fill light from behind her left or right, leaves her body without contour and in the shadows, to a perfectly sculptural effect. The scarf gives her volume and shadows, as well as degrees of transparency on her breasts. Two of these photographs are in colour, five in black and white, the latter especially rendering Marilyn in the colours of white marble sculpture. She is the seductive woman in these photographs, revealing her breasts defiantly behind the security of the veil, yet playfully hiding. There is indeed a play with planes here: the plane of the image and the plane of the scarf behind which she stands. The only photographs on view where Marilyn put an X over them, perhaps not surprisingly, belong to this sequence. A second set of four images with striped scarf was shot again from her waist up. She shows either a girlish playfulness or the melancholy of the necklace portraits. A third set of seven photographs are also nudes from the waist up, in black and white with colour only for the accessories (paper roses). This set has a particularly nice grain. The texture of these prints and her posture, her bust bending slightly forward casting longer shadows on her skin, make this set resemble the texture of alabaster sculptures most closely. The paper roses give colours but, more importantly, also an affirmation to her *nudes* expressing a playful control over her real *body*. These shots revealed particularly well her scar from the gall bladder operation she had had six weeks earlier. Stern (2006: 46) wrote about the importance of this scar:

A blemish, an imperfection that only made her seem more vulnerable and accentuated the incredible smoothness of her skin. She was the color of champagne, the color of alabaster.

Bert Stern, *Marilyn in yellow roses*, hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 58,4 x 43,8 cm.
 Bert Stern, *Marilyn aux roses jaunes*, tirage argentique colorié à la main, 58,4 x 43,8 cm.

Copyright Bert Stern – Courtesy Staley-Wise, gallery New-York / Galerie Dina Vierny, Paris

- 15 Shore (2007: 18) observes that colour photography is not only closer to human vision but it also bears the imprint of the colours of a particular era. In this respect, it is interesting to look at the distribution of black and white and colour images in the exhibition. The images in shades of grey stop the viewer at a distance and bring out more strongly the sculptural aspect of the nude, while the colours make the images more transparent and reflect indeed the colours of the 1960s with their muted warm tones of the flesh: yellows, pinks and oranges.
- 16 The fashion shoot for *Vogue* (with hairstylist, make-up and all, captured in one of the images on view) used dresses by Chanel, Dior and Pucci. Some of the six images on view were in black and white, some in colour. It is especially these fashion photographs that hover between Marilyn acting, “being seen”, and revealing glimpses of her inner self: these are some of the most personal images of Marilyn Monroe and it took Stern’s mastery of his art, “seeing”, as well as a fair share of chance and the daunting number of images, that preserved this Marilyn–Norma Jeane. These fashion photographs represent a classic type of beauty, in her shy elegance and dignity. They were taken in a transitional period of high fashion photography: Stern’s images recall the golden age of couture elegance that had past its pinnacle in the work of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon in the late 1950s. They are not yet a precursor to the more edgy language of fashion photography with confrontational, erotic or autobiographical narratives, for instance, of Helmut Newton in the early 1970s. Curiously, the images of *The Last Sitting* as a whole make a neat separation between the overtly erotic and polemical and the classic fashion shots. This is perfectly in line with Lorquin’s remark (2007: 12): “While the fashion model appears blank and worn out by her own asexuality, the star plays to

the devotion of the masses. She offers her lips, the swelling of her breasts, and she disrobes.” Marilyn embodied both roles in *The Last Sitting*.

Bert Stern, *Veiled portrait*, colour print, 48,3 x 43,8 cm.

Bert Stern, *Portrait à la voilette*, tirage couleur, 48,3 x 43,8 cm.

Copyright Bert Stern – Courtesy Staley-Wise, gallery New-York / Galerie Dina Vierny, Paris

- 17 The seven images of Marilyn with diamonds also belong to the second occasion but were taken a day after the main fashion shoot. These are (sometimes tainted) close-ups with glistening beads of diamond. This is the only part of the whole series showing marked shadows, cast by Marilyn’s head against the backdrop: they were taken from a bird’s eye view with light coming from the sides. These images, many with a demonic laugh and all with her hair undone, evoke the image of the *femme fatale* of unbridled and intimate individuality, in a posture that suggests feeling sexy and receptive. Nevertheless, her position with respect to the camera also conveys the idea that she is actually dominated by the photographer’s view(finder). Stern stated (1982/1992: 463) that the *The evil laugh* was the last image he had taken of Marilyn during *The Last Sitting* and it was the last image of his *Vogue* portfolio.

