

S

E

AUG 21 — SEP 19

JANE BURTON  
CHARLES GATEWOOD  
LINSEY GOSPER  
BOBBY HARRINGTON  
CLINTON HAYDEN  
SAMUEL HODGE  
RUBY KNIGHT  
RICHARD LARTER  
JACK SARGEANT  
ANNIE SPRINKLE  
EMMA VARKER  
KONRAD WINKLER  
HEIDI YARDLEY

X

# SEX

## Observations and Notes

### VENERATED SEX (ALWAYS)

The aesthetic veneration of sex and pleasure begins at the dawn of creativity. The Palaeolithic cultures' sculptured Venuses (the earliest of which the *Venus von Hohlen Fels*, is carved from the tusk of a mammoth and has been dated to at least 35,000 years ago and perhaps as far back as 40,000 years) may be read as a testimony to ritualised primordial fecundity but the emphasis on curves, breasts and genitals suggests sex. In interpreting these statues – their abstracted curves, gaping vaginas, and voluptuous breasts – writers reveal the same contradictory impulses that are faced today. The purpose and repetition of these statues across millennia, which can only be guessed at so many centuries later, suggests that for many they must be explained. But sex under analysis can never be just sex. So often forced by anthropologists and art critics, sex is often compelled to speak to something larger, to greater meanings and interpretations. As if sex itself was not purpose enough.

SEX, the exhibition, seeks to avoid any singular overarching metaphor or analogy. It does not seek to deny or remove meaning, but it does not seek to frame or contextualise works under a single meaning beyond that of sex, read here and understood as concupiscence rather than reproduction. The broad divisions suggested in what follows are indicative of a (non) mapping rather than final flow. In SEX, sex becomes both the original cause and effect for the selection, the interpretations that flow from this flow from, through and to, sex.

There is nothing coy about SEX.

### DOCUMENTARY SEX

**Konrad Winkler's** *Untitled* photographic series details those special private, intimate moments between lovers. The language of sex here is utterly personal; the tender moments between the couple whose bodies are both known to each other yet perhaps always remain unfamiliar despite this casual and easy acquaintance, we know our lover's bodies, but not their flows and interiorities. There is a tender communication in these pictures that exceeds words; an opening up in which a hand on an erect cock and the fingers in the pussy all suggest a physical language of the body. It is a language that any who have experienced the intimacy of a relationship will know, but simultaneously it remains specific, unique and personal between the lovers in the pictures. There is simultaneously a poignancy at play in these images, the deep consuming power of the physical intimacy is momentary, the communication articulated through the sexual processes of desire ends, and the world returns once more to that of the everyday.

The black and white photos that make up the series are often close-ups, sometimes slightly blurred, emphasising the lack of physical distance between the two lovers. Presented in sequence these images read as pure documentation, tracing the couple's lovemaking from foreplay to bed sheets. The camera sometimes seems to be part of their sex, actions transpiring before it, but more often the images seem to be supplementary to the action that is being photographed. Thus viewed there is a tension between the two activities, between creating art and fucking, until they merge.

In contrast, **Annie Sprinkle's** Polaroids document sexual fetishes, personal sexual explorations, individual desires and pure lusts. These images showcase the actualisation of sex before the camera, those portrayed presenting and performing their libidinal outpourings for the artist. The use of Polaroid, an essential medium for sexual documentation in the era before digital technologies, re-enforces a transgressive lust at play in the works, a celebration of polymorphic excesses and sexual freedoms.

For **Charles Gatewood**, a photographer whose documentations of sexuality extend for nearly five decades, *Exhibition!* focuses on the spectacle of public sex manifested through a performance of female masturbation. Turning autoeroticism, perhaps the most private of sexual acts, into a public spectacle, in Gatewood's remarkable photo the act of viewing becomes an equally sexual act. The collective gaze of the audience acting as a counter to the solo sex. Masturbation here becomes public and a moment in which the masturbator opens herself up, both figuratively and literally, to the audiences' gaze and through Gatewood's photographic record to the geo-temporal gaze of the viewer in the contemporary gallery. If Winkler's documentation of

lovemaking charts the short moment of communication between a couple, a moment which by definition becomes too brief, then Gatewood's work reverses this, the solo masturbator communicates and interacts with all.

