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THE NIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY OF CHRISTIAN WAEBER & TOM PAIVA
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©Timothy Greenfield-Sanders



Chloe. ©2004 by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

"I have found myself on the top of the world at times, and at the bottom of the barrel at others.
Either way it's been a wild ride, and I wouldn't change one damn thing."

XXX 30 PORN-STAR PORTRAITS: A CONVERSATION WITH TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS

by Alethea Mock

ON A RECENT SUNNY AND HUMID August afternoon in New York City, I made my way to the East Village studio of Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. The topic of conversation was to be his new body of work, a series of portraits of today's leading porn stars. The portraits, which will be released as a book, *XXX 30 Porn-Star Portraits* (Bulfinch Press), this October, are done as diptychs. The first image is one of them clothed, dressed as they would be in everyday life. The second image is them nude, as they are perceived within the world of porn.

AM: Have you always done portraits in this Velasquez/Monet style of simply the person with a neutral background? Because one of the things I was interested in with this book was how you decided to photograph the porn stars completely removed from anything that would contextualize them, such as a film set or their home.

TGS: Well it's a good question. Since 1978, when I got the 11x14 antique camera, I started out photographing the art world as that was the world I knew. My subjects were either young artists, just getting known like Cindy Sherman, Julian Schnabel, and Francesco Clemente. Or they were the older generation of Abstract Expressionists who I knew through my father-in-law, Joop Sanders, a founder of that movement. Through him I got to know Willem deKooning, Larry Rivers, Milton Resnick, Isamu Noguchi, and many other older generation artists from the 1950s. Then for the next 20 years I took portraits with an 11x14 camera of basically anyone and everyone I was interested in from the art world. My subjects expanded beyond artists to include art critics, art dealers, art collectors and art curators. In 1999, I exhibited this work and there were by then, 700 portraits in all.

AM: That is a huge exhibition. Where did you show it?

TGS: It was shown at Mary Boone Gallery in New York and it was really amazing to see. The prints were hung without frames, five images high and 20 long across the wall, so there were about a hundred pictures in a grid on each wall.



On the Set. ©Timothy Greenfield-Sanders Studio.

AM: It sounds like an overwhelming experience.

TGS: It was an incredible moment for me, and a thrill to see them all hanging at once, 20 years of work. All the prints were 11x14 contact prints on 16x20 paper. And this body of work, about 438 artists, over a 100 critics and more than 100 art dealers, curators etc. sold only as the entire show.

AM: So it was really more of an installation piece.

TGS: In many ways. The Museum of Modern Art now owns it. I can't tell you how terrific it is to know that your work is safely preserved in an institution like MOMA. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston also has a set and I am delighted to have the work there too.

AM: How many editions were there?

TGS: There were four, I kept one and a private dealer purchased the third set. It was very gratifying. After 20 years I had created a unique body of work, a truly obsessive body of work, admittedly. In terms of portraits of the art world, no one else really had been as "possessed." Many photographers have taken portraits of artists but usually only about a dozen or so, 30 or 40 at the most, and usually only the famous ones. But I shot 700 people in the art world and by now it's easily more than a 1,000. So that was really what I became so known as: *the* photographer of the art world. As things progressed during the '80s I started to shoot some actors, musicians, architects, and writers. I would get assignments and began to move outside the box of just the art world. I shot fashion portraits but my fashion work was really all about portraiture. I was never a "high fashion" photographer; it was always about portraits and people. I've been very lucky in my career because people and clients come to me for what I do. For instance, the new Eileen Fisher fashion campaign I just shot is of course about the clothes but it's also about the people. I am interested in capturing a certain quality that many fashion photographers avoid, which is the person. In a way that's what I wanted to do with the porn star portraits. It was about

