

See Jean Pigozzi's Star-Studded Pictures From His Pool Parties in the South of France

His friend, Andy Warhol, inspired his party pictures.

Rozalia Jovanovic, February 17, 2017

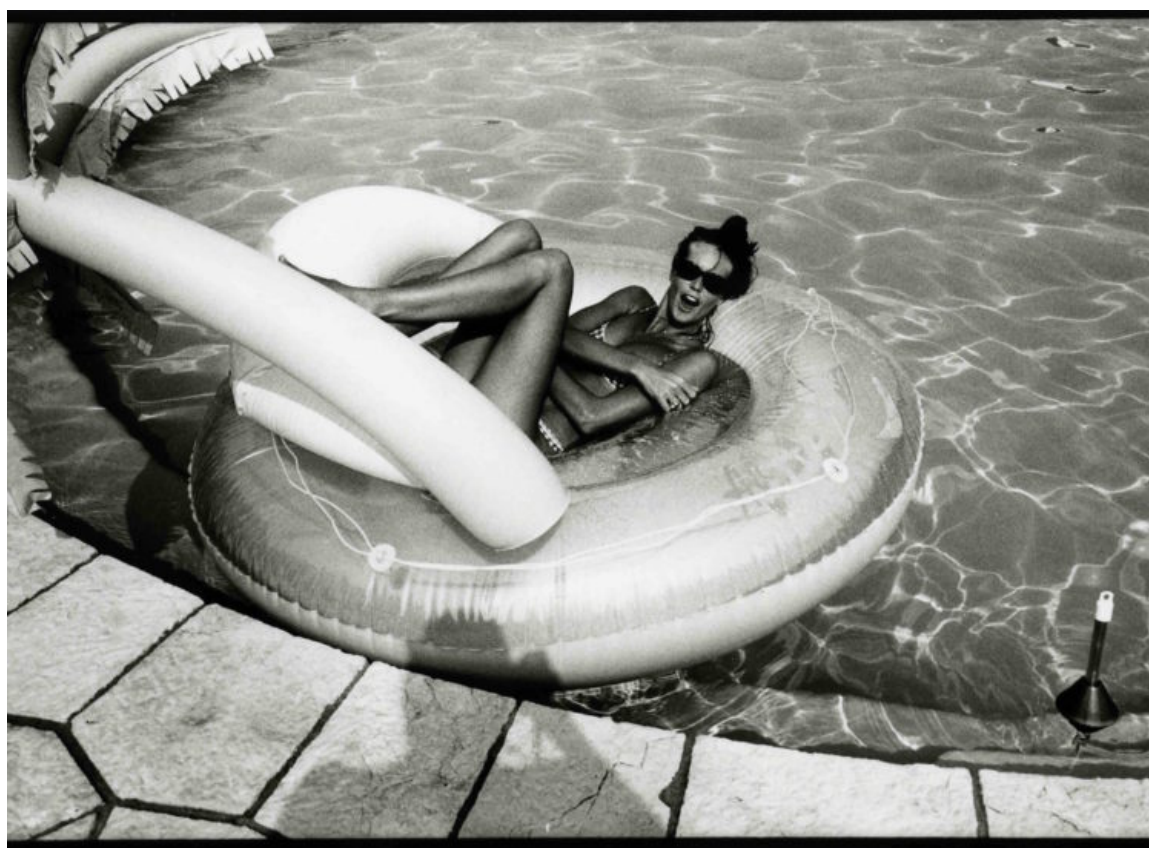


Jean Pigozzi, *Elle Macpherson* (1991). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Gmurzynska

Photographer Jean Pigozzi was born rich. The child of Henri Theodore Pigozzi, the founder of the French carmaker Simca, he first started taking pictures as an adolescent and began to develop a candid style, capturing the well-off as he saw them, in private and at leisure. He was born in 1952, a year before his parents built a pool at their home in Cap d'Antibes. "I have spent every summer for the last 64 years at that pool," Pigozzi told us in an interview over Skype. Images from those summers around that pool are the focus of a show, "Pool Party in the Snow," which opens February 19 at Galerie Gmurzynska St. Moritz, featuring a selection of photographs that Pigozzi took of his famous friends over the years, including Elizabeth Taylor, Jack Nicholson, and Sharon Stone.

