

PLAYBOY

MAY/JUNE 2017

INSIDE THE MANSION WITH

Brook Power

PLAYMATE OF THE YEAR

Meet the New Creatives • The Interview: Vox.com Founder Ezra Klein • The United States of Nudity • MDMA's Long, Strange Trip • 20Q: Kumail Nanjiani • New Fiction by Dennis Lehane • Previously Unseen Andy Warhol Originals



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PLAYBILL

Melissa Seley

This Los Angeles-based writer had never pined for body ink before profiling Scott Campbell, the fine artist and tattoo guru who has fun with our Rabbit logo and a Playmate in this issue. "His advice not to overthink it shifted the tides," says Seley. "Now, if the impulse ever strikes, I'm going to follow my gut and walk right into his shop."



Christopher von Steinbach

It's fitting that von Steinbach shot our *Musings* pictorial: We may have helped kick-start his career. "My first exposure to women and photography was when I was younger, via my late granddad's 1980s and 1990s *PLAYBOYS*," he says. And since he'd worked with model Sera Mann before, the creative chemistry was on point. "She's a joy to be around."



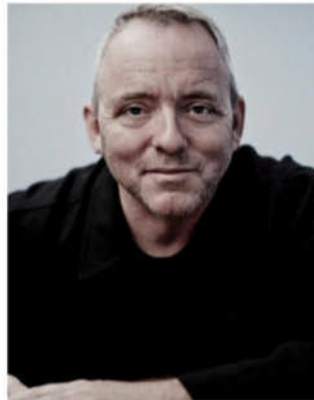
Leah Sottile

After covering right-wing extremists, furies and Juggalo wrestlers, Portland native Sottile wasn't expecting the indie pornographers she profiles in *Porn to the People* to surprise her. "I thought I was writing about just another weird subculture," the *Washington Post* contributor says. "I didn't think they'd change me as a person."



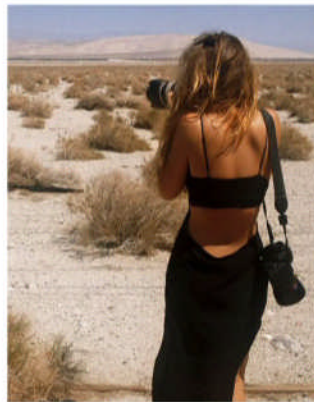
Ryan Lowry

Who better to take on our *New Creatives* feature than Lowry, who shot *The Renegades* for our October 2016 issue? This time around, the photographer captured his subjects in their respective creative spaces, even snapping away as feminist artist Natalie White posed topless with an American flag on Wall Street.



Dennis Lehane

Lehane is the man behind some of our era's most masterful psychological thrillers, including *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River*. In *The Sparrow*, an exclusive excerpt from his latest novel, the *New York Times* best-selling author tells the tale of a journalist who must decide whom to trust when an old acquaintance unexpectedly appears.



Jennifer Stenglein

The Australia-born *Vogue* fashion and portrait photographer brings a raw, youthful vibrancy to our pictorial with model Jessi M'Bengue. (You'll recognize Jessi from Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" video.) Set in a Beverly Hills backyard, *Court and Spark* demonstrates Stenglein's keen sense for natural light and beauty.

Seven McDonald

The drug known as molly no longer hides in the dark recesses of dance clubs. In *MDMA's Long, Strange Trip*, McDonald gives us a firsthand account of drug-assisted psychotherapy. The activist and former *L.A. Weekly* writer uncovers why veterans and survivors of abuse are swearing by the substance as an alternative cure for PTSD.



Matthew Sharpe

In *Monsters*, Sharpe explores what happens after an NFL player morphs suddenly from football star to despised vagrant living secretly in a woman's home. Original fiction from the author of *You Were Wrong*, it's a short story as dark as a hidey-hole and more moving than a winning Hal Mary pass.



CREDITS: Cover and pp. 48–59 model Brook Power for Next Model Management, photography by David Bellemere, styling by Tara Williams for Lang Management, hair by Teddy Charles for the Wall Group, makeup by Jo Baker for Forward Artists. Photography by: p. 6 courtesy Ryan Lowry, courtesy Seven McDonald, courtesy Melissa Seley, courtesy Matthew Sharpe, courtesy Leah Sottile, courtesy Jennifer Stenglein, courtesy Christopher von Steinbach, Maarten de Boer/Getty Images; p. 14 Gavin Bond; p. 16 Jason Lee Parry; p. 20 courtesy Amazon Studios, courtesy Nina Daniele, courtesy New Citizen LLC/Empire, Mathew Imaging; p. 21 courtesy Gunpowder & Sky, courtesy Playboy Archives, Ann Johansson/Corbis via Getty Images, Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for Dior Beauty, Evan Woods; p. 22 Filip Milenkovic, Evan Woods; p. 24 courtesy Scott Campbell; p. 26 courtesy Scott Campbell; p. 27 courtesy Scott Campbell (2), Chris J. Ratcliffe/Getty Images; p. 29 Violaine Martin/courtesy UN Geneva, Steve Korn; p. 30 Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images; p. 35 courtesy Elizabeth Yuko, Norbert Probst/imageBROKER/Alamy Stock Photo, Xinhua/Alamy Stock Photo (3); p. 103 courtesy CJ Hardin, Brett Flashnick; p. 151 courtesy Hump! Film Festival; p. 152 courtesy Hump! Film Festival (2); p. 153 courtesy Hump! Film Festival, Kelly O and Scrappers; p. 154 courtesy Amory Jane; pp. 164–180 all images courtesy Playboy Archives. Pp. 78–82 *The Sparrow* excerpted with permission from *Since We Fell*, © 2017 by Dennis Lehane. Pp. 70–77 styling by Eleanor Wells, hair and makeup by Matisse Andrews; pp. 84–98 model Lada Kravchenko for One Management, styling by Ali Malter Domurat for Kramer+Kramer Agency, hair by Michael Thomas Lollo, makeup by Raul Otero for ABTP; pp. 106–113 model Sera Mann for Freedom Models LA, wardrobe styling by Kelley Ash, hair and makeup by Debbie Gallagher for Opus Reps; pp. 114–117 grooming by Kim Verbeck for the Wall Group; pp. 118–127 model Jessi M'Bengue for Next Model Management, wardrobe styling by Kelley Ash, hair by Nikki Providence for Forward Artists, makeup by Natasha Severino for Forward Artists; pp. 134–148 model Elsie Hewitt, styling by Emma Cali for Bryan Bantry Agency, hair and makeup by Diane Dusting for No-Name Management; pp. 156–163 model Julia Almendra for Photogenics Media.

