

MARTOS GALLERY

The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# Aura Rosenberg's Seriously Playful Art of Collaboration

It takes two venues to contain diverse work from 50 years, connecting sexuality, childhood and her relationships with famous friends embedded in her art.



The artist Aura Rosenberg at her first major survey, "What Is Psychedelic," at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn. Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

## MARTOS GALLERY

**By Travis Diehl**

Published March 29, 2023

Aura Rosenberg's first major survey, "[What Is Psychedelic](#)," fills the Mishkin Gallery of Baruch College in Manhattan and spreads across Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn. It takes this much space to draw a thread through 50 years of her [art](#): witty mash-ups of classicism, op-art, photography, abstract painting, appropriation and — especially — freewheeling collaborations with fellow artists, including Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, John Baldessari and Mike Kelley.

"I hear you've been talking to my friends," Rosenberg teased at her Pioneer Works opening, looking every bit the wry New York artist in a black blazer, black pants and white sneakers. It was true. I'd been on the phone with them all week — friends who are also her gallerists, bandmates, family, collaborators all.

"Everybody knows Aura," Alaina Claire Feldman, the show's curator and director of the Mishkin Gallery, said. (In fact, Rosenberg was a witness at Feldman's marriage.) "But not everybody has seen the depth of her work." Until now. The exhibition includes stoner paintings from the 1970s, an R-rated ceramic tile made with the artist [Mary Heilmann](#) in the '80s; a sun-gold photo portrait from 1996 of Louise Lawler's son, Felix, made up by his mother like a wistful clown; chunks of marble decoupage with monochrome pornography, from 2019. "It looks like a group show," Feldman acknowledged, but "behind every artwork, there's 40 or 50 more in the series."

Rosenberg was born in 1949 in New York City. She grew up in Washington Heights, a neighborhood nicknamed Frankfurt on the Hudson for its German-Jewish community. "My parents were separated," she told me. "My mother liked to paint, but my father was the glamour figure." Her father had fled the Nazis in '39; he set up shop as a designer furniture-maker, and would take Rosenberg to meet clients like Mark Rothko. "I'm sitting in a chair that he made," she said. "It's the only comfortable piece of furniture in our house."



Aura Rosenberg, "Louise Lawler/Felix (from Who Am I? Where Am I? What Am I?)," 1996. via Aura Rosenberg

As an undergraduate at the City College of New York, and later Sarah Lawrence College, Rosenberg painted in a German expressionist style. "I just lucked out," she said, because the person teaching her survey course in art history was Marcia Tucker, founding curator of the New Museum, who nudged her toward the fledgling [Whitney Independent Study Program](#) in 1970. Rosenberg tells the story of her artistic breakthrough, or breakdown: Richard Artschwager, a visiting artist, indicated one of Rosenberg's washy canvases and asked aloud why anyone would make such a thing. "The room started spinning," she remembers, "because until then all my instruction had been more like, 'Put a little more red down here.' But this was questioning the very basis of what I was doing."



## MARTOS GALLERY

She kept asking that question of herself. In 1973, while earning an M.A. at Hunter College, she painted what is now the oldest work in the survey, and its namesake: pinwheels of flower-power purple and red pigment built up around the phrase, “What Is Psychedelic,” lettered in rough, teal-stained canvas.



Aura Rosenberg, “The Dialectical Porn Rock,” 1989-1993. A photo from the project, where the artist glued magazine images of pornography to found stones in Berlin, is on view at Pioneer Works. via Aura Rosenberg



## MARTOS GALLERY

Rosenberg met her husband, the artist John Miller, at Hallwalls, a gallery in Buffalo, N.Y., run by the [Pictures Generation](#) power couple Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo. They didn't start dating until 1986, when they connected at a Whitney Independent Study Program alumni event at the museum. "There was a country western band playing in the courtyard," she remembers. "We danced all night together."

Their daughter, Carmen, was born in 1989. In 1991, her center of gravity shifted again when Miller accepted a fellowship in Berlin. The war remained in living memory and Rosenberg was apprehensive about moving to Germany. "But we made a lot of friends quickly," Miller said, "and we've been back every year for 30 years."

Stirred by the newly reunified city and its dark legacy, Rosenberg began a project based on "Berlin Childhood Around 1900," a memoir by the philosopher Walter Benjamin (German Jewish, like the artist), written while fleeing the Nazis. Rosenberg began taking Carmen to the places Benjamin describes and photographing them. This communion with a dead writer grew to involve his living descendants when Benjamin's granddaughter, Chantal Benjamin, saw Rosenberg's work in an exhibition. They became friends. With the Cologne-based artist Frances Scholz, they're producing a series of videos set to passages from Benjamin's book read by [Lais Benjamin Campos](#), the writer's great-granddaughter.

Parts of this somber project are on view in "What is Psychedelic" but so is the irreverent sculpture "Stashbox for Benjamin," a small pipe Rosenberg set in a niche carved into a copy of Benjamin's book about his experiences with hashish. People who know Benjamin as a heady Frankfurt-school philosopher driven to suicide by the Nazis might not know his lively, cannabis-curious side. Rosenberg draws out both, pairing sweetness with despair.



Installation view of Aura Rosenberg's "What Is Psychedelic" at Mishkin Gallery. Center, "The Sewing Basket (from Berlin Childhood)," 2002/2022, a project based on "Berlin Childhood Around 1900," by the philosopher Walter Benjamin. via Aura Rosenberg and Mishkin Gallery; Photo by Isabel Asha Penzlien

“The material’s not that playful,” the [performance artist Michael Smith](#) said of Rosenberg’s work, “but there’s a sense of innocence.” Smith was the first participant in one of her most intimate series, [“Head Shots,”](#) for which over 50 men agreed to have their faces photographed in the throes of sexual release (or to fake it). “I’m pretty prudish,” Smith said, “but I can mug it. And I happen to have a plastic Santa outfit.” The unsettling image of an orgasmic Kriss Kringle is at Mishkin, alongside sweaty portraits of Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Miller (with Rosenberg’s feet in the photo). There are men laughing and men dying of AIDS. Rosenberg charmed them all into showing their vulnerability.





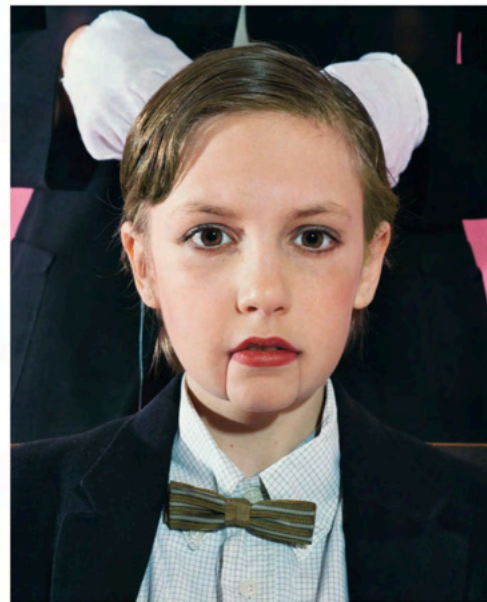
Aura Rosenberg, "Head Shots," 1993-2017. The artist was capturing the visible expression of sexual desire —the moment of orgasm on camera. Whether they were giving her a real expression or a sublime fakery, before a witness, is anyone's guess. via Aura Rosenberg

“She’s not objectifying these men,” says the critic and curator Bob Nickas, a friend since the mid-80s. “That’s where community comes in. Think of the artists who agreed to participate in that project: Tony Oursler, Hunter Reynolds, [John Baldessari](#) — it shows how important collaboration is to her work.”

That same spirit is crucial to [“Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?,”](#) a series of portraits of children costumed by other artists. The idea formed in the photo booth that Rosenberg ran at her daughter’s school fairs. She found children’s faces to be beautiful surfaces for painting. “Could I force people to take face painting seriously by doing it with serious artists?” she wondered. “It would be an opportunity for children, who love to experiment with identity. And for artists to play — which is harder than it sounds.”



Aura Rosenberg was the photographer; Kiki Smith the artist who painted the face of Rosenberg's daughter Carmen, from "Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?," 1996-98. via Aura Rosenberg



Aura Rosenberg, Laurie Simmons/Lena from "Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?," 1996-98. Lena Dunham, painted by her mother as a ventriloquist dummy for Rosenberg's camera, called it the best day of her life. via Aura Rosenberg

The face painting project has drawn the most flak from critics, who charged that the portraits exploited children and exposed them to mature themes. Models beg to differ. The actor and writer Lena Dunham, daughter of the artists Laurie Simmons and Carroll Dunham, calls the day she dressed up as a ventriloquist dummy for Rosenberg's camera the best day of her life. She writes in the exhibition's catalog that Rosenberg "turns children, both so unaware and so hyper-attuned, into both props and creators, objects and fully formed creatures." Carmen Rosenberg-Miller, the artist's daughter, posed for the first portrait with temporary tattoos of butterflies and teardrops applied by Kiki Smith. (With a Ph.D. in art history, Rosenberg-Miller is now teaching a seminar at Princeton about [artists and their models.](#))



“I remember having a lot of fun on the photographs with Dan Graham,” she recalled. “Dan was so playful, and his work thinks so much about children and childhood.”

Sometimes, the game got dark — like the time Mike Kelley made her up as a goth prom queen. When Rosenberg-Miller looked in the mirror, she said, she didn’t recognize herself. “It felt like my identity had been completely erased.”

Her mother, speaking in her spare SoHo studio — where hunks of stone from a previous project, with magazine pages of pornography decoupage to them, were scattered on the hardwood floor — explained, “In that moment, I really had to decide if I was the photographer or if I was the mom. The photographer won out.”

Rosenberg said she thought about titling her survey something descriptive and stately, like “Five Decades.” But the more time you spend tracing the relationships embedded in her work, the more all-encompassing the ambiguous, plaintive declaration “What Is Psychedelic” becomes.

“When I was 22 and making that painting,” the artist said, “I was thinking more about an optical experience that would be comparable to getting high.” Now, she thinks of psychedelia as a way meaning emerges from the world. “It’s a process that artists go through when they’re making their work,” she said, “when you start to see connections that you hadn’t planned on. Those connections happen between works, but they also happen between the actual material of your life. You start to see your life in an expanded way.”

# MARTOS GALLERY



Aura Rosenberg in Red Hook, near Pioneer Works. Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

---

## **What Is Psychedelic: Aura Rosenberg**

Through June 11 at [Pioneer Works](https://pioneerworks.org), 159 Pioneer Street, Brooklyn; 718-596-3001, [pioneerworks.org](https://pioneerworks.org).

Through June 9 at Mishkin Gallery at Baruch College, 135 East 22nd Street, Manhattan; 646-660-6653.



## Aura Rosenberg and the Myth of Corporate Feminism

At Efremidis Gallery, Berlin, the artist's new series of lenticular prints revisits the controversy surrounding Kristen Visbal's *Fearless Girl* (2017)

BY CLAIRE KORON ELAT IN EU REVIEWS, EXHIBITION REVIEWS



For her current solo exhibition at the Berlin-based Efremidis Gallery, Aura Rosenberg has covered the floor with miniatures of the Siegesäule (Victory Column, 1873), Heinrich Strack's monument to the Prussian Victory in the Second Schleswig War and one of the German capital's major tourist attractions. The installation's title, *The Missing Souvenir* (2003/2021), hints at its history: the miniatures were originally conceived as an edition for the KW Institute of Contemporary Art and marked the first time that this popular monument had been made into a souvenir (*Siegessäule*, 2003). With little to distinguish them from the tacky mementos available in tourist shops throughout the city (save the 120-euro price tag), these miniature replicas mimic consumer culture's inherent appetency to turn almost anything into a commercial product.



Aura Rosenberg, *You seem to look right through me*,  
2021, lenticular print, 1.83 × 1.23 m. Courtesy: the artist  
and Efremidis Gallery, Berlin



## MARTOS GALLERY

Surrounding *The Missing Souvenir* are eight new lenticular prints, which depict multifarious drawings of Kristen Visbal's bronze *Fearless Girl* (2017) juxtaposed with Arturo di Modica's *Charging Bull* (1989). Visbal's sculpture of a pre-adolescent girl standing squarely, hands on hips, was commissioned by asset-management company State Street Global Advisors and installed in front of Di Modica's sculpture in Manhattan's Financial District, to mark International Women's Day in 2017. Labelled as an act of female empowerment by the company, it might more truthfully be branded an archetype of hypocritical corporate feminism. In the same year that *Fearless Girl* was revealed to the public, State Street settled a US\$5 million lawsuit after an investigation by the US Department of Labor disclosed that the company had been underpaying female and Black employees.



Aura Rosenberg, 'The Bull, The Girl + The Siegestsäule', 2021, Efremidis Gallery, Berlin. Courtesy: the artist and Efremidis Gallery, Berlin

## MARTOS GALLERY

Rosenberg nods to the discrepancy between (feminist) political activism and corporate branding through the slogan-like titles of her prints, such as *I want to penetrate men's dreams, their secret heavens and remote stars, those called upon when dawn and destiny are at play* and *You seem to look right through me* (both 2021). The latter work depicts Visbal's *Fearless Girl* facing the dauntingly muscular bull – manspreading, genitals exposed – wielding a knife. In *Knowing without words, the thing itself affixed to the heart, shelters us from its image like a shield* (2021) the bull holds the now-naked girl in his arms. Despite the positive connotations of the work's title, it's unclear whether this is a scene of rape or a loving embrace, which could be seen to reflect the ambiguity of corporations who lack equality in their internal structures while externally presenting themselves as allies. The oscillation between abuse and care evokes Rosenberg's previous works, most notably the series 'Who am I? What am I? Where Am I' (1996 – 2008) – photographic portraits of children produced in collaboration with 82 artists, including Dan Graham and Mike Kelly, who painted Rosenberg's own daughter with freckles (*Dan Graham – Carmen*, 1996 – 98) and gothic make up, bruises and a cleavage (*Mike Kelly – Carman*, 1996 – 98).

The medium of the lenticular print, reminiscent of billboards and digital advertising screens, creates an illusion of physical depth from afar, with the figures seeming to protrude from the two-dimensional surface, which dissipates from a closer perspective. In many of Rosenberg's prints, the bull – semi-transparent and awash with watercolour-like splashes of paint – is depicted as either a minotaur or a lamassu. By turning Di Modica's *Charging Bull* into a mythological creature, the artist reveals the dreamy illusions that are often projected onto statues. Similarly, Rosenberg's shifting portrayals of the *Fearless Girl* warn us to be on our guard against pristine images of little girls presented as an easily digestible form of standardized feminism, circulated by the patriarchy, and driven by profitability.





Aura Rosenberg, *You are afraid of the echo*, 2021,  
lenticular print, 1.83 × 1.23 m. Courtesy: the artist and  
Efremidis Gallery, Berlin

*Aura Rosenberg's 'The Bull, The Girl + The Siegessäule' is on view at Efremidis Gallery until 20 January 2022.*



Interview von Aura Rosenberg mit  
Sabine Breitwieser, Kuratorin der  
Ausstellung

**Aura Rosenberg** (\* 1949) lebt in New York und Berlin. Gegenwärtig werden drei Arbeiten von ihr in der Ausstellung „Up To And Including Limits: After Carolee Schneemann“ im Muzeum Susch (Unterengardin, Schweiz) gezeigt. Da die Ausstellung aufgrund der gegenwärtigen Viruspandemie geschlossen ist, haben wir Aura Rosenberg gebeten, in einem Text auf ihre dort gezeigten Arbeiten einzugehen. Darüberhinaus führt der Link zu einem Interview von Aura Rosenberg mit Sabine Breitwieser, der Kuratorin der Ausstellung.

**Aura Rosenberg** (\* 1949) lives in New York and Berlin. Three of her works are currently shown in the exhibition „Up To And Including Limits: After Carolee Schneemann“ at Muzeum Susch (Unterengardin, Schweiz). Since the exhibition is closed due to the current viral pandemic, we have asked Aura Rosenberg to write a text about her works shown there. Furthermore, the link leads to an interview by Aura Rosenberg with Sabine Breitwieser, the curator of the exhibition.

Up To And Including Limits, the exhibition that Sabine Breitwieser curated at Muzeum Susch, takes the work of Carolee Schneeman as its starting point and surveys her legacy in the work of thirteen artists and art collectives. I'm showing three pieces in this exhibition.

The first is titled The Dialectical Porn Rock. It's part of a series of sculptures and photographs that started as a practical joke in the summer of 1988, when I was vacationing in the countryside with some artist friends. There, in the middle of the woods, I didn't want to continue making paintings as though I had never left my New York City studio. So, I was at loose ends. Mike Ballou, one of the other artists, was building sculptures that incorporated pictures from porn magazines. He also liked to fish in the stream in front of our house. So, I devised a joke for him by taking rocks from the stream and gluing porn pictures torn from his magazines on to them. I then covered the rocks with resin and put them back for him to chance upon while fishing. But, the incongruity of the altered rocks in this setting made me want to photograph them – although I had never used a camera before. This turned into a long--term photo project. At first, I thought of the rocks only as props for taking photos – as a way of making landscape photography. However, I gradually started to see the rocks as objects in themselves and installed them in different configurations, both in and out doors. Robert Smithson's essay about Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape, suggested the title for the series.

For this installation, Muzeum Susch, shipped almost two hundred Porn Rocks from New York City, which we then combined with rocks collected onsite from the Flüela River. In this way, the installation recalls the surrounding landscape. But, it also reflects the Muzeum itself, as parts of the Muzeum were excavated by hollowing out nine thousand tons of rocks from the mountainside. One of the Muzeum entrances is a rock grotto, and fragments from the excavation process were processed and mixed with sand from the Flüela to form the terrazzo flooring of the galleries. Sabine Breitwieser installed my rocks next to Schneeman's 1964 film, Meat Joy, in which eight performers covered in paint crawl and writhe together playing with fish, meat and poultry. I've always felt that the Porn Rocks referred to flesh, that they re--corporealize the porn images. In fact, the first time I showed the rocks at White Columns in 1989, we sold them by the pound, like meat.

I haven't shown this work in Switzerland since 1993, when Josef Felix Mueller organized a



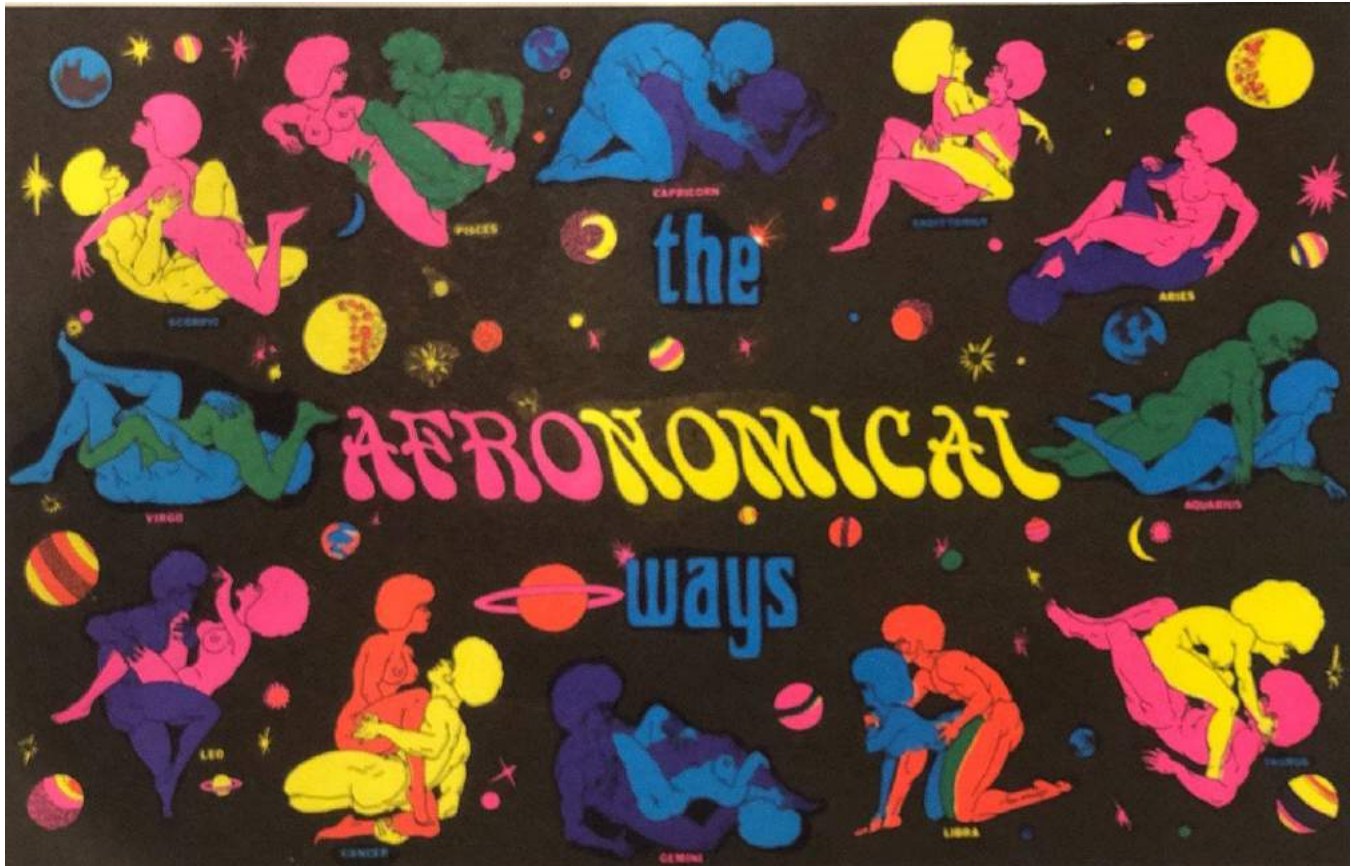
## MARTOS GALLERY

survey of my work at Kunsthalle, St. Gallen. For that exhibition, we also combined Porn Rocks, with rocks from a nearby river. The exhibition included photographs from Dialectical Porn Rock, paintings from my series The Golden Age and a selection of photos from my portrait series Head Shots.

As I mentioned, in 1988, just before starting The Dialectical Porn Rock, I had been making paintings. I produced these paintings by covering my body with paint and imprinting it onto various fabrics, including vinyl and velvet. I referred to found images of figures in different postures to guide me in making the imprints, which were meant to connote a variety of activities and behavior. One of my references was a black light poster titled The Afronomical Ways that I had bought on 42nd Street when it was still the porn capital of New York. On a black velvet background, the poster depicts fluorescent silhouettes of ecstatic couples with Afros cavorting among the stars. Initially these paintings had more to do with formalism than content. I wanted to engage with the Modernist imperative to define painting according to its unique properties. I wanted to produce figurative paintings that were at the same time non-illusionistic. The imprints were indexical traces of my body, the result of a literal process. Coincidentally, I stopped making these paintings when I started making photographs, which, are also indexical images. In a way, the imprints were the last stop in painting before they turned into photographs. The mimetic nature of copying body postures inevitably led to other readings. With the figures in Afronomical Ways I became interested in the cross reading of two texts – astrological signs and instructional sex manuals. I stopped making these paintings in 1988 after The Dialectical Porn Rock took my work in new directions that involved primarily photography and sculpture. Even so, I still wanted to produce a painting for each of the zodiac signs. In 2013, my show at Martos Gallery offered me that opportunity. The back room of the gallery was usually reserved for special projects and I asked if we could use it for a series of twelve imprint paintings that I titled The Astrological Ways. This time, instead of making the imprints myself, I invited couples to make them. I selected couples according to their astrological signs and gave them an image from the poster corresponding to their sign. At the opening of the show we had eleven of the paintings hanging. One space was empty. I had hired a couple of dancers to enact the twelfth painting: Taurus. Halfway through the opening they started to undress and walked from the gallery into the backroom where we had laid out a piece of black velvet and a bucket of white paint for them. The next day, we stretched the painting and hung it with the rest of the group.



Photo © Werner Kaligofsky.

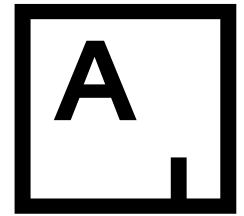


The figures in Afronomical Ways were also the starting point for a three--minute animated "flicker" video.

<https://vimeo.com/manage/33746225/general>

I made the video in Photoshop, altering each of the silhouetted couples in its own way – turning them into outlines, dissolving them into abstract patterns, or mirroring them. I then turned the altered image into a negative version of itself. Finally I made both positive and negative into a rapidly alternating sequence, producing a dizzying stroboscopic effect. The idea for the animation was inspired by Tony Conrad's flicker film of 1966. I was also thinking about "skin flicks", which is another term for porn movies. Preceded by the name of its astrological sign, each of the silhouettes pulsates in alternating black/white for fifteen seconds. The full video is three minutes long. The soundtrack is my band Dirty Mirrors, jamming. The video is projected above the entrance to the room of paintings and helps illuminate that with a pulsating light.





Jul 18, 2019

# The Many Faces of Ecstasy in Art

Wallace Ludel



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–52. Via Wikimedia Commons

The truest depictions of ecstasy in art exist in the muddled territory between exaltation and despair. Its subjects are trademarked by a lack of autonomy—an inability to regulate the self as it slips away from the idea of the self. This is its key: Ecstasy is not the supreme heights of joy nor the violent depths of despondency, but rather the phenomenon of transcendence, often through an indiscriminate combination of extremes.



