

A Pool Party in the Snow: Jean Pigozzi at Galerie Gmurzynska

Pigozzi quipped that he keeps the pool-toy industry afloat.

Emily Nathan, February 21, 2017



Jean “Johnny” Pigozzi—as the billionaire collector, photographer, philanthropist, entrepreneur, and heir to the Simca automobile fortune likes to call himself—is quick to tell you a number of less-than-glamorous things about himself. He is dyslexic, a borderline germaphobe, a terrible cook, and a “very bad traveler,” he says, smiling mischievously. And despite his world-renowned collection of contemporary African Art, he has never been to Africa.

And yet, the French-born, globe-trotting *bon vivant* is best found at the center of the glamour, hobnobbing with actors, models, artists, and celebrities of every shade on boats and at mansions around the world. His favorite party, however, has always been the one he himself put on: every year since he was a little boy, Pigozzi invited friends and their friends to his family home in Cap D'Antibes, to lounge, snooze, and eat around the pool his parents built in 1953, just one year after he was born. Over the decades, that pool witnessed the leisure lives of the world's biggest stars —Naomi Campbell, Sharon Stone, Helmut Newton, Charles Saatchi, Mick Jagger, Bono, Elizabeth Taylor, Willy Rizzo, Nan Kempner, Mel Brooks; the list goes on— and Pigozzi was their faithful archivist, snapping photographs of his friends in candid, behind-the-scenes moments.

Opened this past Sunday night at Galerie Gmurzynska in the ritzy Alpine town of St Moritz, an exhibition of these photographs, shown earlier this year at Gagosian in New York, drew hordes of moon-booted, fur-wrapped revelers. “How fun it would be, I thought, to make a little pool party in the middle of the winter, and to show these photographs so out of context,” Pigozzi told a group of press gathered at the show, as they sipped Piña Colodas served with flamingo-pink straws and tropical umbrellas. “I have a lot of friends here during the winter, so it's kind of like a friends' party.”



Jean Pigozzi. Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

Indeed, for the event, Pigozzi and Gmurzynska co-owner Mathias Rastorfer transformed the three-story gallery in the haute-couture-studded center of the village into a slice of Miami summer. Instead of a velvet rope, a pool-blue carpet ushered visitors inside. There, tables were decorated with enormous cocktail glasses filled with colored water; a blow-up paddling pool occupied the center of the floor, and the walls were covered in Pigozzi-designed mermaid wallpaper. Above the pool, connecting all three floors—designed in 2004 by the local architect Hans Ruch—was a string of inflatable pool toys, from palm trees and popsicles to killer whales and monkeys, stretching floor to ceiling. A DJ spun Blondie tracks and waiters circulated all levels, offering mini burgers, chicken tacos, and chips with guacamole, while a band of bikini-clad hired models with fake tans posed for selfies with gallery visitors.

“You know, Pigozzi joked to me yesterday that he could have single-handedly kept the pool-toy industry afloat,” Rastorfer said, “since they were always in his photographs and advertised with beautiful celebrities in the magazines. So normally when you come to our gallery, it’s an austere, proper gallery—and now when you come, it’s a bit over the top. Anyway, it’s just supposed to be fun.”

Fun was the name of the game, as the likes of Catherine Deneuve—wearing black fur and her signature *Belle Du Jour* coif—kicked back among the gallery’s collection of framed Chagalls and Yves Klein coffee tables. “A pool party in the middle of all these Légers and Picassos?” Rastorfer laughed. “That’s not easy to pull off.”

Downstairs, Pigozzi, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, navy vans and a sky-blue cashmere hoodie, told anecdotes about the photographs and reminisced about the pictured subjects, “a lot of whom are dead,” he grimaced. “My father gave me a little camera when I was nine or so, so I started taking pictures all over using that. He died when I was 12, and I got his nice Leica camera, so then I upgraded to that, and I have never stopped. I’m surprised that every morning I wake up, I still want to take pictures. When I take pictures, then I can relive the moment,” he added. “I can’t read my own handwriting, so I can’t keep a journal. The photos become my diary.”



Jean Pigozzi. Courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska

The collected works, hung against the black-and-white mermaid wallpaper, are compelling for their ease; they document people we have only seen at their most controlled in moments of absolute freedom and surprise. At Pigozzi's pool, posing was not allowed, nor was an entourage; as the legend goes, he enacted these rules after Elizabeth Taylor showed up with her team of makeup artists and hairdressers. And so the photographs are natural and relaxed: We see Charles Saatchi straddling a bench while reading the newspaper; Gianni Agnelli kissing a woman who was not his wife; Mick Jagger pushing Helmut Newton into the pool; Naomi Campbell mid-dance-step, mouth agape, backgrounded by two of Pigozzi's Weimaraners. Occasionally, Pigozzi himself makes an appearance in the images: In one shot, taken underwater, we see only his grinning face and a near-naked woman's derriere.

"The thing is, with the iPhone now, even your dog can take a picture—but I'm not a paparazzi, and I used very small cameras so people were not scared," Pigozzi said. "These people were my friends, and they trusted me, and so I was able to capture these real moments of just life, just living."