Bert Stern, *The evil laugh*, gelatin silver print, 40,6 x 58,4 cm.

Bert Stern, *Le rire démoniaque*, tirage argentique, 40,6 x 58,4 cm.

Copyright Bert Stern – Courtesy Staley-Wise, gallery New-York / Galerie Dina Vierny, Paris

- 18 The related *Portrait in blue*, the Marilyn classic, is among the best-known images of Marilyn Monroe. It is probably her most sensuous portrait taken by any photographer.

Bert Stern, *Portrait in blue*, tainted gelatin silver print, 39,7 x 59,7 cm.

Bert Stern, *Portrait en bleu*, tirage argentique viré, 39,7 x 59,7 cm.

Copyright Bert Stern – Courtesy Staley-Wise, gallery New-York / Galerie Dina Vierny, Paris

- 19 There were two photographs in the exhibition that were crossed out in red marker by Marilyn. She received the contact sheets and transparencies from Stern and she did not approve of the publication of a good number of images: according to Stern (1982/1992: 25) she crossed out half the negatives he had sent her but literally “massacred” the transparencies by scratching them or putting a hairpin through them. The significance of this remains a puzzle in the sense it would be highly pretentious to claim to have found a pattern in her disapproval: as a matter of fact, the two images with Marilyn’s cross are excellent and advantageous shots. At any rate, they are a visible sign that she was consciously shaping the image(s) she wanted transmitted, thereby assuming her role in her own (re)construction.
- 20 Finally, what is truly remarkable about the photographs in the bed is that while there is no indication of movement, there is a very vivid sense of duration in these shots. Some of the portraits in bed were black and white, others in colour. It is especially with respect to this part of the selection that some of the shots do not put Marilyn to her advantage, yet they remain honest, personal and decidedly intimate. However, the huge horizontal image *The bed* (hung on its separate wall in the exhibition space), showing Marilyn lying on her front with her left leg raised, her hair covering half of her face, and supporting her chin in her right palm is certainly among the great nudes of all times because of its composition, the tones and the grain of the black and white. But especially because of that look that glistens in her eye suggesting, possibly addressing all viewers: “Here I am. This is what you’ve wanted. What now?” The last image of the show, before waving her goodbye, was the profoundly moving *Marilyn asleep in blue*.²⁶
- 21 Marilyn Monroe’s sensitivity was shown by her ability to act out a whole series of iconographic references as far as her postures are concerned. Marilyn was both revealing herself and hiding, while playing with these references in front of the camera. Stern’s sensitivity was shown by his swiftness to capture all this on film. Stern wrote about the circumstances of the shooting (2006: 50):
- It was hard, it really was hard, because she was happening. She was alive. A wild spirit, as fleeting as thought itself and as intense as the light that played on her. I couldn’t freeze Marilyn and expect to get a picture from her.
- Marilyn was the fantasy. If Marilyn were still for an instant, her beauty would evaporate. With her, it was like photographing light itself.
- I had all kinds of imagery floating around, and she was picking up on it, performing it all. I didn’t have to tell her what to do. We hardly talked to each other at all. We just worked it out. [...] She’d move into an idea, I’d see it, quick lock it in, click it, and strobes would go off like a lightning flash.
- 22 About the difficulty of catching that decisive moment, he wrote (2006: 68):
- With Marilyn I wanted to shoot fast. Even standing still her expressions were so fleeting, her moods so mercurial, I never knew how long she’d hold still for me to click that shutter.

On the iconography of *The Last Sitting*

- 23 Bert Stern was not the first to have photographed Marilyn Monroe. His series should then also be seen in the context of multiple series of images of Marilyn by various

photographers and the iconographic references the images make. The iconic photographs of Marilyn (with Carl Sandburg) in Beverley Hills taken by Arnold Newman (1918-2006) show Marilyn troubled and unhappy, months before she died. *The Last Photo Session* Marilyn saw published was shot by Allan Grant for *Life* earlier in 1962.²⁷ Also, Richard Avedon photographed her on a number of occasions, including a series where Marilyn impersonated some of her predecessors in December 1958 and another series in May 1957 from which Avedon's possibly most famous shot of Marilyn pensive and melancholic²⁸ is noteworthy.