While Pigozzi is known for his seemingly off-the-cuff photographs of celebrities, what one forgets, until revisiting them, is that he is in many of the pictures, making them incredibly current and fresh and seemingly Instagram-ready. “I invented the selfie,” he told us. While it’s a difficult claim to fact-check, whether he did or did not is beside the point. He was clearly ahead of his time.

In the following interview, we spoke to Pigozzi about the origins of this particular series (which first showed at Gagosian Gallery in New York, this past year), the current status of celebrity photography, and what he’s working on next.



Tell me a little bit about *Pool Party*, the series featured in this show at Gmurzynska. What does this specific body of work mean to you?

So, I was born in 1952, and this pool was born in 1953. I have spent every summer for the last 64 years at that pool. So yeah, it was built by my parents, and it’s in a house that I now own in the South of France in Cap D’Antibes. So I thought it would be a nice present to give to my pool, a book about my pool. So that was the idea. Over the years, my parents had this pool, and then I inherited this house, and I had the pool. So these are pictures about my friends and all the parties that happened around the pool, only in the summer.

How would you define your signature, as far as concerns your photography?

The pictures are snapshots, but they're taken with usually a good camera, not with an iPhone. So the quality of the pictures is high. Now everybody can take a picture — even your dog can take a picture, with an iPhone. So this is a bit different. They're very relaxed and not posed, and they're mainly of people, to use a modern word, “chilling” around the pool. So it's not a formal event like a wedding or the White House Correspondents' Dinner. These are people partying, and they're on holiday. It's what they're doing around this pool. So it is nothing formal. And the other thing is, people trust me. So they know that I'm not going to send their picture to the *National Enquirer* or to any other kind of magazine. I don't take pictures of people looking bad or doing weird things or embarrassing things. It's a project with me and my photographs.

When you were taking the pictures around the pool, did you have a sense that this would ultimately be a collection, or was this conceived later?

No, I thought about it after. About three years ago, I said, ‘You know, I have all these great pictures. Why don't we do a book?’ So one morning I woke up and said, ‘Okay, let's put this book collection together.’ And so we put this book together, we did a mockup with this great design by Yolanda Cuomo.

Do you have a particular favorite from the pool series, a memorable shot or a memorable event that you captured that's part of this show?

Having someone like Liz Taylor come to your pool is kind of fun. And I had a lot of other people there. These are pictures taken over 50 years. So they all remind me of certain girls I was in love with or friends. Many of them have passed away, sadly. So this is really a journal of my summer holidays. And usually my summer holidays are taken around this pool. But it's a very important thing for me. I think the biggest surprise is when Larry Gagosian said to me, “Let's do a show.” I was thinking, ‘Who on earth is going to buy any photographs?’ But we sold more than 50 photographs.

Who collects your photography?

Anyone from David Geffen to Jemima Goldsmith, and others. Gagosian doesn't tell me who buys them, so I have no idea who they are. But, you know, it's a diverse kind of people.

How did the Gmurzynska show come about?

The Gmurzynska show came about because Isabelle Bscher saw the show at Gagosian, and she said, “Would you want to do a show in St. Moritz?” And I said, ‘Yeah, I'd really like the idea of doing a pool show in the middle of the winter in St. Moritz, I think it's a really fun idea.’ I think she's smart in doing that because we obviously know who goes to St. Moritz. I loved the idea of doing this accretion of pool shots and when you open the doors to the gallery there'd be snow and people wearing Moon Boots and all that. And the pool has people in bikinis and short shorts. That's why I loved the idea. I also like the gallery because I like Russian Futurists, and she had a fabulous stand at Miami Art Basel. Did you see it?

