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POP CULTURE
Behind the porn door

Jennie Yabroff, Special to the Chronicle

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New York -- The photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders is sitting at the breakfast table in his East Village townhouse, drinking a cup of tea before being interviewed about his latest series of portraits. His 27-year-old daughter, Isca, who is also an artist, spoons oatmeal as she talks about the technique she used for her recent paintings. "Forget the interview, let's talk about this all morning," Greenfield-Sanders says with a smile. "This is much more interesting than porn."



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Such is the current state of pornography, which has rapidly morphed from unspoken taboo to appropriate topic of breakfast table conversation, innocuous as oatmeal. Reigning porn queen Jenna Jameson is a fixture of both cable and network TV, and her memoir, "How to Make Love Like a Porn Star," is a best-seller. Greenfield-Sander's new show, "XXX," for which 30 porn stars posed nude and in their street clothes, opened last week at San Francisco's John Berggruen Gallery. The New York opening was featured recently on "60 Minutes," and an accompanying book titled, "XXX: Thirty Porn-Star Portraits," includes essays on the subject by a wide ranging group of name brand writers and artists. An HBO documentary, "Thinking XXX," airs this month, and a CD is in the works.

"Right now, there's a cresting of public interest in

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porn," says porn pioneer Nina Hartley, who posed for "XXX" and also contributed an essay and interviewed Nancy ("My Secret Garden") Friday. In her essay, Hartley writes that, "in the twenty years since I performed in my first porn video, society's perceptions of pornography have changed more than the genre itself has."

Certainly, porn is more visible, and more lucrative, than ever. As New York Post Page Six gossip guru Richard Johnson writes in "XXX," "the porn business is huge. ... The biggest profits from porn go to huge corporations: cable TV providers and multinational hotel chains. The late chairman of Loews Hotels, Larry Tisch, made far more money from porn than Jenna Jameson ever has. "

Before beginning "XXX" two years ago, Greenfield-Sanders had photographed only two nudes and wasn't that interested in porn. A graduate of the American Film Institute in Los Angeles, he shifted from film to photography early in his career and made his name photographing members of the New York art world. "Art World," his survey of 700 artists, dealers, critic, collectors and curators, is part of New York MOMA's permanent collection. He's also photographed politicians, actors and writers for Vanity Fair and other high- end publications.

Porn, which many critics deride specifically for its lack of artistic intent, would not seem a natural next subject for a photographer best known for his portraits of artists. But it was precisely the frisson of the juxtaposition that excited Greenfield-Sanders.

"Part of the attraction of this subject was the question of whether my involvement made it art," he says once the interview begins, talking in his studio downstairs from the kitchen. Dressed entirely in black, he is warm and articulate, like an avuncular John Malkovich. He cites a viewing of the film "Boogie Nights," another artistically serious treatment of the porn world, as an early inspiration. "As I got interested, I saw more and more reasons for doing it. It's a supercharged subject that makes you examine your own sexual feelings, makes you wonder about the lives of these people. That's when I started thinking there was a book in it."

The essays in "XXX," by writers and artists Greenfield-Sanders has worked with before, are a mix

of straightforward polemics about the role of porn in society and personal musings only tangentially related to the subject. Lou Reed composes his piece entirely of spammed e-mail enticements to visit porn sites, while Whitley Strieber reminisces about sex with aliens. Francine du Plessix Gray talks about the Marquis de Sade. The poet and critic Wayne Kostenbaum takes a porn star to lunch.

All of the stars photographed contributed bios as well, which appear separate from the essays, and range from the baldly self-promotional -- "I have won several awards in my career to date, including ... two for Best Group Scene, one for Best Oral Scene, and one for Best Threeway" -- to the touchingly sincere -- "I will continue to be a Tushy Girl for as long as my fans will have me." Perhaps the most provocative aspect of the entire project, the bios trace some expected paths (girls from troubled backgrounds who answered ads for "models" and got sucked into the industry) and some not-so-expected (a former stockbroker who left Wall Street for adult video). All the performers evince tremendous drive and ambition, and take the industry as seriously, if not more so, as their counterparts in mainstream film.

"At first, I thought there was a desire to become mainstream, but there's not," Greenfield-Sanders says. "The actors knew when they went into porn that's where they're going to be. Mainstream to them represents more money, more recognition, more fame" -- as embodied by Jameson, who owns her own production and licensing company. While increased economic clout may have won porn new legitimacy in mainstream society, the paycheck remains the biggest draw for most performers.