## FANTASY SEX

The eye becomes encunted in **Linsey Gosper** and **Jack Sargeant's** photographic work, recalling the orb pushed deep into the vagina in the pornographic literature of Georges Bataille's *The Story of the Eye* but this is not merely a literary eye. The eye peering from the pink labial folds recalls Surrealism, symbolism, decadence and eroticism, but more than these it is the eye of exploration and desire. It is the forensic gaze that looks deep upon itself. Simultaneously it is a mutual exploration in which the creative process becomes a momentary personal performance that can only be realised in the undertaking.

In **Jane Burton's** two photographic works the women expose themselves for the gaze of her camera. Superficially they appear as faceless, anonymous figures, perhaps even as intimate ciphers for the artist whose work often articulates her personal urge to merge with the subjects and scene. But these two figures (they could – the artist suggests – even be sisters with their manes of lush black hair) are named in the titles of the work: *Miss Hazeltine* (2015) and *Miss Hatherton* (2015). These formal sounding names are no accident but are drawn from George Augustus Sala's 1882 novel *The Mysteries of Verbena House*, a Victorian erotic text concerning bad girls' illicit pleasures and the inevitable 'punishments' that must follow upon their discovery. The sadistic punishment a common fate for many of those bad girls that populate erotic literature.

Framed within the geographical confines of a long corridor and a staircase, these figures populate interior landscapes that are thoroughfares. Wherein these bare, nude women could be caught and their (titillating) illicit stripped state punished, further playing with the themes of chastisement faced by the protagonists of Sala's novel.

It is also literature that informs **Emma Varker's** work *Hansel and Gretel* (2011), the already haunted fairy tale becomes detoured through games of power, gender and the female grotesque. In her work, best understood as a performance for film, Varker draws on the abject, creating a work in which the lost protagonists find themselves in the contemporary haven, surrounded by the rubble of urban decay, instead of the witch's house, and a table weighed down with consumables. The actions that follow explore the performers bodies as they push themselves up to and beyond their physical limits. *Hansel and Gretel* is part of an ongoing series of performance films in which Varker explores and renegotiates the limits and constructions of gender, the body and identity.

In her painting *Prowler* (2015) **Heidi Yardley** continues her ongoing interest with source material drawn from 1970s' men's magazines. Attracted to the nature of the printing of these magazines, as well as the imagery that defines them, Yardley's work transforms these images into works that draws on classical oil paintings. In *Prowler* this was inspired in part by the folds of drapery. While the rich colours and textures of the paint echo classical art, the image challenges the assumptions commonly associated with the classic psychoanalytic notion of the gaze (itself a redundant critique) with the female protagonist – bold, knowing and aware – no longer simply the object of the viewer's attentions but instead commanding the viewer's gaze even as it denudes her. Her posture and gestures, the turn of her head, crouch of her legs, exposed buttocks, and red shoes all suggest an awareness and strength that empowers the figure.

## SPACES OF LUST

A sense of gradual visual decay haunts **Clinton Haydon's** *Glory* (2015) series that plays on the fragmented nature of desire and memory. In these pictures the fragmentation is manifested via the restriction of the viewer's gaze through the golden circle through which apparently liminal zones exist. The shape of the frames mirroring the halo of the glory hole, those voids of temporary sexual oblivion through which physical exchange can only transpire in the realm in which there can be no contact (visual, aural) beyond the haptic. But now – looking through the hole – it is a moment of imminent or post sex. What is left in these haunting pictures are brief images that echo sex or the traces of divine lusts yet to be born. The gold circles framing these moments give these a contemplative religious quality.