- 24 Nudes of Marilyn go back to the calendar shots *Marilyn Monroe on Red Velvet* (1949) by Tom Kelley that pre-date her film career. However, there is a world of a difference between the context of the two poses in the nude. In 1949 Marilyn was the unemployed cash-stripped actress who had repeatedly declined Kelley's offers before eventually agreeing. By 1962 she had become an awe-inspiring icon who had the stature, despite all her difficulties in her professional and private life, to prompt even Stern to tell her (and probably to himself too) at one point (2006: 72): "I'm not afraid of you, Marilyn." Iconographic references in the history of photography are virtually exclusively to work by other American photographers. They would definitely include some of Man Ray's nudes because of the similarities in the posture of the models. Those equally well-known images with Marilyn holding a Nikon camera, not on view at the exhibition at the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi because not part of the selection originally established by Stern, echo the 15 May 1952 *Vogue* cover photo, by Irving Penn, showing Suzy Parker with a camera. One of the portraits, "Marilyn in a necklace" (reproduced in Stern 2006: 25), shows Marilyn in the same posture as on the cover of *Salute* magazine in August 1946 (reproduced in Mailer 2011: 79). Stern also mentioned (2011: 12) the influence Steichen had on him with his 1928 photograph of Greta Garbo on the set of *A Woman of Affairs*, which Stern considered to be probably the most powerful photograph of a screen icon. The influence of this image would be wrong not to notice in the portrait with necklace where Marilyn wraps her hands around her neck. (Her neck of course, because Marilyn obviously could not put her hands on her iconic hair!) It also has to be added that Marilyn had her own Hollywood idols, Jean Harlow most notably, that served as personal iconographic references. Also, there are references to illustrations of her on some of the film posters on view as an appendix to the exhibition: her posture for *Le Prince et la Danseuse* (*The Prince and the Showgirl*, 1957) or *Le Millardaire* (*Let's Make Love*, 1960) harmonized well with some of Stern's shots of Marilyn with a necklace, while the posters for *Niagara* (*Niagara*, 1953) and *Les hommes préfèrent les blondes* (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, 1953) recall some of the fashion shots.
- 25 As far as the iconographic references to paintings are concerned, there are two points to note: references to the postures of the female nude in classical European painting and the shift from anonymous to more and more identified models. References to the female nude go back at least to *The Birth of Venus* (1484-1486) by Botticelli and its subsequent representations. References to this theme are particularly tangible in the use of the veil, ultimately going back to the Old Testament, and especially in the posture in *Marilyn in a sheet smiling*. However, Bertrand Lorquin's more general approach to the history of the female nude, developed in his catalogue essay "The star, the work and the model" to the 2006 exhibition (2007: 11), can be disputed inasmuch as, while his effort to insert Marilyn's images into this iconography is reasonable and perfectly justified, he does not discuss *specific* iconographic references as they apply to

the particular set of photographs on view in Paris in 2006 and now in Albi. Nevertheless, Lorquin's (2007: 9, 11) presentation of the role of the cinema and theatre in creating the modern female nude is insightful, pointing out that "the artist who creates beauty from a model is no longer a painter or sculptor. He is a photographer." As far as the lying female nude is concerned, various sleeping or reclining nudes can be evoked, such as *Sleeping Venus* (ca. 1508-10) by Giorgione, *The Nymph of the Spring* (ca. 1530-34) by Lucas Cranach the Elder or *The Venus of Urbino* (1538) by Titian: at the same time, these are consistently in a different posture from Marilyn's who lies on her front, so they are not precursors. Marilyn's posture in fact resembles the much more recent odalisques in *Odalisque* (1743) by François Boucher or *Siesta* (1900) by Pierre Bonnard: they have a much more overtly erotic and seductive feel to them. As to the use of bed spreads to shape the fall of light and shadow on the body, *Danaë* (1636) by Rembrandt definitely has to be mentioned as a precursor, although it is in a different posture. *The Valpinçon Bather* (1808), *The Turkish Bath* (1862), both by Ingres and *Nude Woman, Anna* (1876) by Renoir are representations of women with their back to the viewer: this is relevant for the fashion portfolio in particular. *The Source* (1856) by Ingres and *The Young Ladies of Avignon* (1907) by Picasso²⁹ provide models for women raising one arm or both over their head in their intimacy.

- 26 The second observation is that many of the classical nudes represented women as Venuses, nymphs, Danaïds, odalisques, allegorical, biblical and mythological figures—the stock designations (and only legitimate artistic reason) for representations of an unnamed female nude at the time. This changed with *La maja desnuda* (1798-1805) by Goya, which depicts a popular type of woman, the *maja* (without the model being a *maja*), and Manet's *Olympia* (1863), representing a prostitute (whose model was the painter Victorine Meurent). These paintings, however, bear no iconographic relations with *The Last Sitting*. The tradition of de-anonymizing and de-mythologizing the female nude and the tradition of representing "ordinary" women, often prostitutes or starlets, was taken up notably by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and is best represented in the eponymous museum in Albi now showing *Images de star, Marilyn. La Dernière Séance, Bert Stern*. "The anonymous model is substituted by the thundering star who puts her body to work, imposing all the means of her anatomy", as Lorquin noted (2007: 12). And Marilyn indeed performed all the postures of the unnamed Venuses as well as the postures of the ordinary and named women, but acting them out single-handedly, she elevated all of them to the status of a modern icon: Marilyn Monroe.