## MARTOS GALLERY

Throughout history, the perception of ecstasy, not unlike its symptoms, has been disorderly. The English language gets the word from the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning “to put out of place.” In 405 B.C.E., the Greek tragedian Euripides premiered his play *The Bacchae*, the tale of a king attempting to fight off Dionysus, the god associated with revelry and religious frenzy, in order to protect his population from falling into a state of debauched ecstasy. But the word is also filtered through the Old French *extasie*, which roughly translates to “rapturous.” In 1933, Gustav Machatý’s *Ekstase*, starring the Depression-era dreamboat Hedy Lamarr, featured the first-ever female orgasm in mainstream cinema. By the 1990s, it came to refer to the rapture-inducing party drug made popular by well-meaning club kids seeking community in electronic music and getting high.



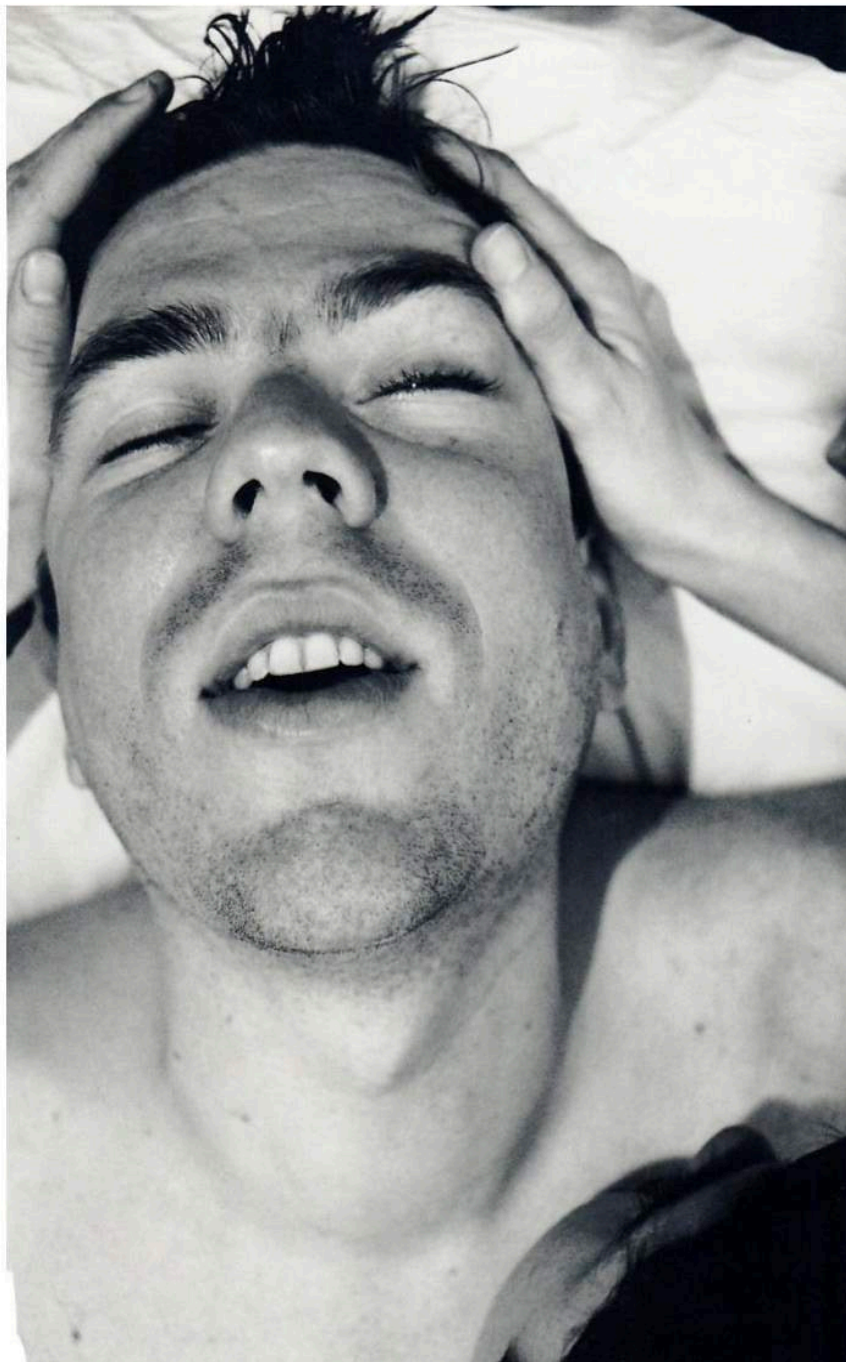
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy*, 1594. Via Wikimedia Commons.

The canonical art-historical example of the emotional condition is Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647–52). The marble sculpture, installed in the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, depicts the 16th-century Spanish nun in the exact moment a visiting angel has come to stab her in the heart with a spear. The vision is one that Teresa herself detailed in writing:

“Beside me, on the left, appeared an angel in bodily form....In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it

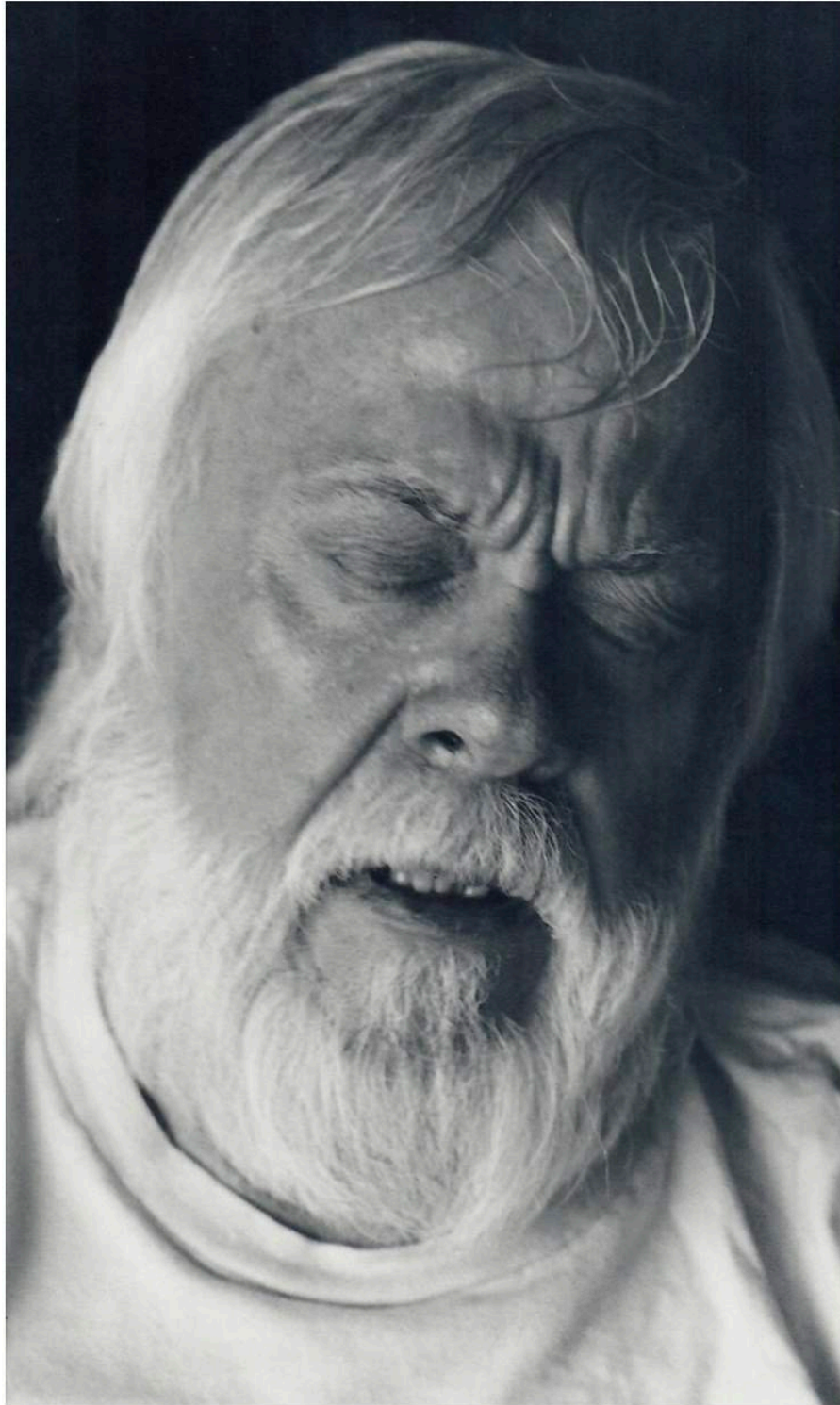
## MARTOS GALLERY

penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease.”



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (OS)*, 1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.





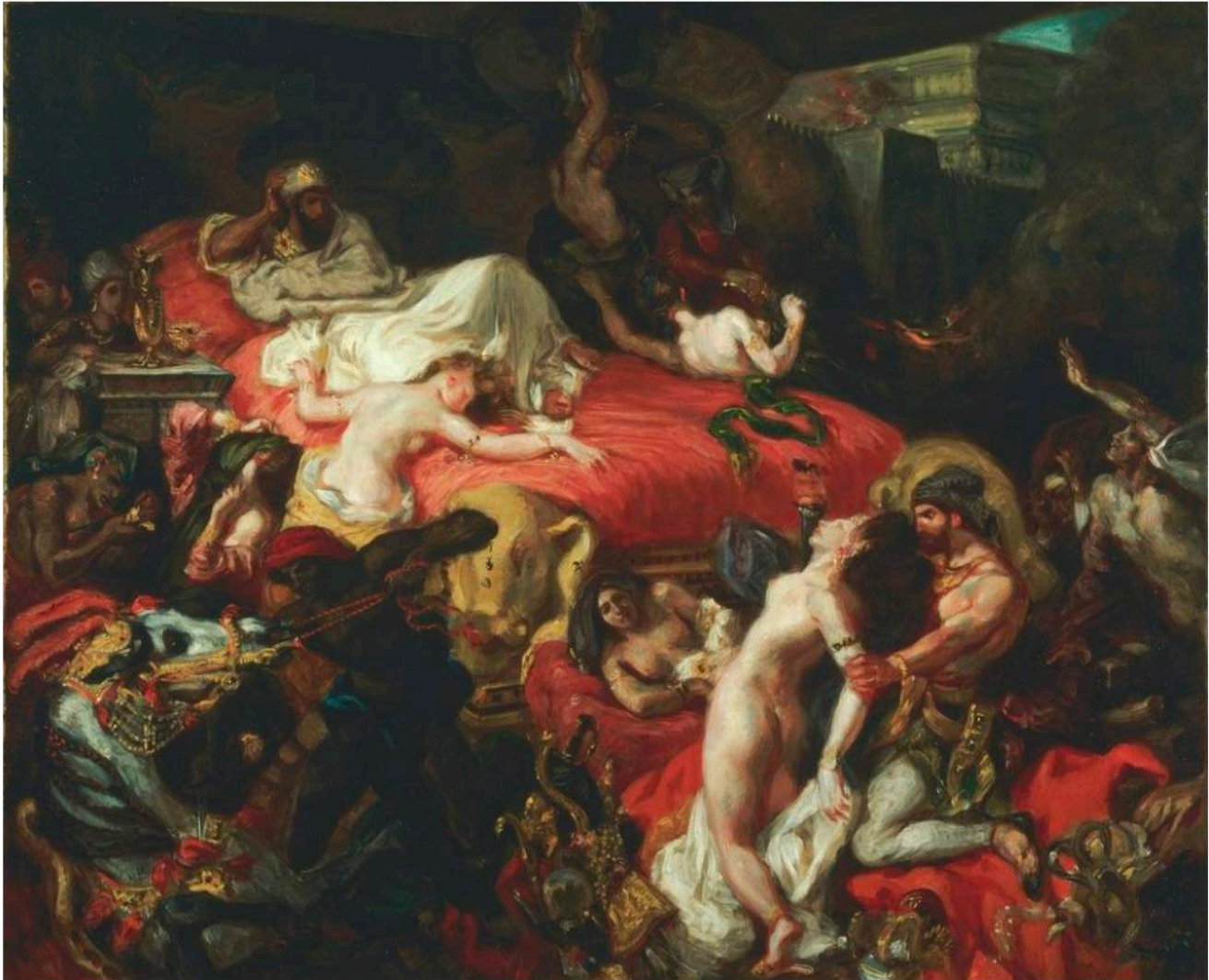
Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (JB)*, 1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

It's this indulgent commingling of pleasure and pain, along with St. Teresa's inarguably orgasmic state of repose—eyes closed, mouth agape, reclining in exaltation as her robe drapes around her—that has earned the Baroque sculpture a place in the canon. Mary Magdalene was similarly chosen for deistic psycho-sexual renderings of ecstasy in Baroque works like Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in*



## MARTOS GALLERY

*Ecstasy* (1606) and Peter Paul Rubens's *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalene* (ca. 1619–20). According to a legend popular in Caravaggio's time, Magdalene was overcome, seven times a day, by "the delightful harmonies of the celestial choirs." Both paintings show her in the midst of such a visit, and in each, she's unable to stand, as if in an erotic delirium.



Eugène Delacroix, *La mort de Sardanapale* (*Death of Sardanapalus*), 1827, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Can similarly preternatural states be summoned by secular figures? Ask any fainting concert-goer who experienced the throes of Beatlemania, and the answer is undoubtedly yes. Ecstasy achieved through cumulative, mob-energy fanaticism is the subject of Dan Graham's seminal 1983–84 work *Rock My Religion*. The nearly hour-long video splices together concert footage of acts like Black Flag, the Doors, Patti Smith, and Jerry Lee Lewis while paralleling these videos with discussions of alternative religions and depictions of religious rapture.

## MARTOS GALLERY

Dancing, be it in a group or alone, seems to be one of ecstasy's many earthly access points. In Adrian Piper's installation *The Big Four-Oh* (1988), a monitor—set amid baseballs, a knight's armor, piss, and vinegar—shows the artist dancing alone to funk music for 47 minutes straight, her back to the viewer the whole time as she loses herself in the dance. (Nearly 30 years later, in her 2007 video *Adrian Moves to Berlin*, Piper again danced herself to transcendence, this time alone in Berlin's Alexanderplatz.)



Larry Clark, *xiii*, 1980, Edward Ressle



Larry Clark, *Skip Tapping Vein* (from the series "Tulsa"), 1971, ClampArt

As John Lithgow's character in *Footloose* (1984) warns us, dancing slips easily into sexuality. Andy Warhol's silent film *Blow Job* (1964) shows only the head of a man who, for a single 35-minute shot, receives the titular act; his face, sunken at times in shadow, slips between wincing and rejoicing. He is an inverse of St. Theresa—experiencing pleasure so great it looks like pain. Aura Rosenberg found success in similar territory with her "Headshots" series (1991–96). She photographed male artists such as John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, and her husband, John Miller, mid-orgasm. Each picture, as the title suggests, focuses on their faces. Stripped of context, these images suggest people vacillating between extreme pain and sublime exultance.

The search for ecstasy can also be a violent spectacle. Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) shows the moment the Assyrian king, facing defeat, has decided to destroy



## MARTOS GALLERY

everything he takes pleasure in, including his women, horses, and riches. Nude bodies flail about in a downright orgiastic state of chaos. The hyper-sexualized death scene is an anti-bacchanal—the opposite, despite their Dionysian similarities, of a work like Henri Matisse's *The Joy of Life* (1905–06).



Bill Viola, *Nantes Triptych*, 1992, Royal Academy of Arts

If we understand ecstasy as a state of transcendence through emotion—often at the expense of such profoundly human traits as the governance over one's own body—then it can be found in much humbler settings. Larry Clark returned to his native Tulsa to photograph the series collected in his 1971 book by the same name. Figures from Clark's world bounce through life, trapped, colliding like pinballs between highs and lows. The viewer watches them unmoor: shooting up in bathtubs and on beds; sleeping with and harming one another. This is the endless pursuit of ecstasy, the active hunt to separate the self from the self through religion, music, and sex, or through getting high. Countless photographers, from Nan Goldin to Wolfgang Tillmans to Dash Snow, have made careers capturing similarly hedonistic scenes of unbridled drug use.

The messiness of ecstasy is contained in Bill Viola's breakthrough 1992 work, *Nantes Triptych*. The 30-minute, 3-channel video shows a home birth on the left screen, a man floating in water in the central

## MARTOS GALLERY

panel, and, on the right, a home video of Viola's mother as she lies dying. On the left, the viewer witnesses childbirth and the agonizing pain and exaltation it intertwines. In the center, the submerged figure seems somewhere between drowning and calmly floating. And on the right, there is Viola's mother, leaving it all behind in the dismaying quietude of a coma. For a stunning and crucial few minutes toward the end, a newborn baby is held by its mother in the first channel while Viola's brother lays a mournful, tender hand on his mother's head in the last. Here, life and death meet each other, the messy ring of ecstasy soldering itself whole.

ARCHIVE – Gallery

TAKE A TRIP INTO THE OUTER REACHES OF THE ART UNIVERSE WITH Bob Nickas AND HIS EXPANSIVE EXHIBITION *STRANGE ATTRACTORS: THE ANTHOLOGY OF INTERPLANETARY FOLK ART*.



Installation view, all images courtesy of Kerry Schuss Gallery.



PHOTOGRAPHY Kerry Schuss  
TEXT Bob Nickas

In 1977, NASA launched the twin Voyager space probes. Each carried with them a Golden Record, a compilation of images, scientific data, natural sounds, greetings in 55 languages, and music presenting an overview of life on Earth, which included everything from Bach played by Glenn Gould to Chuck Berry's *Johnny B. Goode*. Although the folklorist Alan Lomax objected to the song as adolescent, Carl Sagan, who headed the project, defended its inclusion, insisting, "There are a lot of adolescents on the planet." Other than a stylus, the discs came with no playback system. If one of the probes were to be discovered, and with it a Golden Disc, how do we know intelligent life would figure out how it can be played? And if the intelligent life is adolescent, might a disc more readily be used as a frisbee? Another song initially chosen, perfect for a compilation sent into space, *Here Comes the Sun*, by The Beatles, was left off the disc. The group had enthusiastically agreed, but their record company, EMI, which held the copyright, refused. We can only wonder: did it occur to anyone to replace it with Nina Simone's interpretation? Would it have mattered that she was black and a woman? Or was her balancing act, infusing hope with sadness, simply too human?

Music accounts for about three-quarters of the disc's contents. There is no visual art. Are artists somehow too alien, of the Earth but extraterrestrial? Why was art set aside in favour of various recordings – the sound of a kiss, of a whale and ocean waves, a message from Sagan's young son? ("Hello from the children of planet Earth.") Art from the caves in Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet would have communicated as much, if not more. This was the beginning of art, of humans representing themselves in the world, a new level of consciousness.

Artworks may be thought of as 'strange attractors', drawing us towards them, while also being attracted to and possibly summoning one another. There is an interconnectedness across distant points in time and space that is undeniable. The very idea of the contemporary as it persists within the art world is meant, in some measure, to deny art's connection to the larger realm; to ritual and folk-magic, to pre-history itself, insisting as it does – for some inconveniently – that meaning inhabits objects and images, that it may be sensed, is alive inside them, and when it's not, that absence is palpably felt. At its most resonant, as art vibrates, in the words of conceptualist Lee Lozano, quantum-mechanically, its structure and behaviour visible on an almost molecular level, art doesn't necessarily require translation, and not in more than 50 languages. Why is it that all children, and from an early age, draw? There is a need that's universal, and it may include the universe.

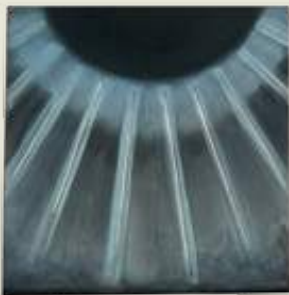
With all this in mind, I organised an exhibition in Los Angeles in 2017, on the 40th anniversary of NASA's Voyager and the Golden Disc, intended as the first in a series. Other shows were meant to follow, and to date a second one has. With its terrestrial launch pad, *Strange Attractors: The Anthology of Interplanetary Folk Art* was subtitled *Life on Earth*. The Voyager probes, having travelled beyond the rings and moon of Saturn, are expected to continue their mission in interstellar space for another seven years, until about 2025, at which time nearly half a century will have passed.

These are the oldest manmade objects sent furthest from the Earth, and have now entered into the realm of mythology, not only for their mission, which continues, but as the ultimate 'message in a bottle', a record of life on our planet – with the exception of art. A show comprised of contemporary artworks, proposing them as 'interplanetary folk art', questions our notion of the term. Is everything new to be automatically considered contemporary? The very designation represents an interminable holding pattern into which art continues to be placed. Of one thing we can be sure: artworks are themselves space probes. To understand them in this way is, on the one hand, to test our tolerance for what may be accepted as a work of art, while on the other to absolutely marvel at art's heightened capacity to retrieve, translate, and transmit information beyond itself, far beyond the moment in which it was made. Works of art may be thought to store data for future retrieval, to aid us in understanding what came before and to help us navigate what's to come. In this we envision a reciprocal elasticity. Time moves in more than one direction. Hasn't it always?

Taking a cue from the music and audio selection on the Golden Disc, the LA exhibition included a playlist/soundtrack assembled in collaboration with the artist Dave Muller. Playing continuously in the office area adjacent to the gallery, it was also available on its website. For the exhibition's second volume, held this past autumn in New York at Kerry Schuss Gallery, music came to the fore in the show's subtitle, *The Rings of Saturn*. The exhibition was based on an expanded notion of field recordings in both music and art. Made outside of a professional studio, field recordings are captured on site, often in nature or in the lived environment of the performers, where there is a resonant overlay: the music of everyday sound, the discovery of which opens up to a sense of rhythm and the pulse of our own bodies. Recordings made in the field are in this sense alive. In terms of visual art, the post-studio artists of the later 60s were also working in the field, whether with permanence, creating earthworks such as Robert Smithson's iconic *Spiral Jetty*, or ephemerally, as in Allan Kaprow's *Fluids*, for which an ice block structure is built and eventually melts. In the mid-to-late 80s, related, though more modest gestures, were made by artists such as Mark Dion and Laurie Parsons, whose practice – poetics and anthropology intermingled – might be termed an anthropoetics. Today, something similar continues, often within a stone's throw of the studio, in the street, on the urban beach, and relates to an alchemy of recycling, to the vernacular re-imagined – the potentiality of everyday objects, particularly castoffs and trash, and their transformation.

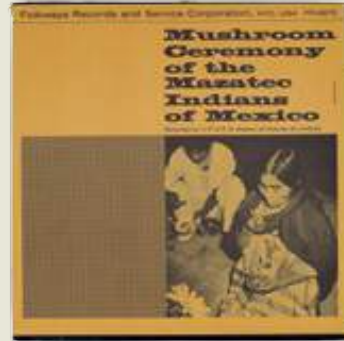
In *The Rings of Saturn*, an unexpected inclusion of works that engage opticality suggested Op as an art engaged with vibration that is audibly visible, with looking/listening in parallel: the artwork as performer, the visual elements as a coming together considered acoustic in their overtones. Here, volume also amplified levels of sound and expansive patterns, from rain rhythmically falling into concentric rings within puddles at our feet while reflecting the sky above, as in a Paul Lee video, to the silent uncorking of a champagne bottle by way of Kayode Ojo's humorous fetish, *Molotov*: revolution as celebratory. To expand our sense of field recordings and make explicit the echoes between visual and sonic realms, a horizontal loop of album covers ran around the gallery, artworks hung above, below and within this line, intermixed, sound-on-sound: Alice Coltrane, Mike Cooper (the experimental British guitarist who has travelled the South Seas), Fred Frith, Milford Graves and Don Pullen, Emahoy Tsegué-Mariam Guèbru (ethereal piano compositions from the Ethiopian nun), Yumi Kagura (a Japanese temple), Norberto Lobo (an Amazon mindscape), Angus MacLise (original drummer for the

MARTOS GALLERY



# MARTOS GALLERY

“ARTWORKS MAY BE THOUGHT OF AS ‘STRANGE ATTRACTORS’, DRAWING US TOWARDS THEM, WHILE ALSO BEING ATTRACTED TO AND POSSIBLY SUMMONING ONE ANOTHER. THERE IS AN INTERCONNECTEDNESS ACROSS DISTANT POINTS IN TIME AND SPACE THAT IS UNDENIABLE... WHY IS IT THAT ALL CHILDREN, AND FROM AN EARLY AGE, DRAW? THERE IS A NEED THAT’S UNIVERSAL, AND IT MAY INCLUDE THE UNIVERSE”





MARTOS GALLERY



Velvet Underground, an occultist who died in Nepal), Nurse With Wound, Terry Riley (*Descending Moonshine Dervishes*), Mustapha Skandrani (the Algerian pianist), Leslie Winer, La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela. Interspersed among them: *Mushroom Ceremony of the Mazatec Indians of Mexico*, *Music From Mato Grosso Brazil*, *Music From Saharan Cellphones*, *Sounds of Insects*, *Sounds of the Junkyard*, and Maya Deren's late 40s recordings of Voodoo rituals in Haiti. From this loop, the exhibition's inverse event horizon, there were points of further return: an eight-hour playlist/soundtrack, again compiled in collaboration with Dave Muller.



