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The faded glitter of Neverland

Henry Leutwyler went to photograph one glove and instead came back with a haunting book about Michael Jackson

By Tim Teeman

The idea, says Henry Leutwyler, was simply to photograph one of Michael Jackson's glittering stage gloves. In April last year, before the singer's death, a number of Jackson's clothes and possessions were up for auction to raise money to clear his debts. For a magazine commission, Leutwyler went to the warehouse where they were being kept, but instead of photographing one glove, he came away with a far larger catch.

For the past few years the 48-year-old Swiss-born magazine photographer has been taking, by stealth, pictures of notorious objects, such as the gun that Mark Chapman used to kill John Lennon, and celebrities' private possessions, including Elvis Presley's wallet, containing a picture of the singer with his daughter, Lisa Marie, as a baby and his identity card. "I had come across the Lennon gun while working on a story about illegal gun trading, and there it was, in a New York police station, with the bullets used to kill him," says Leutwyler. He shows me his photo of the gun used by Jack Ruby to kill Lee Harvey Oswald (accused of assassinating President Kennedy) and says that he is fiercely anti-firearms, especially after being mugged at gunpoint four years ago.

He groups together the gun pictures to show me. "I like this — order and chaos," he says, tidying the arrangement, and then repeats the phrase when we sift through his book, *Neverland Lost: A Portrait of Michael Jackson*, a startling, artsy coffee-table book that has been designed by his wife, Ruba Abu-Nimah. Inside are about 60 pictures of Jackson's clothes and possessions, including shoes with the entertainer's name on them, shirts (stained brown), a strange pair of angel wings, a throne, a sports shirt, an MTV award, a performance shirt sewn into stage underwear, cherubs, *Wizard of Oz* toys, and — "you see, order and chaos!" — a double-page spread of glittery Jackson stage gloves. Neverland was the California ranch Jackson lived on, a Peter-Pannish shrine to childhood, where Jackson was accused (and

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cleared) of abusing children; Leutwyler has photographed a model sign welcoming visitors, with a boy sitting on a crescent moon.

The auction at Julien's, the memorabilia specialist, in Los Angeles never took place and the clothes and possessions were returned to Jackson. After his death they were placed with his estate. The project seems far from Leutwyler's usual beat of glamorous fashion spreads and celebrities (including Michelle Obama, Julia Roberts, Dizzy Gillespie and Martin Scorsese) for glossy magazines such as *Vogue*, *Esquire* and *The New York Times*. He is bearded, has dancing eyes and is both mischievous and passionate.

"Why did I do this? It's our popular culture. The objects are open to interpretation, but now they have a sadness. This was a man who died far too early. My dad died at 57 and I am still emotional about it today. I wonder what [Jackson] thought, putting this up for sale, broke after the trial," says Leutwyler. "He'd had it all, now he was losing it all over again — including Neverland. Thank God it hadn't happened to me. I couldn't have handled it." (Colony Capital bought Jackson's \$24.5 million Neverland mortgage before he died and he shared ownership of the property with Sycamore Valley Ranch LLC, a Colony subsidiary; Jackson's estate is now paying off the debt.) Leutwyler had 48 hours to photograph them, though he did return for a second visit. Starkly photographed in transit, the artefacts — such as the black shirt with the "Michael" name tag in gold on the book's cover — may glitter, but they already feel discarded and cold.

That wasn't Leutwyler's intention. "The Pharaohs were supposed to have built tombs to reveal their lives to future generations," he says. "Michael Jackson sacrificed his childhood to singing and stardom. Neverland, later in his life, was the pyramid he constructed to that lost childhood. These are the artefacts of that lost childhood. We will never see the like of Michael Jackson today." Sure, but aren't they also intrusive, I ask. Leutwyler looks shocked. "I don't think so. They are not meant to be." Well, I say, in one way it's quite a tabloid exercise — and nothing wrong with that — photographing a celebrity's belongings. "I did not want to intrude," Leutwyler replies. "This was meant as a record of an entertainer. I've danced to Michael Jackson, I have Michael Jackson on vinyl. Just as you need to separate Church and state, you need to do the same with him. I don't judge people. He was an amazing entertainer. I have no opinion on the child abuse charges. You can tell Michael had a short childhood, if any at all."

Leutwyler says that he photographed everything up close. "Frank Capa said that if the picture wasn't good then the photographer probably wasn't close enough. Art Kane [another famous photographer] said that a good picture is a result of research and investigation. For me, this project was a mix of archaeology and research."

Jackson's estate isn't happy about the sudden exposure of the objects, professing ignorance of Leutwyler's project until the book's publication and "it is actively looking into" the matter; with a view to taking what action, if any, is presently unclear.

