

MEMORY COLLECTOR

Kelly Klein recounts the magical moments featured in her latest book, *Photographs by Kelly Klein*

Words by Vanessa Pascale • Photo Credit: *Photographs by Kelly Klein* by Kelly Klein, Rizzoli New York, 2015

To be invited into one of Kelly Klein's beautifully designed homes is an honor; to be there to pepper a normally private person with questions is a bit daunting. Accustomed to rubbing elbows with the upper echelon of society—as seen in her latest photo book *Photographs by Kelly Klein*—the former fashion designer started out working with Ralph Lauren, then went on to work with Calvin Klein—who she married (after twenty years together, they divorced in 2006). She transitioned into fashion photography, and over the last few decades has photographed for Hearst and Condé Nast's magazines. The self-taught photographer escaped to exotic locales, forged relationships with fashion-business-media magnates, attended exclusive events, and built an extraordinary body of work, and for the first time, we get a rare peek into her life with *Photographs by Kelly Klein*.

It's mid-October and the sun has already disappeared into the west. I rush from the cab to check in with the doorman, and take the elevator up. As soon as Kelly opens her front door, I apologize for arriving a few minutes late. In a soothing tone, she assures me that it's okay and leads me into her living room passed photographs of a young Gisele Bündchen and a horse by Steven Klein. The muffled barks of her dogs, nowhere in sight, fill the quiet space.

Her affinity for aesthetics is palpable in the modern, warm decor. Walls of yawning windows overlook Central Park. In front of the fireplace is an oversized coffee table with a bottle of water set out for me; a couple of candles aglow; stacks of coffee table books including her own; knickknacks and fresh flowers. To the left of the fireplace is a grouping of black-framed photos: a close-up of her son Lukas, an "eerie" woman outfitted in a string of lights sitting by the fountain down the street (both photographed by Kelly) and Annie Leibovitz's shirtless Arnold Schwarzenegger with a cigar in his mouth, circa 1988, sitting bareback on a white steed.

I remove from my tote her sixth book, *Photographs by Kelly Klein* and set it on the couch between us. The luxe fabric cover features a paparazzi-taken photo of Kelly in the 90s. Dressed in a light-colored slip dress (a 90s staple of hers) and a genuine smile, she is the epitome of grace, glamour, and confidence. From my recent internet research on Kelly, I found that she went to great lengths to secure this particular photograph. "It was such a

crazy story," says the soft-spoken photographer. "I remember this picture from 1994 because it ran in *Women's Wear Daily*, and *W...* For some reason, I thought that Getty images had it, but they didn't. So I contacted every paparazzi I could find for 7 months from Europe to America, searching the image. And I finally found it in a box in California.



Self-portrait East Hampton, New York, 1984

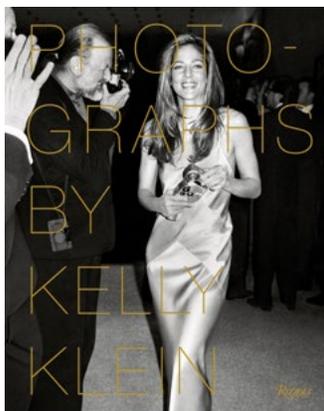
A negative inside a box... 5 or 10 years of negs from *Women's Wear Daily* at a company called PMC and they had it." Many had relinquished the hope of locating the negative, and therefore suggested other book cover options, but Kelly persisted. "I'm Scorpio, so I'm determined," she replies.

Aside from it being a beautiful photo of her, the true reason she sought out this specific photo is because she's pictured holding a camera. "Really sorta says it all. I'm one that carries a camera all the time." I initially mistook the camera for a purse, with good reason: "I used to carry it at night 'cause I thought it sorta looked like a purse," says Kelly. She walks into the room next to where we're seated and returns with the special edition 90s-made Olympus film camera from the cover.

Kelly's past books *Pools, Cross, Underworld...* were themed and featured the donated work of other photographers, whereas her latest book is comprised entirely of her photos. At first reluctant to publish a book of her work, she eventually decided to pull around 500 images for her art director, Sam Shahid, to work with. If she liked the outcome, she'd present it to her book publisher Rizzoli. The chapterless layout he presented her with was "amazing," she tells me, so she finally embraced the idea. "I wanted to tell a little bit of my journey over the last 30-35 years through photographs. I love Instagram. I love showing people or inspiring people throughout the day with what I'm doing or what I think is pretty by snapping a photograph. So this book came together. And then I felt it was important to show some very personal moments in my life." Aside from her work appearing in magazines over the years, Kelly has never showcased her work in a gallery nor has she shown others her personal photograph collection. She doesn't even have an agent.

She flips through the pages of her book and pauses on the image to share the anecdote associated with it. "This happened to be a trip in the South of France; I think we also ended up in Italy with Lapo Elkann and a group of his friends and my friends. We were on the most beautiful boat and we were just sailing around and it was a trip that I will remember forever," she says in a tone as lulling as the water they're pictured on. We stop on another sailboat excursion, this time in Turkey. "This is a very important part," she says thoughtfully, "this Bruce Weber shoot in Santorini, Greece. It was probably the most memorable moment of my life, when I first started working for Calvin and he sent me to Greece for one month to work as an assistant-assistant-assistant stylist on this one month underwear shoot." She and her glamorous coterie, that included Iman, Andie MacDowell, and a band of gorgeous models, ruled the hotel they resided in. She stops on images from her birthday party at Indochine, intimate moments with Calvin, "breakfast with [Henry] Kissinger." She points to the photo. "These are just moments that meant a lot to me. I will never forget them and that's why they're in the book. It goes on and on," she laughs.