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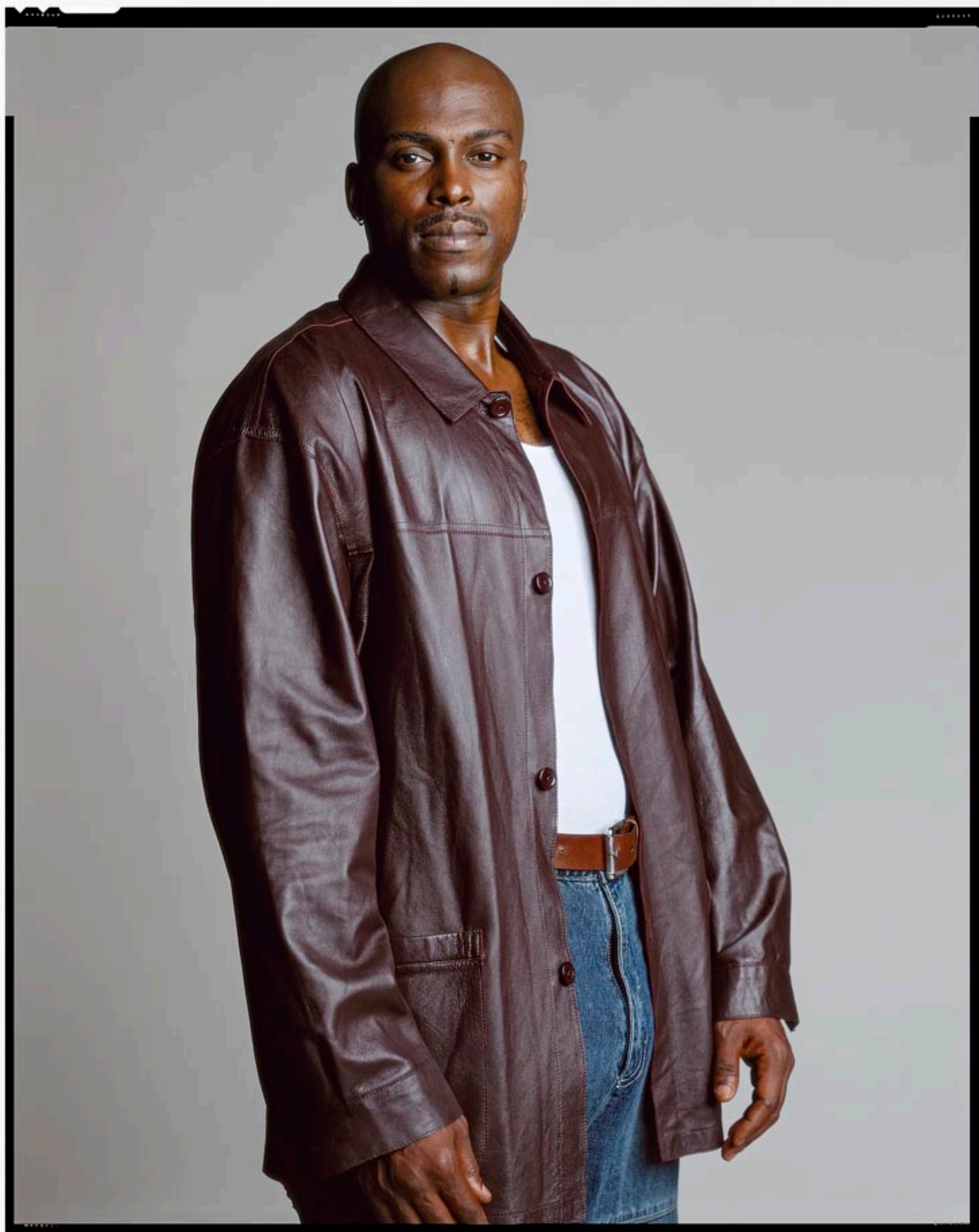
Ron Jeremy. ©2004 by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

"What would I want carved on my tombstone? That's simple: 'Here is a guy who lived his life as he wanted. He pretty much called his own shots, his checks did not bounce, he did not lie to anybody, and it is time to move on.'"



Sharon Mitchell, PhD. ©2004 by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

"I started the Adult Industry Medical Healthcare Foundation, a non-profit organization for sex workers...which has virtually eliminated HIV from porn. I've saved lives. I have been given the privilege to give back to the community from whence I came."



Lexington Steele. ©2004 by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

"Before doing porn, I spent five years on Wall Street...Do I ever look back? Well, I enjoyed the square world.
I do miss the regimented environment that corporate America provides."

showing these people as people and not objects. Porn stars are so easily made into objects.

AM: That's true, according to mainstream culture, porn stars don't have a history; they don't have families; they are just porn stars. They're an abstract part of an industry, which is taboo in our culture. We can't approach it. We can't even talk about it or them, but if they become human that kind of cracks the ice.

TGS: Exactly, exactly, exactly.

AM: So how did you decide to do one portrait clothed and one nude, rather than just one clothed or one nude?

