

Fashion still drives Ventura photographer Neal Barr's latest project



Credit: Chuck Kirman

CHUCK KIRMAN/THE STAR Renowned fashion photographer Neal Barr with one of his Harper's Bazaar cover photos. He recently was named Brooks Institute 2015 Distinguished Alumnus.



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World-renowned fashion photographer Neal Barr has photographed many famous stars and models, including Sophia Loren.



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Renowned fashion photographer Neal Barr was recently named Brooks Institute 2015 Distinguished Alumnus.



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CHUCK KIRMAN/THE STAR
Mannequin hands used by fashion photographer Neal Barr who was recently named Brooks Institute 2015 Distinguished Alumnus. Currently he is working on the text for a two-volume set of books on women's fashions of the 1920s.

In a 43-year career as a fashion photographer, Neal Barr photographed some of the world's most famous faces. People like Sophia Loren, Halston and Warren Beatty.

Now Barr has returned to his hometown of Ventura to pursue his dream of creating a record of 1920s fashion.

He is excited about the project, 40 years in the making — a 900-page two-book encasement of fashions and accessories from the 1920s, styled and photographed by Barr on mannequins. It is due to be released this year by Media 27 in Santa Barbara.

"It's sort of my legacy," he said.

Barr was recently honored by Brooks Institute of Photography as 2015 Distinguished Alumnus.

Naming Barr as the recipient, Brooks President Edward Clift said, "Neal's integrity and passion bring honor to the Institute. He is an outstanding example of both alumni accomplishment and personal commitment to his craft."

Growing up on Brent Street in



Credit: Chuck Kirman

CHUCK KIRMAN/THE STAR
Fashion photographer Neal Barr looks at photographs being considered for his book on women's fashions of the 1920s.

Ventura, Barr's first job, at age 13, was washing dishes in Barr's Bakery on Thompson Boulevard, owned by his grandfather.

"I used to have to ask the bakers to help me lift the big pans, they were solid copper," he said.

As a student at Ventura High School, Barr's favorite class was photography taught by Denning McArthur.

"I was below average in all my classes and the only thing I really shined in was art," Barr said. "That was my saving grace."

Later, it was a letter of recommendation from McArthur that helped him land a job as regimental photographer in the Army in Germany.

Returning to Ventura, he enrolled at Brooks Institute on the GI Bill in 1956.

Barr was introduced to the glamour of fashion photography when he saw the film, "Funny Face," while attending Brooks.

"When I saw Suzy Parker swinging across that cinematic screen with chiffon blowing behind her I thought, Oh my god, this is incredible," Barr recalled. "Then I saw Sunny Harnett, who was this blond with a neck this long, step out of a limousine, I thought that was the most elegant thing I had ever seen." Then, reading an article about photographer Richard Avedon on a fashion assignment in Egypt, he saw his own future.

"So I had made up my mind the minute I got out of Brooks Institute I was going to New York and work for Harper's Bazaar. That's how naive I was," he laughed.

Upon graduating in 1958, Barr got on a plane to New York City. His first job was with fashion photographer Ray Kellman.

"I was his slave, really, but I was where I wanted to be," Barr recalled. "I thought I've got to get experience. I was right off the turnip truck. I met all the star models I had been looking at on the covers of magazines."

That was followed by stints working for Wilhela Cushman, fashion editor of Ladies' Home Journal, and for fine art and fashion photographer Irving Penn.

"He was a great guy to work with. To watch him with the camera. ... I was in such a privileged place," Barr said. In his free time, Barr built his portfolio.

"I knew after I finished with Penn I was going to bite the bullet and go into business. I wasn't going to be a career assistant," he said.

It was his reputation for retouching, a skill he learned at Brooks, that launched Barr's career. He was a master at removing wrinkles and blemishes, adding highlights.

"When I went into business it was a godsend because the models were lining up to my door," he said. One of them was Barbara Feldon, who later went on to play Agent 99 on the TV spy sitcom "Get Smart." Her husband Lucien, a photography agent, was impressed with her shots.

"So I started out almost from the very beginning with an agent," Barr said.

When Harper's Bazaar wasn't impressed with his portfolio, he developed a new lighting technique using seamless paper and diffused light. That led to eight years of work for Harper's, including four Paris collections.

His first celebrity photo was of Beatty.

"He was really great to work with, loose and easy, very creative," Barr said. When his suit and tie looked too uptight for the shot, he borrowed Barr's black sweater.

His photograph of Loren for a Ladies' Home Journal cover in 1972 began a string of jobs with her over the years.

He photographed Halston when he was just designing hats.

Barr, 83, retired in 2000 after prostate cancer surgery.

"I thought it's time for me to do something I really wanted to do and move back to Ventura," he said.

His Ventura studio has rooms of vintage clothing and boxes of carefully organized accessories he purchased through the years. He estimates there are over 1,000 dresses, at least that many hats and 500-600 pairs of shoes, still in boxes.

"I bought the studio before I bought a home. I set this place up specifically to do this project."

But to do the project, he had to switch from film to digital photography.

He enlisted the help of Brooks faculty member Christopher Broughton, who volunteered his time.

"How is that? Incredible." Barr said.

Broughton had admired Barr's work while a student at Brooks himself. He nominated Barr for the Distinguished Alumnus award.

"In terms of what he was able to accomplish, I don't think there is anyone higher," Broughton said. "He is the

personification of a perfect photographer."

A selection of Barr's work is on exhibit at the Brooks Institute Visions Gallery at the Marriott Ventura Beach through Feb. 20.

His website is NealBarr.com.

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