In the beginning of her photography career, Kelly was commissioned to shoot celebrity portraits. Among



those she photographed are Warren Beatty, Woody Harrelson, Christy Turlington, Carré Otis, and the ever-ethereal Liv Tyler, whose beautiful image is featured in this book. “It was right at the beginning of her [Liv] career, and she was just this beauty that walked into the room. And she’s so romantic—just the way she looks and talks. The stylist had this white dress. I remember we were standing by a very grungy, old New York City elevator and she just looked—in this white, romantic dress and that face—just a beautiful moment of her.”

Since the book’s debut, admirers have asked to purchase select images. She’s sold a few. “I’m donating all my profits to God’s Love We Deliver from this book and I can certainly donate profits for the photography if it sells, as well. I’m not thinking of a gallery, but I’m thinking of possibly selling them if someone’s interested. I dunno. I’ve never done that before.” All of the proceeds from every one of her books have been donated to charity. Not a lot of people do that, I comment. “No, but it’s my little way. I always choose an AIDS foundation ’cause when I started doing books in the early 90s. Everyone was dying in New York City, people I knew and people I didn’t know, and it was just a terrible time. I decided with *Pools*, I think, to donate all the profits to Elizabeth Glaser’s AIDS foundation, and ever since then I just decided to choose a different foundation for each book, mostly for AIDS and healthcare... I just like to do it that way, it makes me feel good.”

Prior to working as a fashion photographer, Kelly worked in fashion as a designer for almost twenty years under “two great American designers.” “I happened to have met Ralph and he gave me a job when I was 19.” She was there for six years, then took the summer off. After her hiatus, she



Tasha Tilberg, East Hampton, New York, 1996

interviewed with Calvin Klein and landed that job. You worked alongside two iconic fashion moguls, walked away with the heart and last name of one—what is the secret to such success? She laughs. “I’ve gotten a couple of breaks in my life, I have to say. I’ve been blessed and humbled by how lucky I’ve been to either be at the right place or the right time or just meet the people that I’ve met, some of which are in this book—the most inspiring people, who have taught me a lot... Y’know, I dunno what it really is? I feel like I work hard and I try to learn from everyone around me. I think if you work hard, a lot of things come to you. I worked hard,” she replies with a laugh.

Was there any moment when you thought, I can’t believe this is my life? “No. Everybody’s life is—no one’s treated differently. Life is full of bumps and rocks and it’s a bumpy ride for everybody. I’m not saying that my life is not bumpy at times. Life treats everyone the same. So, no, I don’t feel like I’m some person that’s so privileged but I have appreciated every moment of my life that I feel I’ve been lucky to have. And some of which, I think, comes across in this book, and it has inspired me to work harder and keep going and have a child later in life. And all *this* is my journey. Who knows where the rest will go? But it’s life. It comes to you, I think, *mostly* from perseverance and hard work. I think.”

PEOPLE MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO FIND OUT THAT...

"I can cook. I walk the dogs," she laughs, "um, I'm taking pottery and I can't make anything on the wheel. I'm thinking to myself, I'm a very creative person, and I'm very visual —when it comes to spinning on a wheel with a bunch of mud, I can't. I've done 14 hours in 4 weeks and I can't make anything. But y'know what!? I'm going to stick with it. It's a 14 week course."

(Note: Take a peek at her Instagram @KellyAKlein and you'll find that she, of course, did succeed.)

FLORIDA LIVING

"I've always loved Florida, I find it very easy. You can drive to the bank. You can drive to Starbucks... It's a very nice life and it's a beautiful place to spend your winters." For thirty years, every winter, the accomplished equestrian competed on the circuit in Wellington, Florida. "I recently retired for a couple of reasons, one being my son. I need to stay healthy and strong for him and horses are a little dangerous —especially at my age." She sold her place in Wellington a couple of years ago, and built a house in Palm Beach. "It's a 3,000 square foot house. I really wanted a small turnkey... I'd built a huge barn door, closes the house off on the eastside, the ocean side, for hurricanes... We spend a lot of time grilling at home. We love cooking and watching sports and hanging out with my son," she remarks on how they spend their time there.



Amanda Moore, Bridgehampton, New York, 2000



Michael Gandolfi, New York City, 2002

These days, her time is happily devoted to motherhood. "I really stepped back just to be a mother. I'm 59-years-old, I had him [Lukas] when I was 51, and I need the energy to be his mother... I'm still working but I can't call myself a fashion photographer at this point." Has Lukas taken an interest in photography? "No, he's very interested in the press, like if he saw you here with the tape recorder," she says with a smile. "If he sees a news channel outside filming, *What are they filming? Who are they interviewing?* I was wondering if he showed up here, if he was going to ask you what you're doing?" she laughs. "He's a character."

What is the best part about being a photographer? "If I'm shooting travel, and just shooting a woman walking down the street or an alleyway in Cuba —you're just capturing these moments, then you go home and you remember your trip. And it brings back all those memories and you have those pictures forever. What I love about photography, it's the memories. You don't always have the memories if you don't take a camera... My mother just sent me an envelope of pictures of me from a baby through teenage years that she found, these kodachrome old slides, and nothing is better than that —that's beautiful stuff to have —to show my son." **ML**