TGS: By accident, pretty much. I met a porn star about five years ago, through my friend Beauregard Houston-Montgomery. I had been very casually talking about the idea for this project. The first inklings of XXX actually go back to when I saw the brilliant film "Boogie Nights." I thought, "What an interesting group of people." I was so drawn to their story. All of a sudden I realized that these are people who have lives. So in the back of my head was this idea and I spent a little time researching some of the key players, but never got anywhere with it. Then one day Beauregard called and said, "I've got this friend who is a porn star. Do you want to meet him?" And I said, "Sure." So he brought him over and I was really struck by the way he dressed, and he had an edgy coolness to his manner. It was just fascinating to look at him and think: "This is a porn star" and to think about what that really meant. The entire atmosphere became charged in an unusual way...as did the conversation.

AM: When you look at the book and you see some of the people you might easily think: "Is this really a porn star? I can hardly believe that this is one of the leading porn stars, if I saw them in a grocery store I would never know."

TGS: Well, it's not your world or mine. But trust me, when you walk down the street with porn stars, a lot more people than you would ever imagine do recognize them.

AM: So what happened then?

TGS: He posed for me and after we did the first portrait he said, "Okay, let's do a nude one now." And I said, "Uh...oh...well, sure." I then immediately said, "Well, let's do the same pose." The project just started that way. Remember, I majored in art history at Columbia University and as a photographer I have always, in my mind, played off images from the past, great paintings, beautiful portraits and so on. Goya's famous paintings, *La Maja Vestida* and *La Maja Desnuda*, of a woman on a couch in the same pose were obvious models for this simple idea. It's not brain surgery. It was just an idea to play around with. Well, the pictures were amazing.

AM: Is his portrait in the book?

TGS: No, he's not in the book for a couple of reasons. I had shot him against a black background and this se-



XXX 30 Porn-Star Portraits, front jacket.
Photograph of Jenna Jameson
©Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

ries ended up being shot in another way. When I shoot a series of portraits I very much try to conceptualize the project completely in advance. I didn't have a long-term view of the series at that point. So this porn star shoot became a test run. With my art world work I almost always shoot in black and white and in large format. I use a single strobe, a plain backdrop, and it is always about the person not about the environment. Minimalism is my paradigm. Starting a new series is very complicated for me. There are so many questions to answer. Do I shoot in black and white or in color? What format? What backdrop? For the Porn Star series I shot a few in black and white at first but they looked too arty, too obvious to me. Eventually after I shot another person or two, who also didn't end up in the book, I settled

on the look you now see. A very light gray, almost off-white background, color transparency Kodak EPP 8x10 film, one bi-tube light source, a certain distance from the seamless to keep the grey consistent.

AM: Really, it's almost a skin tone. It's very close to the color of flesh.

TGS: Exactly, you're very smart. When I saw it I thought: "Of course, that's it. That's the look for this series."

AM: And they are very striking. They look at you. With the large prints I imagine that exhibition will be intense. The photographs definitely challenge you, which seem to be what you want. One of the things I appreciate about the work is that you don't land on either side of complete acceptance or any judgment of the people. Who decided to include the essays, and chose the essayists for the book?

TGS: It was totally my idea. I conceived it, I constructed the entire project, and paid for it. Of course, I had help from many wonderful people, especially my main assistant, Mark Mahaney, my photography producer Jordan Schaps, my text editor Simon Dumenco and my design director Mark Nelson at Anthony McCall Associates. But I selected the writers and I reached out to them personally.

AM: Because there is an interesting tension that's occurring between the essays and the images. There is a subtle criticism of the porn industry by some of the writers, not by all of them; some are very embracing of and love the industry.

TGS: The XXX project moved at its own speed and changed along the way. As I started to shoot and as the work progressed I could soon see how it was really going to come together. In fact, at first, I planned to have 100 portraits in the book, then I switched to 50. One night at dinner with Laurie Anderson and Lou Reed I was explaining the book and that it would be called XXX. Laurie said, "Well, if it's called XXX why don't you do 30 portraits, since XXX is Roman numeral for 30?" I felt like

a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. It was so much more manageable. But of course it would now mean that the 30 have to be very well chosen. I wanted a range within that 30 of straight and gay, young and old, men and women, and legends and newcomers. Everyone represents a type almost.

AM: So how did you do your research to figure out exactly who you wanted to shoot?

