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Michael Jackson's Neverland

By Diane Smyth | 1 June 2010



Henry Leutwyler found a pitiful portrait of a man in Michael Jackson's weird possessions

When Michael Jackson died in June last year, opinion was divided. Hardcore fans sanctified the man they considered the King of Pop; detractors scorned what they saw as a tawdry life and death. What very few stopped to consider was the man behind the myth, says photographer Henry Leutwyler.

“Whatever happened to him, it was really tragic,” he says. “Here’s a man who didn’t have a childhood, who worked professionally from the age of five. After decades of success he created his second childhood [the Neverland Ranch], only to have it taken away again [when he went bankrupt]. He lost his childhood for a second time. If I had been him, I wouldn’t have had the strength to go through it again. I would have wanted to kill myself.”

This insight came to Leutwyler while he was working on his recent book, *Neverland Lost, A Portrait of Michael Jackson*. Shot in February 2009 before anyone knew what was to come it’s a non-judgemental picture of a man built up through images of his belongings. Photographed in an anonymous

warehouse after Jackson’s estate was repossessed, it shows paintings, toys, stage clothes and books, packaged and unwrapped, but all about to be sold. It’s a poignant and at times darkly comic collection. Images of cherubs and characters from Peter Pan speak of an obsessive fixation on youth; sweat-stained rhinestone costumes of the sheer grind behind an apparently glamorous façade. “I found it really sad that none of his costumes had been archived or even dry-cleaned,” says Leutwyler. “All of these objects were going to go under the hammer and be scattered around the world.”

The book started out as part of a much wider personal project, *Artifacts*, for which Leutwyler has photographed objects such as Gandhi’s glasses, Jimi Hendrix’ guitar and the gun that killed John Lennon. He was keen to track down Michael Jackson’s Moonwalk glove and, backed by a commission from Condé Nast’s *Portfolio*, got permission from the auction house to spend one hour in the collection in Los Angeles. One hour turned into a day and one day into four, until Leutwyler was able to build a book-length series. All of the still lifes are lit with a bright, quasi-forensic light and many were shot in a makeshift studio which, by “some instinct”, Leutwyler lined with funereal black cloth. “It is said the Pharaohs built tombs to reveal their lives to future generations,” he writes at the back of his book.

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“Michael Jackson sacrificed his childhood to the calling of his musical gift. Neverland was the pyramid he constructed to a lost childhood. The artefacts captured in this book return us to the Neverland he lost.” But if it’s a book about loss it’s also, perhaps, about the loss of the consumer dream. At one time rich beyond reason, Jackson dissipated his fortune on totems, a living example of the maxim “money can’t buy happiness”. His ranch was closed in 2006, an early precursor to the repossessions that would sweep the US and lead to a worldwide recession. Leutwyler’s images were published in what would turn out to be the last issue of Portfolio, which had charted the fortunes of worldwide business only to close when advertising declined. Jackson, with his ragbag collection of shopping, typified the excess of the 1990s and noughties; how weirdly appropriate he should die with the era.

Neverland Lost, by Henry Leutwyler, is published by Steidl (ISBN: 978-3-86930-050-4), priced £27.

Photo caption: One of Michael Jackson's socks, from the book Neverland © Henry Leutwyler.