Yes. It was a remarkable booth. We wrote a lot about it.

I like how diverse the program is: it goes from these serious things to these fun pictures around the pool.

How do you print and sell the photographs? Are they editions?

They're in editions of 15, and two APs, and they're all signed and dated. I think they're very reasonably priced around \$4,000. They're not expensive, but I've been taking pictures for years, and I've had many shows in museums and galleries. So I'm not someone who's just started taking pictures a week ago.

Are you still taking pictures? Or are you done with celebrity photography?

I take pictures every day. Now I have a house in Panama, and I'm taking pictures every day. And I'm working on two completely different projects. I'm working on a show at Gagolian about my two dogs in the South of France: one is called Charles and the other is called Saatchi. So these are two young dogs, and there's some really strange pictures of them. And then I'm working on another nature program, the subject is completely different. So I'm definitely still taking pictures. I still take pictures of my friends, but in the years to come, I'm gonna show pictures that are very, very different from the pictures that I've been doing over the last 30 years.

I was hoping you could say something about celebrity photography. You started taking pictures of celebrities at a time when celebrity culture, the way we know it today, was very fresh. Warhol and his concept of celebrity were kind of new to the public. I was wondering what your thoughts are on how celebrity photography has evolved.

You know, I invented the selfie. I can prove that. I started doing it in the 1970s. The first celebrity selfie I ever took was with Faye Dunaway when she came over. I think it was in '73 or '74. I've always been taking pictures of celebrities, some of them I know, some of them I don't know. Now, with the selfie stick and with the iPhone, it's a completely different story. But it's interesting; about two years ago, I was in the South of France, and I took Woody Allen to lunch at this place called Club 55, and at least 30 people came up to us, and not one of them wanted an autograph. They all wanted selfies with Woody. So the visual record of when you meet a celebrity has completely changed. You could see how an autograph could be real or fake. But a photograph, a selfie with you next to Mick Jagger—you can actually say, 'I was two inches away from Mick Jagger's face.' Now, as far as photographs that I take, once again, I take pictures of celebrities, but I make no effort. I don't stand outside for five hours in front of Lady Gaga's house freezing in the winter for a picture with her. If she happens to stand next to me at the Oscars, I'll take a picture, and sometimes I'll say, "Can I take a selfie." And they usually say yes. But I'm a lazy photographer. I'm not the paparazzi, hiding in a tree for three days trying to take a picture of Angelina Jolie putting on her new bathing suit. That's not what I do.

Well, it seems like your selfies have inspired a whole generation of photographers.

But in full disclosure, I was friends with Andy Warhol, and I went quite a few times to Studio 54. And I did notice how he would take pictures with a small cheap camera. And I think that was an inspiration for my party pictures. And that happened with a small self-focusing cameras, but I had another advantage. I'm very tall and have long arms. So I didn't need to have the horrible selfie sticks. So that was something that helped me in taking these pictures.

So, do you still take pictures of friends and celebrities?

Absolutely. I'm amazed that, at my age of 65, I'm still interested in taking pictures, which is really crazy because people get bored, they stop taking pictures. But I'm still interested in it everyday. I'm looking at my desk now and there's six cameras in front of me.

And do you have any interest in doing video or film?

I'm doing videos and one of the things I'll show, this year or next year at Gagolian, will be video.

Will it also be of celebrities or something else?

Absolutely not. Something completely different. It has zero to do with celebrities.

Do you ever feel like you get pigeonholed? Do you like it when people talk to you about celebrity photography or do you wish they'd move on from that?

Well once they see my new photographs of the dogs, and this other video that I'm doing, perhaps people will look at my pictures in a slightly different way. It might expand what I do in photography.

Do you have a home in Saint Moritz? Or are you just going there for the opening?

Absolutely not. I'm going there for three days. I do not like the cold, and I do not like skiing, so there's no reason for me to be there.