

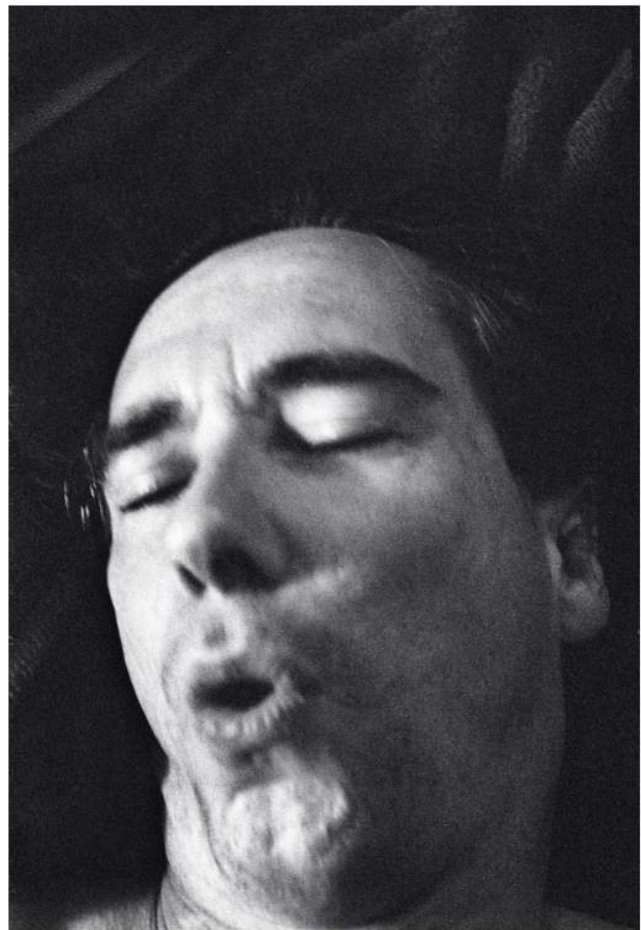
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# The Woman Who Photographed Mike Kelley and John Baldessari Mid-Orgasm