Looping and refraction were present symbolically and materially in artworks tuned in to various frequencies: the snake coiled at the centre of Swedish artist Moki Cherry's vibrant banner, spiralling outward, flowered horns facing north, south, east and west, which had been hung on stage at concerts by the omni-directional Don Cherry; roto-reliefs turning and snakes entwined in Philip Taaffe's *Emblem Painting*; the reflective silver skin of Steven Stapleton's *Spiral Insana*; a small phase of the Moon painted on mirror by Lisa Beck; German conceptual artist Hanne Darboven's record, *Der Mond ist Aufgegangen - The Moon is Risen*; Mamie Holst's radiant *Landscape Before Dying*, a distress signal, perhaps unheard, in deep space; Tillman Kaiser's photogram, seeming to emit electricity and radio waves - intercepted by the Dan Walsh sculpture, *Receiver*. Interwoven lines of vibrant colour knitting, Chip Hughes' painting evoked a synesthetic speaker from which musical patterns chromatically emerged. Beyond the metaphorical, there were images of sound and its absence: such as Nancy Shaver's sculpture, *Trombone Missing*; the silenced and restrained figure embodied in James Crosby's *Use Bound in a Sentence*; the waterfall in the Lukas Geronimas photo; the tea kettle about to whistle in Nikholis Planck's waxy *Kettle Study*; the delicate wind chimes hung from Jutta Koether's nocturne; Mitchell Algu's surrealist tower of shells, on a pedestal next to the record *Sounds of the Sea*; the body-operating of Aura Rosenberg's psychedelic mandala, *Golden Age Rorschach*; the ten-part vocal score Jane Benson composed from all the chapters of WG Sebald's book, *The Rings of Saturn*. With its tangled wires, plugs and speaker-type letters, Sally Ross's *Pro Audio* loomed above the room, while the monkey gazing up at it from Josh Tonsfeldt's photograph, *Elephenta Island*, seemed to hear something we can't.

Down below, directly connected to the notion of field recording, were works made from things scavenged in the street, as well as scenes recorded on various forays beyond the studio, from Yuji Agematsu, a master of found object-poetics; the New York-based Ugandan sculptor Leilah Babirye; Tony Conrad (PVC trumpet!); Ryan Foerster, and the hallucinatory wonder revealed by his half-broken camera, spirit photography for our time; visionary artist/musician Lonnie Holley and his protester/lawn jockey; Candy Jernigan (the drug paraphernalia of *Found Dope*, collected on East Village streets in hairier days gone by); the magic potions of Lazaros (each their own encoded 'message in a bottle'); and B Wurtz, who has conjured art from next to nothing, since the early 70s. The only work with a mechanical apparatus, Tonsfeldt's otherworldly liquid projection within a television laid bare, was brought down to earth: a haunted cradle containing grape stems, a child's sock and an insect skeleton. These elements served as a reminder of the fragility of humans and the natural world. Despite the artist's tinkering, the flatscreen still functioned. In an ongoing age of machines, there is a certain stubborn persistence that they, and we, share.

Recently, Voyager 2, despite its creaky 70s engineering, has travelled beyond our heliosphere after more than 40 years, 11 billion miles from Earth, continuing on to interstellar space. Remarkable on the achievement, Suzanne Dodd, the Voyager project manager at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, was compelled to put it into perspective: "You can think of what the technology was. Your smartphone has 200,000 times more memory than the Voyager spacecraft have." Let's not forget that in times as troubled as those that have come before, with the very existence of the planet in peril for future generations.

The naming of one work in *Strange Attractors* rang clearly, a drawing of multiple interlocking Saturns by Richard Tinkler, for which the artist quoted the mid-19th-century French historian Jules Michelet, as a warning and with resolve: *Each Epoch Dreams the One to Follow*.

ARCHIVE – Focus



Clockwise from top left: *TILBUG SUN*, 2017. C-type print on Diasec mount. *MACHO NNE 05*. *WESTGATE*, 2014. Pigment ink on HP premium satin photographic paper. *MACHO NNE*. *SLAY QUEEN*, 2018. C-type print on Diasec mount. *DADAB*, 2011. C-type print on Diasec mount. Copyright Cyrus Kabiru. Images courtesy of SWAC Gallery.

## MEET Cyrus Kabiru, THE KENYAN ARTIST TURNING TRASH INTO EYEWEAR GOLD...

022 Another Man





KWA KUBADILISHANA UTAMADUNI MACHO NNE AT THE DOT, 2017. Photographic print. MALI YA MFALME MACHO NNE MOROCCO NGOME (MOROCCO CASTLE), 2016. Pigment ink on HP premium satin photographic paper. Copyright Cyrus Kabiru. Images courtesy of SMAAC Gallery.

PHOTOGRAPHY Cyrus Kabiru  
 TEXT Laura Allsop

“I feel like one of nature’s soldiers,” says Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru in a voice decidedly more mild than combative. Yet soldier of nature is a perfectly apt description for the 35-year-old, whose practice involves collecting trash from the streets of his native Nairobi and alchemising it into wildly inventive sculptures, from out-there eyeglasses embellished with bottle tops, beads and bits of wire, to souped-up bicycles that recall the poetry of Alexander Calder’s mobiles. Part Afrofuturist, part diesel-punk, Kabiru’s aesthetic is underpinned by the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life. “When I walk, I just collect. But nowadays, people know what I want,” he says of his recruits, who will often bring him bits and pieces. Materials are sourced on a local and occasionally global scale. When in London, “I get shining metals, even some wire and copper – very colourful trash,” he says. “If it’s plastic we get a very bright plastic. You have unique trash. Very clean.” Airport staff are frequently intrigued by the contents of his luggage. Happily, he says, “I connect with everyone very easily. If you’re a pastor I’ll connect with you very easily; if you’re gangster, I’ll connect with you very easily.”

This quality came in useful when Kabiru was a child, making the very first iteration of his longest-running series of artworks, dazzling pairs of ‘glasses’ known as C-stunners (the C is for Cyrus). His father, refusing to buy him a pair of glasses, told him to make his own, which he set out to do using scrap from around the house, and later the gangster-run dump opposite the family home. His first pair, he recalls, featured beads, wire and bits of plastic; pretty soon he was operating a mini-economy, exchanging trash sculptures with classmates for homework. It earned him the nickname ‘Msanii’, or ‘artist’ in Swahili, though Kabiru had never met one and it was a while before he realised that artists

were allowed to do more than just paint landscapes. Now, his C-Stunners are exhibited all over the world, drawing the interest of creatives and tastemakers from designer and curator Duro Olowu to Yasiin Bey, who visited the artist’s studio in Nairobi. Ever more outlandish and mask-like, they defy any normal conception of eyewear. A 2017 piece is composed of a flattened coral-blue paraffin lamp base, decorated with long metal eyelashes and a piece of circuit board for the forehead, while another almost entirely obscures the face with a sun-like construction featuring a wire mesh centre radiating white spokes. The former may recall a deep-sea creature out of Jules Verne but is named for Nairobi’s so-called Slay Queens – young women pursuing wealthy men and flaunting their surface riches on social media – while the latter is based on the architecture of Roman cathedrals. Modelled to fit Kabiru’s face, his practice now involves being photographed wearing the C-Stunners against stark backgrounds. “You see the glasses, you see my face,” he says.

At his most creative during his peregrinations around Nairobi, Kabiru also draws energy from the rural area near Mount Kenya where his grandmother lives, a haven populated with paradisaical birds and animals. “I try to combine the congestion of Nairobi and the beauty of my rural area,” he says. His current project is a marriage of the two worlds, taking disused radios – once the glue of village life – and giving them the Kabiru ‘touch’. He wants, he says, to make these increasingly obsolete pieces of technology “more fantastic”. Though they might suggest the relics of a far-off planet, Kabiru’s works are entirely earthbound in their texture and composition. A hundred years from now, they will speak silently and powerfully of our throwaway culture – archives, as he puts it, of “junk histories”.

**ArtSeen**

# Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros

By **Steven Pestana**



Installation View, *Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros*, Curated by Eric Fischl. Hall Art Foundation, Reading, Vermont. Photo: Jeffrey Nintzel. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation.

A buxom blonde nude with bright red lips plays joyously atop a white fluffy cloud, stars overhead. Beneath her cloud, crude blue lettering reads, “We are just complicated animals.” This neon sculpture, by Dan Attoe, casts a cool glow through a gallery that was once a farmhouse, highlighting the kind of tongue-in-cheek wit that animates much of Eric Fischl’s own work. In this multi-generational group exhibition, curated by Eric Fischl, representations of mankind’s most basic and everlasting instinct—the compulsion to copulate—waver from existential to carnal in a vein that is often ribbed with humor. While none of Fischl’s own work appears in the show, his taste is everywhere apparent.

READING, VT

Hall Art Foundation

May 6, 2017 – November  
26, 2018



## MARTOS GALLERY

*Hope* occupies three of the Foundation's buildings. The first, the aforementioned farmhouse, is intimate and domestic, the ceilings low. The majority of work here depicts the female form, ranging from abstract to hyper-realism. As with Fischl's own paintings, the imagery is largely sexual, though less lascivious than Balzacian: a human comedy, blindly underpinned by our opaque animal natures. In one room a trio of paintings by Ellen Berkenblit, Marcel Dzama, and Tala Madani, respectively, portray cartoonish figures in the midst of performing or insinuating sex acts (in one case, while wearing a horse mask). Their partners? A human-sized mouse, a surly pack of dogs, and a playmate suggestively wielding a hobbyhorse. The absurdity of the work is perfectly in keeping with Attoe's neon aphorism. Complicated indeed. On the neighboring wall, a diminutive salon grouping of five small paintings by Ridley Howard, Walter Robinson, Aura Rosenberg, and Tom Wesselmann depict the female nude as it is so often represented in contemporary eroticism: recumbent, faceless, depersonalized, and sexually available. Seductive though the imagery may or may not be, taken together, the selections lean towards a transactional view of desire, with the body as currency. What is the psychic cost of a culture grounded in objectification? This question resonates throughout *Hope*. As with his own voyeuristic canvases, Fischl mostly abstains from overt judgment, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions.

In the rear gallery of the second building—a larger and brighter room, previously a horse barn—two oversized wall works address the complexities of real-world relationships that spill into public view through visual art. Judith Eisler's canvas *Liz and Rock* (2014) recreates a moment of onscreen tenderness from the 1956 film *Giant* between co-stars Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson. Eisler's hazy brushwork and soft, cool palette create an air of wistfulness, or perhaps tension; cinéastes might complicate this reading with a knowledge of the actors' lifelong friendship. Towards the end of Hudson's life, following his revelation of off-screen homosexuality and AIDS illness, they grew even closer. By contrast, the pseudo-eroticism of *Fingers Between Legs* (1990), from Jeff Koons's photographic series, "Made in Heaven" (1989 – 1991) is anything but tender, and, in reality, the relationship between Koons and the porn-star turned politician, Ilona Staller, was ill-fated. Appropriate to any exercise in high conceptualism, that disjunction occurs in



Judith Eisler, *Liz & Rock*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Judith Eisler.



# MARTOS GALLERY

the mind of the viewer.

Standing ten feet tall, a lumbering giant, *Egg Figure I* (2009) by Thomas Houseago, awaits in the far corner of the cow barn, the third and largest of the buildings. The figure is backlit, on the verge of ominous, except that his crestfallen shoulders and gloomy disposition are more likely to inspire pity than fear. Houseago's forlorn behemoth stands in, fittingly, as this comedy's sole representative of loneliness.



Joan Semmel, *Untitled*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 69 x 81 inches. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Joan Semmel.

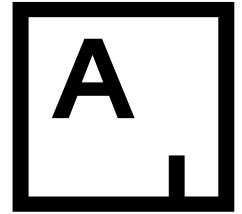
The remaining selections are the most painterly, a vibrant and tactile playground of gesture and chroma. Sensuous moments abound, such as Bjarne Melgaard's *Untitled* (2005), a lusciously liquid pink, beige, and green-slathered abstraction, and André Butzer's heavily impastoed, monstrous, phallus-headed *Portrait*

*Carl Zuckmayer* (2004). They are messy physical documents of fugitive bodily encounters between the artists and their materials, singing the body erotic. In a walled-off area at the heart of the gallery, two orgiastic scenes face one another: the first a 2009 riff on Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) by Peter Saul reinterpreting it as gaudy caricature (although, given the theme, some might say it was already this), and a frenzied bedroom scene, *Session*, (2005) by Peter Schoolwirth, where wild, disjointed limbs defy the bounds of space and time. Joan Semmel's 1971 coital devotional, *Untitled*, composed of luminous color fields, revels in unselfconscious abandon. Another wall features three paintings focused on comically exaggerated male and female derrieres. Two by Carroll Dunham, *Untitled I (July 28, 2005)* (2005) and *(Hers) Night and Day #2* (2009), feature humorously grotesque physiques demarcated with swollen black lines. They appear on either side of a third butt painting by C.O. Paeffgen, also featuring bold outlines but this time more anatomically correct. The differences are more compelling than their similarities, with Dunham's brushwork layered,

## MARTOS GALLERY

loose, and lawless, while Paeffgen's is muted, harmonious, and oddly classical.

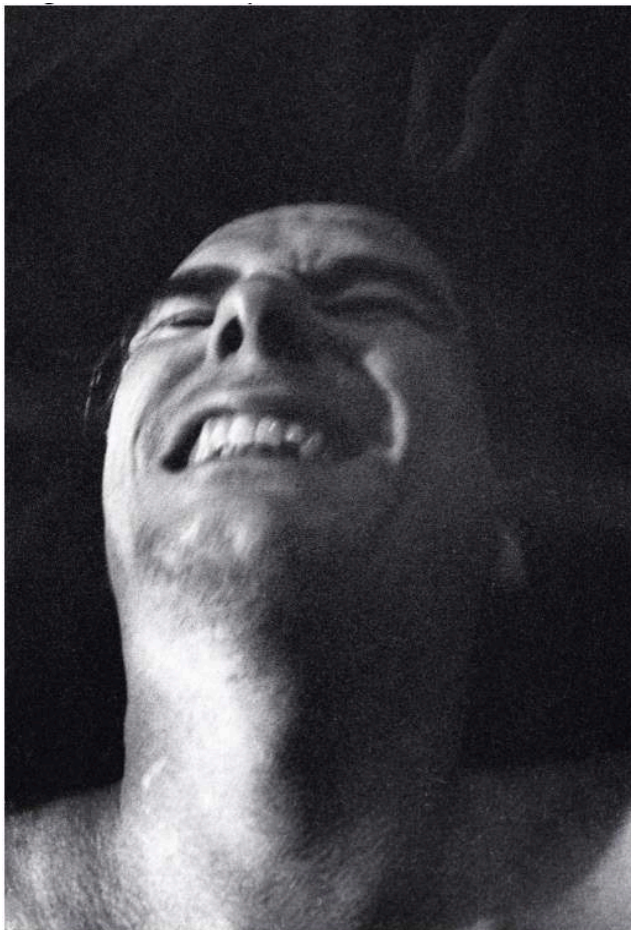
Even in the earliest Greek comedies, sexual foibles played a key role in the farces of deeply relatable and even poignant characters. In Fischl's exhibition, the motivation is Eros, god of sexual desire, and, in Hesiod's words, conqueror of "the mind and wise counsel in the breasts of all gods and men"—in other words, hope and hazard captured in a single archetype. Throughout *Hope*, Eros appears in sundry forms of attraction, seduction, tribulation, and consummation with Fischl in the role of chorus. Nevertheless, *Hope and Hazard: A Comedy of Eros* does more than extrapolate these themes through others' work. In fact, it locates them within a powerful framework for understanding human nature, namely that of the ancient tradition of drama and its enduring visions of love, lust, and the utterly inscrutable.



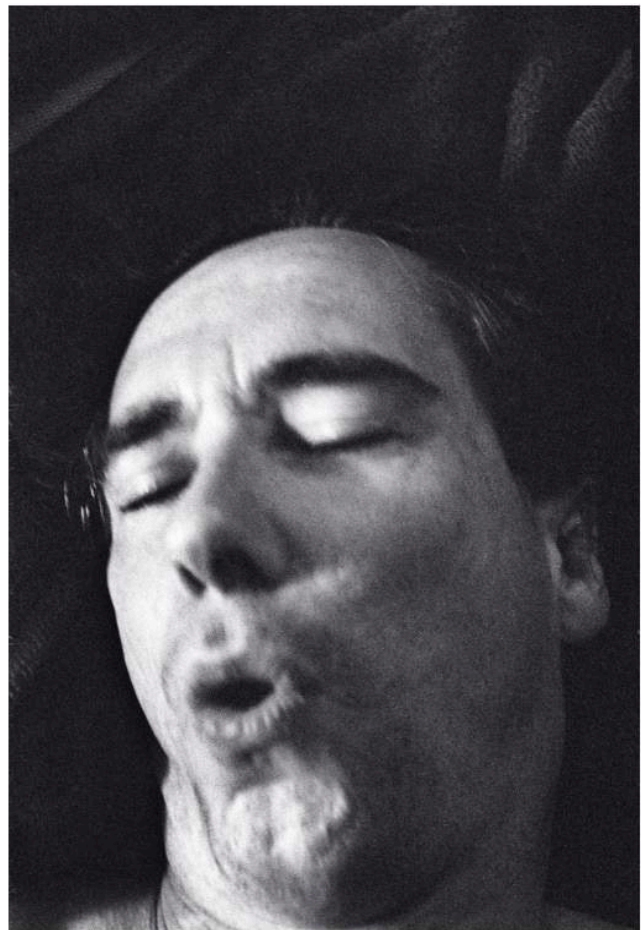
Aug 8, 2017

# The Woman Who Photographed Mike Kelley and John Baldessari Mid-Orgasm

Scott Indrisek



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots: Mike Kelley*, 1993-2017. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.



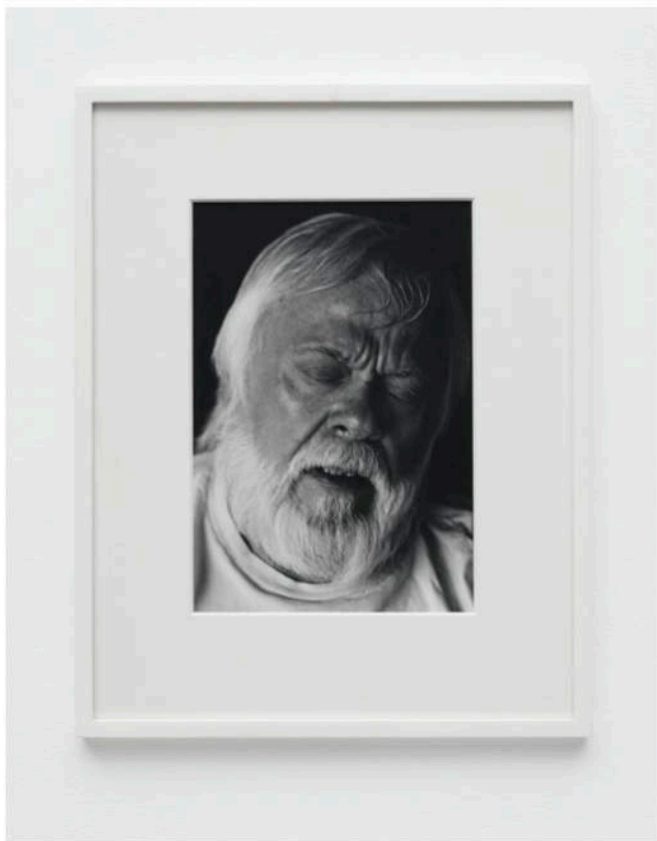
Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots: Mike Kelley*, 1993-2017. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

In the mid-1990s, Aura Rosenberg was pondering a limited-edition artwork she could contribute to a holiday project being organized by the artist Cary Leibowitz, a.k.a. Candyass. She immediately thought of her friend, the performance artist and occasional comedian Mike Smith, who often performed conceptual stand-up around Christmas while dressed as Santa Claus.

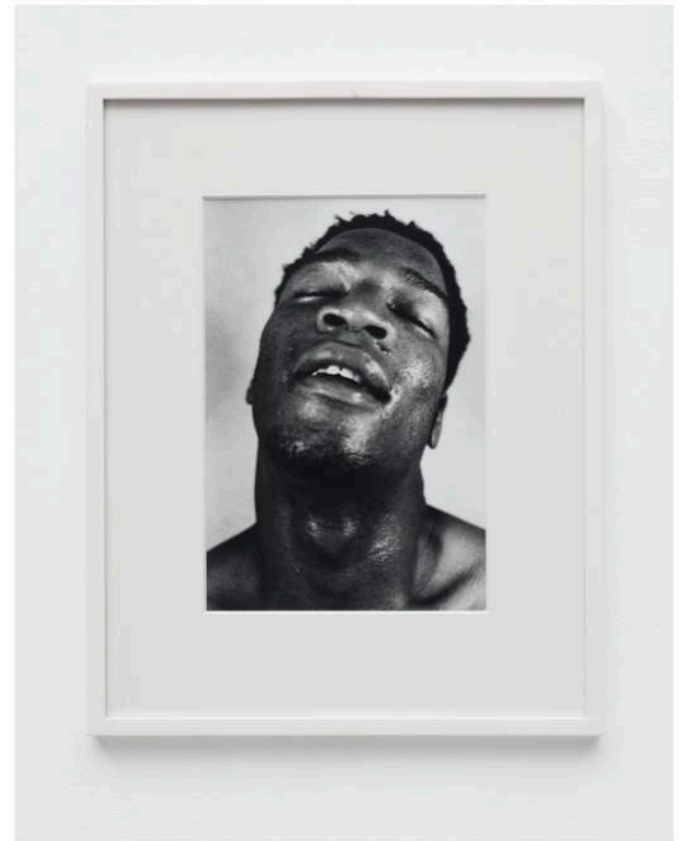


## MARTOS GALLERY

Why not, she thought, ask Smith to suit up as St. Nick and have him pantomime an orgasm while she photographed? She could then affix the resulting images to small stones in an extension of a series she began in the late '80s, called "The Dialectical Porn Rock," in which she adorned rocks with found pornography, placing and documenting them in various sites. The limited-edition holiday set never came to fruition, but the experiment tickled Rosenberg. "It was such an unusual way for a man to be pictured," the artist told me recently, recalling the shoot from two decades past. Rosenberg had noted that in pornography, women's pleasure was most often captured via their facial expressions—while for men, the proof was in the irrefutable "money shot." And so her one-off photo shoot with Santa Claus turned into a prolonged project that would result in a series, and an accompanying book of 61 images, known as "Head Shots." These closely cropped portraits see her male peers, friends, and friends-of-friends all caught in the (supposed) moment of sexual release.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (JB)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (DL)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

Rosenberg shot some of the pictures herself, and outsourced the job to others when that wasn't possible. Her subjects include more than a few boldface names, including the late Mike Kelley and John Baldessari. The experience, Kelley noted in a 1995 fax to Rosenberg, was

## MARTOS GALLERY

“definitely the most pleasant photo shoot I have ever done. Now the so-called ‘little death’ is frozen into an eternal one—my longest orgasm to date. And because these are head shots, and not cum shots, we fellows finally have the choice, like the ladies, of faking orgasm.”

Kelley’s point addressed a central coyness around “Head Shots”: the fact that there was no way of proving the male orgasms in these photos had actually *happened*. In the cases where someone other than Rosenberg was operating the camera, the artist herself isn’t quite sure which of the documented *petit mortes* were authentic—and that was all part of the game. “When photography was developing in the 19th century, there was a belief in the truthfulness of the photo-document that we’ve come to question,” she says. “We don’t automatically believe what we’re seeing anymore.” Even some Civil War photographers, Rosenberg notes, were “rearranging corpses on the battlefield to make better photographs”—so why didn’t she have the right to toy with the veracity of a man’s orgasm on film?

When she was making “Head Shots,” Rosenberg was married—and still is—to the artist John Miller. The epitome of a confidently undoubting husband, he contributed an essay (“The Perverse Gesture”) to the original 1996 book. “The shoots could be really funny,” Rosenberg says. “Sometimes we were just laughing like crazy. And sometimes they were really erotic—in a way, you can have an erotic experience through the lens of the camera.”



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (JM)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (TO)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

## MARTOS GALLERY

Most of her subjects were “men from the art world,” she reckons, but there were also doctors, stockbrokers, and book publishers. “A lot of my work has to do with collaboration, so it’s a bit of a representation of a community—and a number of those people are gone now.”

Not everyone was comfortable with such raw depictions of the male orgasm, even if none of the resulting photographs were *technically* explicit. In the summer of 1996, curator Nancy Spector tapped Rosenberg to contribute a project for a magazine published by the Guggenheim Museum. Rosenberg suggested they work with the “Head Shots” material. One of the portraits ended up on the cover, and Spector contributed an essay in which she wondered, “Is it the strip or the tease that arouses its audience?”

The image, Rosenberg remembers, received “really extreme backlash” from the Guggenheim trustees. “They were furious, saying they were going to pull back their support of the museum. *What was this? Was the museum becoming 42nd Street?*” she’d wondered. “I think the Guggenheim had been interested in perhaps acquiring some of the photos—and, of course that didn’t happen.”



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (OS)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (TK)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

Fast-forward 20 years, and “Head Shots” is no less intimidating and salacious; we’re still not completely comfortable with photographs of men’s orgasm-faces. Last year, the Los Angeles



## MARTOS GALLERY

gallery JOAN exhibited the full suite of 61 images, the first time they'd hung together since the mid-'90s.

