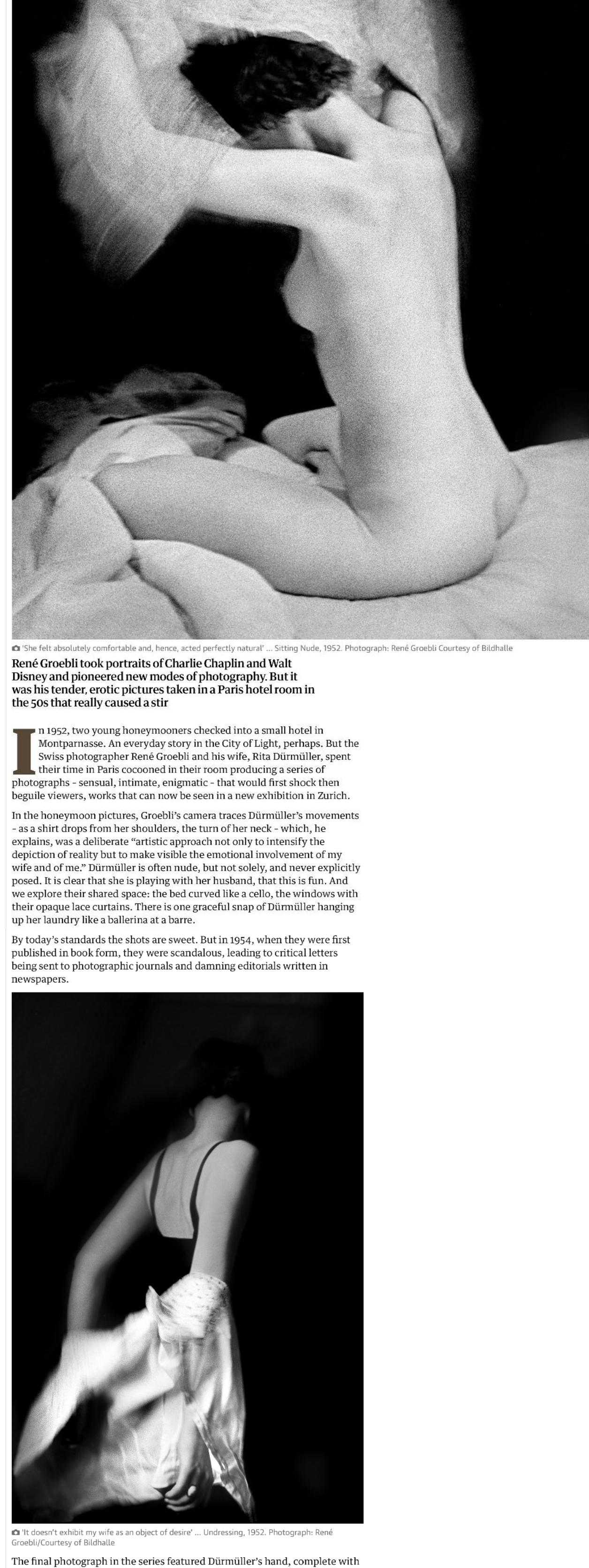


'It's all about love': how a Swiss photographer's intimate honeymoon pictures caused a scandal



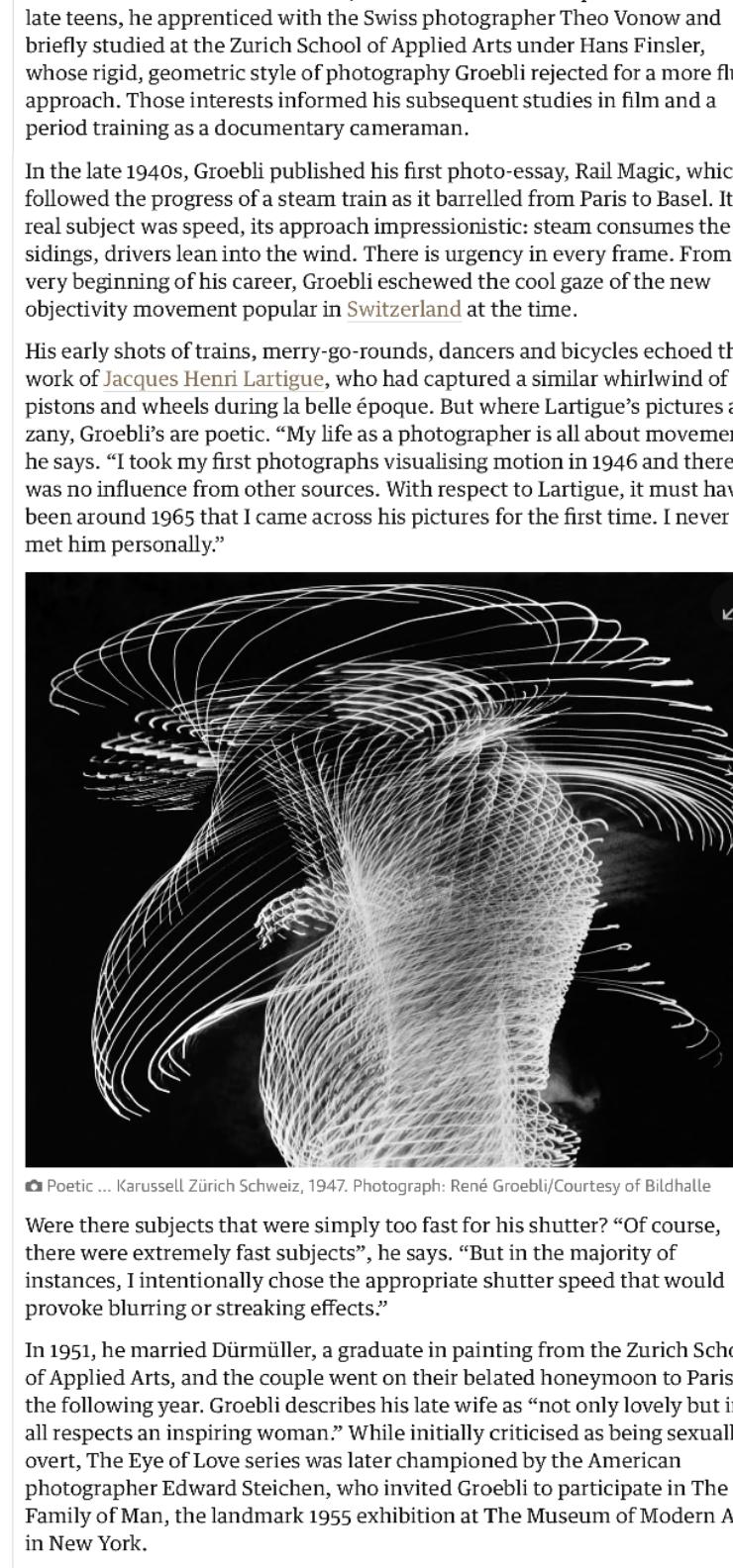
She felt absolutely comfortable and, hence, acted perfectly natural ... Sitting Nude, 1952. Photograph: René Groebli Courtesy of Bildhalle