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ON THE COVER Playmate of the Year Brook Power, photographed by David Bellemere.



PLAYBOY

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A photograph of actor Rob Lowe sitting on a wooden director's chair on a film set. He is wearing a dark grey zip-up jacket and dark blue jeans. He is holding a white script or book in his lap. In the background, there is a yellow taxi cab, a camera dolly, and other film set equipment. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early evening.

ROB LOWE

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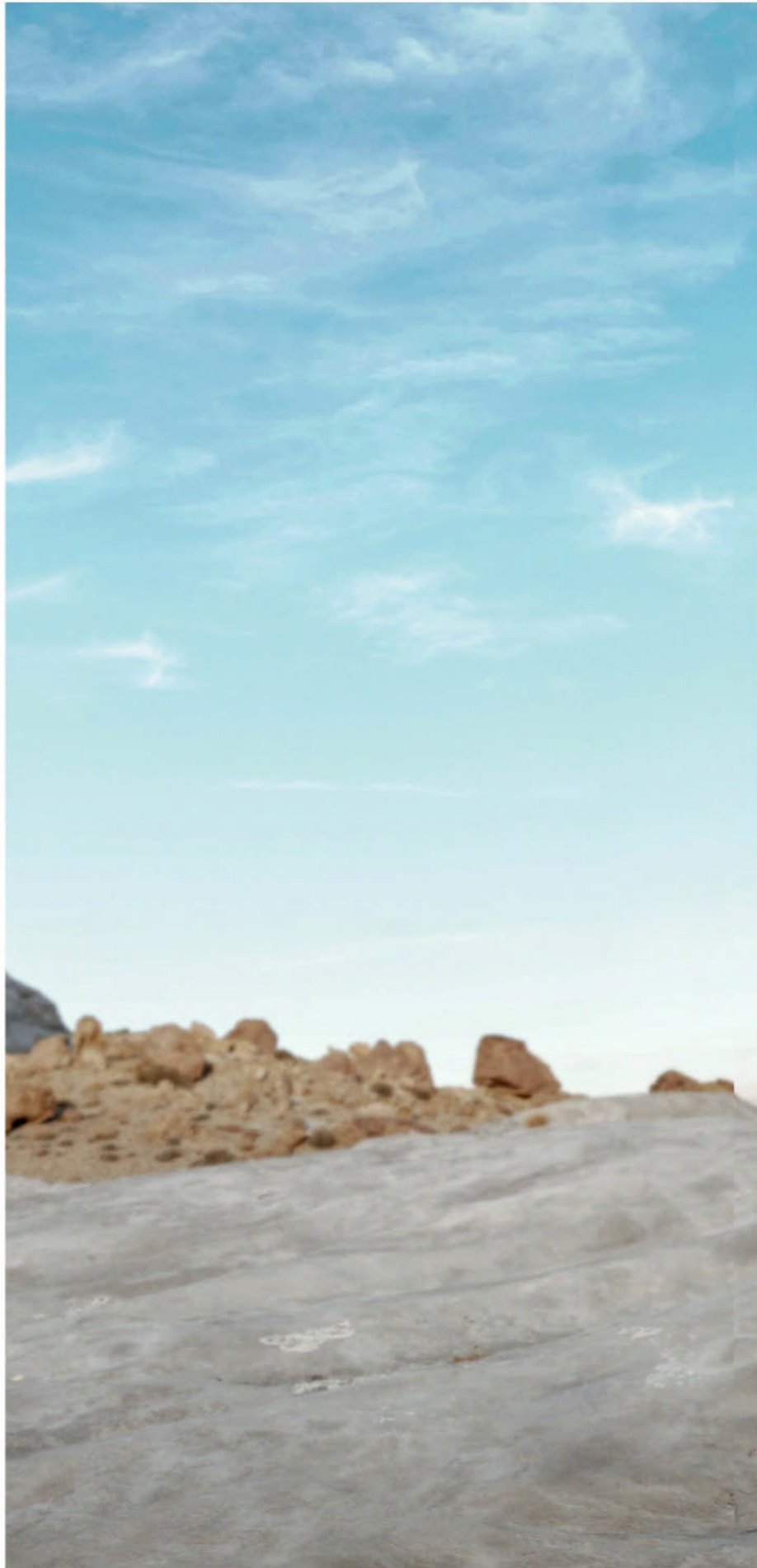
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Dear Playboy

BOY WONDER

Based on the *Advisor's* response (March/April), I would like to offer my own definition of *fuckboy*: someone whose immature behavior conveys that he values sex and not much else about his relations with women.

*Steven Rovnyak
Indianapolis, Indiana*

RABBIT, RABBIT

I'm a fan of cartoonist Arv Miller's first Rabbit (in a smoking jacket) in the December 1953 *PLAYBOY*, so when I opened the envelope for the January/February issue, I thought, Mr. Playboy is back! I would also note that your photos and articles have been getting better every month. Keep up the good work.