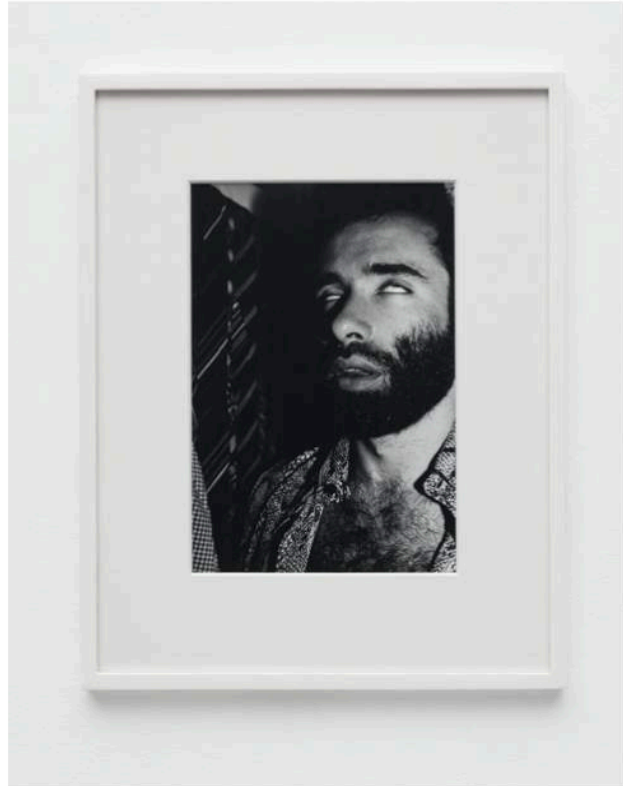
"We were interested in 'Head Shots,' at least partially, because of its difficulty, both conceptually and formally," Rebecca Matalon of JOAN tells me. The gallery had seen the exhibition as an opportunity to "reconsider the questions [the work] raises about sexuality, identity, intimacy, enactment, and visibility," she says, and what aspects of the work might offer contemporary feminist artistic practices.

At Frieze New York in March of this year, Martos Gallery joined in the "Head Shots" revival, giving its entire booth over to an extended offshoot of the series: 22 rapid-fire outtakes of a rapturous Kelley.

The renewed interest in Rosenberg's prescient series is unsurprising given the recent vogue for exhibitions examining the female gaze, from a two-part survey at Cheim & Read in 2009 and 2016 to this summer's "Secret Garden: The Female Gaze on Erotica" at The Untitled Space and "NSFW: Female Gaze" at the Museum of Sex, to name only a few.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (YS)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (CL 1)*,  
1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

One of the young artists included in the latter exhibition, Aneta Bartos, could be an accidental acolyte of Rosenberg. Her images in that show come from a series, "Boys" (2013), in which she

## MARTOS GALLERY

asked various male peers to masturbate while she photographed them. The images, while dimly lit, are indeed more explicit than “Head Shots”—they certainly present fewer opportunities for faking it. And they underscore the fact that audiences have still yet to fully come to terms with the phenomena of women artists capturing male sexuality.

Thinking back on “Head Shots” with two decades’ worth of hindsight, Rosenberg makes the experience sound far sweeter than smutty. “To be able to give men a picture of themselves that was in some way being denied them,” she muses, “felt a bit like a gift.”

February 23, 2017



Some of the key figures of the Pictures Generation, brought together in New York by T magazine on Dec. 10, 2016. Jason Schmidt

1. Janelle Reiring of Metro Pictures
2. Helene Winer of Metro Pictures
3. Hal Foster, critic
4. Douglas Crimp, critic
5. Robert Longo
6. Paul McMahon
7. **Aura Rosenberg**
8. John Miller
9. Troy Brauntuch
10. Sherrie Levine
11. David Salle



## MARTOS GALLERY

12. Nancy Dwyer
13. Glenn Branca
14. Cindy Sherman
15. James Welling
16. Laurie Simmons
17. Walter Robinson

Images and technological media now pervade every minute of our lives so thoroughly that much of what passes for reality is indistinguishable from its representation. The urban environment is a cloaca of hypnotic, animated signage, sounds and image streams that follow us into taxicabs and hospital waiting rooms, and in turn, any banality, from a misspelled street sign to a funny advertisement, is considered suitable to become an image on social media. This didn't happen overnight. One of the least helpful clichés of recent years has been the declaration that some phenomenon or person is “on the wrong side of history”; the presumption that history is headed, with occasional setbacks, toward a much-improved, even utopian state of things could only be endorsed by someone unfamiliar with history. Mistaking the perfection of our devices for the perfection of ourselves relieves us of responsibility for what happens to the world: It will just naturally turn out O.K., sooner or later. But technology can easily outrun our comprehension of what it does to us, even while it incarnates our wishes, fears and pathologies. (What could be more pathological than a nuclear weapon?)

Our present bedazzlement-by-pixels was anticipated by a loosely affiliated group of artists who emerged in New York in the mid-1970s and early '80s — before iPhones, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. “The Pictures Generation” has become a ubiquitous, awkward catchall term, probably abrasive to the artists themselves, for something that was less an organized movement than a heterogeneous expression of a zeitgeist. Their art was connected by an interest in examining power and identity in a media-saturated, politically uncertain age. The name derives from a 1977 show at Artists Space curated by Douglas Crimp, simply called “Pictures,” where five of these artists — Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith — were featured. A survey exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum a few years ago folded in another 25.

Some of the artists that carry the Pictures Generation label are well-known to the general public, such as Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, David Salle and Cindy Sherman; many have achieved canonical status in the art world, with their work featured at multiple venues throughout any given year, all over the world. A few, such as Walter Robinson and Troy Brauntuch, are only now starting to get long-overdue recognition. A number of them, like Louise Lawler, the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this spring, have re-entered public consciousness at a moment that is oddly similar to the one in which they first appeared. The questions they all first addressed in a faraway, predigital period may be even more relevant today than they were then.

## MARTOS GALLERY

The Pictures artists, so-called, were born in Cold War America, during the schizoid cultural meshing of unparalleled national prosperity with the daily threat of looming nuclear annihilation. They grew up with Hollywood movies, low-def network television and ad-heavy pictorial magazines like *Look* and *Life* as the audiovisual wallpaper of their childhoods, mostly in American suburbs.

The initially black-and-white, then gradually colorized media world they absorbed trafficked heavily in prescriptions for living: heterosexual families with gleaming teeth in an all-white America; unambiguous gender stereotypes; dream homes in tidy neighborhoods; knee-jerk patriotism; holidays made sparkling with margarine; and an ever-expanding, ever-better smorgasbord of branded consumer products including cars, watches, cigarettes and anything else that could plausibly enhance a quotidian middle-class lifestyle.

As the dreary conformity of America during the Eisenhower years loosened dramatically in the '60s, mass media got more sophisticated at manipulating public moods and private consciousness. Families that had prospered in the '50s passed enormous buying power to their offspring, who became a lively demographic for a brilliantly adaptive advertising industry, a juggernaut that could selectively appeal to bikers, hippies, African-Americans, feminists, student protesters and bohemian types as readily as it did its traditional suburban targets.

Despite the political violence and social atomization of the '60s, the sense of a stable country still on the rise was sustained, for the most part, by a general belief in the solidity of its institutions, including the media. This optimism lost much of its credibility as the '60s counterculture fizzled into paranoia and bleakness during the Nixon years. American failure no longer felt impossible. The Pictures artists came of age in this disillusioning period, sharply aware that the images and narratives they'd been nurtured on were not only bogus but insidiously coercive. They were reflective people who read widely, wrote well and could easily articulate their concerns, well-versed in the deconstructive approach to texts and images of theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes's deflation of authorship and originality, Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking writings on the male gaze in cinema and Conceptual art's distillation of the artwork to its self-conscious, philosophically pointed idea. They were intellectuals as well as artists, a disfavored combination throughout most of American art history: Artists weren't supposed to think about the implications of what they were doing, or the overall context in which it appeared.

op Art made the art world desirable to the general public, but this admiration constricted during the '60s, with the ascendant asceticism of Conceptual art and Minimalism, which called into question the whole idea of art as something to look at. The Pictures artists initially had to contend with a small nexus of established galleries unwelcoming to new work, and a presiding narrative about "advanced art" that inevitably led to the disappearance of art objects. They were too fastidious, and too smart, to discard the poise and economy of Conceptualism in favor of some inchoate, spontaneous "self-expression" — the construction of the self, after all, was one of the things they were pondering.

So they experimented, showing early work in alternative spaces, which were rapidly losing

## MARTOS GALLERY

funding. Providentially, the commercial rise of painting at the end of the '70s brought serious revenue back to the art world, and with it a number of new galleries receptive to emerging artists — like Metro Pictures, where many of these artists got their start. For the first time ever, young New York artists could hope to earn serious money by making art. The work they produced in the '70s and early '80s might be described as a theatricalization of Conceptual art, or a caustic mimicry of both fine art and commercial illustration.

Perhaps because photographs are already “copies” of what they picture, and because photography was barely considered art at the time, so many of the Pictures artists found it the most congenial medium for what they wanted to do: to point at things already in the world, and make what they implicitly signified apparent.

Photographs could be staged to emphasize the look of artfully subtle, unremarked female stereotypes in movies (Cindy Sherman), or to picture toy housewives in miniature home interiors, evoking the pathos of domestic imprisonment (Laurie Simmons). Photos could be excavated from the morgues of bygone magazines and science journals, blown up and bannered with jarring, sardonic captions (Barbara Kruger). Images could be scissored out of National Geographic and Vogue, and repatriated to blocks of strident primary colors, where their fetishistic weirdness became hilariously disturbing (Sarah Charlesworth). A photo could present art in the settings it occupies after it's sold, on walls of rich collectors, corporate offices and other privileged venues — today, typically, a billionaire's storage facility (Louise Lawler).

Not everyone made photographic works, but all were engaged in photo-derived imagery. Robert Longo's large-scale charcoal-and-graphite drawings of “Men in the Cities” were sourced from photographs of the artist's friends and are key icons of the period; the remarkable painters in this group (Thomas Lawson, Walter Robinson, David Salle and Michael Zwack, to cite a few) found powerful ways to provoke questions about how we process representations of reality, in which contexts, with what quality of attention.

The use of existing images, which might be altered in scale, cropped, rephotographed, angled or simply presented in copied form — “appropriation,” as practiced by Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, among others — inspired indignant critical sniping from writers like Robert Hughes. Yet it had a perfectly respectable lineage in art history. These pictures revealed how contrived, unnatural and seductive the originals actually were. They attracted and repelled simultaneously. Such works created a nervous sense of how representation operates in the everyday world — almost subliminally much of the time, tapping into myths and illusions sunk deep in our brains, influencing the way we act, how we dress, behave in public, occupy space, choose and attract sexual partners, spend money, make friends and enemies.

But above all else, the Pictures artists addressed power, especially patriarchal power, at its quotidian level of social engineering, as well as in its grip on art history. If we are to think of the Pictures Generation as an art movement, then it was the first one in history that included a substantial number of women artists. Much of the early resistance to it was flagrantly misogynistic, though its male artists came in for their own share of ridicule from newspaper and magazine critics, whose favorite dismissive word for this art was “brainy.”



## MARTOS GALLERY

When it first appeared, in a predigital world, Pictures art looked imperiously distanced from its subject matter, detached from its own japeries and even merciless in its view of American life's visual detritus and empty glorification of the arbitrary. But a backward glance at these artists reveals plangent nostalgia for innocent first encounters with a visual culture that proved far from innocent. It's no accident that we are giving these artists a careful second look now. Whatever progressiveness was afforded by the Obama era has come full circle to an isolationist longing where an unpredictable celebrity president speaks directly to an electorate that is collectively backlit by technology's artificial glow. The emotional resonance of the Pictures Generation has accrued over time, strengthened by its curious suitability to the present.

REVIEW Kate Wolf

## Picturing La Petite Mort

SHARE: FACEBOOK, TWITTER

Aura Rosenberg: *Head Shots (1991-1996)*  
JOAN, Los Angeles  
April 30–June 12, 2016

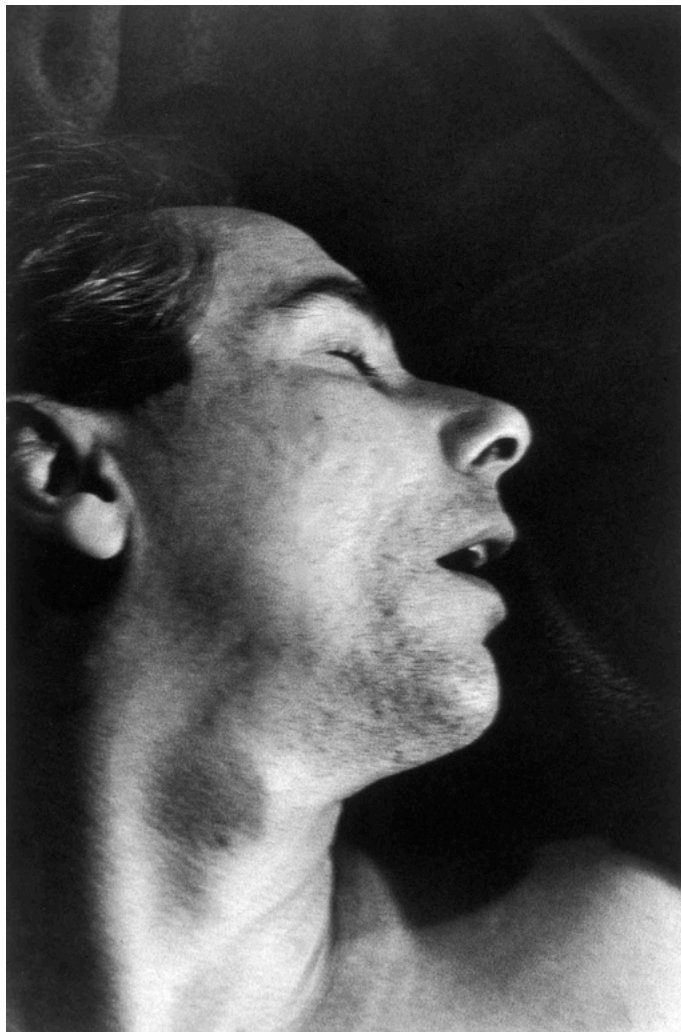
In 2015, a novel called *A Little Life*, by the author Hanya Yanagihara, became a surprise bestseller. Its 720 pages feature excruciatingly detailed accounts of sexual abuse, mutilation, and other forms of physical violence amidst the story of a friendship between four men over the course of multiple decades. In addition to commenting on Yanagihara's devastating prose, many reviewers also noted the aptness of the book's cover, a 1969 black-and-white photograph by Peter Hujar titled *Orgasmic Man*. Yanagihara told the *Wall Street Journal* that she was set on using the photograph: "I really hung on for the cover," she said. "I love the intimacy, the emotion, what looks like anguish. There's something so visceral about it."<sup>1</sup>

Without the telling title, it would be easy to mistake the expression in Hujar's photograph for intense distress, as opposed to pleasure. The tight close-up shows a man with his eyes crushed closed, a pathetic whimper passing across his mouth, and his right hand jammed up against the side of his cheek, as if to keep his head up. More substantially than other photographs Hujar produced with similar conceits, the picture reinforces a deeply held connection between agony and ecstasy, between orgasm and death. Here the viewer seems to be witnessing a true *la petite mort*—the expression that is not just an synonym for climax but also an acknowledgement of death and orgasm's shared state of ego dissolution—a moment of absolute transcendence of oneself, from which only in the second case are we able to return.

Beyond its eroticism, Hujar's image also evinces something fundamental about photography: the supremacy of the frame. Apart from sheer affect, it's the exclusion of a larger context that gives *Orgasmic Man* its powerful

## MARTOS GALLERY

ambiguity and, ultimately, its resonance. Hujar constructs a perspective that would occur in everyday life only in the most intimate of circumstances, but the meaning of his image would likely be altered if a viewer began to focus on actualities. (Did Hujar play a role in his subject's orgasmic state? Was this state indeed orgasmic or was it feigned?) Actuality easily becomes the enemy of metaphor. In describing photographs, we use words like "pictured" to account for the distance between these two poles. In the post-mortem photography of the late 1800s, for example, deceased children are often "pictured" sleeping, lying in bed with their eyes closed. This manner of framing was not intended to mislead family members or conceal the sad reality, but instead to represent a gentler view of death, not as fiery paroxysm but as a long and peaceful slumber.



AURA ROSENBERG, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots* (1991–1996). Gelatin silver print, 16 × 12 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

In a series of photographs entitled *Head Shots* (1991–96), Aura Rosenberg pictures men in orgasm. The suite of 61 black-and-white, vertical images



## MARTOS GALLERY

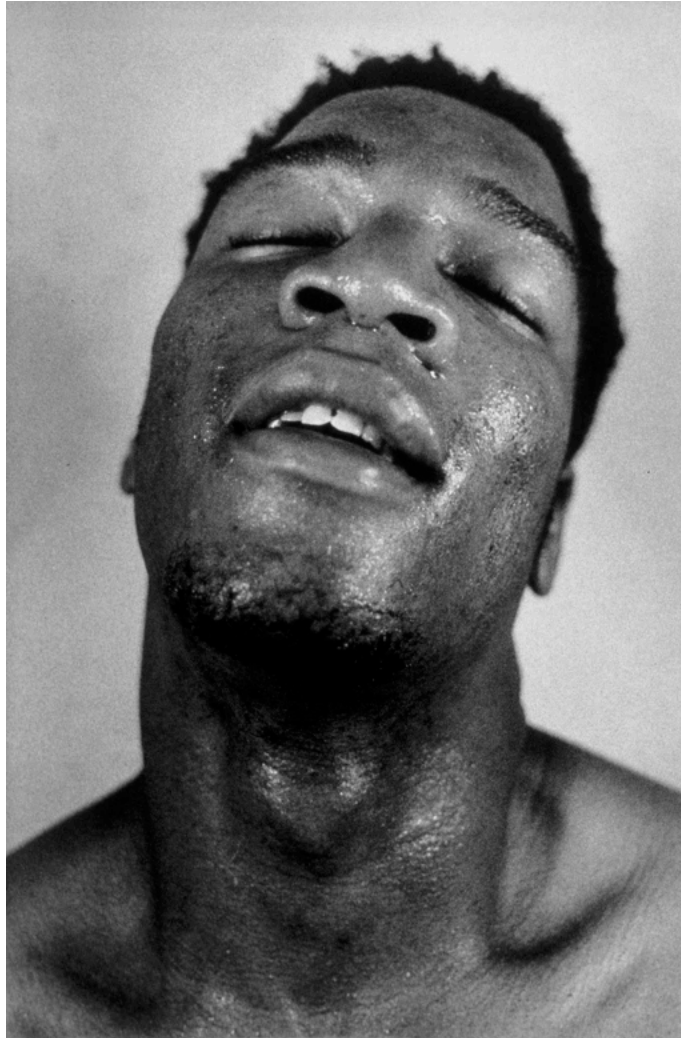
were exhibited in their entirety, at JOAN, a nonprofit space in Los Angeles's West Adams neighborhood, for the first time in two decades. The photographs were hung in their original order, in a straight line at eye level across the gallery walls. Like Hujar, in *Orgasmic Man*, and Andy Warhol, in the film *Blow Job* (1964, a touchstone for *Head Shots*), Rosenberg trains her camera exclusively on the faces and upper bodies of her subjects, leaving everything else to conjecture. At times the stray body part of another person—toes, hands, a shadowy profile—tips the scale of inference directly toward sexual encounter, but mostly the men are shown alone. Orgiastic signifiers, the most common of which is the gaping mouth, à la Saint Theresa, also include torrents of sweat, closed or rolled back eyes, darting tongues, and private little smiles. Sometimes the men's expressions verge on or arrive at abandon; others exhibit deep concentration that almost comes across as rumination. None of the subjects produces a countenance quite as indelible as the man in Hujar's photograph, and a few even shirk the task completely, posing with cartoonishly bulging eyes in static faces that seem to announce artifice.

Indeed, one way of looking at *Head Shots* is as a compendium of performances, the documentation of a group of men all interpreting and enacting the same directive. The title of the work seems to refer as much to the pictures actors use for representation (and the prints are only a few inches larger than the standard 8 × 10) as it does to pornography.

were made, but her comments indicate that they were mostly staged. "I asked them to act out what they thought they looked like coming," she told her partner, the artist John Miller, about the process in a 2013 interview.<sup>2</sup> The photographs' kinetic, informal style—many of them have soft focus or are blurred by motion—gives the impression that these were extended sessions of simulation. And the inferred proximity of photographer to subject implies intense communion. In some shots, Rosenberg (who also credits twelve other photographers in the making of *Head Shots*) seems to hover directly above her subject, or kneel below him, or come within an inch of his breath. This produces extreme, sometimes unflattering, angles that reveal nose hair, double chins, wrinkles, scars, strains of saliva, and crooked teeth. The candid, snapshot quality of the grainy images, which project disinhibition, complicates and destabilizes the knowledge that as viewers we are seeing something that is most likely pretend. Whatever is taking place,

## MARTOS GALLERY

though, the mode of posing alone suggests a base level of intimacy. “Shooting those pictures brought up a range of emotions for me and my models,” Rosenberg told Miller. “I realized that sexual exchanges can happen through the lens of a camera.”<sup>3</sup>



AURA ROSENBERG, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots* (1991–1996). Gelatin silver print, 16 × 12 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

The seeming disparity between what the photographs portray and what they document was noted when selections from *Head Shots* first began to surface in the early 1990s and when Rosenberg published a book of the same name in 1995. In the loft above the main gallery space at JOAN, artifacts from the project’s lifespan, such as contact sheets, exhibition posters, publications, and a few testimonies from Rosenberg’s subjects, were on view. Several contemporaneous reviews were also displayed, and they attest that the response from some critics at the time focused primarily on this aspect of the work. David Pagel, in a brief roundup of a group show Rosenberg appeared in at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, wrote: “The images are



## MARTOS GALLERY

*supposedly* exposing a moment of naked intimacy, but they actually mask their subjects behind a list of clichéd conventions.”<sup>4</sup> “Rosenberg’s images reek of insincerity and fraudulence—of men acting out stereotypical responses of ecstasy and release,” offered a reviewer in *Art issues*.<sup>5</sup> Another, though noting the series’ inspired subversion of the male gaze and its reversal of pictorial depictions of female sexuality, still seems to have found the pictures distasteful: “interesting as these mechanisms are [they] take a backseat to the basic visual challenge, the ugly impact of the images... produced.”<sup>6</sup>

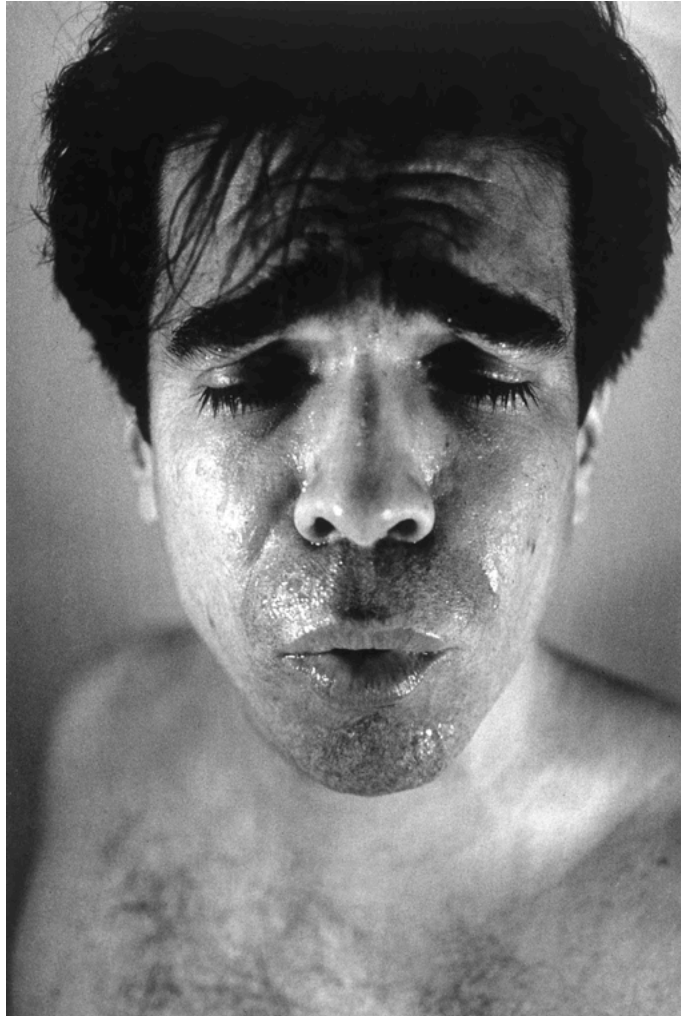
But we could ask, do the photographs try to conceal their pretense, or do they instead brandish it as another element of their mingling of fiction and nonfiction? While pornography, though equally contrived, confirms what has taken place in the form of the obligatory climax shot, in *Head Shots* Rosenberg responds with uncertainty, allusion, even farce. The isolation of the men’s faces requires the viewer to fill in what’s left unseen. Roland Barthes writes: “The erotic photograph...does not make the sexual organs into the central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame and it is there that I animate this photograph and it animates me.”<sup>7</sup> By insinuating a strong level of doubt in the series, Rosenberg expands past the most obvious corollary, in some ways severing male ecstasy (or at least the gesture towards it) from material emission alone, attempting to make the realm outside the frame not just an afterimage cast by pornography, but possibly something more subjective or even profound. “Not only toward ‘the rest’ of the nakedness,” as Barthes writes, “but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.”<sup>8</sup>





AURA ROSENBERG, *Head Shots (1991-1996)*, installation view, JOAN, Los Angeles, April 30–June 12, 2016. Image courtesy JOAN. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

On their surface, *Head Shots* form a loose portrait of an artistic community. In contrast to David Robbins's *Talent* (1986)—a collection of 18 professional head shots that cast well-known artists, mostly of the Pictures Generation, as entertainers, with their names printed bottom right—Rosenberg's choice of participants seems less a comment on art world affairs than a matter of friendship or propinquity. At JOAN, the men depicted were not identified, and the individual photos were exhibited without titles.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some of the artists in the series are recognizable, such as John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and the elastic-faced Mike Smith, who appears a few times, once in a demonically makeshift Santa Claus suit. The close focus limits our access to the settings, which might tell us more about these men as individuals, but Rosenberg still captures small details: a painting here, a pet there, bookshelves, a phallic prong of cacti, the Empire State building in the distance, and a glass display case housing a collection of animal skulls, as well as blankets and sheets, as many of the men are shown in bed.