"Most people get into porn for the money," Hartley says, speaking by phone from her car in Los Angeles. She considers herself one of the few performers using porn to make a larger statement about human sexuality, which she attributes to her educational and economic background. In "Thinking XXX," performer Gina Lynn boasts of buying a new car and jokes about saving her parents money on college.

Hartley takes issue with critics who will pity the women in "XXX," making the point that porn offers a high rate of pay for someone with a high school education. "These women do not have a choice of Harvard or porn. It's porn or white paper hat, porn or

double-wide trailer," she says in the film. Writer Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, who contributed an essay discussing the role porn played in the lives of the South Bronx family she profiled for the book "Random Family," is also interested in the intersection of porn and socioeconomic class.

"The more vulnerable you are economically, the more your sexual power works to your advantage," she said by phone from her home in Manhattan. "Being able to use your body or your sexuality to survive is definitely class-related." LeBlanc was recently visiting one of the subjects of her book in prison when another prisoner excitedly recounted seeing her in "Thinking XXX." (The prison receives HBO.)

LeBlanc, who says she's watched "maybe 20 minutes, total" of porn in her life, says she's most surprised by the banality and obviousness of the porn she has seen. "The conversations I've had about porn are so much more highly charged than the porn itself," she notes.

The photographs in "XXX" are uniformly untitillating, which is Greenfield-Sanders' point. The pictures, he says, are not erotica, but portraits, shot with the same intent as his photographs of Madeleine Albright or Sidney Poitier.

"Human is the key word for me," he says. "This whole project is all about these people as human beings. It's much more about them as people than about them as sex objects." To achieve a de-eroticized approach, he had to overcome his own preconceptions that porn stars are "stupid, or sex addicts." His subjects also had to get past their ideas of what he wanted. When he asked actress Savannah Samson how she looked her best, she replied "with my ankles behind my head." (She posed standing up.)

"If they came up with a cliched pose, I'd say, 'That's great but it's too porno-ish, let's make it more about you,' " Greenfield-Sanders says. "I had to do (the project) with a certain sense of dignity, a sense that I liked these people. If that didn't come through, I'd look like I was exploiting them. It was a perilous group to shoot in that sense."

His original conception was to shoot the stars in their street clothes, which he thought would be a "radical" presentation of people who make their living in the nude. But his first test-subject asked if he could take

his clothes off, and the photographer was intrigued by the technical and conceptual challenges of a series of diptychs. "There is such a complicated dynamic between nudity and what they do for a living and their lives as real people, and this brings out all of it," he says.

The photographer had the stars first come up with a pose with their clothes on, bearing in mind that pockets and belts would disappear once they undressed. Then he had them disrobe, and offered the services of a makeup artist, who gave them "a different look than they're used to, less Crazy Horse Saloon, more Vogue magazine." The stars then assumed the same pose as before, only this time nude.

Many of the performers look more comfortable with their clothes off. "In porn, naked is our workclothes," says Hartley, who feels she looks more "flirty, fun, happy" in her clothed portrait, and more "in-your-face" in her nude shot. Greenfield-Sanders says he edited the shots by asking, "Is this that person that I shot today," for each case, clothed and nude. "In some cases I remembered that they seemed more in command one way or the other."

The photographer did not watch porn in preparation for the project, and though several of the participants have sent him their movies, he has no desire to see them. Like LeBlanc, and many of the other essayists in the book, he is more interested in the ideas around pornography, and the lives of the people who make it, than in the content of the porn itself. But he knows many people will buy the book or see the show just for the naked pictures.

"People say what a smart gimmick to do this, but it wasn't a gimmick, it was a very serious body of work," he says, at the same time acknowledging he's had no trouble getting coverage of the project. "You don't need a PR agency for this," he says. "It is a subject everyone's attracted to in some way. ('XXX' is) the perfect combination of high and low, and the book is a way to look at nude pictures and also read brilliant essays." It's an example of an artist tapping into the national zeitgeist in a way one of his influences, Andy Warhol, would admire.

"This was a very Warholian experience," Greenfield-Sanders says. "If Andy were alive today he'd have porn stars on the cover of Interview magazine."

He'd be hanging out with porn stars, there's no question."

"XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits" is at the John Berggruen Gallery, 228 Grant Ave. through Feb. 12. "Thinking XXX" runs in rotation on HBO through Feb. 22.

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