Concluding remarks

- 27 There were various events organized around the exhibition: lithographies of contemporary starlets by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec from the Museum collection, two talks at the Auditorium of the Museum³⁰, film screenings at the Cinémathèque in Toulouse and in Albi and various events for small children, families and school groups. There were no originals in English of Bert Stern's commentaries in the exhibition space, which I found was a pity precisely because it would have driven the concept of the exhibition to its logical conclusion manifest in the title: defining a definite selection of *The Last Sitting* supported by Stern's original English texts, fully acknowledging the part each partner had played in it. The exhibition catalogue, only in French and priced at €20, was the Gallimard edition of the 2006 catalogue, but had been out of stock just a

couple days in. Hopefully, a re-edition of this volume will be published in the near future: there was significant public interest since an impressive 15,000 visitors went to see *Images de star, Marilyn. La Dernière Séance, Bert Stern*, at the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi.³¹

- 28 Because some of the photographs, especially those of the fashion sitting on the bed, are suggestive of an exceptional intimacy between Marilyn and the photographer, there has been much celebrity-style speculation, some of it academic, some downright distasteful, about the degree of this intimacy and the degree of influence the bottles of champagne brought to the scene. Stern has always seemed to be categorical despite his admitted hesitations all along the sittings. But in the final analysis, it does not matter at all: whatever happened between the two, whatever they talked about, whatever they saw in each other, was possibly the best they felt fit to bring to the situation. This encounter was exceptional because the two made it so with their own contributions and then events in life also put their hand in and turned these images into *The Last Sitting*.

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank Danièle Devynck, of the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum, curator of the exhibition, for providing me with the press kit, answering my subsequent questions in a generous telephone interview on 7 January 2016 and having the visuals sent to me. Many thanks

go to Emeline Jouve, of Champollion University Centre in Albi, for drawing my attention to the event in the first place and for her encouragement.

2. Staley-Wise Gallery is official authorized dealer for Bert Stern photographs: http://www.staleywise.com/collection/stern/bertstern_collection.html

3. <http://www.museemailol.com/le-musee-maillol/galerie-dina-vierny>

4. For a review, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/05/arts/design/05monr.html>, consulted 6 January 2016.

5. Lorquin did not specify the exact museum.

6. See [http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/photographs/bert-stern-marilyn-monroe-the-last-sitting-5165012-details.aspx?](http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/photographs/bert-stern-marilyn-monroe-the-last-sitting-5165012-details.aspx?from=salesummary&intObjectID=5165012&sid=88bc3f67-8cbe-4de2-87a8-3f93510b4113)

for the exhibition history of this part of the Constantiner Collection.

7. These 59 prints subsequently went on view as part of a larger selection of photographs of Marilyn in the Constantiner collection including work by other photographers: *Marilyn Monroe: Photographs from the Collection of Michaela and Leon Constantiner*, Tel Aviv Museum, Israel, 13 May–25 September, 2004; *I Wanna Be Loved By You: Photographs of Marilyn Monroe from the Leon and Michaela Constantiner Collection*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 12 November, 2004–3 April, 2005, see https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/657/I_Wanna_Be_Loved_By_You%3A_Photos_of_Marilyn_Monroe_from_the_Leon_and_Michaela_Constantiner_Collection.

8. See <http://www.christies.com/presscenter/pdf/11172008/145530.pdf> of 17 November 2008 for a presentation of the collection. For the prices realized and the description of the lots, see <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/salebrowse.aspx?intsaleid=22292&viewType=list>, both consulted 6 January 2016. There were two additional lots, of one print each, that came from *The Last Sitting* but were separate from the selection of 59 images.

9. Stern (2011: 15)

10. Stern (1982/1992: 25) remarks that *Vogue* did not change the layout or the images for the publication after news of her death. It means that the very sombre and melancholic series of black and whites, and no nudes, had been selected before they became a visual obituary. The absence of nudes of Marilyn from the *Vogue* portfolio is also curious since they had published nudes earlier of other models.