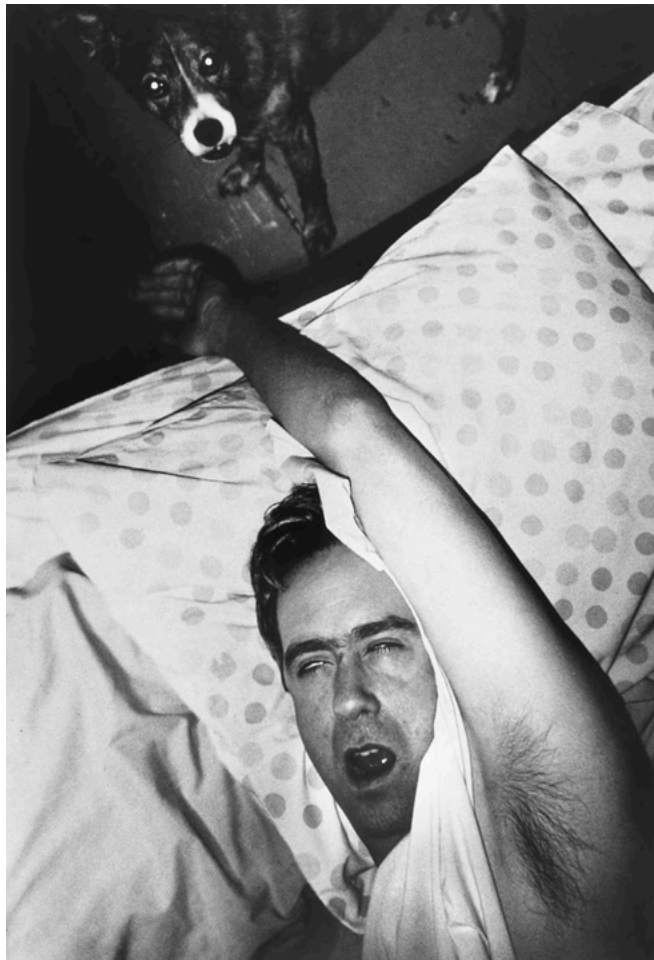


AURA ROSENBERG, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots* (1991–1996). Gelatin silver print, 16 × 12 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

A bed, of course, conjures sex, fantasy, creativity, and the unleashing of the unconscious in dreams, but also illness. Rosenberg was photographing members of a community living through and likely touched by the devastation of AIDS, which, by 1995, had reached peak death rates in the United States.<sup>10</sup> (That fact conspicuously went unmentioned when the work first appeared, but was highlighted by JOAN in their press release.) Looking at *Head Shots* in light of the AIDS epidemic reveals different layers of reference. Indeed, the work was created at a moment when the oppressive symbol of sex equaling death had jumped genders, from the syphilitic femme fatale of the nineteenth century to the promiscuous gay man of the twentieth; and when the image of a man lying in bed with a wrenched face, sweating profusely, may have had a slightly different resonance than it immediately would today. (One recalls another photograph: the shattering image of Hujar, with his mouth agape, on his deathbed, taken by David Wojnarowicz in 1989.) It seems fair to say it wasn't Rosenberg's aim to

## MARTOS GALLERY

illustrate any of this, but the disease is present in a number of the photographs. In one, for instance, a seated man barely motioning toward climax holds a framed picture of Liberace. At first, it seems like a gag, until one remembers that the singer died of AIDS in 1987. Hunter Reynolds, the artist and AIDS activist, is photographed in the drag face of his persona, Patina Du Prey. And an image of the poet and performance artist Bob Flanagan (who had cystic fibrosis), with oxygen tubes up his nose, being asphyxiated by his partner Sheree Rose, demonstrates that the sick needn't forgo desire or agency in the face of disease. The many representations of men experiencing an ambiguous moment of release—a vaporous photograph of Mike Kelley with his eyes closed, leaning his head to one side in a transported pose against a sea of black, is a particularly resonant example—enable the series to hint at some of the darker edges of sex during the decade, while also advocating for pleasure, and treating it with humor and play. (In fact, some of Rosenberg's *Head Shots* photographs ended up being used in a Swedish campaign for safe sex, in 2002.)



AURA ROSENBERG, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots* (1991–1996). Gelatin silver print, 16 × 12 inches. Image courtesy the artist.



## MARTOS GALLERY

Rosenberg, who trained as a painter, began adapting pornographic images for a group of sculptures called *The Dialectal Porn Rock* (1989–2012), in which she pasted magazine cutouts onto rocks and encased them in resin, sometimes placing them back in natural settings. More recently, she has made paintings over images of vintage pornography culled from the Internet. Particularly with *The Dialectal Porn Rock* and *Head Shots*, she plays with notions of obscenity and objectification. In these works, Rosenberg ruptures a circuit of imagery that, while unbelievably vast and varied, can also be rigidly constrained. If *Head Shots* had been comprised of photographs of women or of less elliptically captured and perfectly statuesque men, perhaps it wouldn't hold our interest as much today. Instead, amidst the contemporary refrain of a phrase like "toxic masculinity," the photographs seem newly, even urgently, relevant. What would a culture look like, Rosenberg's pictures seem to ask, where men were not only sexualized to the same degree as women, but also depicted as porous and open, as equal in vulnerability and in capacity for feeling?



AURA ROSENBERG, *Untitled (Neu Palais, Potsdam)*, 1992. C-print, 20 × 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Meliksetian/Briggs, Los Angeles.

## MARTOS GALLERY

“There are endless things we can do with our faces because we have endless motives,” the affect theorist Silvan Tompkins has said. “But nonetheless, a critical part of what we do with our faces, even when we pretend, is based on what we know to be innate.”<sup>11</sup> As Rosenberg suggests in *Head Shots*, perhaps the first step to answering the question about what such a culture could look like is simply suspending disbelief and assuming the position.”

KATE WOLF is a writer and an editor-at-large for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

### Footnotes

1. Jennifer Maloney, “How ‘A Little Life’ Became a Sleeper Hit,” *The Wall Street Journal.com*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-little-life-racks-up-readers-1441312965>.

2. John Miller, “Aura Rosenberg,” *Bomb.com*, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/7034/>, March 4, 2013.

3. *Ibid.*

4. David Pagel, “‘Go Down Stairs Diagonally’ Offers an Off-Balanced View,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1993, F2, 3.

5. Alisa Tager, *Art issues* (January–February 1994).

6. Marina Rosenfeld, “Johnny Came Lately,” *LA Weekly* (May 24–30, 1996), 32.

7. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 59.

8. *Ibid.* Here, Barthes is writing specifically on the punctum of a 1975 self-portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe.

9. According to JOAN’s press release, the individual photographs are all titled *Head Shots* followed by the subject’s initials in parentheses. But these titles were not included in the gallery’s exhibition or in the publication from 1995.

10. See Dennis H. Osmond, “Epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in the United States,” *HIV InSite*, University of California San Francisco, March 2013, <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=kb-01-03>.

11. The Tompkins Institute, “What Tompkins Said,” <http://www.tompkins.org/what-tompkins-said/introduction/the-face-is-the-primary-organ-of-the-affect-system/>.

MARTOS GALLERY

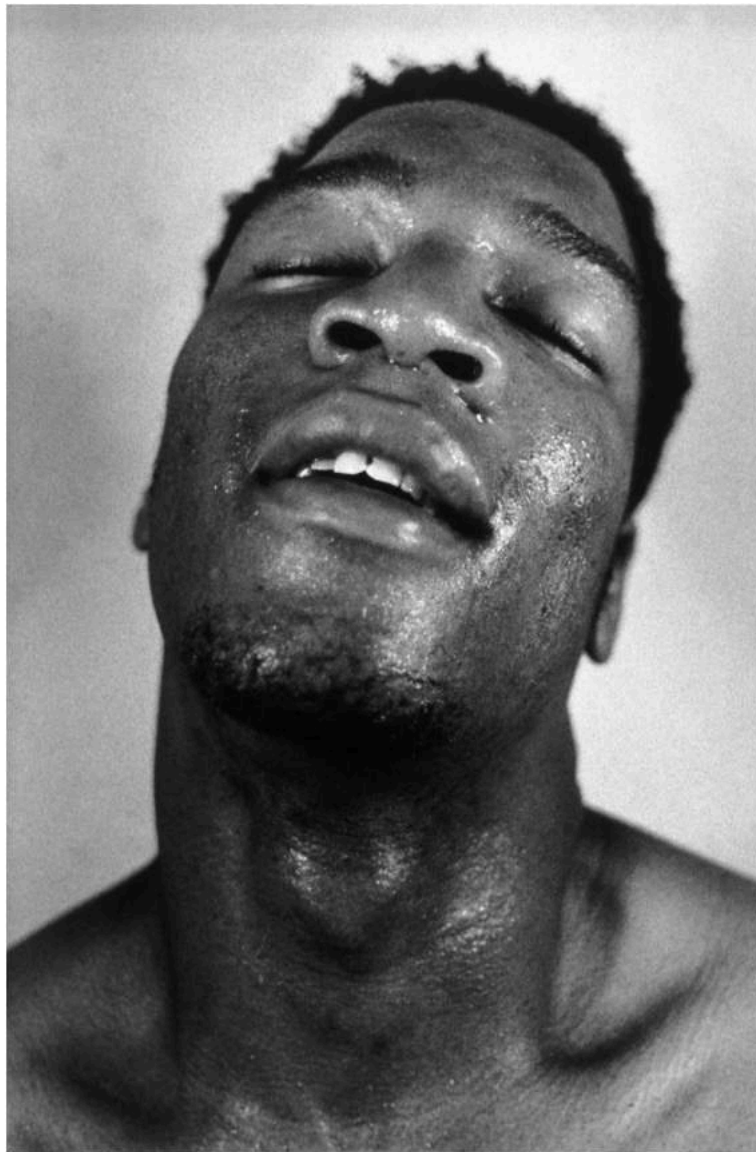
Contemporary  
Art Review

.la

June 2, 2016

# Aura Rosenberg at JOAN

Text by Catherine Wagley



**Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (DL)*  
from *Head Shots (1991-96)*.  
Gelatin silver print, 12 x 16  
inches. Image courtesy of the  
artist.**



## MARTOS GALLERY

When Aura Rosenberg's book *Head Shots* came out in 1996, the alt press had fun. *LA Weekly* published a review called "Johnny Came Lately." The Swedish magazine *ETC* put a photograph of performance artist Mike Smith (sweaty, eyes closed) on its cover over the word "Orgasm!" These publications accompany Rosenberg's photographs on view at JOAN; all sixty-one of the black and white images the artist initially included in the series hang in tight succession, one after another.

Perhaps the best way to stumble upon these images, as with much good art, is unknowingly, with no expectation. The skin-baring close-ups take a minute to register, then you figure out exactly what you're looking at: men apparently in the throes of sexual pleasure. Some are noisier-looking than others; some figures are sweatier. Most eyes are closed.

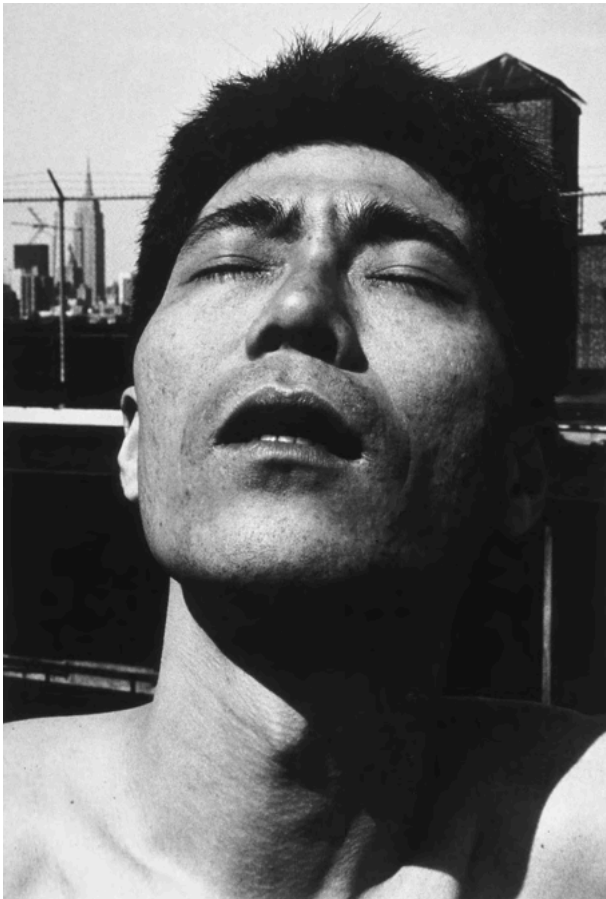
The possibility that the men may be acting (many were) doesn't matter much. It would be self-exposing enough to act out this kind of experience in front of a camera, especially since the photos—while compelling—are not necessarily flattering. One man with his mouth half open looks as though his eyes have rolled up into his head.

When orgasms and and ecstasy appear in art—by Ann Hirsch, Clayton Cubitt, or Tracy Emin—women tend more often to be the subjects. And we often talk about male vulnerability as a rarity, as if showing or capturing it is in itself a feat. Rosenberg's project, with its many seemingly willing participants, turns said vulnerability into a given. This frees us to revel in the nuances and quirks of its expression: the thrown back heads, half smiles, stark shadows, and mussed-up hair.

*Head Shots (1991-1996)* runs April 29-June 12, 2016 at JOAN (4300 West Jefferson Boulevard #1, Los Angeles, CA 90016)



**Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (PN)*  
from *Head Shots (1991-96)*.  
Gelatin silver print, 12 × 16  
inches. Image courtesy of the  
artist.**

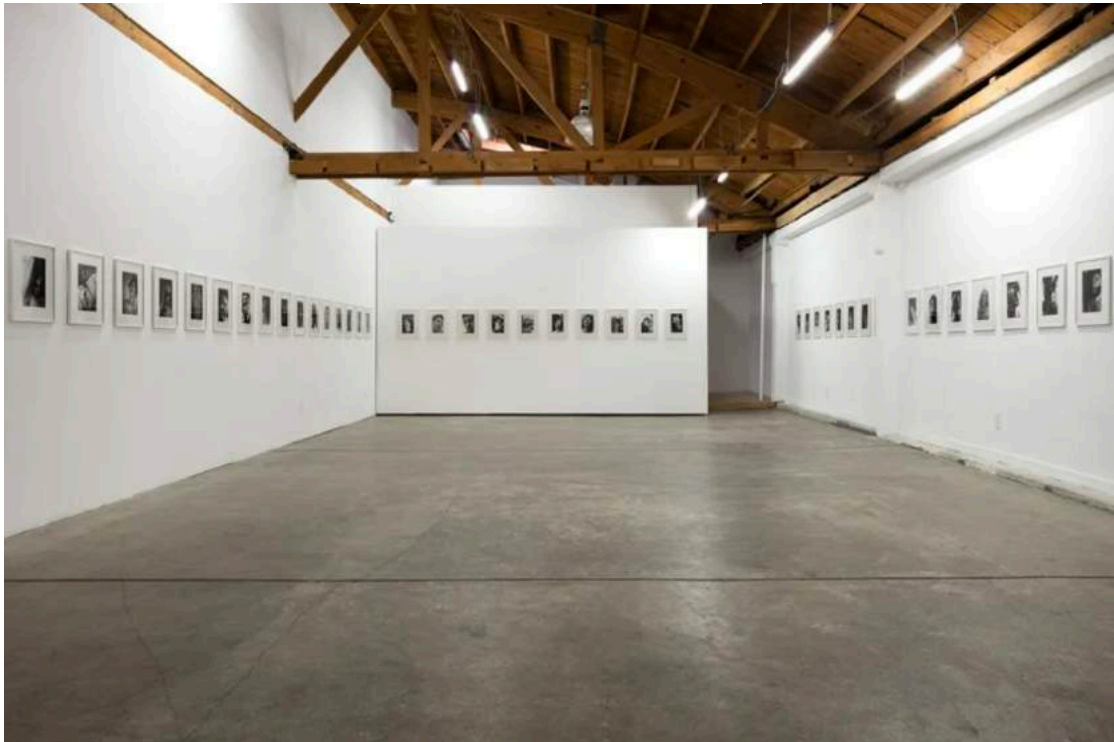


**Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (JMu)*  
from *Head Shots (1991-96)*.  
Gelatin silver print, 12 × 16  
inches. Image courtesy of the  
artist.**

MARTOS GALLERY



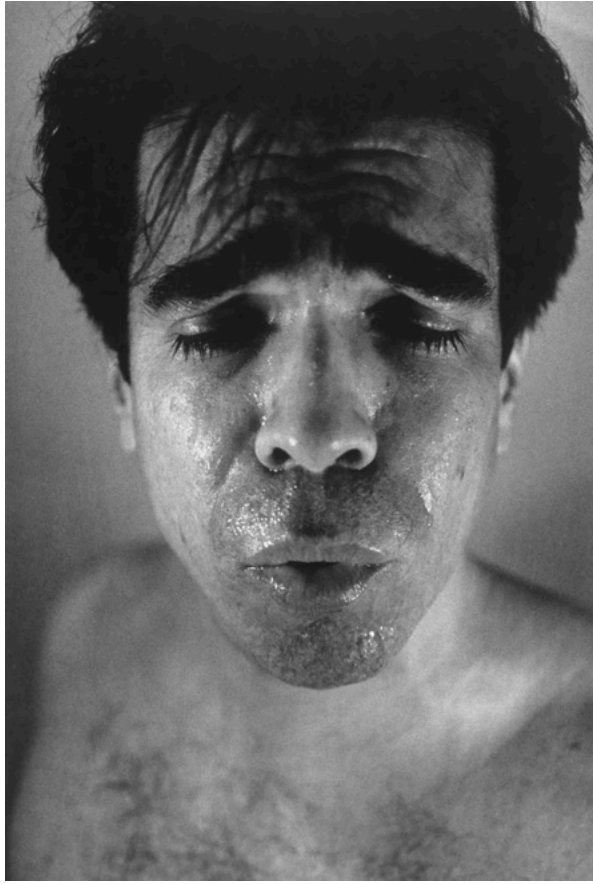
**Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots*  
(1991-1996), April 30-June 12,  
2016 at JOAN, Los Angeles.  
Installation view. Photo: Fredrik  
Nilsen.**



**Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots*  
(1991-1996), April 30-June 12,  
2016 at JOAN, Los Angeles.  
Installation view. Photo: Fredrik  
Nilsen.**



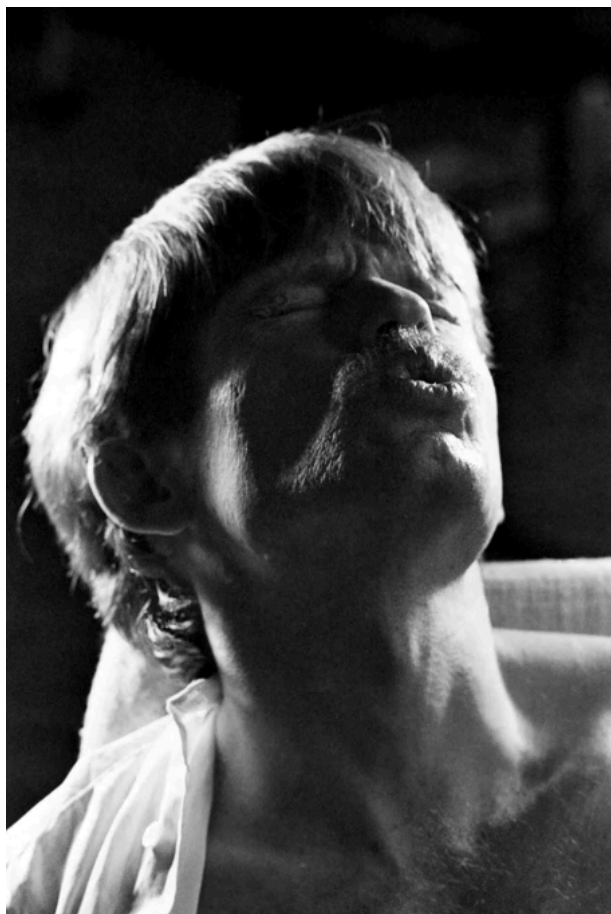
MARTOS GALLERY



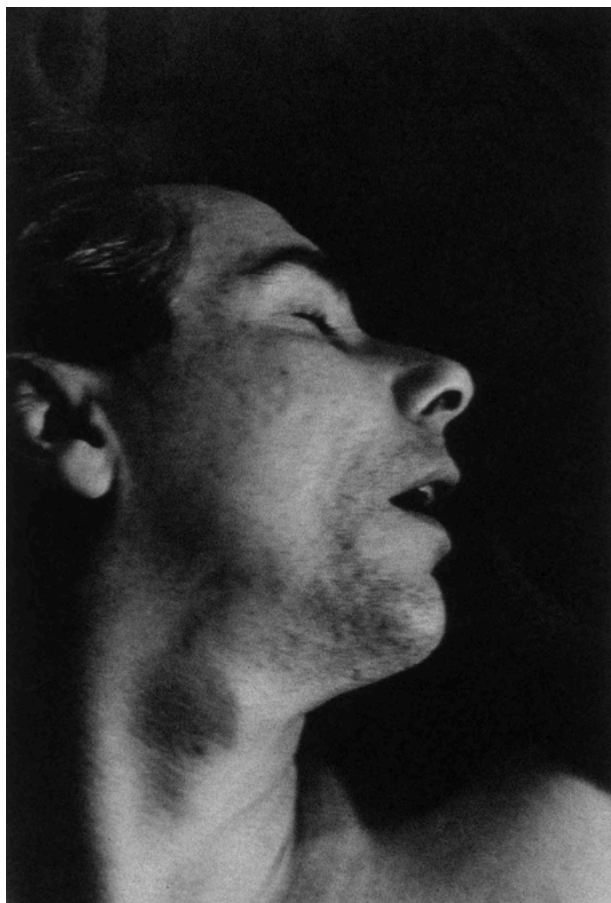
**Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (MS)*  
from *Head Shots (1991-96)*.  
Gelatin silver print, 12 x 16  
inches. Image courtesy of the  
artist.**



**Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots*  
(1991-1996), April 30-June 12,  
2016 at JOAN, Los Angeles.  
Installation view. Photo: Fredrik  
Nilsen.**



**Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (RD)*  
from *Head Shots (1991-96)*.  
Gelatin silver print, 12 x 16  
inches. Image courtesy of the  
artist.**



**Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (MK)*  
from *Head Shots (1991-96)*.  
Gelatin silver print, 12 x 16  
inches. Image courtesy of the  
artist.**

JUNE 26, 2015

Q&amp;A

## Porn, Philosophy, & Trout Fishing: Artist Aura Rosenberg on Finding Inspiration in the Rubble of Civilization

By Dylan Kerr



Aura Rosenberg (Photo by Olen Riyanto; all photos courtesy of Aura Rosenberg)

“Children” and “pornography” are not words we generally like to hear in the same sentence, and yet it strangely works if you happen to be talking about the artist [Aura Rosenberg](#). These two topics have proven to be fertile grounds for Rosenberg’s experimentation; the latter enters her work as appropriated erotic images pasted onto rocks or copied as paintings, while her persistent meditation on childhood is explored through various photo series featuring Carmen, her daughter with the artist [John Miller](#), and their adoptive city of Berlin.

Ranging across media and displaying an affinity for both critical theory—the celebrated German philosopher Walter Benjamin is a frequent reference point—and her storied contemporaries, Rosenberg’s work handles her sometimes weighty subjects with a light touch, creating photographs and objects that allow us to think through such issues with humor and a degree of clarity. [Artspace’s Dylan Kerr](#) sat down with the artist to learn more about her circuitous routes to inspiration, including everything from practical jokes and teary seven-year-olds to obscure memoirs and the props in '70s porn flicks.



## MARTOS GALLERY

**How did you first find yourself making art? Was there an original impetus towards pursuing the path of an artist?**

If we go way back to being a child, I think my first idea was that I would illustrate children's books. I went to Sarah Lawrence for college, which was all women at the time, and when I got there I was doing these figurative stain paintings. I wound up going to the [Whitney](#) Independent Study Program because my teachers were Marcia Tucker and Barbara Rose—the two of them urged me to go to the Whitney Program, which was still in its early stages. That just completely turned me around about what it was to make art. It became a very strange thing, and very difficult in a way. Going to my studio was scary for a while.

**What shifted there?**

I was doing these figurative stained paintings as a high school student and in early college, and I was used to my teachers really liking what I was doing. When I went to the Whitney Program, we had a crit one day with [Richard Artschwager](#). He didn't know whose studio he was in, but he said to Ron Clark, "Why is this person doing this?" Some of my teachers might have questioned things like, "Why is this so red?" or say that the composition was a little off, but nobody ever asked the simple question of why I was making something. I really had to stop and ask myself, "What am I doing? What am I making?" The question of "What is a painting?" became so strange, and I would just stare at my canvas and wonder, "What is this supposed to be?"

I just thought I would stop making art. It was the first and one of the only times I've ever thought that I just can't do this, but I was still in the program and had to stay there. After a couple of weeks I started drawing again, and gradually worked my way into making some really different work and learning much more about the discourse around painting. There have been a few more times when it's been very hard to go on, but I always have. I think finally at this point in my life I've realized that this is just what I do.

**I've read that your *Dialectical Porn Rocks* series started as a practical joke on one of your friends before evolving into something more. I'm wondering if you can tell me a little more about how they came to be.**

Before I started on those, I was making body imprint paintings in my Canal Street studio, which inevitably had a kind of sexual connotation. I think those were some of the earliest paintings of mine that dealt with what you might call sexual themes. I wasn't thinking so much about erotic imagery, but more about making a mark or figuration of a body without depicting it, without having to will it into being. It's already there—you paint your body, you print it, and you have a figure.

