

Noted photographers turns his lens on adult film stars

By JOE MEYERS

October 25, 2004

Pornography is one of the biggest businesses in America, but it's rarely treated seriously by the mainstream media.

The past decade has seen an explosion in adult entertainment on video, the Internet and on in-room entertainment systems in most of the major hotel chains.

Like it or not, so many people are watching adult movies that leading performers such as Jenna Jameson are beginning to make names for themselves outside the porn field.

Now, one of the country's finest photographers, Timothy GreenfieldSanders, has completed a multi-media project involving porn actors that is likely to be among the most talked-about cultural events of the fall.

Greenfield-Sanders' "XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits" was published by Bulfinch/Little Brown earlier in the month. Thursday night HBO will unveil the artist's documentary "Thinking XXX," which takes viewers behind the scenes of the photo project. On Saturday, an exhibition of the photographer's portraits will open at Manhattan's Mary Boone Gallery.

Greenfield-Sanders is a contributing photographer at Vanity Fair. Over the past two decades he has shot pictures of some of our greatest writers, visual artists and musicians. (The current Good Housekeeping contains Greenfield-Sanders portraits of George and Laura Bush and John and Theresa Heinz Kerry.)

Greenfield-Sanders added to the special event status of the Bulfinch book by inviting some of his artist friends to contribute essays to "XXX." Gore Vidal provides the introduction and the other writers include Salman Rushdie.

In a recent phone interview from his downtown Manhattan studio, Greenfield-Sanders said he has been gratified by the positive response to the book so far and was looking forward to Thursday night's airing of his HBO documentary.

"I was just trying to make a book I would enjoy myself," the photographer said, adding that the project began with seeing "Boogie Nights," Paul Thomas Anderson's 1997 film about the porn industry.

"I thought, what a great group of people to shoot," Greenfield-Sanders recalled.

The photographer had never done nudes before and decided it was an area he wanted to explore.

Inspired by Goya's dual paintings — with a clothed woman on one canvas and a nude in the same pose on the other — Greenfield-Sanders made a few double portraits of porn actors.

“I decided to play off the Goya and it was just so strong ... I knew I was on to something,” the photographer said.

What was originally going to be a series of pictures for an exhibit at Mary Boone Gallery eventually grew into a book. When the photographer showed some of his video footage to HBO's Sheila Nevins, a deal for a documentary was signed.

Porn has been such a hot button issue for so many years that Greenfield-Sanders' non-judgmental examination of the subject is refreshing.

Just as in his wonderful portraits of artists like Toni Morrison and Patti Smith, we can see that the people in “XXX” were made to feel comfortable — and respected — by the man who took the photos.

Greenfield-Sanders said he is not interested in catching his subjects off guard or trying to tell us what we are supposed to think when we look at his pictures.

“You have to make the subject feel comfortable, so there is always a little dance you do with them when they come in the door,” he said.

Ironically, on this project, a photographer who had never shot nude people found himself being put at ease by subjects who were sometimes more comfortable naked than with their clothes on.

Greenfield-Sanders' subtle and elusive style of portrait photography mixes realism with glamor.

“I don't believe in super glamor,” the artist said. “I'd like to think I'm showing you on your best day.”

The photographer recognizes the weird dichotomy in contemporary American culture with porn becoming more widely available at the same time that conservative politics have become more popular.

“There is a real split in this country,” he said. “With a shame-based Bush Administration on one hand and people who are more open and accepting on the other.

“A real fight is going on, a serious ideological fight with our fundamentalist religious right not much different from fundamentalists [in other parts of the world],” Greenfield-Sanders said.

“With this book I wasn’t trying to make a political statement but it has become a very political issue,” he said of the battle between would-be censors and those who produce sexually explicit art.

Greenfield-Sanders hopes the contributions of the 15 writers in the book will spur the discussion of porn as a serious contemporary topic.

“I like the range of views,” the photographer said of the book’s text. “Originally, I thought, wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a great writer contribute something? ... but I didn’t think that one [writer] could do it.”

The HBO film features comments by some of the 15 writers, but it is the interviews with the porn stars that make the film unique. These are bright, funny people, several of whom have built their own porn businesses and feel no shame about the work they do.

“I don’t think anybody has seen these people talk this way before,” Greenfield-Sanders said.

“I think it is the honesty here that is so interesting — these are people who don’t ‘spin’ their lives. They tell it like it is,” he said.

“Thinking XXX” debuts on HBO Thursday at 11 p.m.

The Timothy Greenfield-Sanders exhibit “XXX: 30 Porn Star Portraits” opens Saturday at Manhattan’s Mary Boone Gallery, 541 West 24th St., where it will run through Dec. 18.

Illustration: Adult stars: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders photographed Lukas Ridgeston, and Gina Lynn, from left, from his latest book.

PHOTOS OF GINA LYNN AND LUKAS RIDGESTON CLOTHED.