René Groebli took portraits of Charlie Chaplin and Walt Disney and pioneered new modes of photography. But it was his tender, erotic pictures taken in a Paris hotel room in the 50s that really caused a stir

In 1952, two young honeymooners checked into a small hotel in Montparnasse. An everyday story in the City of Light, perhaps. But the Swiss photographer René Groebli and his wife, Rita Dürmüller, spent their time in Paris cocooned in their room producing a series of photographs - sensual, intimate, enigmatic - that would first shock then beguile viewers, works that can now be seen in a new exhibition in Zurich.

In the honeymoon pictures, Groebli's camera traces Dürmüller's movements - as a shirt drops from her shoulders, the turn of her neck - which, he explains, was a deliberate "artistic approach not only to intensify the depiction of reality but to make visible the emotional involvement of my wife and of me." Dürmüller is often nude, but not solely, and never explicitly posed. It is clear that she is playing with her husband, that this is fun. And we explore their shared space: the bed curved like a cello, the windows with their opaque lace curtains. There is one graceful snap of Dürmüller hanging up her laundry like a ballerina at a barre.

By today's standards the shots are sweet. But in 1954, when they were first published in book form, they were scandalous, leading to critical letters being sent to photographic journals and damning editorials written in newspapers.



It doesn't exhibit my wife as an object of desire ... Undressing, 1952. Photograph: René Groebli Courtesy of Bildhalle

The final photograph in the series featured Dürmüller's hand, complete with wedding ring, dangling over the edge of the bed holding a cigarette. Since Groebli's book did not specify that he was married to his subject, some viewers saw this as depicting an extramarital encounter.

Now 98, Groebli is sanguine about the mid-century response. "I wasn't really surprised by the reaction of the media," he tells me from his home in Zurich. "In those days only artists and people acquainted with the arts were used to nudity. Photography was not commonly perceived as an art yet and photographs of nudes were associated with pornography rather than with artful, tender erotic poesy. It was therefore not surprising that, prejudiced by common perception, the poetic photographic essay could hardly be judged by its artistic value."

He responded by defining the series himself. "I reacted with the title *The Eye of Love*. It puts into words what the photographic essay is all about: love. It is not about voyeuristic sex, it doesn't exhibit my wife as an 'object of desire,'" he says of his spouse, who died in 2013. "Rita loved to create the images when we took those pictures. She took an active creative part in posing and composing. One may sense, while looking at these photographs, that she felt absolutely comfortable and, hence, acted perfectly natural. She was not an actor, but an artist helping to create scenes. The pictures are the result of a collaboration in perfect harmony."



Cornelia, 1961. Photograph: René Groebli Courtesy of Bildhalle

Over the course of seven decades, he made his medium change

immeasurably. "In the 1940s, I made pictures with a box camera. I took

photographs were either professionals or educated enthusiasts," he says.

"They expanded through digital photography. And they are definitely

blurring or streaking effects."

In 1951, he married Dürmüller, a graduate in painting from the Zurich School of Applied Arts under Hans Finsler, whose rigid, geometric style informed his subsequent studies in film and a period training as a documentary cameraman.

In the late 1940s, Groebli published his first photo-essay, *Rail Magic*, which followed the progress of a steam train as it barreled from Paris to Basel. Its

sidings, drivers lean into the wind. There is urgency in every frame. From the

very beginning of his career, Groebli was at the cool gaze of the new

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