Around this time, my husband John and I rented a house in the country with a bunch of artists—Mike Smith, Perry Hoberman, Mike Ballou, and several more. It was so much fun. There were these huge prefabricated houses, and there was a trout stream nearby. I had room for a studio, but I just felt like I didn't want to transfer what I was doing on

## MARTOS GALLERY

Canal Street to the country. It somehow seemed wrong. I had been thinking about how I wanted to get away from the sort of fetishism that art, I guess, ultimately is. I was trying to think of a way from this quality, but I didn't know what to do.

Mike Ballou was making these sculptures out of porn images, and he's also a trout fisherman. I thought, "I'll make a real fetish! Instead of trying to run away from it, I'll totally embrace it." I stole some of his magazines, pasted the pictures on these rocks, covered them in resin, and put them in this trout stream. I did that, but then I looked at them and thought that there was really some food for thought there. I tried photographing them then, which were the first photographs I ever shot. I was really amazed at the way these rocks looked through the lens of a camera. It wasn't until a while later that I started thinking about them as things in themselves, as something that I could install indoors or outdoors as a sculpture.



*Dialectical Circle of Rocks, 1989*

**How did this shift between thinking about them as photographs of something to thinking about them as things in themselves occur?**



## MARTOS GALLERY

I had a presumption that they could only be photographs. Then Jose Freire had this gallery called Fiction/Nonfiction and he wanted to show some of the work, and I thought about just making a big circle out of the rocks. That was the first time I'd ever shown them that way, and I found it really interesting. I decided that they could be that also, that they could be both. Think about figurative stonework, starting from as far back as you can imagine—the Venus of Willendorf, classical Greek statues. The desire to make flesh out of stone is an old story. But I wasn't really thinking about that. I don't know if this is a great comparison, but when I did that circle they felt a little bit like [Richard Long](#) with porn.

I definitely see an element of his work at play here. Speaking of [land artists](#): these aren't just porn rocks, but dialectical porn rocks, a term you borrow from Robert Smithson's 1973 essay "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape." In what way are your works dialectical?

I think it has something to do with the indoor and the outdoor. These rocks that I found in nature were then recontextualized in a gallery space. This idea of bringing nature indoors functioned sort of like Smithson's installations functioned—that there is this conversation between indoor and outdoor, between nature and a presumed naturalness of sex that, in the magazines I was drawing these images from, was actually very mediated. The body itself was divided up into parts, and that supposed naturalness was very circumscribed.



*Dialectical Porn Rock: Flower Woman, 1989*



## MARTOS GALLERY

**You've returned to working with pornographic images with your series "The Golden Age," after a long hiatus following the birth of your daughter Carmen. These new paintings are based around some of the same photos from the porn rocks, this time painted over to create an appropriative new work. Why did you stop working with these images more than two decades ago, and what's brought you back to them now?**

I think my work follows the trajectory of my life. It's true, I had a daughter, and that was very absorbing, but that wasn't really why I stopped using the porn images. It wasn't a programmatic decision to start making work about childhood either, but I was very involved in a lot of things that had to do with her and childhood, which drew me away from the work I was doing with painting and pornography. Carmen actually encouraged me to go back to that work—she said it seemed like they weren't finished.

A few years ago, [James Siena](#) asked me to do a show at his little space called Sometimes (Works of Art). He asked me if I had any of the little porn paintings that I'd made all those years ago. I didn't have any, or I didn't know where they were, but there was one that I'd had laying in my shelf for a long time unfinished. I'd just stopped it in the middle. I decided to just finish that painting. It's interesting, taking a painting from 1989 and finishing it in 2010. I was interested in doing it again, and that opened up all this new work with paintings.

Coming back to pornography years later, I was like Rip Van Winkle. When I woke up again and looked for the material that I'd been using in '89, it didn't exist anymore, or at least wasn't being published. You'd have to go to vintage stores to get it. I remembered some of the actors who'd been in those big ensembles of actors who performed in these productions, especially this one couple: Kascha and Francois Papillon. She's an Asian woman with blonde hair and a butterfly tattoo on her butt, and he's this really beefy French guy. They supposedly only worked with each other, and they wouldn't have sex with other porn actors.

I googled them, and what came up was "the Golden Age of Porn." I thought this was amazing, that there was this period that I had been a part of that is now called the Golden Age. When I then googled the golden age of porn, a lot of stuff started coming up, and that's what I'm working with now.



*Landscape with Red Shoe, 2013*

**Given the explosion of Internet pornography in the years since 1989, do you still think these kinds of porn images have some sort of transgressive power to them?**

I'm not sure. I find the images that I'm working with almost quaint, in a way. I'm always surprised when people are shocked by them.

**Are people still shocked by them?**

They are, and I don't feel that way. I feel like they're almost relics. It's interesting that sexuality can go through these fashions or styles like anything else. It's like in parenting—there's a certain kind of stylization around how you bring your child up that really changes. It's really cultural.

The Golden Age period lasted from the '70s to the late '80s, and it really ends with AIDS. It's a little far to say it was a utopic period, but it was a time when women from the suburbs were flocking to the movie theaters to see *Deep Throat*. There was this real openness, with all kinds of liberation movements. Maybe it was a kind of golden age. I think all of that feels very different now. That's why I say it feels like a relic, like a fiction from the past.



## MARTOS GALLERY

**These works don't read as criticisms of the porn industry, but neither do they come off as celebrations. What's the function of the pornographic images you appropriate for your work?**

It's a hard question. I feel that a lot of what I've been talking about are formal qualities, but you're right—you could use a picture from the front page of the *New York Times*. Part of the pornographic image is that it does have the power, potentially, to really physically affect you. You have to enter into the fantasy of what's being depicted. It's a little bit like theater in that way—you have to suspend disbelief.

Years ago, making this kind of work felt like being a bad girl, in a way. It was transgressive. I was pretty good friends with a lot of guys who I felt were doing this in their work, like John with his brown work or [Mike Kelley](#)—I wanted to do something that felt like maybe it could have this kind of disruptive effect. I think that was my initial impulse, just to do something that felt transgressive. Now, I can't see them that way at all.

There's a whole set of issues around that work that I don't think have very much to do with pornography today. I don't really know anything about what's going on in porn now. My students [at the School of Visual Arts and Pratt] will tell me that most of them have watched or made some kind of amateur porn, and that these productions don't really exist anymore. My biggest questions were about why these productions looked the way they looked, because it wasn't just about raw sex. It was always in a specific setting, usually a very cultured one in the country or a beautiful house with books and wine and art objects around. The productions tried to be art, maybe as a way around some of the censorship laws of the time. The props are so interesting in relation to what's going on, which I don't think you have today at all.

The word "obscene" comes from ancient Greek theater, where it refers to something outside of the scene. There was a screen behind the actors, not in front of them, and everything that it was felt you shouldn't see, like extreme emotions or murder, happened behind this screen. I got interested in this idea, that something that's outside of the bodies and the image would actually be the obscene. There's so often curtains in these pornographic scenes—that's an ongoing interest of mine now, the scene and obscene in the Golden Age.





*Men With Golden Green Curtains, 2013*

Your work in “Berlin Childhood” represents a marked departure from your earlier work with porn, as you turned your lens onto scenes of your adopted city and especially on your daughter, who figures into much of your work since her birth. How did this shift occur?

It happened in a really natural way. It was an outgrowth of my everyday life and where I was. I was in Berlin and taking pictures of Carmen’s kindergarten class, and Klaus Biesenbach, who was then a very young emerging curator, saw them and wanted to show them. He said, “Let’s call it ‘Berlin Childhood’ after Walter Benjamin’s memoir *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. People will make the connection.” After that I thought to myself, “Maybe I should read those texts.”

There was no real English translation at that point, and it’s not easy German—lots of wordplay, that sort of thing. The text is written with a kind of montage technique, because Benjamin was really interested in cinema and photography. He would cut from one scene to another, or do panning shots or close-ups. I’d be reading a text and think, “I’m really not following this. He was just in a swimming pool, and now there’s a red light district.” I had a friend, a biologist whose daughter was Carmen’s best friend, who I asked to help explain the text to me in German that I could

## MARTOS GALLERY

understand. She and I started working together a lot.

I was only there in the summertime, so for four months of the year I tried to shoot everything I could, to internalize the text and carry a camera with me all the time so if I saw something that fit the text I could just photograph it. I wanted to find images in contemporary Berlin that spoke to the images in *Berlin Childhood*, and I decided to only photograph contemporary equivalents. If Benjamin mentioned something like the Kaiserpanorama—an early precursor to cinema viewed through stereoscopic glasses—I would try to find a virtual reality club or something like that.

One day I was at the museum with my daughter and her friends, and we heard the little bell that tells you that the photographs in the Kaiserpanorama are turning, which Benjamin describes in his text. Carmen and her friends were so excited—they ran over and were looking through the holes. It was so beautiful, and I thought, “Why not photograph this?” Even though it’s something from the past, it’s still here. It has a different sort of existence now, as a relic, but that’s what it is in contemporary life. Then I really discovered that Benjamin was really interested in these kinds of objects from the recent past that kind of fossilize time, that time congeals around.



*Kaiserpanorama, 1993*



## MARTOS GALLERY

What about your other Benjamin project, *The Angel of History*? It's very different from everything else that you've done.

Benjamin is really a writer who writes in images. That's something that I learned about him. I'm not a sex expert and I'm not a Benjamin expert, but I learn about these things by working with the images. I work with them and let them work on me as well. After I finished "Berlin Childhood," I found the last text of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which he wrote in 1940 shortly before he committed suicide. There's a section in this essay that is based on another image, Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* from 1920, which he owned. It was kind of meditative focal point for Benjamin, and he talked about it as the angel of history looking back at the rubble of civilization.

I decided to make a picture out of this picture. It was the very beginning of Photoshop for me, so I tried Photoshopping this montage. I realized that this pile of rubble that Benjamin is talking about could be so many things that it was in a way all of culture, all of civilization. I started making a lot of different photomontages, but I thought that since it was really a moving image, I should make a movie out of it, with the angel blowing backwards and the pile getting bigger. That was a bone-crushing project. It took years to do. Luckily I found this wonderful filmmaker named Lisa Crafts to make this five-minute film with me. It's since been included in the European Month of Photography and a few other shows.

Walter Benjamin had four granddaughters. His son Stefan fled to London during the war with his mother Dora, where he ended up marrying three times before he died. His second daughter Chantal had seen my work at some shows and came to Berlin to learn more about her grandfather—that whole intellectual tradition had been lost for her. We became friends there, and she settled in Berlin as a social worker. She works with Turkish and African families, and she's quite poor. I started filming her and her daughter, always with the thought of "Berlin Childhood" in the back of my head. I have a lot of footage, and I've decided to make a movie. I've asked Francis Schultz, the artist from Cologne, if she wants to collaborate, and I think that's what I'm going to work on during my sabbatical next year.



*Spree, 2013*



## MARTOS GALLERY

Your photo series “Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?” also features your daughter and her friends, this time with their faces painted or otherwise altered by artists including Mike Kelley, [Jutta Koether](#), [John Baldessari](#), and about 80 others. How did you find yourself working with children on this level?

“Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?” also started in Berlin. I have conflicted relationship with Germany because my family fled in '39, which is perhaps also a subtext to “Berlin Childhood.” I had brought some face paints to my daughter’s kindergarten class as gifts. One of the teachers was an African-German woman. I’m German-Jewish, and it was a particularly xenophobic moment then, in '93 or so. She and I would often discuss how we felt in Berlin. One day I picked Carmen up and her teacher had painted all the children’s faces. Everyone was so happy, and I felt like I should just do a show with her. She should paint the children, I’ll photograph them, and it will be an act of reconciliation for both of us.

That’s what I did that summer, but when I came back to New York it didn’t seem like such a gesture would have any relevance. I was still shooting the children at Carmen’s elementary school—I’d take photos at the winter fair and put them up on the bulletin board for them to take home. There are still people I meet now who say they still have those pictures up on their refrigerators. Children love to be photographed with their faces painted, but I wondered who would ever take this seriously. A mother painting butterflies on her daughter’s face? It’s beautiful, but, you know....

One day, I was having dinner with [Kiki Smith](#), and she had all these henna designs on her face. I asked her if she would want to paint that on a child’s face. She said, “Actually, I have an idea.” She came over the next day with these rice paper tattoos that she had made and tattooed Carmen’s face with them, and that was the beginning of “Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?” It’s a kind of funny trajectory, from Berlin into New York. Not all of the artists I worked with wanted to paint a kid’s face, so the project started change and evolve as other artists came in.



*Mike Kelley-Carmen Rosenberg Miller, 1997*

**In some ways, this series is one of your most challenging, insofar as it incorporates children into what some critics have called sexualized imagery. What's more, many of the photos are of your daughter. Can you tell us a little more about the process of making these images?**

It's funny. I worked with porn images in part for their transgressive qualities, but in the end they actually seem very formal, whereas with the children I was thinking of this as a really good-natured project. So I was surprised—and then of course understood—how challenging and maybe questionable some of the process was. When I first showed this work in '98, I got this really scathing review from Robert Mahoney about how any mother who would allow Mike Kelley within 10 feet of her daughter should be in therapy. Maybe he's got a point, I don't know [laughs].

Carmen still has real issues about that image that Mike and I did together. Carmen was about 7 years old and knew Mike, so when he came over to do the photographs she put on her best dress-up gown for dinner and was really excited. Her friend Joe Siena, James Siena's son, was there too. Mike told me he wanted to paint her like a goth girl, but when she went in the bathroom and saw what she looked like she come out crying. What I hadn't really thought about at the time, because I was so preoccupied with lighting and everything else, was that Mike had painted cleavage on her, and that she looked kind of battered.

At that moment, I was definitely the photographer and not the mother. I was thinking, "If I don't shoot this, I won't

## MARTOS GALLERY

At that moment, I was definitely the photographer and not the mother. I was thinking, “If I don’t shoot this, I won’t have it. I can make the decision about whether I want to keep it or not later on, but I need to shoot it.” I begged Carmen to let us shoot one roll of film, and when we were finished she was really crying, tears rolling down her face. I told her to go in the bathroom and wash her face. She came out of the bathroom wearing my dark sunglasses and started to really vamp it up for us. We ended up shooting another roll of film, and then she took off the glasses and was kind of happy. After that, we had dinner and everything was fine.

Neither Mike nor I had really understood what had really happened—we were just happy we got three rolls of film out of it. Carmen wrote about this experience years later, for her college entrance exam. She’s written about it since then too, so I know it’s still something that she’s contending with. She said that it had something to do with her sense of who she was. When she looked in the mirror she didn’t recognize the girl she saw, but she knew it was her. It contradicted her sense of a fixed identity. When she put the sunglasses on, she covered up what she didn’t like and sort of took control. That made her feel that she did have some agency when it came to how people saw her or who she was or thought she was.



*Laurie Simmons–Lena Dunham, 1997*



## MARTOS GALLERY

I think it's an example of the way that a lot of children had agency in these pictures that Bob Mahoney didn't see. I did a photograph with [Laurie Simmons](#) and Lena [Duham, Simmons's daughter], and Lena always says it was her directing debut. When she was flossing her teeth at night, she'd floss down under her lips to make herself look like one of Laurie's puppets. That's what she wanted to do. We had Laurie dress up in this white suit with these black gloves and stand behind Lena holding the floss. When Bob Mahoney saw that, he said that Laurie was so carried away with her own ego that she's turned her own daughter into one of her puppets, but that's really not the way it happened.

The children weren't just blank slates that these artistic egos were getting projected onto, but of course there is that aspect to it. When artists are given the opportunity to play, they often do their kind of work. They play with their trademark, with that thing that identifies them as an artist. There was a lot of stuff going on with this series that I hadn't really anticipated, but that's the best thing about working as an artist—to create these more complicated scenarios for yourself.

ART TALK

## FREE-SPIRITED



New work by Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (Bottle)*, 2014. She and other overlooked artists are on view at Independent Projects.

48

Independent art fair is holding its second New York event of 2014 at its usual 22nd Street location in Chelsea from November 6 through 15. This new show, in part an appeal to collectors in town for the November auctions, has an altogether different approach. Elizabeth Dee, an art dealer and cofounder of the fair, describes it as “one holistic exhibition.” It features 40 galleries, each holding a solo show, with presentations ranging from mini-historical surveys to performances.

“Positioning Independent at a different time of year allowed us new territory to create a broader distinction between the auction house and the creative production activities of galleries,” Dee says. “These worlds are not mutually exclusive, however, and the project recognizes that overlap. We wanted to address the audiences and introduce galleries that reflect this spectrum, with minimal overlap between the March and November editions.”

And so dealers like Larry Gagosian and David Zwirner are on hand, but there are also plenty of more modest galleries bringing the kind of work one doesn't

expect to see at an art fair. In particular, works that fall into what Dee calls the “ascendent” category, almost famous, if you will.

This accounts for the inclusion of artists like Robert Moskowitz. The dealer Kerry Schuss has re-created Moskowitz's 1962 show of so-called window-shade paintings at Leo Castelli gallery. Martos Gallery brought Aura Rosenberg's series of porn rocks—which are basically exactly what you think they are, but have only rarely been exhibited since Rosenberg stopped making them in the 1980s. White Columns, whose director Matthew Higgs is also a cofounder of Independent, is showing work by Billy Childish's mom.

If dealers feel less obliged to bring work that sells quickly, it's because the fair runs through two weekends, with the usual opening sales frenzy followed by a more museum-like exhibition setting.

“This is an opportunity to return and discover things one didn't see on the more social days, where the content can really dominate and the focus can be on the artists,” says Dee.

M.H. MILLER

CHARLES BENTON/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARTOS GALLERY, NEW YORK

ARTNEWS NOVEMBER 2014

INTERVIEW

## Aura Rosenberg

Aura Rosenberg—whose "The Golden Age" harkens back to the politics of appropriation of her earlier work—discusses her use of pornography with husband John Miller.

MARCH 4, 2013



Aura Rosenberg, *The Dialectical Porn Rock*, 1989–1993, C-print, 40 x 30 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Aura Rosenberg began using pornographic imagery in her work about 25 years ago. After a period of intense activity, she stopped and moved on to other subjects, only to return to it in 2011. Much, however, had changed: the porn “industry,” the social acceptability of pornographic images, the kinds of cameras used to produce them and the kinds of media used to disseminate them. In short, very little stayed the same. Instead of taking a “bad girl” stance, Rosenberg raises the prospect of a feminine gaze. In the interview that follows, she and I discuss some of these issues and what they might imply.

### **John Miller**

When did you start working with pornography?



# MARTOS GALLERY

**Aura Rosenberg**

It was the summer of 1988.

**JM**

We already had been together for four years at the point.

**AR**

No—more like two years. When we met I was making paintings by imprinting my body on canvas. We were just getting to know one another when you suggested we collaborate on these paintings. You built some shaped canvases—a cross and an x—and painted my body brown. I always felt that was your version of “Come up and see my etchings.”

**JM**

Regardless of whether it was two or four years, we were already more or less living together before this collaborative attempt. You had been doing body prints for a while and I had started working with what was to become my trademark brown impasto trope. Your body prints are definitely not porn, even though they sexualize the body. How exactly did you go from there to actually using porn?

**AR**

The body imprints, for the most part, conveyed sexual allegories. For example, one group of paintings depicted the sexual positions that ostensibly represent the 12 astrological signs. These were based on a '70s-era day-glo poster, “The Afronomical Ways.” I made many of the prints on brightly colored vinyl from *Industrial Plastics*, the store on the ground floor of our studio building. Some were printed on black velvet. In your work, I liked how you used brown acrylic to refer to feces, thus rejecting the idea of real, i.e., authentic, materials—namely shit. So, I think we were both focused on a split between the visceral and signification. Right around then, we rented a house in the Catskills with some artist friends. One of them was Mike Ballou who happens to be an avid trout fisherman. As a joke, I tore some images from porn magazines, pasted them on rocks, and then put them in the stream where he liked to fish.

# MARTOS GALLERY



Aura Rosenberg, *The Dialectical Porn Rock*, 1989–1993, C-print, 40 x 30 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**JM**

That was an elaborate joke. Ballou was supposed to think he was hallucinating porn. You decoupage clippings onto the rocks with polyester resin. Where did you get the porn magazines from?

**AR**

The magazines belonged to Ballou. He was using them in his sculpture. Before that, I had never bought a porn magazine, or even looked through one.

**JM**

Why did you decide to stick with this?

**AR**

Since we were spending so much time in the country, I didn't want to stay inside all the time. Outdoors, I liked how sunlight, playing over rocks in a stream, could suggest images: the way we find images in otherwise amorphous forms, like clouds.

# MARTOS GALLERY



Aura Rosenberg, *The Dialectical Porn Rock*, 1989–1993, C-print, 40 x 30 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**JM**

Fairly wholesome . . . on the face of it.

**AR**

I discovered that by projecting bodies from a staged photo shoot onto a bucolic landscape, I could take the theatricality out of those images and make them corporeal, but, in so doing, I found that there was a tension in the gesture, a dialectic, that later led me to title the series: “The Dialectical Porn Rock.”

**JM**

What began as a joke became an ongoing investigation. Did your first work in this vein include rocks from the trout stream?

**AR**

Yes. I took the same rocks and photographed them in the stream, in the woods and imbedded with other rocks around the house. Believe it or not, I had never taken photos before. The rocks looked great in the landscape, so I just shot a lot. Then I realized there wasn’t any film in the camera. Next, you had to load the film for me. That was my first photo lesson.



# MARTOS GALLERY



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 2011, acrylic and inkjet print, 5.5 x 7 inches. Courtesy Sassa Trützsch, Berlin.

**JM**

So, porn allowed you to access landscape—or at least land—in your work. It also led to photography. But it also led to sculpture and paintings.

**AR**

I began with a rule that I would put the rocks only into existing settings, but before long I started bringing them indoors and arranging them in various configurations—first in circles.

**JM**

In some ways, your photos parallel Robert Smithson's mirror displacement series—and the sculpture, his non-sites. Smithson, however, considered his outdoor arrangements of mirrors as sculpture and the photos he shot of them as documentation. Yet, like him, you used a set of objects that appears in different locations in different arrangements. Smithson saw the mirror as a cut into the landscape. In contrast, your photos are a kind of re-photography. The clippings, however, look less like photographic appropriation than they do like displaced figures and body parts that merge into a generalized "photo reality." They have a sense of actualization rather than montage. Did you make any outdoor sculpture?

# MARTOS GALLERY

**AR**

Yes. Once I added a selection of orgasmic faces to a pile of rocks being used for repairs in Berlin's Alexanderplatz U-Bahn station. Another time, I put a circle of rocks covered with penetration photos in front of Berlin's Kunstlerhaus Bethanien. In this piece, I liked the way the penetrations spiraled into the ground. I regard the rocks as a kind of ready-made figurative sculpture. I would try to match the contours of the photographed body to the form of the rock. They could be seen as part of a sculptural tradition that equates stone with flesh, one that goes back to prehistoric Venus figurines. But I considered my photos as works, too.

**JM**

What's the difference between looking at the rocks firsthand and looking at photographs of them?

**AR**

Photographs engage memory, both the memory of the source material—in this case, a porn magazine—and the memory of having been someplace, where the shot was taken. Seeing the rocks firsthand is uncanny because the embodied image, its claim to presence, challenges the notion of recollection. The decoupage rocks are always present tense. I wanted to make them feel as natural as any other part of the landscape. The way Tim Martin put it in his essay on the work is that it "resurrects the real of the photograph or uncovers the body beneath its skin."



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (Truck)*, 2013, acrylic and inkjet print, 7 x 5.25 inches. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**JM**

Then you went on to paint directly on porn clippings as well. Do those paintings continue opposition between memory and embodiment?

**AR**

I tried to give both the rocks and the paintings on porn a skin. Skin is the organ of touch, so it adds something sensual to the pleasure of looking. In the paintings I try to mimic the underlying photograph as closely as possible. By painting just enough to transform the image, I want to undermine conventional, overly rhetorical notions of painting skill. This renders the optical screen of the photograph into something that is also tactile. The transformation could be seen as a mirroring of the body itself. It contrasts with kinds of feminism that reject pornography and visual pleasure.



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (It Goes On All The Time)*, 2011, acrylic and magazine clipping, 5.5 x 5.5 inches.

**JM**

Since you had to buy porn to make your work, did you ever get into it?

**AR**

At first, I found it intimidating to go into the 42nd Street porn shops. Most of the customers were men and they assumed I was a hooker. The magazines I bought featured a regular cast of actors who soon became familiar. The scenarios they enacted were, for the most part, formulaic. Some I found exciting, but eventually I became more interested in the settings and props than the actors.



# MARTOS GALLERY

**JM**

Conventionally—and I guess by that I mean through the lens of the 1980s culture wars—porn has come to stand for transgression, particularly in art world terms. Here, you seem relatively indifferent to the “bad girl” stance that arose from pro-porn feminism—which is funny when I recall what happened when you were working as a graphic designer at *Lear’s* magazine.

**AR**

*Lear’s* was a magazine for older women, published by Francis Lear, who had divorced Norman Lear shortly before founding it. One of the editors was John Stoltenberg who, unbeknownst to me, was married to Andrea Dworkin and had founded “The Pose Workshop” where men reenacted the positions women took in porn photos. This was supposed to teach them about the sexual degradation of women. During my lunch hour I’d photocopy images for the rocks to enlarge and distort their proportions. One day, I was running out a gigantic, stretched penis. While my back was turned, Stoltenberg had entered the room. I looked behind me and saw him. He was almost transfixed by the penis emerging from the copier. Without a word, he spun on his heels and left.