*Bill Martin Jr.
Ironwood, Michigan*

BEAUTY WITHOUT BORDERS

Regarding *The Beauties of Sinaloa* (December), I am of 50 percent Mexican descent, and my mother is from Sinaloa's neighboring state of Sonora. I can cite many more examples of Latin American women (Venezuelan, Colombian, Brazilian, Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican) who are just as lovely as the Sinaloan beauties and unfortunately have to deal with just as much violence and corruption in their respective countries.

*John Totten
Lomita, California*

BACK AT IT

A *PLAYBOY* subscriber since I was 20, I just celebrated my 60th birthday and have been scrolling through my March/April issue. Sign me up for another 40 years.

*David B. McCulloch
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

I'm a proud Bunny and Playmate (Chicago Playboy Bunny of the Year 1976 and December 1979 Playmate), and I want to congratulate Cooper Hefner and the team. I was highly critical of the non-nude position, but now, after seeing the March/April issue, I can relax knowing *PLAYBOY* is on the right track. The women are alluring and natural, and I also love

seeing the vintage Playmates. There's something for every fan. And my roller-skating photo with Hef (*World of Playboy*) is an added bonus! I have a long and proud history with *PLAYBOY* and have always championed Hef, the magazine and my decision to pose.

*Candace Collins Jordan
Chicago, Illinois*

I'm relieved to find that *PLAYBOY* has decided to reclaim its identity and profess that nudity is not a problem. We need more companies, brands and people to stand up and say, "Naked is normal."

*Brendon Snyder
New York, New York*

I've been reading *PLAYBOY* since the days when I would steal my older brother's copy. Hef is my hero not only for what he has done to open people's minds about so many issues but also his fortitude in fighting back when his adversaries came after him. And now I see that Cooper Hefner is putting his stamp on the magazine (*The Playboy Philosophy*, March/April). I'm proud of your focused efforts to protect all our rights, especially the First Amendment, as we again find ourselves in turbulent times.

*Bill Nunnelly
Nashville, Tennessee*

SEEING SCARLETT

Scarlett Johansson's comments on monogamy piqued my curiosity (*Playboy Interview*, March/April). I'm afraid she and I will have to agree to disagree—I can think of several bird and mammal species that mate for life. However, I enjoyed reading the rest of the interview. Johansson has championed good causes and is honest, down-to-earth, forthright and gutsy. These are good qualities, especially in a leader.

*Bob Losse Jr.
Eastampton, New Jersey*

Great interview with Scarlett Johansson. And I agree with Scarlett Byrne (*The Feminist Mystique*, March/April): Why hide a woman's breasts in a photograph?

*David Burroughs
Port Townsend, Washington*

In Scarlett Byrne's essay, she mentions that Cooper Hefner told her it would be controversial to put bare breasts on the cover. I believe *PLAYBOY* has done it before, albeit with plastic wrapping covering the image.

*Sean Gravel
Daytona Beach, Florida*
You are correct. In the early to mid-1970s we featured many topless covers. A couple



March Playmate Elizabeth Elam helps us proclaim that naked is indeed normal.



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DEAR PLAYBOY

of favorites from that era include the June 1970 cover with Playmate of the Year Claudia Jennings and the July 1974 cover, which features another modern-day phenomenon: the underboob. (See more on this revealing topic in our January/February 2017 issue.) It appears that we've always been provocative.

MISSED QUOTATIONS

In The Crown Prince of Hip-Hop (November), James Prince says, "These n****s awakened a sleeping giant. Do right by me and pay every penny due." He knows what he said, and your readers know what he said. Unfortunately, Prince chose to demean himself and the black race by using the word niggas. However, it does not make PLAYBOY racist to use that term in a quote from a black man. I challenge your editors to fully quote that word.

Michal Kowalski
Alexandria, Virginia

Although we chose to use asterisks in the large display type, you'll find we did not censor that same quote when it appears in the body of the story.

WE'RE GLOWING UP

I greatly enjoyed the November issue of PLAYBOY and would like to congratulate you on the beautiful and artful pictorial featuring Jasmine Villanueva (Day Glow). You have taken the magazine in a wonderful direction; the pictorials get better each month.

Frank Lazzerini
Barberton, Ohio

ONE LUCKY DOG

As a connoisseur of adorable dogs, I think you really missed a trick by not selling a poster or print of the awesome two-page spread featuring Kelly Gale and the happy pooch triumphantly sitting on her bum (Playmate, September). That is an image to bring a smile to the face of anyone with a soul, no matter how dark the day. Make this happen and take my money!

Jim Lancaster
Capon Bridge, West Virginia

We thought that Kelly's colorful PLAYBOY cover was equally appealing, so we turned it into a limited-edition T-shirt. Do yourself a favor and check out PlayboyShop.com for more products and exclusive releases. We'll be sure to pass along your compliments to Ziggy, the Star Dog.

NEW YEAR, MORE GEMS

February Playmate Joy Corrigan is beautiful from head to toe. There's no doubt in my mind that she will remain one of my favorite Playmates of all time.

Malcolm Pride
Knoxville, Tennessee

Please convey my admiration to January Playmate Bridget Malcolm, a multifaceted gem of a woman. The January/February issue



The talented Bridget Malcolm has us seeing double.

is worth the price of admission for her glamorous looks alone. What a talent and what beauty.

Gabriel Weinstock
Rochester, New York

TRICKY COVERS

One fun thing I've always liked about your magazine is looking for the Rabbit Head on the cover. However, even after scrutinizing the answer key (Dear Playboy, March/April), I still feel like a kid who has been stumped by an illusion. As hard as I try, I can't find the Rabbit. Help!

Rob Elford
London, Ontario

I just got my latest issue and couldn't be happier to see the return of Party Jokes (March/

April). However, I still miss the hidden Rabbit on the front cover.

Phillip M. Tilley
Billings, Montana

We hear you. We tested a few editors to see if they could spot the Rabbit without cheating, and alas, even a few of our staffers were stumped. Try looking at her tresses once more—we found it was easier to spot from afar. Hopefully this month's Cover Story, below, will be of more assistance.