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

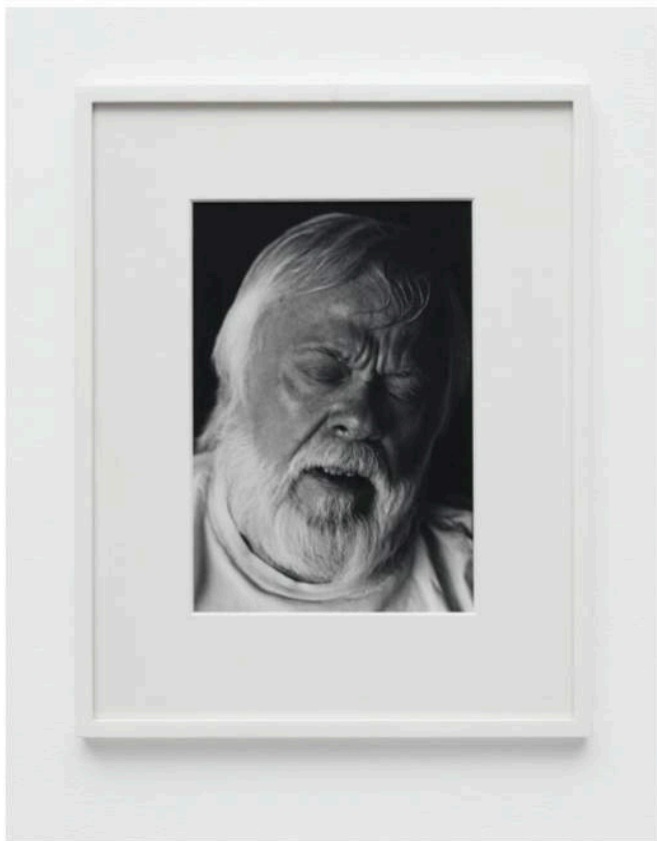


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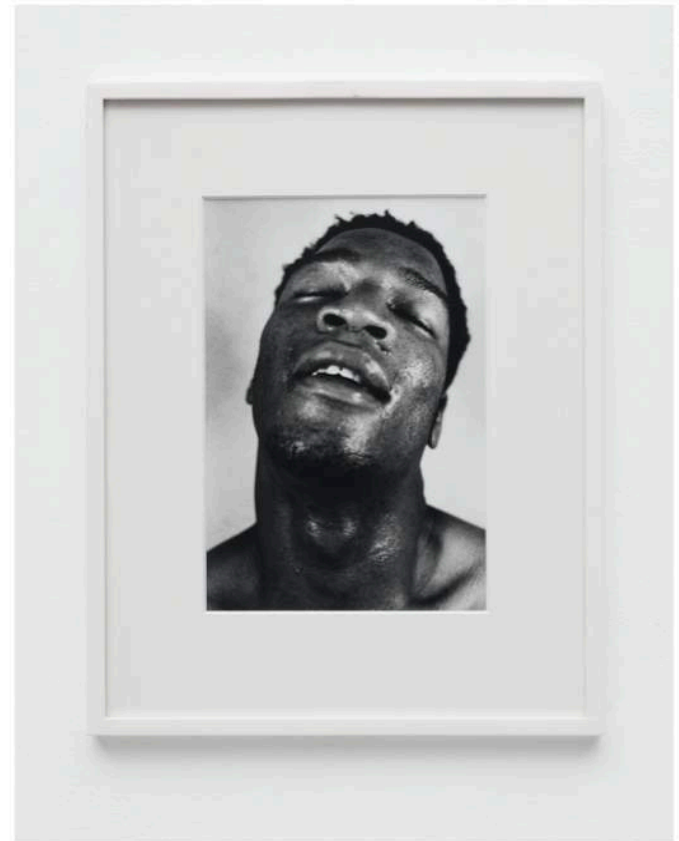
In the mid-1990s, Aura Rosenberg was pondering a limited-edition artwork she could contribute to a holiday project being organized by the artist Cary Leibowitz, a.k.a. Candyass. She immediately thought of her friend, the performance artist and occasional comedian Mike Smith, who often performed conceptual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

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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

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“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.

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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

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

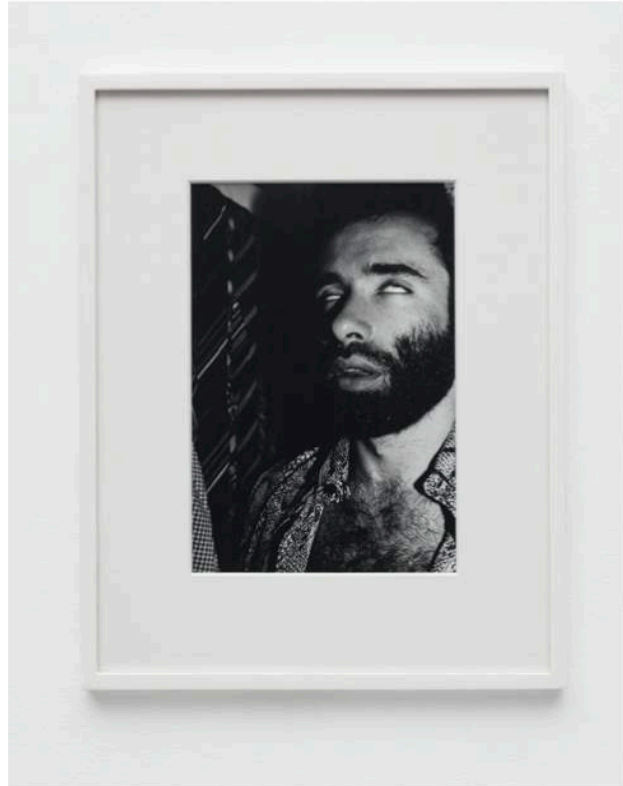
"We were interested in 'Head Shots,' at least partially, because of its difficulty, both conceptually and formally," Rebecca Matalon of JOAN tells me. The gallery had seen the exhibition as an opportunity to "reconsider the questions [the work] raises about sexuality, identity, intimacy, enactment, and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

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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.”