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (Farmer)*, 2011, acrylic and inkjet print, 3 x 4 inches. Courtesy Laurence Rickels.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**JM**

In the last ten years, pro- and anti-porn positions have become increasingly irrelevant. Much of this had to do with technology. Cameras are everywhere. So are images. Anyone who wants porn can get it instantly. Instead of a sexual underground, it's become more of a constant, background murmur. You titled your recent show at Galerie Sassa Trülzsch "The Golden Age." That refers to what's become a nostalgic period in the porn industry, a bygone era that seems quaint in retrospect.

**AR**

It had been a long time since I showed any porn work. I stopped working with it around 1996, when our daughter Carmen was six.

**JM**

Because after that you didn't want her to see it? I remember her crawling through piles of porn rocks as a baby.

**AR**

As a baby I didn't think it made much difference. But, after she was six, I turned to long-term photo projects that involved her and my experience of being a mother. Ironically one of these projects, *Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?*, raised questions about childhood sexuality that were probably more challenging than anything in the porn work. What did you think about all this?



Aura Rosenberg, *Pisces (Matt and Alex)*, 2013, acrylic and black velvet, 7 x 4 inches. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

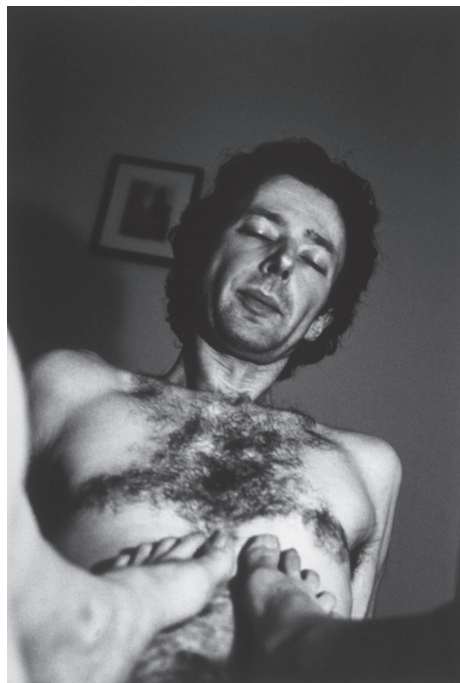
# MARTOS GALLERY

**JM**

I think the whole idea of whether it's bad for small children to see porn rests on social convention. I don't think that images of sex and sex organs pose any inherent psychological threat to children whatsoever. Rather, it's the social complications of a particular culture and how these are negotiated. Since there's no getting around these, you were right to put away the porn rocks until Carmen was older.

**AR**

When Carmen turned twenty in 2010, I pulled out my boxes of old porn and started thinking about new works. In these pictures, sex had become fossilized. Despite their explicitness, they felt picturesque.



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (JM)*, 1991-96, silver gelatin print, 16 x 12 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**JM**

Is that why you wanted to use them again?

**AR**

When I checked online to see what had happened to some of the actors, "The Golden Age of Porn" came up, a period from the mid-60s to the late-80s.

**JM**

What's so special about the Golden Age?



# MARTOS GALLERY

**AR**

That's when pornography went mainstream. In part, this had to do with the sexual revolution of the sixties, feminism and black liberation. The end of the Golden Age corresponds with the outbreak of AIDS.



Aura Rosenberg, *Dialectical Porn Rock*, 1989–1993, C-print, 40 x 30 inches.  
Photo courtesy of the artist.

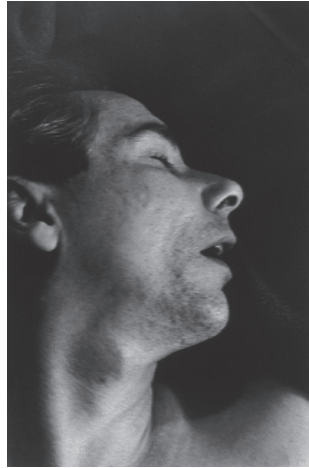
**JM**

So we might characterize the Golden Age as a blip when people felt free to experiment with a relative absence of guilt or fear, a period both sexualized yet innocent.

**AR**

Obviously, the very idea of what was once called “free love” flies in the face of this reality. Look at the coyness of *Sex and the City*. We were shocked recently to hear that some participants at an HIV/AIDS conference in Berlin were arguing for the right to keep their illness a secret from sexual partners because telling them supposedly destroys the romance.

# MARTOS GALLERY



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (MK)*, 1991-96, silver gelatin print, 16 x 12 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**JM**

We could speculate that the consumption of porn has skyrocketed to compensate for sexual unfreedom, but I think that more importantly the technological apparatus in which porn is embedded dissolves the old moral strictures surrounding it. Electronic technology—most obviously, the profusion of digital cameras, but not just that—increasingly blurs former distinctions between public and private space.

**AR**

The rise of amateur porn comes with the various media we've come to depend on. The camera and the technical image was the beginning of a reliance on devices that, whether we realize it or not, direct much of what we think and do. The last time we went to the movies, during the trailer almost everybody in the audience was more involved with an electronic device than the partner sitting next to them. It was strange seeing their faces lit by the electronic screens.

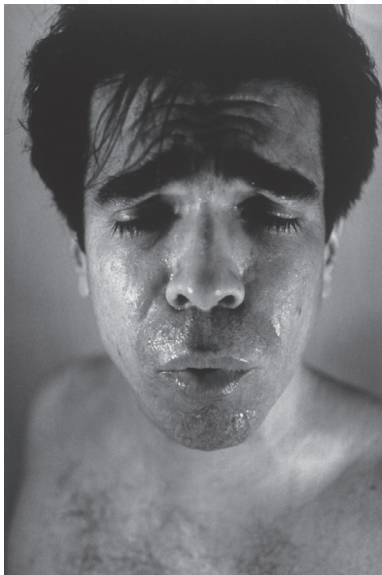
**JM**

It was a literally obscene scenario because "obscene" refers to what's offstage, not in the scene. There was the movie screen flanked by stage curtains, showing twenty minutes of ads before the feature, and there was the audience, each individual in his or her own virtual space. To me, our present condition has less to do with proliferating amateur porn than it does technological objectification. The British anthropologist, Mary Douglas, famously defined "dirt" as matter out of place. I think contemporary culture is moving in the direction of a "porntopia" that is not just virtual, but more importantly placeless—everywhere and nowhere.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**AR**

The closest I ever came to shooting homemade porn was *Head Shots*, a series of close up portraits of ecstatic men. I asked them to act out what they thought they looked like coming. Most of the shots were staged and, I should mention the book was dedicated to you



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (MS)*, 1991–96, silver gelatin print, 16 x 12 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**JM**

While many of the photos in the book became popular—Mike Kelley's, Jim Shaw's, Tony Oursler's and Cary Leibowitz's—the one you shot of me never did. Nobody wanted it! And I hasten to add that I wasn't acting. But my favorites are the Mike Smith portraits, especially because a Swedish AIDS-activist group used them for a safe-sex campaign. They made T-shirts with pictures of Mike and the slogan "Come in a condom."

**AR**

When the Swedish Federation for Gay and Lesbian Rights asked if they could use my photos, I was flattered. They thought their campaign would be more effective if it linked caution to pleasure. And they contacted me because there aren't many photographs of orgasmic men around. We see lots of ecstatic women, but men are always in control—in mainstream media too. That's why *Head Shots* is only men. Shooting those pictures brought up a range of emotions for me and my models. I realized that sexual exchanges can happen through the lens of a camera. But, we also laughed a lot.



# MARTOS GALLERY

**JM**

That's a reversal of the obscene: the face instead of a penis!

Aura Rosenberg lives and works in New York. Her latest exhibition, *I Know It When I See It*, is showing at Martos Gallery through March 30th.

John Miller is an artist living in New York.

## Picture This

From Roni Horn to Marina Abramović, Christina Zück examines the 'enraptured faces' of portrait photography today

C

BY CHRISTINA ZÜCK IN FRIEZE | 21 MAR 12



As a photographer, I have always been interested in how the 'portrait face' is arrived at – in how the relationship that develops between the sitter and the photographer translates into an image. At times, the sitter presents me with the 'perfect' face; at others, I have to determine it myself during the process of selecting an image after the shoot.

Like their painted counterparts, photographic portraits require lengthy sittings, but in photography a face is not assembled from the combined application of paint and imagination. Instead, a session in a photographic studio usually generates a large number of separate, minutely differing images. The subsequent choice of image is as crucial to the final portrait as the process of taking the pictures in the first place. In the days of analogue photography, the cost of negative material limited the number of shots taken. I would sit with a magnifying glass over a few contact sheets: the work was fiddly and it called for a predetermined notion of how the finished result might look. Today, I have a digital camera, and I have developed the bad habit of filling the memory card at every session. Sitting in front of a screen sifting through a folder of 800 images is an arduous process.



Pieter Hugo, *Yakubu Al Hasan, Agboghloshie Market, Accra, Ghana*, 2009, c-type print, 1.5 x 1.5 m. Courtesy Cokkie Snoei, Rotterdam and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town

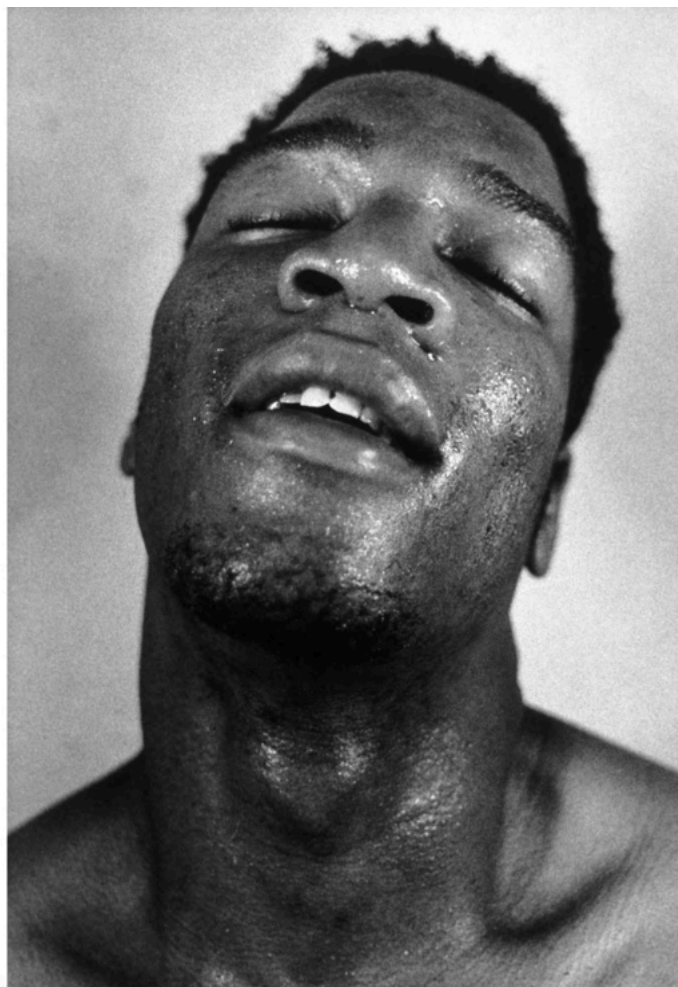
At the beginning of a portrait sitting, people often feel awkward and self-conscious. The intimate situation they find themselves in with the photographer is a highly contrived set-up. Reactions swing between contradictory feelings: to use the clichés of psychoanalysis, these are narcissism (the wish to be looked at) and paranoia (the fear of being looked at). In a lecture on the introduction of perspective during the Renaissance ('Quid tum?', *What Next?*, 2002), delivered at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, the art theorist Bazon Brock described how the imaginary geometrical space of painting located the eye as a central point from which a real space could be encompassed. The physiological apparatus of the eye was what enabled the mind to create a unity through the image. During the early modern period, Brock argued, perspective led to an increased reflexivity in thinking. This self-mirroring (later pathologized as narcissism) provided an external anchor for burgeoning human subjectivity, and subsequently became an intrinsic element of cultural practice. In the light of technological advances – ranging from HD cameras, webcams and smartphones to endoscopy – a person's identity and self-perception today vacillate between complete instability and a normative commodity that can only be constructed via the perspectives of others.



## MARTOS GALLERY

Nowadays, having a portrait made of oneself is charged with great significance – it can be endlessly replicated via Google and Facebook; it can be identified by facial recognition systems – consequently, the photographer is expected to make the sitter look perfect.

As a photographer, it is my task to relax people during a portrait sitting. I chatter incessantly in an attempt to make the huge lens I'm hiding behind simply disappear. I trip over the tripod, give a detailed commentary on what I'm doing, in order to distract attention away from my relentless clicking. Fellow photographers have told me they take a similar approach – or remain stoically silent throughout the entire procedure. Often, the pictures are just not good enough: the way the person looks into the camera is all wrong. Some people, I tell myself in such cases, are just unphotographable.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots DL*, from the series 'Head Shots' (1991-96), silver gelatin print, 41 x 30 cm. Courtesy Sassa Trülzsch, Berlin, and the artist

# MARTOS GALLERY

Looking through *Magnum Contact Sheets* (Schirmer & Mosel/Thames & Hudson, 2011) – a new volume showing 139 historically significant contact sheets for the first time – I'm at a loss. There is no clear systematic approach to picture selection, no how-to guide to creating masterworks: it is left to the author's subjectivity, to the moment of publication and to other parallel narratives to decide why one particular image is better than the one just before it. Peter Marlow, who photographed Margaret Thatcher during a public speech in 1981 for *Newsweek*, always took several pictures of a given subject, so-called 'in-camera duplicates', enabling him to send original negatives of the same image to several agencies at a time. As we see from the contact sheet, Marlow photographed Thatcher from below: her gaze is aimed upwards, her eyes not trained on any object or other person, as though in a moment of pausing for thought. The differences in eye position and muscle tension in the frames leading up to the image Marlow selected are so minimal as to be barely visible. René Burri's famous portrait of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara only achieved the status of a masterwork in 1967, four years after it was taken, as a result of being reproduced across multiple publications. In 1963, it was only printed in small format as part of a 16-page picture feature in *Look* magazine. It was the response it gained from viewers which turned that particular image into an icon.

## **In Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*, the role played by photography was secondary but nonetheless essential.**

Although they depict 'visible reality', photographs need to be charged with additional meaning. Without the photographer's annotations, or just left on the contact sheet, these pictures would have been lost in the archive. In their comments, the photographers featured in *Magnum Contact Sheets* invoke the mysticism of chance – *le moment décisif* (the decisive moment), a term coined by the Frenchman Jean-François de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz, in the 17th century. In his 1952 book *Images à la sauvette* (published in English as *The Decisive Moment*), Magnum-founder Henri Cartier-Bresson referred to this idea, thus introducing it to photographic theory. This moment of divine grace – *kairos* in Ancient Greek – involves a coincidence of several uncontrollable factors, from various fields of perception and form, which leads to the pictorial 'event'.

## MARTOS GALLERY

I take another look at the folder of portrait photographs on my desktop: 'A' gazes calmly, intensely into the camera, her eyes are melancholy and downcast, but I can tell she feels awkward. Slight tensions in her cheeks pull her mouth upwards; above the eyebrows her forehead is furrowed. 'B' pulls a face and stares into the camera with his mouth open – what a poser. I can't use this. For a representative commissioned portrait, I would like to show a face cleansed of all affect and muscle movements – energy should flow through it and off it, it should be permeable and open. 'Noble simplicity, quiet grandeur', as the 18th-century German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann called it – a living still life. Only the eyes should shine, gently, full of kindness. This would be the moment when the person was at one with themselves, or rather at one with me, having opened up and granted my wish for the chance to make a decent portrait.



Tobias Zielony, *Jayde*, 2011, c-type print, 69 x 46 cm. Courtesy Tobias Zielony and KÖW, Berlin

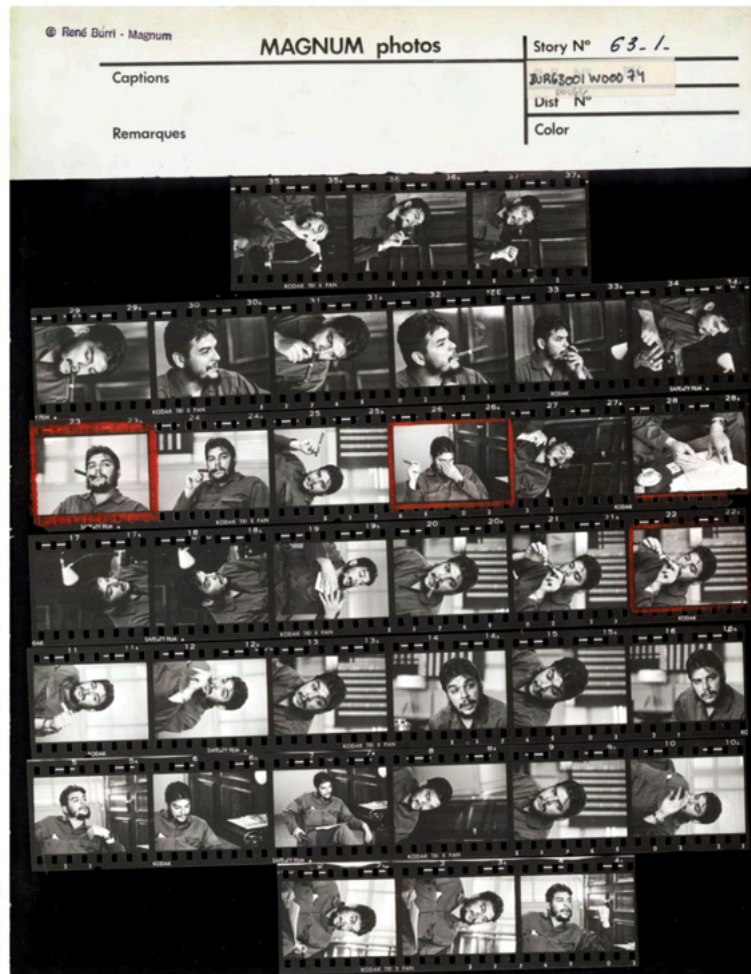


# MARTOS GALLERY

The tradition of straight photography – which has also been picked up in fine art since the 1990s – deals with visible reality, leaves found situations as they are, refers to recognizable art-historical traditions, and attaches importance to the form of presentation. It tries to add as little extraneous context as possible when creating pictures, so as to let the main subject speak for his or herself. Alterity is often a central theme. Time after time, contemporary art exhibitions present the sad faces of hopeless youths, as in Göran Gnaudschun's 'Berlin-Alexanderplatz' series (2010–ongoing), or in the atmospheric dystopias photographed by Tobias Zielony in many drab suburbs around the world (from Winnipeg, Canada, via Naples, Italy, to Zielona Góra, Poland); or the Ghanaian slum-dwellers in Pieter Hugo's series 'Permanent Error' (2010), who stand amid the toxic filth of an electronic waste dump, staring with dignity into a camera that cost several thousand euros. Referring back to the typologies of August Sander and the school of Bernd and Hiller Becher, these portraits are mostly presented in large, formally similar series. It is the fate of photography never to be able to separate itself from duplications and taxonomies. One example of a proactive approach to this is provided by Thomas Ruff's early portraits from the 1980s, which evoke the aesthetic of standardized passport photographs or physiognomical charts, with the neutral gaze of his sitters rejecting all fantasies of inwardness. Wolfgang Tillmans mixes up the classical genres of both photography and painting – landscape, portrait, still life, abstraction – and puts them back together again as sub-groups in a hanging or layout.

What is striking about the work of artists who use the medium of photography for portraits in this way is the phenomenon of the 'enraptured face'. In photojournalism, the prevailing ideal is to show faces with strong emotions: the pain of attack victims or the anger of rebels. In fashion photography, the emphasis is usually on the face's artificiality and mask-like quality: models stare stiffly, arrogantly, coldly. But in the fine art 'straight photography' of Rineke Dijkstra, Bernhard Fuchs, Jitka Hanzlová, Zoltán Jókay or Fazal Sheikh (if one can allow for such a generalized grouping in spite of the differences between these artists' practices) the faces are 'at one with themselves'. The sitters are not distracted by the outside world, they feel no emotion, they look – sometimes absorbed, sometimes with detached tenderness – straight into the camera. Here, the *moment décisif* has migrated from a movement in space to the sitter's inner intensity and concentration. Photography becomes a meditative practice. The neo-Buddhist notion of 'being at one with oneself' means perceiving the historical, chaotic world as a distanced viewer. In contemporary society, displays of emotion only bring a reduction of social status. In the tumultuous currents of capitalist globalization, it makes sense to let go of everything in a Zen-like manner and to allow disturbances, especially all that tiresome negativity, just pass straight through you.

# MARTOS GALLERY



René Burri, *Che Guevara, Havana, 1963*, photographic contact sheet. Courtesy © René Burri / Magnum Photos

- Thomas Struth has pushed the method of portraying sitters with an 'enraptured face' to particular lengths.
- Like a court painter of Baroque princes, in his series of family portraits (including one of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, taken in 2011 to celebrate her forthcoming Diamond Jubilee) he documents the
- habitats of social elites and spends large amounts of time with the sitters. The absorbed faces they are
- seen making in the magnificent finished pictures distract their own attention from the fact that the high-
- resolution detail and the spacing, gestures, constellations and interiors give a clearly legible account of
- conditions within society. Instead of pointing to inwardness, the face becomes a stylistic fetish to
- accompany a subtle, critically distant way of seeing.

# MARTOS GALLERY

In his 1990 book *Bild und Kult (Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. 1997), Hans Belting describes the transition from icon painting to devotional images in the late Middle Ages. During this period, mysticism gained ground as a movement within the Christian church, with the emphasis falling on contemplation and the inner religious experience. Nuns and monks withdrew from public communal rituals and strove for an intense, private experience of God. In the pictures painted for private devotion, the faces of Jesus, Mary and the saints took on increasingly individual traits. This turn towards the gaze of the Other, symbolizing the experience of oneness with God's all-seeing eye, was further refined in the Renaissance by complex painting techniques, for example in trompe l'oeil portraits whose subjects appeared to keep their gaze fixed on the viewer from any angle or distance.

These now-classical pictorial tropes continue to exert an influence, becoming strangely entangled with the self-help mysticism condemned by Slavoj Žižek as the ideology of Western Buddhism. Today, rather than becoming one with the Christian God, people assimilate with the 'now', with the esoteric flow or, in the field of fine art, with the photographer or viewer seeking enlightenment in the face of an Other. Photography has a special affinity with phenomena that are in decline: the European individual of old, caught in the crosslines of rampant growth and the digital tsunami, is no longer a given. With photographic portraits, we attempt to capture the individual precisely by referencing his or her inner boundlessness. In an uncontrollable outer world, any flight inwards might end up being just as untethered and groundless.



Mette Tronvoll, *Rena (10)*, c-type print, from the series 'Rena', 2006, 1.2 x 1.2 m. Courtesy Galerie Rupert Pfab, Düsseldorf, and the artist



# MARTOS GALLERY

Artists who not only use photography but who also link their practice with a firmly conceptual approach have always articulated a conflict with hegemonic pictorial tropes. When they address the sitter's countenance and gaze in their works, they reflect on the compromising circumstances under which this occurs. For her 'Head Shots' series (1991–96), Aura Rosenberg asked a number of men if they could be photographed at the moment of orgasm (we are left to wonder which of the subjects might have been faking). The black and white works show faces that are blissfully out of control, sweating, with closed or rolling eyes and open mouths – leaving the viewer unsure if this ecstasy should be taken seriously. Rosenberg's series prompts less of a curiosity about the individuals depicted than an interest in the eroticism of photography itself – the wish, here taken to absurd lengths, to partake of intensity and to affect the sitters at a remove.

**Photography has a special affinity with phenomena that are in decline: the European individual of old, caught in the crosslines of rampant growth and the digital tsunami, is no longer a given.**

For *Portrait of an Image* (2005), Roni Horn photographed Isabelle Huppert in lengthy studio sessions, asking the actress to re-perform various roles from her 30-year film career. The published work consisted of 50 close-ups of Huppert's face arranged into sets of five. In these images, the private Isabelle is indistinguishable from the film character she is enacting or the coolly staring image of the star. To further complicate things, the emotions being acted out under studio lights are not assigned any kind of meaning. Huppert's face escapes us by its very presence – the photographs portray a paradox.

In contrast to these works, Mette Tronvoll's *Rena* (2006) doesn't allow for much speculation on the authenticity of the way people present themselves. The artist had been commissioned by the Norwegian army to photograph the elite soldiers of a special unit at the Rena military base – with the requirement that she would not show their faces, which are obscured by the balaclavas and protective goggles of their hi-tech uniforms.

## MARTOS GALLERY

Tronvoll photographed them in a style reminiscent of August Sander, except that in Sander's work the sitter's posture and gaze are an expression of social status, while the eyes of Tronvoll's soldiers stare out of their mask-like holes with a vacant gaze. Speaking of the mystifications involved in the militarization of the individual, the series acquired a new, eerie topicality following the highly detailed media reports on the case of Anders Behring Breivik who, in the summer of 2011, dressed as a policeman and executed 68 people.