Sorry to have to go on one more time about the bewitchingly beautiful November Playmate Ashley Smith (Cover, November), but am I seeing things? Was your art department trying to suggest Bunny ears of some sort with the central Y in the PLAYBOY logo behind her lovely head?

Irving B. Barrett
Newport, Rhode Island

Our art director says the placement was unintentional, but we're happy to have a reader with such a discerning eye.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

I would like to express my respect for the October issue. All the profiles (The Renegades) are commendable opportunities to shed light on the true stories that real people face today. Mavericks, heroes—these are people who live their values and are unapologetic about it. PLAYBOY is really redefining what it means to be sexy, and I am so proud to live in an age when a publication such as yours can use its voice to change the status quo.

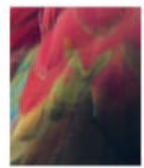
Brandon Killman
Brea, California

WE MESSED UP

Our March/April feature Van Jones: Real American Hero incorrectly identified Jana Jones as the daughter of Billy Carter. Jana was born in Palmyra, Pennsylvania and raised in La Verne, California.

COVER STORY

Birds of a feather flock together, especially the ones at home in the Mansion's private zoo. Our Rabbit has a bird's-eye view.



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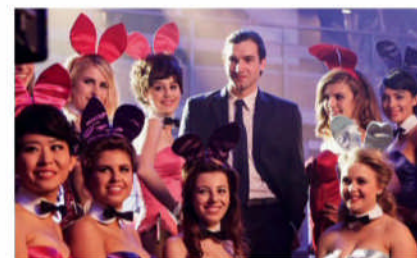
PLAYBOY JAZZ FEST KICKS OFF SUMMER CONCERT SEASON AT THE HOLLYWOOD BOWL

On June 10 and 11, the Playboy Jazz Festival returns for a two-day celebration of superb music and our long history of supporting performers—both in the pages of the magazine and on the stages of Playboy Clubs across the country. Headlined by rapper (and Oscar winner) Common and two-time Grammy winner Corinne Bailey Rae, this year's installment

also welcomes Gregory Porter, Marcus Miller and Lalah Hathaway, among others; George Lopez returns as MC. The festival is produced in association with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and held at the Hollywood Bowl, a historic venue that offers sweeping views of the Hollywood Hills. Tickets are on sale now for as little as \$23 at HollywoodBowl.com.

American Playboy's Big Premiere, from Chicago to SXSW

In April, the Amazon Prime original series *American Playboy: The Hugh Hefner Story* premiered on the streaming service after months of anticipation (Matt Whelan stars as Hef, below). Amazon Studios hosted an exclusive party at SXSW, and we celebrated the occasion with events at the Mansion and in the Windy City, the birthplace of Hef's empire. At the Chicago International Film Festival, Chief Creative Officer Cooper Hefner joined two of the series's executive producers on a panel to discuss the docudrama (which features original footage from Hef's personal archives) and how the magazine ignited a sexual revolution while propelling Hef into the spotlight as a civil rights activist and champion of free speech. Later, Cooper hosted a VIP screening in the Mansion's home theater, followed—in true Playboy fashion—by an afterparty with Playmates and Bunnies. To experience the Rabbit like never before, stream the 10-part series now on Amazon.



PLAYMATE NEWS

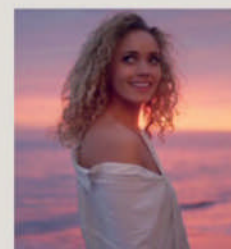
Nina Daniele Rocks a Bomber Jacket

• April 2017 Playmate Nina shows off her new limited-edition satin bomber jacket, designed with Chain Gang L.A., at Playboy HQ. You can order (and personalize) your own at PlayboyShop.com.



Allie Silva Lends a Helping Hand

• October 2016 Playmate Allie woos us as platinum-selling artist Mario's main squeeze in the video for his track "Let Me Help You." Check it out on YouTube. (There's a shower scene.)





PLAYBOY



Hef Honored for His Free-Speech Activism

This spring, Newseum, a Washington, D.C.-based museum that celebrates freedom of expression, bestowed on Hugh Hefner and his daughter, Christie Hefner, its 2017 Arts and Entertainment Award. Christie served as CEO of Playboy Enterprises from 1988 to 2008; Hef, of course, has been the magazine's editor-in-chief since he founded it in 1953. Newseum's Free Expression Awards "recognize those who exhibit passion for and dedication to free expression" and who "have been censored or punished by authorities for their work or have pushed boundaries in artistic and media expression." Notably, Hef was arrested and charged with "publishing and distributing an obscene magazine" in 1963. (The case was later declared a mistrial.) Newseum honored Hef and Christie alongside Apple CEO Tim Cook, ABC News's Martha Raddatz and U.S. Representative John Lewis.

PLAYBOY'S HIDDEN ARCADE DEBUTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Virtual reality and augmented reality may be revolutionizing the way we play video games, but we still have a soft spot for the era when brick-and-mortar arcades offered a more social gaming experience. That's why we debuted our Hidden Arcade event series in Los Angeles back in March (below). Now, we're

taking the party nationwide. A 1980s-inspired pop-up arcade featuring live music, Bunnies, cocktails and classic games including *Donkey Kong* and *Ms. Pac-Man* will make stops in San Francisco, New York City and elsewhere. To find out when this button-mashing bash visits your city, head to Hop.Playboy.com.



Camille Rowe Gets Toxic

• Dior tapped April 2016 Playmate Camille, who proudly calls herself a "nasty woman," as the face of its Poison Girl campaign, complete with an über-sexy one-minute short. Watch it on Vimeo.



Dree Hemingway Has a Bad Trip

• March 2016 Playmate Dree stars opposite *Get Out*'s Keith Stanfield in the indie thriller *Live Cargo*, about a couple who crosses paths with a human trafficker in the Bahamas.