For Leutwyler, the sparkling brilliance of the objects "speaks more than a portrait — it shows the child in Michael, the 50-year-old kid he really was, his joy, his playfulness. If you were photographing Madonna's clothes, they'd be dry-cleaned, sealed, probably in a temperature-controlled environment, immaculate. I think it's fascinating some of these clothes are soiled."

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When Leutwyler showed the photographer Robert Polidori his spoils, Polidori gasped over the shoes with “Michael” written on the sole. “You must do something with this,” he told Leutwyler and called the art-book publisher Gerhard Steidl immediately. What does Leutwyler think will happen to the objects? “I think some will pop up at auctions, in museums, some will be stolen or be seen in travelling exhibitions. It’s pop art. My fascination is rooted in us living in a society where everything feels known about public figures — through magazines or the internet — but these show something more personal. They also show us why we loved them.”

An only child growing up in the Swiss town of Lenzburg, Leutwyler has always fiercely pursued his own path. His father, Henry, a printer who wanted Leutwyler to follow in his and his grandfather’s footsteps, bought him a Kodak camera and five rolls of film when he was a youngster: “I was a very exuberant, open kid. My first pictures were of sailboats in Rimini harbour in Italy, one tilting at an extreme angle. At school I found a way of skipping gym class by opening a photo club.” However, his application to a top photography college in Switzerland was refused.

“I gave them a blank page for the chemical and optic exam. I didn’t know anything and didn’t think I needed to. I always remember the head of the course saying, ‘Real photographers have photography in their eyes or their heart, and you don’t. Forget about it.’ How can you say that to a passionate kid?” At 19, he began his own studio, photographing “cheese, watches, chocolate — that’s all you could shoot in Switzerland”.

He went bankrupt in a year and a half and for a couple of years became an assistant to the French photographer Gilles Tapie (partner of the dancer Sylvie Guillem) — a vital apprenticeship, he says. “He told me, ‘Remember how you felt when you took those first photographs of the sailboat’.”

Leutwyler became a “naughty Eighties photographer”, jetting around the world for glossies. He met Abu-Nimah in 1989 when she was the art director at a magazine. She greeted him with the line, “Oh, you’re the arsehole we’ve all been waiting for” when he turned up late with the pictures to one story. They married in 1992 and moved to New York three years later. He remembers stressing over the pictures he took of the Broadway star Nathan Lane on his first job for *The New York Times*, only for an editor to roll her eyes and say, “Henry, they’re fish wrapping by Monday.” He laughs. “I never forgot that. I didn’t want to do anything bigger. I’m still not that courageous. I love Mr [Irving] Penn. I love Mr [Richard] Avedon. I don’t want to be remaindered.”

When he photographed his idol, Helmut Newton, in 1993, Newton growled, “Are we done yet” as time ticked by under the hot Monte Carlo sun. “For him, seven minutes was all a ‘good’ photographer needed to get ‘the shot’.” Leutwyler’s speed was useful when he had 15 minutes to photograph Julia Roberts for the advertising hoarding of her Broadway play *Three Days of Rain*: “I said, ‘Julia, I’m glad I’m photographing you now. As a younger photographer I would have pissed my pants.’ She laughed. I’ve always had the mentality of the little boy playing with his friends in the sandpit.” When he photographed Michelle Obama, she wrote a note to Yasmin, his 14-year-old daughter: “Always dream big.”

Leutwyler has contributed to books and been asked to mount gallery shows, but this is his first solo project. “I love being a magazine photographer. My pictures are disposable. I don’t consider myself an artist. If anyone is kind enough to do so, I’ll take the compliment. But I’m a gun for hire. Regardless of

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how well-known I am, there's still that hunger, doubt and fear. It's better to be a medium-sized fish in a small pond than a small fish in an ocean. With the Michael Jackson book, now I'm in the ocean and I'm scared shitless." He frets that he doesn't take enough care of his mother, Lilly, in Switzerland — she had a stroke on September 11, 2001, worried for her son in New York — and that he doesn't see his children (he also has a son, Henry, 8) enough because of work. "But I love what I do, so what should I do?"

He shows me the pictures he has taken of other celebrity artefacts — the last paintbrush Andy Warhol used, Bob Dylan's harmonica — and tells me that he wants to photograph the shoe-cleaning kit that the Brazilian footballer Pelé had as a young boy, Serge Gainsbourg's Gitanes ("or his Converse trainers"), the wallet James Dean had on him when he died, Jacques Tati's pipe, Irving Penn's camera — "all my heroes' belongings". Then he reveals other pictures he has taken — Lennon's moon-shaped sunglasses, Elvis's comb and glasses, Gandhi's glasses, Bono's guitar, Janis Joplin's guitar, Jimi Hendrix's guitar.

Leutwyler has already asked for the shoes Barack Obama wore on the presidential campaign trail. "Maybe one day," was the White House answer. "You know what? I'll get them," says Leutwyler.

Neverland Lost: A Portrait of Michael Jackson is published by Steidl (£30)