Marco Anelli, from the series 'In Your Eyes', documentation of Marina Abramović's, 'The Artist Is Present' MoMA, New York, 2010.  
Courtesy © Marco Anelli, 2010

# MARTOS GALLERY

In 2010, in the atrium of MoMA New York, Marina Abramović gave a performance lasting a combined 760 hours entitled *The Artist Is Present*. Individual visitors could sit down opposite the motionless artist for as long as they wished during the museum's opening hours while she looked at them. The photographer Marco Anelli used a zoom lens to make portraits of each participant and the 1,545 pictures were published on the museum's interactive website and on Flickr. In this work, the role played by photography was secondary but nonetheless essential. One visitor selected portraits that showed her and others reacting intensely to the project and launched the blog 'Marina Abramović Made Me Cry' – a new round of artistic production had been set in motion. Another blog responded with a satirical meme, 'Marina Abramović Made Me High'. There was a blog with collected attractive faces, 'Marina Abramović Hotties', a computer game was developed, and sitters published videos on YouTube in which they described their experiences, speaking of energy exchange and telepathic phenomena such as involuntary trembling of the legs. Famous pop stars made the pilgrimage to visit Abramović, like a guru in a Satsang, and they could be identified by their fans in the portraits. Spreading from the present moment to the perpetuity of the Internet, the performance was cast outward like an inverted *mise en abyme*.

In this contest of 'being at one with oneself', Abramović remained the toughest power meditator in the ring. As she stated in the documentary *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (2011), the artist sensed the terrible inner pain of some of the sitters, and on occasion burst into tears herself. Her high-performance gaze was always present and, according to statistical analysis, the average length visitors could bear to sit opposite her was 21 minutes. The emotional transgression and intense control involved in such a heightened inner experience turned into a demonstration of power structures. The work evokes the traumatic, all-seeing eye that stares out at us from Renaissance portraits – the gaze later described by psychoanalysis as that of the absent mother, the father or the 'big Other' who doesn't actually exist and who, according to 21st-century discourse, we really need to eradicate – while nonetheless colluding with it. By blogging, for example, by taking our own photographs, uploading videos from mobile phones, making fresh selections from all the available images and glazing them with a layer of our own subjectivity. A symbolic substitute is required in order to externalize the imagined controlling gaze of the 'big Other': this job could be performed by an enraptured face carrying within it the idea of a space extending endlessly inwards, with which one could briefly commune. Just briefly – any longer would be unbearable.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell



# The Great American (Male) Nude



BY LILLY WEI



December 1, 2010 12:00am



In thinking about women's prospects in the arts over the past half century, I realize we've indeed come a long way from the stereotype of the active male artist and the passive female muse—men looking at women and women looking at themselves being looked at. Given women's greater autonomy in general and in sexual matters in particular, it should be payback time, a chance for the woman artist's gaze to linger on the naked male body as a source of esthetic delight and desire. Yet, "nude" remains virtually synonymous with the female body.

Instead of ratcheting up the male body count, **female artists** such as Lisa Yuskavage, Jenny Saville, Ghada Amer, Vanessa Beecroft, Marlene Dumas, and countless others have joined men in portraying women, whether themselves or others. Conversely, while recent decades have seen hard-core male sexuality and phalluses in greater evidence on gallery walls, more often than not these works are instances of men being depicted by other men, from Lucian Freud to David Hockney, Paul McCarthy, and Juergen Teller to, most notoriously, Robert Mapplethorpe.

## MARTOS GALLERY

So why are there so few stripped-down males, their charms unveiled by women for the delectation of women? While there is no one answer, some artists say that men's bodies are less esthetically pleasing; others suggest that women need to take back the female body, not colonize or promote those of men. Women—in fact most viewers—still have difficulty scrutinizing male genitalia, or, conversely, men resist being scrutinized by women as subjects. It might make them feel too vulnerable, and that raises a question: Does the mere fact of being depicted naked feminize the male body?

Yet even if their numbers remain small, more and more female artists are taking on the subject of the male body. In the years since **feminist art** began in the '60s, and especially in the last decade, women have been exploring the possible meaning of a "female gaze," with approaches that range from coy to ambiguous to explicitly sexual.

Looking at the work of younger women artists today, we find glimpses of naked body parts and even genitalia in **Cecily Brown**'s sexy abstractions, for example, but her imagery is more about hide-and-seek amid gorgeous brushwork than putting the male body center stage. And **Elizabeth Peyton** on occasion paints naked men, but her characteristically androgynous figures—whether unclothed or not—signal chaste longing more than carnal knowledge. Dana Schutz offers schematized, hardly erotic renditions of male *beauté* in *Frank on a Rock* (2002) and *Presentation* (2005), in which the subject is laid out as if for a dissection. A similar lack of sexual engagement affects **Chie Fueki**'s *Super* (2004), featuring a great, shimmering superhero caged in a transparent box with glitter obscuring the nudity.

Sexuality, and its connections to power and violence, comes to the fore in **Kara Walker**'s narrative silhouettes. Yet the dominance of the racial discourse overshadows the nakedness of white rapists and their black female victims, making it a lesser point. In *Matterhorn* (1995), **Hilary Harkness**, departing from her paintings of miniature militant women, depicts an enormous white cow with a strapped-on dildo mercilessly abusing a naked man. According to Harkness it's a depiction of artist Mel Bochner, her former professor at Yale: the picture is every female student's revenge fantasy. For all their diverse approaches and motivations, these works raise another question: Why does so much sublimation and unease surround these descriptions of the male body, once considered the ideal of beauty?

Ranking among the heavy hitters of earlier generations to tackle the male body, **Alice Neel** is notable for her unembarrassed presentation of the nude. She was praised for her unexpurgated, psychologically acute studies of friends, family, and acquaintances. *Joe Gould* (1933) presents a Greenwich Village eccentric sitting on a chair with legs spread and penis not only proudly on display, but in triplicate. Neel explained she gave him this "tier of penises" in tribute to his exaggerated virility. A later Neel nude, from 1972, portrays artist and critic John Perreault, awkwardly lolling on a bed, head propped up by his hand, fully exposed. His flaccid phallus, the focal point of the composition, is perhaps more unnerving.



## MARTOS GALLERY

Women artists have more directly tackled the art-historical notion of the **male gaze**, turning it on its head. Now in her mid-90s, **Sylvia Sleigh** has been undressing her male subjects for decades. The model in *Philip Golub Reclining* (1971) looks into a large mirror in which the artist at work is also reflected. It appears to be an amalgam of two Velázquez paintings: the *Rokeby Venus*, one of the most seductive nude female backs in the history of art, and his masterpiece *Las Meninas*, in which the artist is shown as he paints the scene before us. A more recent work, from 2006, portrays a nude young man sitting in an Eames chair clutching the armrests. The work, featured in P.S. 1's "Greater New York" exhibition earlier this year, suggests a provocative interpretation of another Velázquez, his canny portrait of Pope Innocent X.

Working in a similar vein, **Ellen Altfest** is noted for her meticulously detailed, *trompe l'oeil* paintings of quirky subjects as well as her sly, subtly charged portraits of male nudes that parody the male gaze. Some she presents with eyes closed, arms behind their heads, legs apart, mimicking a classic female nude pose. *Penis* (2006), an anatomically correct, crisply drawn close-up of the body part, offers an upending of Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* (1866), an unblinking look at the male phallus that is both real and theatrical, perversely clinical but with an undertone of heat, appealing to the voyeur—and exhibitionist—in all of us.

Other artists find more subtle ways to critique the objectifying gaze, to make pictures about sex that are not about power and subjugation. **Joan Semmel** is best known for her ongoing series of almost photorealistic nude self-portraits—a repossession of the female body from the male gaze and a meditation on time and its effects. But she has also depicted male nudes and, in the '70s, created suites of paintings that show her lover and herself in various stages of sexual engagement. Because she didn't want to objectify the male body in the way women's bodies have been objectified, Semmel says, she chose to highlight situations in which pleasure was mutual, adding that "women are not as much aroused by the sight of the male body as they are by implications of touch, followed by sight."

Among photographers, it seems evident that many women are simply not overtly fixated on the male body as a source of visual titillation. **Diane Arbus**'s photographs of the residents of a nudist colony include men, but their nakedness is incidental—vulnerability and marginality are the themes, rather than sexuality. And **Nan Goldin**'s naked men are part of a nervy, narcissistic autobiographical narrative of extreme urban bohemia. **Sam Taylor-Wood**'s photographs of naked men do qualify as ma

le nudes, despite the hothouse glamour that envelops them, making them look less exposed. **Katy Grannan**, on the other hand, comes closer to naked than nude, sexuality being beside the point. In some of her color photos of men outdoors—including one shown with a full erection—Grannan reminds us that being naked in public is criminal.



## MARTOS GALLERY

Yet photography's immediacy is also suited to work that is unequivocally about sex. "As a European who was raised in a Mediterranean culture, I'm quite comfortable with the human body," says photographer **Ariane Lopez-Huici**, who divides her time between New York and Paris. "However, **male nudity** is still a difficult subject." In 1992 she made "Solo Absolu" (1992), a series focused on the genitalia of a naked male in flagrante delicto, because she "thought male masturbation was a subject not often addressed." In her recent show at the French Institute Alliance Française in New York, a film documenting her career was not shown, she said, to shield children from the sequence. "It was not meant to be shocking." But evidently "it still is, in 2010."

One of **Aura Rosenberg's** series, "Head Shots," also deals with masturbation but consists of black-and-white photos of men's faces at the moment of orgasm. The artist, who lives in New York and Berlin, says a central element of her work is to represent "a larger picture of sexuality than just women's bodies and women's pleasures," and it never occurred to her not to make images of nude men. Rosenberg said she wanted the images to be "edgy, ambiguous, to reference pornography and its conventions, but not be porn." For that reason, in "Head Shots" (selections from it published as a book in 1996), she did not photograph the obvious but relied on the expression of the face to convey ecstasy, although whether that ecstasy is real or fake is deliberately left unclear.

New York-based artist **Brenda Zlamany**, who began painting portraits of men in 1991 and still focuses primarily on them, says she has been criticized for her preference. "The penis is the last sacred cow, the last taboo. People tend to get stuck on one thing with male nudes—the penis—and they can't get beyond it," she says. "I made a full-length portrait of artist Leonardo Drew in the nude and I've never been able to show it. It's too confrontational, too explosive. I have been told by certain galleries and collectors that no one really wants male nudes, but I think there are more of them around than we know about."

Whatever the reasons, the Great American Nude, Male Edition, has yet to become an art-world staple. But if Zlamany is right, women artists need to drag the **paintings of naked men** out of their studios. Then maybe the next generation will feel less reticent taking up their brushes and cameras as a naked man strikes a pose. It could be revolutionary.

***Lilly Wei** is a New York-based art critic and independent curator.*

## Aura transfer

At the entrance to the Haus am Waldsee in Berlin there is an oversized sign with ten bell buttons, as is usually found on Berlin apartment buildings. The name boards are unmarked, the large-format photograph - "I should greet you by Walter Benjamin" (2004)

---

January 6, 2005

At the entrance to the Haus am Waldsee in Berlin there is an oversized sign with ten bell buttons, as is usually found on Berlin apartment buildings. The name boards are unmarked, the large-format photograph - "I should greet you by Walter Benjamin" (2004) - refers to the advertising slogan of a Berlin furniture store that is now located at the address of Benjamin's former birthplace. The start couldn't be better: in the situation that you come across like a Berlin stroller; in the game of original and copy; in the echo chamber of history that opens up here; in the question about the nature of memory that arises, in short: in the richness of allusions of a Benjaminian cosmos.

## Grief work

The work by Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock is specially for the exhibition "Writing Images Thinking. Walter Benjamin and contemporary art" was created and opens a striking and encrypted tour, which includes the works of 56 artists - around a third of them commissioned for this occasion. It is a stimulating course through a world of reflections, reflections, gaps and mental images like those of Mark Lammert ("Risse I-IV", 2003-04), who translated Benjamin's texts into Berlin school notebooks using meticulous writing and tiny letters. They are barely readable and look like the negative of the actual image. It arises where the writing creates blank spaces that it circles in thought: an ironic self-assertion of a world of images that, according to Benjamin, we may like "out of a dark defiance of knowledge".

# MARTOS GALLERY

Using a thematic structure and an associative approach, the show examines the influence of the Jewish philosopher on the artists' work, from the rediscovery of Benjamin's writings in the 1960s to the appropriation of his ideas in the present. Represented include names such as Anselm Kiefer, Christian Boltanski, Marcel Duchamp, Sylvie Fleury, Jeff Wall and Via Lewandowsky. Two strategies can be recognized in the way art shows itself to be connected to its early theorist: In the one, it sticks closely to the creation of legends around the person of Benjamin, to his life, which was followed by the persecution by the National Socialists and the suicide in Port Bou cast a shadow after a failed escape in 1940.

Few of the works develop a pull like Dani Karavan's sketches "Passages Port Bou" (1993/2004). They were created in the context of the Israeli artist's Benjamin monument and repeatedly scan the dunes by the sea in hard, moving graphite lines, as if they had to do all the mourning work. In contrast, the glossy views of the American Aura Rosenberg in her motivic quotations from Benjamin's "Berlin Childhood in the Nineteenth Century" - for example in shots of the famous imperial panorama or chocolates in colorful tin foil - do not go beyond the significance of a devotional item. Candida Höfer's photographs from the Paris National Library (1998) overcome the mere location of this pivotal point in Benjamin's exile and search for the memory of history in the patterns of systematic archiving.

## **Art as a medium of reflection**

On a dialectical level, the second group of works approaches a Benjaminian hodgepodge of themes and concepts. The focus of attention is naturally the writing on the question of the reproducibility of the work of art. Timm Ulrich's "Walter Benjamin: The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility. "The Photocopy of the Photocopy of the Photocopy" (1967) represents a melancholic self-experiment of copy art. The fading copies of Benjamin's book title cover the walls of an entire room and, in the gradual disappearance of the signifier, make the precarious attempt to create memory visible.



# MARTOS GALLERY

The matter-of-factness with which this show allows the images, installations, and video films to speak, its consistent avoidance of texts with the exception of brief explanations, may be irritating at first, but it follows Benjamin's call to break down the barrier between writing and images and to use art as a medium of reflection. Space is created for the fetishism towards things, the passion for collecting, the phenomenology of the everyday. Anyone who gets involved will be rewarded with a sensual experience that makes clear the aura that surrounds Walter Benjamin, whose name itself stands for the destruction of the concept. The room installation "Auratransfer - Everyone has his Benjamin" (2004) by Volker März draws the opposite conclusion in an ambivalent attitude of reverence and ironic distance: März has created a collection of Benjamin cartoon figures made of clay that show the greatness of spirit in all possible situations which seem so stereotypical, as if they were manufactured industrially: art as a commodity. The aura is primarily not a phenomenon of art, but rather one of perception.

Claudia Schwartz

Exhibition until January 30th. Accompanying book: Detlev Schöttker, Barbara Straka (ed.): Writing Images Thinking. Walter Benjamin and contemporary art. With further essays on, among other things, Benjamin's reception in film and architecture. Suhrkamp-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2004. Around 120 illustrations, 263 pages, Euro 39.-.

## Culture Aura Rosenberg exhibition: Berlin childhood in pictures

In his "Berlin Childhood around 1900," Walter Benjamin notes that the scope of what can be photographed in the modern city is shrinking. Like the train stations, photography no longer provides the real entrance into the city's landscape.

January 28, 2001, 12:00 a.m

**I**n his "Berlin Childhood around 1900," Walter Benjamin notes that the scope of what can be photographed in the modern city is shrinking. Like the train stations, photography no longer provides the real entrance into the city's landscape. "The train station gives the order, so to speak, for a surprise maneuver, but an outdated one that only encounters the old, and it is no different with photography."

When Benjamin wrote this look back at the Berlin of his childhood in narrative fragments and motifs in 1932, he was referring to the "soft image" of the late 19th century, the only side of the city, according to Benjamin, that is "really accessible to photographic recording."

Now someone today has dared to recreate Benjamin's children's world with a camera, someone who goes by the name Aura - "Aura", one of Benjamin's key terms. Coincidence. And again it's about a childhood in Berlin - but that's not a coincidence, but a conscious intention.

Eight years ago, New Yorker Aura Rosenberg started taking photos of her daughter Carmen, who started kindergarten in Berlin.

Rosenberg and her husband, the DAAD scholarship holder and artist John Miller, came to a country that her parents had left for America in 1939. Aura Rosenberg liked Berlin: Here her daughter's childhood intertwined with the memories of her grandparents' childhood in a strange way.

Aura Rosenberg herself acted as the medium of mediation. Even after her year-long stay in Berlin ended, the American continued to come to the city for months and, equipped with a camera and Benjamin's book, followed in Benjamin's footsteps. Now her photos are being exhibited in the daad gallery.

# MARTOS GALLERY

Of course, one shouldn't expect a translation of Benjamin's text from Rosenberg's "Berlin Childhood" around 2000, even if the Victory Column as a cake at the entrance to the gallery takes the book's motto literally: "O brown-baked Victory Column with winter sugar from childhood."

How do you photographically imitate the perception of the city from a child's perspective? Aura Rosenberg didn't even try the impossible. Her color photos only show the motifs that the chapters in Benjamin's childhood speak of: the mosaics of the "Victory Column", which reminded Benjamin of Dante's circles of hell, the "stocking" rolled up into a pocket, which taught that form and content are one, etc the "Carousel," where the child "perched as a faithful ruler over a world that belonged to him." Some motifs have changed little since Benjamin's time, such as the hated bathing establishment on "Krummen Straße". Here as elsewhere, Rosenberg photographed objectively and precisely, as she usually did, using a tripod for the camera view. Sometimes the photographer continues Benjamin's motif into her own present. For example, when the "Imperial Panorama" that she photographed in the museum is accompanied by a photo from the cybercafé.

Many of the beautiful images of a childhood around 2000 only gain their excitement because the viewer knows their hidden reference to "Berlin childhood around 1900". The images in this exhibition live in the space between the distance that Benjamin's text suggests and the closeness of the present that the photo presents.

Following Benjamin, one could perhaps call them dialectical images, since they cannot be pinpointed. Because the photographed objects only provide the occasion for these other, neither visible nor readable images, which oscillate between photo and reading, memory and imagination.

*Ronald Berg*





April 28, 1999

## **Pink for boys Light blue for girls**

The sexualization of the girl as a woman

From *Gabrielle Werner*

Years ago, British Vogue maltreated the female adult eye with models who stared out of haute couture gowns with their half-empty children's eyes. Lolitas are now cult under the label "Natural Beauties" (Vogue, No. 1 / 99). Karl Lagerfeld drew his new "Chanel muse" from this reservoir. While Stella Tennant was already a role model for the total reductionism of female forms, Devon Aoki is now increasing the tendency towards dewomanization. She looks like an elementary school girl.

Ellen von Unwerth stages her and her peers for Wella Italia with the comment: "We appeal to a new femininity - provocative, seductive, cool. There is something of that in every woman." (Vogue, No. 1/ 99) Only there are no women in her photos, but rather young girls, some of whom are made up to look like female children.

The fact that glossy fashion magazines make their money by making adult femininity invisible has not yet led to their ruin. Women themselves bear this responsibility. But what do these images of feminine femininity mean for the image of the feminine child, and what image of the girl is created by them?

I will make a linguistic distinction between the feminine child or girl and the female child in order to make clear where images of the adult woman are imposed on the feminine child via images of the feminine. I will also use "adult" as an adjective where a distinction between a child's and an adult's world or fantasy seems necessary.

If you read Michel Foucault's "Sexuality and Truth", you get the impression that childhood as a sociological phenomenon of Western civilizations only became important when it came to the control of children's sexuality, especially masturbation and masturbation. It seems as if childhood was created in the discourse about sexuality and its surveillance and with it the adult fantasies about a child's sexuality and the fascination of adults with it.

The talk about children's sexuality that began in the 18th century has today led to feminine children in particular being given a sexuality that can be used and marketed. To do this, it is necessary to act as if they were already in full possession of this good, as if they had already acquired the ability to consciously experience sexuality as part of their identity. This view marks the redefinition of a feminine child to a female child.

# MARTOS GALLERY

As if to prove otherwise, an example with a boy shows where such an assumption can lead. "The Little Helper", staged by Terry Richardson, not only conveys the adult man's fear of the sexually potent woman, but also the colonialist power relationship, not between the woman depicted and the sexualized boy, but between these two objects Fascination and the man taking photographs. "A man in uniform should not forget his privileged position. Nor should he ever seek to gain advantage from this." (The Face, No. 18 / 1998)

Here too, the image of a child, in this case a boy, is used to talk about an adult, here a man. But there is no man in these photos. He is behind the camera. Childhood sexuality is no longer under the care of adults; control no longer means prohibition, but rather controlling use to visualize a male, adult sexual fantasy. And the sexuality of female adults is childized by turning male fears around.

With fatal consequences, feminine children and girls can then be made similar to adult femininity. Comic series like Naoko Takeuchi's "Sailor Moon" from Japan work with this diminution of female identities. In everyday life, Bunny Sukino and her school friends cover a whole range of divergent girls' identities. However, when they change clothes on the fly and transform into warriors to save the earth, their external appearance acquires a typification and standardization that only exists on the street prostitution (e.g. on Berlin's Oranienburger Straße).

And only in this form can they speak of themselves as "women", and only with a view to this second and actual form can it be explained why today's appropriate linguistic precision with regard to gender constructions in fanzines is thrown overboard and "each one "Find (can) find a sailor warrior with whom he can identify".

Girls' worlds are designed with a male counterpart in mind and as a world in which the gender and sexual identity of girls cannot arise and form, but is determined from the outset by a reduced and standardized image of the feminine.

The exhibition addresses the production and use of female child sexuality in various ways, and the examples I select are read under the heading "sexualization of the girl as a woman." I will try to show in detail which forms of sexualization can be seen where, but in general these works seem to me to be effects of the identity political debates that are taking place about the body, i.e. about gender and sexuality.

Contrary to the theoretical debate, which deals with dealing with adult female identities, the artistic works show female children exercising identity practices of adult females. The latent violence that can be observed in these works results from the collision between an image of the girl and the knowledge of the sexual beyond experience imposed on her through an image of the feminine.

# MARTOS GALLERY

Zbigniew Libera's "You Can Shave Your Baby" can be compared to the girl culture that is supposed to socialize feminine children into mothers and wives through playing with baby dolls and even Barbie dolls. The stultifying reduction of these female play worlds to changing diapers, undressing and dressing and combing is turned into a sexual obsession and can be turned this way because the girl's play world has the sexually connotated body as its object in different ways, her own or that of the game -"Companion". What is practiced is not how to deal with the contingent offers of what "woman" and "femininity" could be, what is practiced is how to deal with sex.

Mike Kelley and Sue Williams brutalize the effects of this socialization in their photographs based on a concept by Aura Rosenberg. Although boys and girls equally like to dress up and put on make-up, the girls' childish play with a future, adult female gender identity apparently lends itself to naming something additional.

When Kelley transforms "Carmen" into a childish whore like "Last Exit Brooklyn", then in the dual relationship between photographer and girl, he takes on the position of threatener and threatener. The additional information about the loss of virgin innocence is developed from the disguise game. The violence of the production also makes the male's view of the female appear to be always violent, to which the female can only position herself as a victim from the beginning of her creation.

Williams, on the other hand, takes the position of observer and commentator on what happens when an oversized something breaks into feminine living spaces that should actually be protected. The fact that the girl seeks support from Barbie dolls, these asexual sex bombs, exaggerates the threatened innocence, since the girl's game is shown as one that is intended to prepare for this situation. Girls have already lost the space of feminine childhood through toys, and unlike Libera, Williams does not transfer this dimension of their socialization into the sexual fantasy of an adult, but rather shows it as a real threat to the child who is portrayed as feminine.

Inez van Lamsweerde sums up what is meant by "the distrust of any definition of identity that does not face the challenge of reflecting in what it says and what it keeps silent" (Sabine Hark). "Kirsten" is a conglomerate of artificial, phantasmatic images of the feminine. The computer-processed highlights on the lower lip of this female surface made of plastic doll and death mask leave no doubt that this is supposed to be about a creature and not a portrait. This face is a product of the media, as is clearly shown by its resemblance to one of the better-known images of Marilyn Monroe. In contrast to Ellen von Unwerth's work, no girl is marketed here, but the mechanisms of marketing are revealed.



# MARTOS GALLERY

This shows the different politics of aesthetic practices. Lamsweerde conceives representation as a depicting relationship, while Unwerth does not depict, in the sense of an artistically produced documentation, but rather "actually produces hierarchizations and power relationships" in the depiction (Isabell Lorey).

The two photographs by Sally Mann "Jessie as Jessie" and "Jessie as Madonna" show how confusing the oscillation between identity and identification can sometimes be when practicing adult female sexuality. Of course, Jessie as Jessie is no more authentic than the same as "Madonna." The photo of a young girl without make-up is also a representation, that is, a representation that simultaneously and inseparably creates a certain - melancholic, soft, lovable - image of the girl. But one can say that Jessie as Madonna is a collection of such distinctive signs of "Madonna" that individuality is generalized into the image "Madonna", whereby "generalized" also means sexualized.

The special transformation into a pop idol means making oneself an identifiable symbol of something that, as an icon, is by definition already a reduction to something unambiguous. The attempt to discuss possible gender identities as historical, contingent and fleeting collides with a market strategy that must rely on recognition. Identity becomes a merchandising effect.

Ginger Roberts shows a way to think identity and difference together. Hickeys are symbols of pride, romantic relics of unsupervised moments (clumsy intimacy), in front of which is written in large letters: Adults are not allowed in. But on the shoulder of a female adult, they are also melancholic, possibly sentimental memories through which one's own story is constructed in a certain way. Roberts' work shows that the aesthetic production of female childhood does not mean feminine childhood, but rather how female childhood is made in the mirror of a female and male adult reality.

In this sense, the theoretical identity policy debates of adult women naturally have an impact on childhood: "It is important to understand (...) the social production of identity as the ongoing and merciless process of hierarchizing differentiation, but at the same time always also of redefinition, of is subject to intervention and change." (Sabine Hark)

Without this understanding, "Basis" couldn't sing, "I don't want your (shitty) life," and wouldn't have so much success with it.