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Backyard Oasis: The Swimming Pool In Southern California Photography, 1945-1982



Synopsis

Southern California's pool culture is the subject of this unique and luscious collection of photographs that explore the parallel evolution of an iconic symbol and an artistic genre. Since the end of World War II, Southern California's backyard pools--those blue-green oases in an otherwise often arid landscape--have symbolized any number of American ideals: optimism, wealth, consumerism, escape, physical beauty, and the triumph of man over nature. Simultaneously, the field of photography developed as a transformative method for recording the human condition. This exhibition catalog celebrates the nexus of these two phenomena in a one-of-a-kind collection that features more than two hundred works by more than forty postwar artists and photographers. It presents works by photographers and artists including Bill Anderson, John Baldessari, Ruth Bernhard, David Hockney, Herb Ritts, Ed Ruscha, Julius Shulman, and Larry Sultan. Thematically grouped into topics ranging from the rise of celebrity culture, suburbia and dystopia, avant-garde architectural landscape design, and the cult of the body, these images offer a rich study of the cultural connotations of the swimming pool. Six insightful essays provide a comprehensive overview of the development of the swimming pool and its attendant aesthetic and social culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Some of these images will be familiar--Herb Ritts' unforgettable shot of Richard Gere taking a poolside business call, oblivious to his girlfriend performing an almost too-perfect dive to his right; William Holden floating dead in the 'Sunset Boulevard' pool, surrounded by press and police--but

most are new to me. Threads emerge: the pool as a piece of the Southwest's modernist architecture (caught best in Julius Shulman's b&w photography, much of it in austere Palm Springs, and in Leland Lee's color photos of the Hollywood Hills); the pool as symbol of prosperity and/or banality (Bill Owens); the long afternoon at the country club (Bill Anderson); abandoned, emptied--or, in one pitiful case, even filled-in--pools (Loretta Ayeroff); and of course an absolute ton of Hockney (no complaints here). There is also much here on the pool as a focus of Hollywood's mid-century gay culture, and it must be said that this last theme rather runs away with things. Aside from a couple Ruth Bernhard portraits, the only women to show up here are either embalmed housewives or gay icons like Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield. In short, the book got a little sidetracked, if not downright hijacked, by one of its subplots. Really fellas, did it never enter your head that a woman might also feel vital near one of those big vats of chlorine?

Sigh! I put this book on my wish list when it was still on pre-order. I was quite excited at the prospect of vintage photography of vintage swimming pools. I was excited for the watery blues, the tiles, the sneak peak of backyards in Southern California, the families, the lone swimmers, alas, this book had none. The most true-to-what-I-was-expecting photograph was the repetition of the front cover image. The majority of the images are either small, black and white, of people in their bathing suits with no swimming pool in sight, crotches, and penises. Pretty disappointed to say the least. Even so much that I returned it. This book was of no visual value to me.

This is truly a comprehensive overview of the swimming pool culture up to 1982, which is steeped in tradition in Southern California. Beautifully printed, 264 pages, filled with full page photos of many noted images and many unseen images. Great for your library, coffee table or gift.

I wanted to visit the exhibition in Plam Springs for this book last year but couldnt - so next best thing was to buy the book. I love it! If you are a bit of a pool nut like me and love a bit of nostalgia which california is loaded with then this book is for you!!

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