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Polaroid Couture

Paris photographer Cathleen Naundorf's new book *Haute Couture* channels her mentor, Horst P. Horst, in bewitching new ways.

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Photography by Cathleen Naundorf



One moment inside the spacious Paris apartment of the German photographer Cathleen Naundorf and it's clear that, among the many things she shares with her mentor, the late Horst P. Horst, is a love of exotic props. Piles of them are arrayed, like a carnivalesque installation, along one long wall: the white skull of a horse, several large stuffed black and white birds with their wings aloft, giant leering paper-mache Chinese heads found in a thrift store in Belleville, an explosion of silk flowers from the venerable Paris shop Legeron, and a stunning rainbow-feathered headdress of the indigenous Yanomami people of Brazil's rainforest.

Gamely, the teeny-tiny, hyperkinetic Naundorf, who wears jeans and silver metallic sandals, put the feathered crown on her head. "I've always been very interested in nomads," she says, toggling between German-accented English and French. "They're strong because they only carry what they need. I've been a nomad all my life. I

didn't even get a washing machine until I turned 40. But I'm still a nomad."

That is, a nomad who's perhaps about to become better known in the world of fashion and art photography for her book *Haute Couture: The Polaroids of Cathleen Naundorf*, out June 15 from Prestel. For the book, Naundorf, 44, who has shot for magazines like *So Chic* and *Vs.*, was allowed access to the couture archives of Chanel, Dior, Lacroix, Gaultier, Valentino and Elie Saab. She then put the clothes on models in Paris settings as grand as, well, the Grand Palais or as beguiling as an old plaster shop (for an all-white series) or anatomy museum. The photos, which also feature plenty of amazing hats from Philip Treacy and surrealist hairpieces from Odile Gilbert, were made in Naundorf's signature style: taken on a boxy vintage Deardorff camera with Polaroid film, printed Avedon-style on the negative, then hand-pressed on a table, giving them a mottled, haunting, painterly effect.

That style, featured in a recent exhibition of Naundorf's work at London's Hamiltons Gallery

and at a show next month at Munich's Bernheimer gallery, helps bring the photographer back to "painting and my childhood," she says. Born in Weissenfels, Germany (the same hometown as Horst), under communist rule, to an engineer father and a homemaker mother who painted, Naundorf showed an early interest in brushes and canvas—and in the piano.

But it wasn't until after the family managed to move to West Germany's Munich in 1985 that Naundorf got the itch to take her Praktica camera around the world with her, shooting native cultures in places like Malaysia and Mongolia. "It's always the best way to meet people, to ask to take their picture," she says. After shooting in the latter country, she wrote to 150 book editors before she found one to publish her images. "They needed 20 shots and I gave them 1,000," she says. "I have a lot of energy!"

That, along with the often cheeky opulence of her work, is likely how she managed to charm couture-house and venue managers in Paris, a notoriously inhospitable city, into giving her such extraordinary access to clothes and backdrops for Haute Couture. One shot from the book, taken in the kitchen of the Plaza Athénée Hotel, shows a model in a Dior dress (its hem pooling dramatically on the tiled kitchen floor) and a Stephen Jones lobster hat pulling a live version of the clawed creature from a steaming silver pot. "I pre-ordered lobsters from the hotel for the shoot but they weren't there, so I sent my stylist out into the streets to find a lobster," she laughs. The book also has more than a few nods to Horst, such as an image of a dark-haired model lounging in the same chair in Coco Chanel's rue Cambon atelier that Chanel sat in for Horst's famous 1937 shot. Typical of her chutzpah, Naundorf looked up the elderly Horst's number in the New York City phone book when she was still a twentysomething in Germany and called him. "I told him I was from his hometown," she says, "and that was destiny. He told me to come to New York." So she did, for a spell. Naundorf never worked with Horst, who died in 1999 at 93, but she ended up talking with him on the phone nearly every day for years. "He'd give me advice, always so well-dressed and full of old-fashioned manners," she says. "He started as a painter, too."

To look at their work alongside each other's makes clear what Naundorf, despite her unique processing style, learned from him. She says it best herself. "It's the lighting, the drama," she says. "It's called *zweilichtin* in German, the play of light. If you could see the way the light comes through the leaves in Weissenfels, you'd see where we both get it from."