



## Sex Off the Beach

Photographer Mona Kuhn forsakes T&A stereotypes of Brazil for a subtler take on sultry São Paulo | *By Jori Finkel* |

“Where are you from?” For photographer Mona Kuhn, there’s no short answer. The photographer is German by blood—her parents hail from the healing-waters haven of Bad Homburg. She is Brazilian by upbringing, raised in São Paulo after her father landed a job there as a manufacturing exec. And since moving to the states twenty years ago, at age 19, Kuhn has made her home in San Francisco and now L.A., where she is married to a German film composer. Oh, and just to complicate things, her best-known photographs

### HOT SHOTS

*Clockwise from top:* A collection of photos by Mona Kuhn: *Doppelgänger*, *Still Trace*, *Foliage*, *Livia and Renan* and *Marina*, all 2009.

feature achingly beautiful nudes from the Médoc region of France, where she has built a bungalow to “escape and create” each summer.

But her life’s trajectory is about to become clearer with a new exhibit and book, both titled *Native*, which represent a Brazilian homecoming for the globe-trotting artist. The coffee-table book (Steidl, \$50) is out this month; the show opens October 24 at WeHo’s M+B Gallery.

Kuhn has been known for her nudes since the late ’90s, when San Fran gallerist Scott Nichols included her in a group show alongside provocateurs like Robert Mapplethorpe. But she soon developed an M.O. for soft-focus beauties, an approach that’s winning over collectors such as Elton John and Trudie Styler. And James Perse—who calls her his fave artist—is selling limited-edition T-shirts emblazoned with Kuhn’s own hand-drawn images of her work.

In her new photos, Kuhn couples her sultry portraits with ripe images of the Brazilian rainforest. They conjure a country where the natural jungle meets the concrete jungle and where reality turns out to be shadowy, like childhood memories dancing in and out of focus.

“Brazil has been photographed so much, with so many images of beaches and butts and Carnaval, and also the favelas and the religious imagery,” says Kuhn. “I knew I wanted to stay away from all of that.” What ultimately resonated most was her visit to the rainforest, as well as the discovery of an equally wild apartment in downtown São Paulo that had gone uninhabited for decades—the walls painted in the greens, yellows and pinks that she associates with the country.

She used the apartment as a backdrop for shooting friends of friends with a Hasselblad, her favorite camera since her struggling artist days. She avoids shooting professional models. “I’m looking for something more authentic, unique—the moment when you are completely disarmed.”

To achieve this state—where physically exposed subjects seem uninhibited, even unaware of their own nudity—Kuhn works to earn their trust and establish real relationships. Her Brazilian-style exuberance helps, as does the fact that she gravitates towards creative types. For *Native*, she met with subjects at least twice (often at coffee houses and late-night bohemian bars) before inviting them back to the apartment.

But surely the locals were game to disrobe? “Brazilians have a natural joy about life, as if they carry a piece of sunshine inside of them. But that doesn’t necessarily translate to being open to taking their clothes off. It’s a very Catholic country.” **A**

### (KUHNS FAVORITES)



The Beach Camburi: “A beautiful, half moon beach north of São Paulo.” The Resto Sujinho, São Paulo: “Known for its late night, flamboyant audience of actors, artists, critics and journalists.” The Hotel Hotel Unique, São Paulo The Designs Environment Furniture (8126 Beverly Blvd., L.A.): “Gorgeous pieces using rare, reclaimed Brazilian wood.”