

BlackBook

FALL 2004 By Sam Schechner



ebbie Does MoMA?

story Sam Schechner

When Jenna Jameson becomes a household name, it's only a matter of time before the art world joins the orgy.

□ Last summer, Ashkan Sahihi had a relatively unusual problem for an artist. He was concerned that people were jerking off to his new gallery show.

"I struggled with this for a while," he says of the series, "Cum Shots," which consists of nine photographs of everyday people, their faces spackled with real semen. The idea behind the images, he says, was to highlight—or maybe subvert—the pornification of mainstream culture. The idea was not for people to jack off. "I didn't want to give people that out," he says. "I want it to be clear that I'm looking to force a discussion."

So Sahihi photographed his subjects clothed, with neutral expressions, against a cheap marbled backdrop. "I wanted people who were very normal looking," he says. "I didn't want hot babes."

Well, it's pretty much guaranteed that people masturbated anyway. When Sahihi posted the series on his Web site, the operator of a page called "Downloading Porn with Davo" linked to it and asked Sahihi whether he could buy a photo of one particularly er, comely woman. Others e-mailed to inquire where they could find shots of actual hardcore penetration. Sahihi says he was getting 84,000 daily visitors to his site at one point; it still makes the top ten Google results for the query "cum shots."

The photographs aren't about porn, says John d'Addario, editor of *Fleshbot*, a blog that tracks pornography in the popular consciousness. "The

most interesting artists are making art about *looking* at porn," he says.

The context is clear: We live in a world where Jenna Jameson's new house can (and did) appear in *The New York Times's* House & Home section, where Terry Richardson commands a fortune to shoot major ad campaigns, where the XXX video market outsells mainstream movie tickets, and where a blind alliance of irony and facile empowerment has rendered a *Hustler* T-shirt about as shocking as a "Baby on Board" window sticker. "The art world," d'Addario continues, is just getting "in step with the rest of media and culture."

Some other artists joining the orgy include Whitney Lee, who makes latch hook rugs that depict the faces, and sometimes the naked bodies, of adult-movie stars, repurposing an arts-and-crafts medium usually reserved for portraits of, say, puppy dogs and Winnie the Pooh. In Chicago, Jason Salavon has written software that creates visual averages of hundreds of images; one of his recent works aggregates every *Playboy* centerfold of the past 40 years into four decade-long and -specific panels. Another artist, Adam Connelly, paints lush canvases of very low-resolution porn pictures downloaded from the Web.

Even Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, a mainstay of the New York art scene, is turning his gaze toward the porn world. His newest project features dual portraits of 30 porn stars—everyone from Jenna Jameson to gay adult-

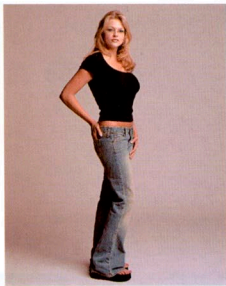
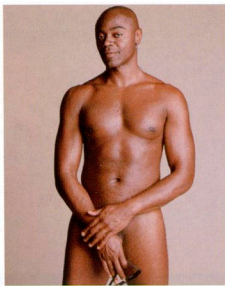
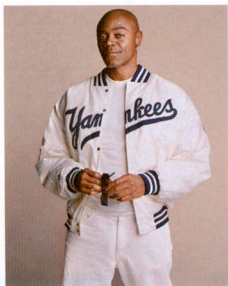
film star Michael Lucas—shot both in everyday clothes and in their porn uniforms (i.e., nude and heavy on the makeup), the centerpiece of which has become a book, *XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits*, which features essays from folks like John Waters, Gore Vidal, and Salman Rushdie.

In the late '80s and early '90s, the artists who engaged porn operated a little differently: Reaganitis was the affliction and they were the shock therapists. Robert Mapplethorpe explicitly sampled the visual vocabulary of hardcore porn, Karen Finley brandished pussy in pursuit of her politics, and Jeff Koons even produced some real cum of his own in a series of graphic shots with his then-wife, a former porn star.

These days, conservatives have better ways to raise money than by crusading against photographers and painters. In any case, the work in question seems far tamer. "Art is always reflecting greater cultural trends," d'Addario says. "And porn is no longer this really transgressive thing that has the capacity to shock." That leaves artists to find other approaches to the material.