**NEW BUNNIES
GALLERIES DAILY**

• Faith Picozzi
poses for photographer
Filip Milenkovic.



PHOTO BY FILIP MILENKOVIC

**BONUS MAGAZINE
CONTENT**

- Join Cooper Hefner on a virtual-reality tour of the Mansion.
- Kumail Nanjiani nails our 20Q lightning round.
- May Playmate Lada Kravchenko takes you behind the scenes.
- Extended interviews with our New Creatives.

**ORIGINAL VIDEO
SERIES**

- Learn simple, classic

cocktail recipes with *Drinking Decoded*.

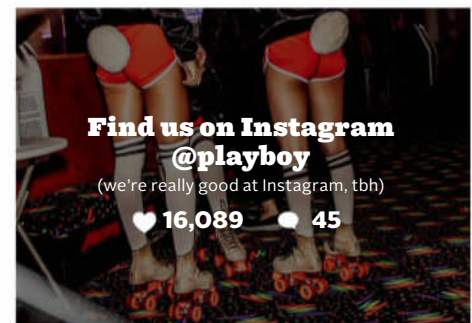
- Get up-close coverage of Playboy events, from midnight roller discos to hidden arcades.

**THE BEST OF OUR
ARCHIVES**

- Revisit our 1986 20Q with Koko the gorilla, who's still kicking at 45.
- We've unearthed the one woman who drove Donald Trump truly mad: power broker Leona Helmsley.

**CULTURE,
POLITICS & MORE**

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"Love and respect is every day. Don't need a day for women to sexually service and serve steak to men. My partner and I cook for each other—and please each other mutually."

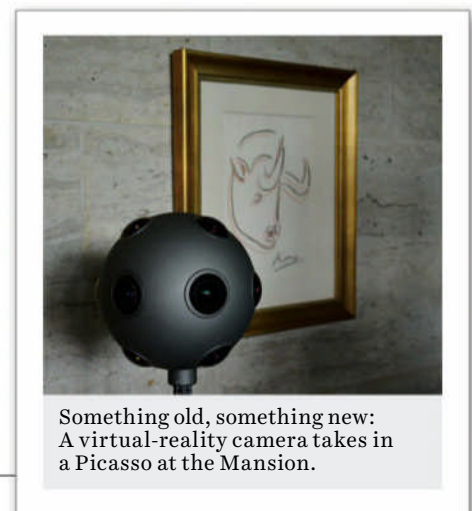
—comment on *Steak and BJ Day Grosses Me Out—and I'm a Dude*

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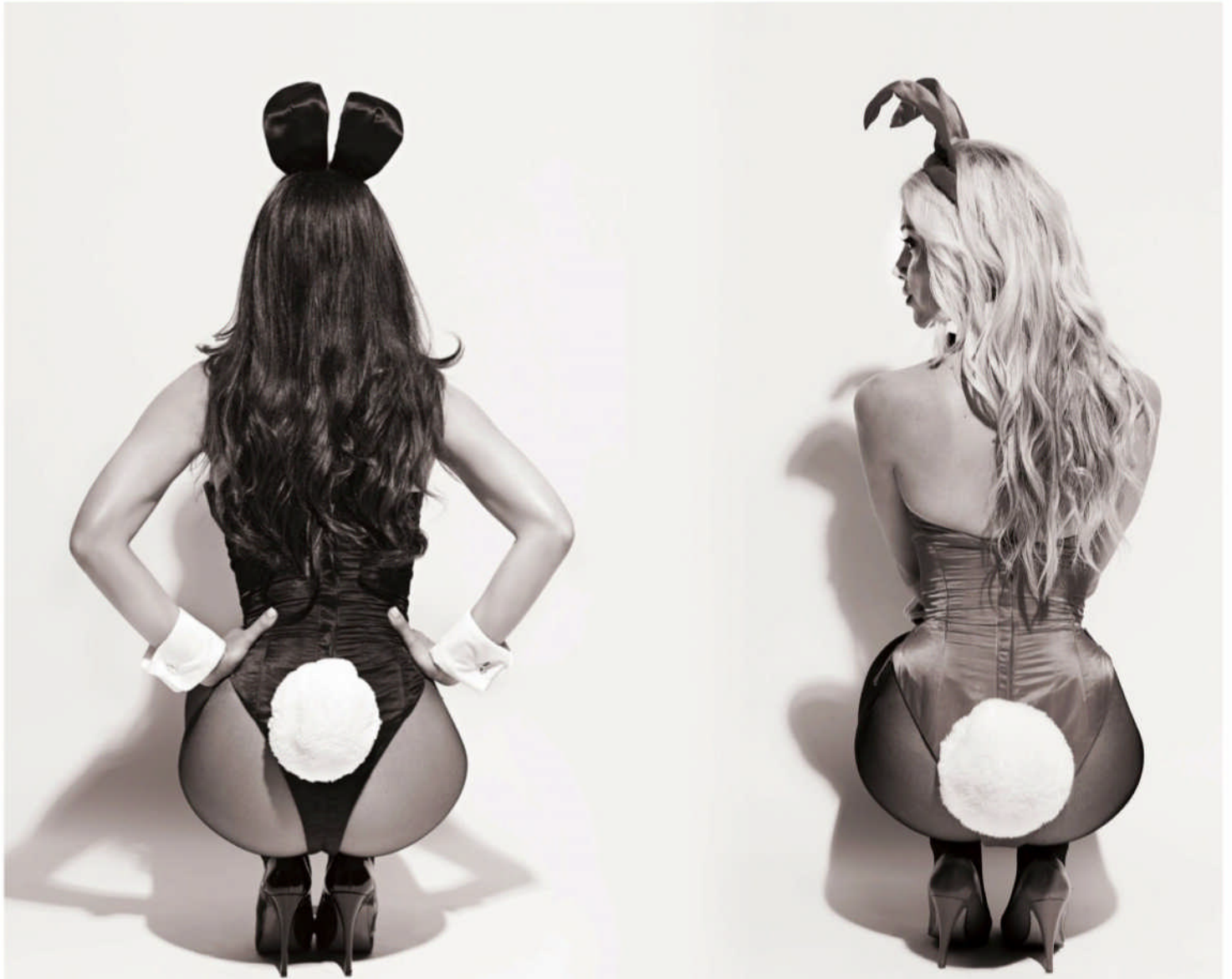
"A lot of people do things at 26 for idealistic reasons that don't turn out the way they anticipated. Stop beating yourself up. You've got a lot of years to read, think and engage in action. Move on, and I wish you the best."