TGS: Some of the straight stars were just obvious. Jenna Jameson, Nina Hartley, Ginger Lynn, and Tera Patrick were clearly important from the start. My friend Candida Royale, a former porn star and now a porn director and producer gave me important names and contact information. For the gay porn world Jordan knew who everyone was. Setting up this kind of project is familiar territory to me and is really similar to my art world projects. I always try to start with the key people and move from there. Once you get those important figures as you're talking to them they say, "Well, you have to have Sunrise Adams and you have to have so and so." Certain names keep coming up. It really falls into place. I would say there are hundreds of important porn stars that I left out, who should have been in this but that's not what this book is. The book is really about these certain people chosen to represent a lot of other people or types.

AM: So how was your experience photographing them? I'm interested, as you shot them clothed and then nude did you notice a change in their persona? How they carried themselves?

TGS: Oh, absolutely. The nude moments were much more exciting for many of the porn stars. Exhibitionism is a big thrill for many people. And, it's a very big part of porn. I remember when I first started this project, I talked to my friend, the writer Nancy Friday, who became one of the writers for the book and who has written for many years about sex and sexual fantasies, of women particularly. And Nancy said, "Well, you know darling, this is all about exhibitionism." I kept that in mind and as I was shooting this series I realized that she was right in many cases. A number of porn stars can't wait to take their clothes off. Certainly not all are that way, but many. At first, it was very awkward for me. I was just not comfortable with the nudity. My portraits have always been about the face, a search for the intelligence in someone that projection of who they are as a person.

AM: Well, with your other portraits they are all artists, or creative types. We're interested in them because of what they've created, what they've accomplished and what's inside of them.

TGS: Exactly. However, as a photographer I'm also very aware that my job is to make someone comfortable. So I forced myself rather quickly to get past all my personal hangups. I got to a point where I was very comfortable and that is really important. Because you want to make someone who is naked feel at ease and appreciated and not ridiculed. One of the things a number of the porn stars have said to me was that they felt very comfortable in my studio because I tried to create a dignified atmosphere. Just imagine what it is like on an actual porn set for these men and women, where the guys behind the cameras are oftentimes basically creeps. It's not hard to hear the jok-

ing and the kind of crap that goes on. In my studio it was really about trying to make wonderful portraits; it was a moment for them to feel like they were beautiful and special. And I think that comes through in the pictures.

AM: I agree. So when you were creating the structure of the book when did you decide to include the biographies of the porn stars in the back?

TGS: Originally, I thought I would get one writer, some really great writer, to tackle the subject. That was my initial dream. Then I thought maybe two writers and then three writers. But soon I felt that since the book was a collection of portraits of many disparate, different types of people, the writing should also be from many points of view. As a photographer with a 25 year shooting history, I know so many people by now. I'm friendly with Gore Vidal, A.M. Homes, John Waters, or Karen Finley. These are people I've photographed, who would take my phone call and who would trust that my intentions were serious. Porn is a subject a lot of people are interested in and don't often get asked to write about. Very few people turned me down. But in answer to your question about the porn star essays, I started to interview the them while I was with them. I imagine most photographers interview their subjects in some manner. I thought if I could get the them to write something for the book it would be add so much. I even considered conducting Q&As with each of them or hiring someone to interview them. In the end, it was their stories that were so revealing and riveting, especially because the stories were in their own voices. This was a very difficult project to pull off. And writing for a lot of the porn stars probably felt like homework! I think some of them felt uncomfortable doing it. But they came through with wonderful, honest reflections on their lives and I am very grateful to them for taking the time to write for XXX. The idea for the Top Ten List of porn star movie titles was one that I knew would just be really funny. The names of some of the films are often so hilarious and it would also just be informational. Who wouldn't want to know what films they thought were their best work?

AM: Their statements and the list of films they've done also really contextualize the portraits and affirm that, "Yes, these really are porn stars. This is actually the work they've done, believe it or not." So now that you've got the book completely finished and you go back and look at the portraits, do you see anything in particular revealed about the people between the images of them clothed and nude?

TGS: I think if I were to generalize, I would say that if you want to be a porn star you had better be very comfortable in the nude. Porn stars like taking off their clothes; they're more empowered naked, generally. Sex is such a fascinating and charged subject. I also think that clothing says so much about a person, about how he or she sees himself or herself. Some of the porn stars in their daily lives wear things to cover up the fact that they're so big breasted or whatever because if you're a porn star and you're walking down the street it's probably better not to look like one. Clothing speaks volumes. ▲

Caption quotes taken from biographical statements of each person in XXX 30 Porn Star-Portraits (Bulfinch, 2004).