**Samuel Hodge's** *Untitled* (2014/2015) plays with the transgressive desires of Jean Genet, a fetishistic interest in 'bad boys,' in this instance baring the physical marks of brawling but holding their heads high and

shoulders back, there is something of the aggressive, powerful stance of boxers at play rather than victims. The fragmentation of the image disavows ready identification and suspends meaning, creating multiple images of unleashed desire. This repetition and manipulation of gaze and desire is echoed in *Untitled for BUTT* (2013/2015), which sees the cock, already the subject of the image, doubled and repeated. Playing on those familiar pleasures of identical and non-identical repetition associated with fantasy. These are moments that echo even within its own difference. But Hodge's work also turns to documentation, with images essaying ongoing concerns and activities, whether watching a porn shoot or surveying the morning after litter and post fucking detritus.

The uncensored and affirmative gaze of sexual desire dances through Linsey Gosper's *Boy* (2015). In the black and white photograph the youth stands both cocksure in his masculinity – his tongue pushed firmly against his cheek – yet paradoxically his nudity renders him open and even vulnerable to the photographer's camera. Gosper's position as an older woman photographing a younger man reverses the assumptions commonly associated with the classic active / passive, male / female, photographer / model relations, creating an image in which her own female power as a photographer and a woman is echoed by the subject. This female gaze takes on a critical and humorous form in her collage of boys sitting, uncomfortably perched so that their pricks hang visible, cock and balls exposed, these found images play on an absurdity of desire that mirrors the variety of poses undertaken by females to expose their cunts for cameras.

Female desire also plays in **Ruby Knight's** series of black and white illustrations (2015), which foreground and showcase women's pleasures, desires and fantasies, whether solo or with a partner. These pictures – populated by figures that recall both those from Otto Dix's illustrations and underground comics – offer a mirror onto numerous aspects of sexuality. The drawings emphasising the gestures and faces of the protagonists caught up in their own fucking, lusts and loves. The starkness of the lines and whiteness of the paper creating black and white images that retain a sense of documentation even as they collapse literal naturalistic representation.

One of Australia's best-known pop artists, **Richard Larter's** work frequently depicted sex during a time when artistic censorship was rife. The quartet of works included in *SEX* showcase his explorations of sex manifested through collage and drawings. The most powerful of these depicts a woman, legs spread, sitting on a toilet. On one level a gleeful transgression combining sex and (potentially) the process of pissing, here the bedroom replaced by the toilet (the angle of the walls suggest a purpose built toilet cubicle rather than a bathroom). The explicit nature of the gaze, the essentially forbidden location, the unashamed celebration of desire, this, then, is art that explores sex.

## THE STAIN OF SEX

From near universal experience: real sex stains sheets, soaks panties, and leaves its genetic and fluid traces on jeans and dresses. Sex, **Bobby Harrington** observes, is wet. Bodies are sweaty, sticky, wet, always just below the surface veneer. In Harrington's *Fluid 1 - 3* (2015) the artist explores these notions of the moist, wet, sticky, juicy and fluid. These are moments during which the body reveals and unleashes its liquids. Frequently linked to the abject, these fluids are denied by mainstream cultures' too safe, too cold, too dry depictions of sexuality. However the viscosity of the fluids from both our and our lovers' bodies invariably fascinate us, *Fluid 3* plays with this fascination with an exquisite sensuality, the dribbling fluids suggest motion and action here, rather than post-coital closure. With their faded palette and delicate tones, these three pictures create a sexual energy through their explorations of the abject subject matter, away from the harsh-tones of commercial pornography they instead speak to a more personal sexual aesthetic that escapes gloss and replaces it with an organic desire.

Finally in Gosper and Sargeant's *Spermogram* series (2015) representation is no longer necessary, the photographic image is pure chemistry: cum sprayed across sheets of carefully positioned and rapidly printed photographic paper. Like the money shot in pornographic film, a moment that demarks authenticity that exceeds literal representation.

© Jack Sargeant for Sex, August 2015.

Image credit: Linsey Gosper & Jack Sargeant, *Spermogram (semen on gelatin silver paper)* 2015

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