—comment on *Abandoned by Both Sides, a Secret Society of Trump Regretters Begins to Build*

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Something old, something new: A virtual-reality camera takes in a Picasso at the Mansion.



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ART

SCOTT CAMPBELL

He has inked A-list celebrities and carved sculptures out of legal tender; now the artist (with help from a Playmate) takes on the Rabbit

Scott Campbell, fine artist and bicoastal tattoo purveyor, has always had a thing for skulls. He would carve them into school desks as a kid growing up outside New Orleans, where, he says, “artsy fartsy was not honored, and it was all about who could catch the biggest bass.” He got a skull tattoo on his leg at a grimy parlor in Houston when he was 16 years old—the first of dozens that now festoon his body like graffiti on the walls of CBGB. As a tattoo artist, Campbell has inked skulls, as well as innumerable other designs, into the hides of clients ranging from truckers to surfers to celebrities such as Johnny Depp, Jennifer Aniston, Marc Jacobs, Courtney Love, Heath Ledger, Penélope Cruz and Lake Bell, Campbell’s wife.

As a fine artist, he has carved three-dimensional skulls out of stacks of dollar bills, etched delicate skulls inside ostrich-egg shells and inked skulls onto patches of pigskin he suspends inside watertight frames filled with

BY **MELISSA SELEY**

preservatives. These pieces regularly appear in international galleries including Moran Bondaroff (formerly OHWOW) and Deitch Projects. For *Whole Glory*, an ongoing participatory exhibition he likens to a palm reading, Campbell inks tattoos—including skulls wearing top hats, biting down on roses, sporting headbands—onto the arms of anonymous strangers who blindly stick their fists through a hole in a fence, on the other side of which sits Campbell like Oz behind the curtain.

Then there are the skulls he draws in permanent ink on his two-year-old daughter, Nova, before she heads to school—skulls and starfish, garbage trucks, cars, rainbows. And there is the ominous beaded steer skull that towers above his desk in the downtown Los Angeles art studio where he works when he isn’t inking clients at the newly opened “secret” outpost (entered through the back door of a Shinola store) of his legendary Brooklyn tattoo studio, Saved.

When pressed, Campbell traces his cranial fixation to the ancient artistic tradition of skulls as symbols of the fleeting nature of life. But he’s quick to add that tattooing “serves a primal need people have always had to define themselves,” offering a sense of control amid chaos—in the throes of love or grief or heartbreak. So what was the import of that inaugural Houston tattoo? Campbell attributes it to an adolescent desire to make independent decisions, before adding, hesitantly, that his mother, Maggie Campbell, had just died after battling cancer for eight years. “She really normalized the whole cancer thing and death,” he



PHOTOGRAPH BY GAVIN BOND

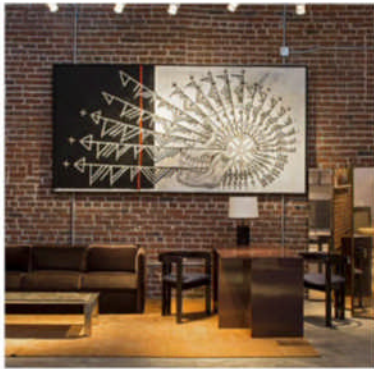








ART



Clockwise from top left: Campbell's L.A. studio; from *As It Pleased the Lord*; a participant in *Whole Glory*. Opposite: from *Always Almost There*. Previous spread, left: from *Applied Poetry*.

says. During medical treatments, she would let Campbell and his sister mount one of her wigs on a remote-control car and use it to chase the family dog around the house. If she needed her son's help with injections, "she'd draw a smiley face on her butt, and I'd stick the needle in."

Maggie's free-spirited ethos is evident in Campbell's claim that the biggest mistake first-time tattoo clients make is overthinking it. "Whatever you're feeling when you get the tattoo is what you're going to see for the rest of your life," he says. "If you're feeling stressed about it, that's what you're going to see. Keep it light and spontaneous." What about those diehard romantics who ask for the cliché of a sweetheart's name? Campbell says he never cautions against the decision, as is standard tattoo-artist practice. "If you're going to fall in love, I don't think you should hold back or second-guess yourself. Go all-in."

As his cross-country courtship of Lake Bell suggests, Campbell tends to live up to his own ideal of romantic spontaneity. When the two met in 2011 on the set of Bell's HBO show, *How to Make It in America*, she was living in L.A. and he in Brooklyn. "I knew she was my one

shot at healthy domesticity," Campbell says. Undaunted by distance, "I got to fall in love with her the way I wanted—making her things and writing letters. Once I mailed her a tiny, ring-size box. A tag on top read, 'This is....' Inside, a really thin paper unfolded into a giant poster that said '...a love letter.'"

When the chance arrived to ply his trade on a Playmate, Campbell's sly wit and eye for iconography again came to the fore. Taking inspiration from a 1968 PLAYBOY cover that features a bathing suit cut into the shape of the Rabbit Head, he opted to illustrate the immortal silhouette entirely out of tattoo roses—a double homage to Mr. Playboy and to classic flash art, and the perfect complement to March 2017 Playmate Elizabeth Elam's natural beauty.