Take Adam Connelly's lo-res porn portraits. "My work tries to tie the mass consumption of pornography back to the tradition of the painted nude," he says. His method leaves viewers to squint, supplying the naughty bits from their own imaginations. "They're sort of re-inputting the information that is compressed in the pixels on the canvas," he explains. "By removing the specifics, you allow people to inject what they want to see."

"I imagine that, as someone who's photographed presidents, I represent one thing the porn stars all want: mainstream acknowledgment."



With her porn rugs, Whitney Lee is trying to play with porn without practicing it. "It's taking an image made by and for men, but putting it in a medium that's associated with women," she explains. And it draws in a large audience—"grandmotherly women like it, and younger children," she says, sounding a little surprised. Far from being pilloried, Lee's been invited to show her rugs across North America; they'll be on display this September at Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography in Toronto.

In all, the new art may be marked most of all by the studied ambiguity of its message. Playboy Enterprises Inc actually bought one of Salavon's averaged centerfolds, for example, and installed it proudly at corporate HQ in Chicago. "Many people see them as critiques," Salavon says, avoiding any single analysis. "But Playboy took it as an homage."

Lee likewise shies away from being overtly political. Although she agrees that there's a feminist angle to her work, she says she'd rather not repeat the example of the firebrands who went before. "The best kind of art walks the line," she says. "You look at it and wonder if it's supposed to be critical or not."

If Finley and her contemporaries were advancing a specific politics, today's porn artists are content to let the viewers inject whatever they want into the work. Regardless of your ideology, this art goes down easy.

So while Koons's porn series was a critical disaster and sold terribly, Salavon and the others say their work has done surprisingly well: "Only so many people can have a swine cut in half in their apartment, while anyone

can have a white canvas with colorful dots in their living room." Sahihi says, just back from a Mexican vacation paid for, in part, by "Cum Shots" money. "With this, it seems to not be a problem. And it throws a bit of art wisdom off the pedestal."

Timothy Greenfield-Sanders's porn-star portraits contain the most explicit nudity of all these artists' work. But, despite the shaved pussy and semi-hard cock, you can imagine his book on almost any coffee table. "It's very smart of him," says Michael Lucas, the Russian émigré turned gay porn star and producer. "The man who photographed all these celebrities and politicians suddenly coming up with a book like that? He chose the right time and the right situation."

The approach is a full-frontal, mainstream assault. The photographs lend their subjects a grace more at home in Romantic portraiture than in the San Fernando Valley. At his studio, in Manhattan's East Village, Greenfield-Sanders says he was inspired by Goya's dual portraits of the nude and clothed Maja, and he even showed the porn stars celebrated paintings to help them nail their poses; Briana Banks, for example, mimicked the stance from Cézanne's *The Bather*. It's a similar process to the one Greenfield-Sanders used to photograph luminaries of the caliber you might meet at a party at Diane von Furstenberg's apartment (where, incidentally, he ran into John Malkovich and convinced him to contribute a porn essay).

"Timothy is the most high-stature artist to turn his vision in our direction," explains adult-film legend Nina Hartley, who's as comfortable tossing around terms like

"the male gaze" as she is appearing in bondage videos. "His connection with the intelligentsia is priceless. To have porn as a subject addressed by such big minds is a sort of validation that many in the industry seek from society." Greenfield-Sanders is likewise aware that he is, in a sense, a colonizing agent. "I imagine that, as someone who's photographed presidents," he says, "I represent one thing the porn stars all want: mainstream acknowledgment."

But it goes further than that. The art, especially Greenfield-Sanders's, confers a cultural legitimacy, too. "I don't know if their work affects what's acceptable in the larger culture," says Connelly, "but these artists have a major impact on how people see the art world and how people see the adult industry.

"It may be that the popularity of my paintings is just a reflection of the popularity of Internet porn," he adds. "But porn in the art world is more consumable. When you're seeing it in a gallery, it's sort of publicly sanctioned."

Still, there's the jerk-off problem: You never know quite whom or what you're sanctioning. On one hand, you attract an audience that might not otherwise frequent art galleries. Latch-hookers might not catch the sarcasm in Lee's work, but they e-mail her to say how much they enjoy it anyway. Then there are the creeps. "One guy asked me if I would latch hook his cock," Lee remembers. "And it became apparent after a little bit of the conversation that he was just excited to talk to me about his cock.

"So that's uncomfortable," she says, "but it goes with the territory, I guess."