11. Lawrence Schiller had assembled photographs taken by 24 of the best-known photographers (such as Eve Arnold, Milton Green, George Barris and Bert Stern) before the publishing house contacted Mailer to write the text to accompany the images (Schiller 2011: 16, 19). After the book was published in June 1973, the collection of photographs Schiller had put together was inaugurated at the Hotel Beverly Wilshire in Los Angeles before going on a world tour (Schiller 2011: 18). This seems to have been the first *public* showing of some of Stern's photographs among other work.

12. The French translation came out in 1982 (Editions du Chêne/Hachette) and in 1992 by Editions de La Martinière, to coincide with *Le Mois de la Photo*. Page references "(1982/1992)" are to the latter edition.

13. This edition was slightly abridged by J Michael Lennon; a French translation came out in 2012.

14. Another connection between Stern and posters is that he himself photographed images for film posters, for *Lolita* by Stanley Kubrick in 1962, among others.

15. He was, however, commissioned by *Vogue* for the second time, for the dress sittings, and Marilyn agreed to pose again for Stern (Stern 2006: 64).

16. cited in Campany (2014: 46)

17. Stern's other portraits were shown in Paris at the Galerie de l'Instant in 2013: <http://www.lagaleriedelinstant.com/bert-stern/>

18. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/27/arts/bert-stern-elite-photographer-known-for-images-of-marilyn-monroe-dies-at-83.html?_r=0, also <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/10146775/Bert-Stern.html>
19. According to the text on view at the exhibition.
20. A selection of these portraits can be seen at: <http://www.vanityfair.fr/people/legendes/diaporama/bert-stern-photographe-de-marilyn-monroe-brigitte-bardot-catherine-deneuve/22#bert-stern-et-ses-muses-de-marilyn-bardot-16>, consulted 6 January 2016.
21. On this reprise, see: <http://nymag.com/fashion/08/spring/44247/>
22. 19 October 1952, *The New York Times Book Review*; reproduced in Campany (2014: 216)
23. There is some confusion about the duration and exact dates of the sitting. Stern (2011: 12) gives “Four days in June 1962” as an indication: the two occasions, a week apart, would span four calendar days because starting late in the afternoon they ended the next morning. Stern (2011: 15) specifies that they were weekends, although he seems to have arrived a couple of days earlier, on 21 June to Los Angeles, for the first sitting (2011: 14). It adds to the uncertainty that Stern (2006: 62) claimed he made arrangements for *three* days and nights at the hotel for the *second* occasion. Moreover, there was a short third occasion where Marilyn posed for Stern after a day off after the second, fashion, sitting – which would likely add up to five calendar days. In sum, the four days only work out if the first occasion is considered as a reservation for one night and the second occasion a span of three calendar days.
24. Stern (2011: 15) mentions “more than 20 different clothes”, “if scarves count as well”.
25. Various selections have been assembled into slide shows by Marilyn enthusiasts, for instance at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheMarilyn1969monroe/videos>
26. This image is not the last Stern shot during *The Last Sitting*. Moreover, the very last photographs of Marilyn Monroe were taken by his friend and photographer George Barris just a couple days before her death.
27. See <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/photographs/allan-grant-marilyns-last-photo-session-1962-5165082-details.aspx?from=salesummary&intObjectID=5165082&sid=0018e3f2-4d31-4453-b93b-fa8f7696d4a7>, consulted 7 January 2016.
28. See <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2002.379.11>
29. It is a lucky coincidence that Picasso’s paintings, including some female nudes, were at a temporary exhibition at the Abattoirs Museum in Toulouse, nearby Albi between late 2015 and early 2016.
30. 9 October 2015, Professor Georges-Claude Guilbert: “Marilyn, la construction d’un mythe”; 26 November 2015, Dr Vincent Souladié “Marilyn et la mélancholie du glamour dans le viel Hollywood”.
31. For reviews in the mainly local and regional press, see: <http://culturebox.francetvinfo.fr/expositions/photo/le-jour-ou-bert-stern-immortalisa-la-derniere-seance-de-marilyn-monroe-228449>, <http://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2015/09/12/2175725-marilyn-monroe-sur-les-cimaises-du-musee-toulouse-lautrec.html>, <http://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2015/09/28/2186235-maryline-monroe-star-du-musee-toulouse-lautrec.html>, <http://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2015/09/27/2185727-c-etait-la-derniere-seance-de-la-venus-marilyn.html>, http://www.lejournalnici.com/actualite/a-la-une/marilyn-charme-les-albigeois#.VpBQm_nhDIU, consulted 8 January 2016.

INDEX

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