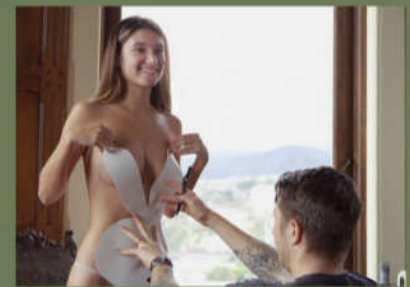
So how does an artist go from skulls to our Rabbit's famous visage? To hear Campbell tell it, the two aren't as different as they may seem. "When I was younger, the skull was this rebellious mantra," he says, "this little punk rock symbol of pushing against what was around me. Now it's become an old friend. It makes everything seem a little less severe and a little more lighthearted." ■

LIFE
ANIMATES ART

A step-by-step look at how Scott Campbell creates a seamless, sensual union between PLAYBOY iconography and the female form

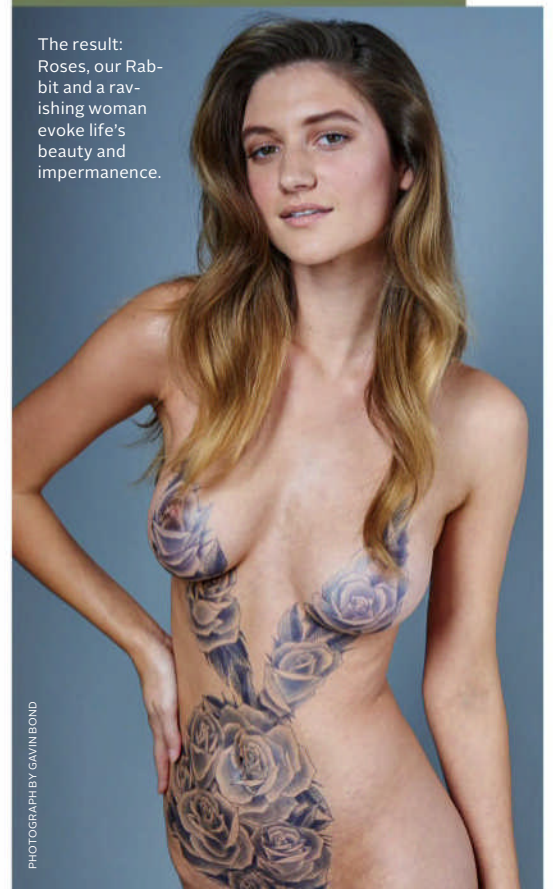


Campbell keeps it old-school as he makes the pattern.



He applies the design to Playmate Elizabeth Elam, who's happy to lend a hand (or two).

The result: Roses, our Rabbit and a ravishing woman evoke life's beauty and impermanence.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GAVIN BOND



A NEW DAY

for the World's Oldest Profession

The effort to legitimize consensual prostitution is stronger than ever. Why, then, is it still so divisive, even in the most progressive circles?

When Eileen, a former prostitute, was working the streets of Seattle, she dressed more like a mall rat than a sex kitten: jeans, a T-shirt, Chuck Taylors. She chose this look not to attract a certain type of customer, or even to make her days of wandering the streets more comfortable.

"I didn't wear high heels or a negligee," she says, "so I could run from the cops."

Now 53, Eileen (who asked that we withhold her last name) is a social worker. Thinking back

BY **JESSICA P. OGILVIE**

on her time in the sex industry, she's emphatic in her belief that she would have been safer if her work hadn't been criminalized. In addition to worrying about the police, she was harassed by clients, robbed of her few belongings and unable to access health care for fear of being stigmatized or reported. And too often, law enforcement did worse than make arrests.

"I've had cops tell me that if you do this or that"—i.e., perform sexual favors—"they'll let

you go. It happens every day. There's probably some woman getting shook down while we're having this conversation."

For centuries, law enforcement, government and religious organizations have criminalized prostitution and other forms of sex work. But the oldest profession in the world doesn't seem to be going anywhere, and according to both sex workers and a range of experts, keeping it illegal serves only to endanger those engaged in the practice. That's why, in August 2015, Amnesty

ILLUSTRATION BY JUN CEN



CULTURE

International—one of the largest human rights organizations in the world—announced it would join the effort to decriminalize sex work.

In May 2016, the group released its official policy paper on the issue. The 17-page document states that continuing to treat sex work as a crime infringes on the human rights of consenting adults. It recommends repealing laws that penalize sex workers, educating law enforcement on how to protect sex workers and providing health care that's free of stigma and discrimination.

Patricia Schulz, a United Nations gender-equality expert who sits on the organization's Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, lays out the cost of ignoring those recommendations.

"When prostitution is criminalized, sex workers risk being abused," she says. "They risk being manipulated. They risk being forced to have sex with police workers. If they're brought to detention, they might be raped by other inmates. They might be raped by other workers. There's a whole series of violations of their rights arising from the situation."

This insight comes after years of hearing from sex workers in many countries, studying the issue and, she says, "traveling a long way" from her initial view on the matter.

"When there's no penalty, it means sex workers can have an apartment; they can have an alarm system, a guard to make sure nothing happens," she says. "From a pragmatic position, there's no benefit of criminalizing the activity."

Schulz's line of thinking, however, has some surprising detractors. Amnesty International's 2015 announcement was met with a Change.org petition signed by, among others, Lena Dunham, Meryl Streep, Kate Winslet and Emma Thompson, asking the organization to reevaluate its position. The petition states that "the sex industry is predicated on dehumanization, degradation and gender violence." It calls prostitution "a harmful practice steeped in gender and economic inequalities."

