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# Entertainment



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## XXXpression of art

**A cultural inundation of provocative films, books and art exhibits raises the question: Art or pornography?**

by Megan Rowlands

Not that it's a news flash, but sex has nearly gone household.

Somewhere between seeing Jenna Jameson's shoe closet splayed across the pages of the New York Times elitist House & Homes section, and selecting a side of velvet restraints to accompany your sushi rolls from the room service menu of Toronto's posh Drake Hotel, it becomes apparent that sex has settled into everyday life.

But not without ruffling a certain amount of feathers and furrowing the collective brow of conservatists, of course; sex still remains s-e-x (sssh!) to those who think the phrase "lube job" strictly refers to their car's three month, ahem, servicing. For these folks, the old-fashioned sensory overload of marketing/media tools has become too blatant and obvious an attempt at selling desire to offend anymore. In this day and age, flesh peddlers are forced to find a more innovative way to slide underneath the commercial radar without going too far down. As a result they've unveiled a new partner in their XXX conglomerate- a mainstream dive bomb of provocative films, books and gallery shows that raises the subjective question: Is it art, or is it pornography?

Timothy Greenfield-Sanders is a respected and prestigious photographer known for his portraits of high profile subjects such as Jimmy Carter, Toni Morrison and Madeleine Albright. Sanders, a 52-year old father of two is also synonymous with the XXX world, thanks to his latest project, a book-turned-art exhibit titled "XXX: Thirty Porn Star Portraits," which features one clothed and one nude shot of adult film stars. Snapping shots of seasoned vets like Ron Jeremy, Seymour Butts and Nina Hartley, as well as rising stars like Jesse Jane, Bella Donna and Chad Hunt, was anomalous for Greenfield-Sanders, who shook both his upper crust contemporaries and the entire porn industry with the project's announcement.

"My pictures have always been about intellectual pursuits -artists, thinkers, people of accomplishment- so I was not initially at ease," Greenfield-Sanders told Time Out New York in October. "But I got comfortable quickly, not because my subjects -whether they were straight, gay, young, old, male or female- were very exhibitionistic, but also because I began to realize that porn stars are accomplished people. They're the best at what they do. They're the best at f\*\*\*ing."

Perhaps equally unexpected was the Mary Boone Gallery, a high-brow gallery in New York's Chelsea art district, announcing it would exhibit Greenfield-Sanders' portraits in large format, 58" x 88" prints. Though many wouldn't consider Greenfield-Sanders' prints "pornographic" simply because they display porn stars nude, such a nod of mainstream attention marks another notch in the pornification bedpost of American culture. It also gives the XXX industry a new niche; a purpose to an intellectual class who suddenly have a valid excuse to look at naked people.

It's art.

"I thought it was a really good idea because he's trying to get the point across to different people about pornography, and how it's more of an art, but still a job," says Jesse Jane, a platinum blonde porn star who is featured in Greenfield-Sanders' book.

"Some people look at it as smut and don't look at the artistic side of it. So I thought it was awesome."

Of course, Greenfield-Sanders' work, which inspired the HBO documentary "Thinking XXX" along with a music soundtrack, isn't the first to straddle the evasive artistic/pornographic line. Last December, the Axel Raben gallery (also in Chelsea) displayed photographer Ashkan Sahini's "C\*m Shots" exhibit. The series consisted of nine photographs of average, everyday subjects, their faces dotted with what's said to be semen. Sahini's series, like Greenfield-Sanders', appealed to a unique audience; those who might not be regular viewers of sexually explicit material, but were intrigued by the vision behind it.

"You're seeing these enormous, blown up subjects of porn stars in a fine art context between the pages of a handsome, coffee table book. Despite the references Greenfield-Sanders' makes about Goya (Spanish painter) and classical photography styles, these are still pictures of naked people who have sex for a living on camera," says John d'Addario, editor of Fleshbot.com, a blog that follows pornography in the mainstream. "You can't pigeonhole what he's doing. There will be a lot of people looking at it saying, 'ah, boobies.' So for the Chelsea art hounds who are looking at it one way, there will be a 16-year-old boy looking at it in a very different way. It's all subjective."

The perspective that lies within each individual viewer is, ultimately, the only distinction that can be made between the two abstractions. What is art to one person may be pornography to another and vice versa, says d'Addario.

"Once you put something in one category does that mean it stops being in the other category?" he says. "It's more of a gray area, but here in America we aren't too good of thinking of things in terms of a gray area."

When things really start to get confusing, then, is when you start to wonder, with such loose boundaries and abstruse definitions, can an objective view of art/pornography even exist?

"Everybody has a different point of view. I have a hard time even thinking of what pornography is," says Rolfe Ross, a Scranton-based photographer who assists in running the Camerawork Gallery (located in the basement of The Laundry building in Scranton).

"...Artists should be free to create whatever they want. It's up to the viewer to interpret. If I put a picture on a wall and [the viewer] doesn't feel anything, the picture failed. If they feel angry, so what? At least they're feeling something."

Wilkes-Barre based photographic artist Curtis Salonick, who often uses nudity in his work, says that some people are predisposed to be offended by the sight of flesh.

"For some people, it automatically presses a button without considering what's going on," says Salonick. "People are really rigid. Nudity isn't art for some people, but only because they don't look beyond the nudity."

Both artists admit their racier work has offended others, but also say they are sympathetic to the cause.

"For me there's no conflict, but I understand why others have one," says Ross.

Ross says he doesn't believe an exhibit like Greenfield-Sanders' or Sahini's would be successful in northeast Pennsylvania.

"I think in NEPA, there's a provinciality that exists," says Ross. "I don't think there are enough galleries where owners would put such a project on their walls. It's a little too cutting edge for our area, a little too much for the people of Scranton."

Ross may be right. Though some people who would attend such a show and regard it as beautiful, others would find it offensive or in poor taste. For smaller, independent galleries, the potential to lose a large chunk of customers is a gamble that may just not be worth the risk.

Those who are offended by an exhibit like Greenfield-Sanders', or by the slew of provocative memoirs offered on bookstore shelves these days have a choice: Just don't look.

However, the fact that we can peruse Jenna Jameson's Scottsdale, Ariz., mansion in the daily paper, or that opulent galleries like the Mary Boone Gallery are glorifying porn stars' naked bodies means it may be more difficult than ever to prevent sex from seeping into the mainstream consciousness.

"It says a lot about our cultural climate that porn is being more accepted among the mainstream," says d'Addario. "I don't think it's that the audience has gotten any bigger, because there's always been an audience, but I think people are acknowledging it more."

But as with anything, d'Addario says too much sex can be a bad thing.

"I would hate to have porn be discussed with mom at the breakfast table, like 'oh did you see Jenna did a double penetration?' Part of porn is that it is naughty and a little dirty and dangerous, but if you mainstream it too much you run the risk of losing that aspect and it becomes as boring as MTV or QVC or pretty much anything."

go:

"XXX: Thirty Porn Star Portraits"

by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

Mary Boone Gallery

541 W. 24th St., Chelsea, NYC

Showing through Saturday, December 18

Gallery hours: Tues. to Fri. 10 to 6; Sat. 10 to 6

More info: 212.752.2929 or [Maryboonegallery.com](http://Maryboonegallery.com)



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