In January, a dispute erupted among organizers of the Women's March on Washington over the inclusion of sex workers' rights in their official platform. Reportedly intended to embrace



Left: U.N. gender-equality expert Patricia Schulz. Right: Sex Workers Outreach Project head Savannah Sly.

all groups marginalized under the new presidential administration, the platform initially included the phrase "we stand in solidarity with sex workers' rights movements." Then, on January 17, reporters covering the march discovered that the phrase had been quietly removed. Following an uproar on social media, it was put back in and currently reads "we stand in full solidarity with the sex workers' rights movement."

March organizers made no formal statement about the removal or reinstatement other than to tweet the phrase in question on January 19 with the hashtags #WhyIMarch and #WomensMarch; they did not respond to PLAYBOY's request for comment. But the surrounding controversy indicates that even among highly progressive women advocating for their own bodily autonomy, sex work is still a lightning rod.

Savannah Sly, president of the U.S.-based Sex Workers Outreach Project, has worked for more than a decade in the sex industry. She argues that those who oppose her profession, while perhaps well-intentioned, disregard the basic rights of sex workers to do their jobs and do them safely.

"God forbid something does happen and I'm assaulted or robbed," she says. "I am an outlaw."

• • •

Opposition to prostitution is as old as prostitution itself. As far back as the year 596, the king of the area now known as France and Spain declared that sex workers should be flogged and

banished. Sex work has been frowned upon in the United States since the Pilgrims first set up shop in New England, and by the early 1900s, prostitution was officially criminalized in most U.S. states.

"There was such social stigma to it," says Melinda Chateauvert, author of *Sex Workers Unite*. "Prostitutes were considered to be ruined."

In recent decades, things have changed. Measures introduced by lawmakers that are based on morality alone—think opposition to marriage equality—tend to face a steeper battle in the court of public opinion than legislation with an eye toward, say, protecting vulnerable members of society. In response, the movement to shut down the sex industry hasn't died; instead, it has grown more subtle offshoots whose rhetoric often conflates all prostitution with sex trafficking.

"Before, sex workers were seen as dirty whores," says Sly. "Now, these women are victims who need to be rescued."

One of the largest antiprostitution outfits is the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, a New York-based nonprofit founded in 1988. CATW's goal, according to its website, is to "end human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children worldwide." The group asserts that all sex workers need saving, regardless of how or why they engage in their work. A 2011 paper published on its website claims, "Prostitution is a sexually exploitive, often violent economic option." (CATW declined to be interviewed for this article, stating, "Please don't take this personally, but we don't interview with PLAYBOY or any other pornographic magazine as a matter of policy.")

"IF WOMEN CAN MAKE THESE CHOICES FOR THEMSELVES, MEN NO LONGER CONTROL THE WORLD."



CULTURE

The basis of this position—that all sex workers are victims—makes no distinction between consenting adults and underage or otherwise vulnerable people who are forced into sexual labor. Amnesty International states clearly and repeatedly throughout its 2016 policy paper that the two are not interchangeable: “Forced labor and human trafficking...constitute serious human rights abuses and must be criminalized.... Human trafficking, including into the sex sector, is not the same as sex work.”

Schulz clarifies the point further: “The notion of selling sex services is really within the context of a decision made by two adults who negotiate a certain price for certain acts. If a person is being trafficked and is obliged to perform sex acts, it’s a form of rape.”

• • •

The stigma that all sex workers are damaged, traumatized or victimized spills over into the lives of those engaged even in legal work, with very real and serious consequences.

Porn actress Bonnie Rotten—in 2014, at the age of 20, she became the second-youngest woman to win the AVN Award for female performer of the year—encountered this problem while trying to report a sexual assault to police. Several years ago, she discovered she had been raped in a particularly gut-wrenching way: Her attacker filmed it and posted the video on the internet. She says the man drugged her before assaulting her. “I didn’t really know what happened until the video came out,” she says.

Rotten hired a lawyer, but by that point she had already become famous for her work in pornography. When she went to the police, they recognized her. “They acted like I was a scumbag for trying to do something about it,” she says. She eventually settled two years later, succeeding in having the video of her rape taken offline. But the ordeal wasn’t without trauma.

“It’s very hard for any of us to go to the police when this stuff comes up,” she says. “The legal system doesn’t look at us as an equal in the community. It’s like, ‘You guys agreed to this by spreading your legs once on camera. How are we supposed to differentiate?’”

Nowhere in this discussion is anyone making the argument that all sex workers love their jobs. Some women (and men—sex workers are predominantly, though by no means exclusively, female) enter the field because of financial problems, a lack of educational opportunities or a dearth of other job prospects. What makes sex work stand out from other



Marchers at 2014’s International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, a global event since 2003.

lines of employment, though, is that while plenty of people don’t like what they do for a living, few industries inspire the formation of nonprofits intent on outlawing them.

With that in mind, it’s hard to accept that much of the antiprostitution platform isn’t built on the same puritanical values that inspired the criminalization of prostitution. Sex work, after all, touches on some uncomfortable truths about sexual desire—truths that perhaps not everyone wants to acknowledge.

“There is a difficulty in accepting that if there are prostitutes, there are clients,” says Schulz. “It’s not very comfortable for many women to ask themselves whether their partner goes to see other women, and if so, what does he do that he doesn’t do with them?”

But sex work’s threat—or its power, depending on how you look at it—runs even deeper than that. Emboldened sex workers represent a significant challenge to the current balance of power between men and women. If women are legally able to capitalize on their sexuality and the female body is no longer controlled by male-dominated governments, power will shift. The sex industry will go from a buyer’s market, if you will, to a seller’s.

“If women can make these choices for themselves,” says Chateauvert, “men no longer control the world.”

• • •

Amnesty International’s position remains unchanged. “The policy is still as it stood last year,” says a spokesperson for the organization, and it “will guide all future actions we take on this front.”

But the battle for sex workers’ rights is still an uphill one. In April 2016, France enacted

legislation modeled on a Swedish law that criminalizes buying, rather than selling, sex; though well-intentioned, it effectively stigmatizes and pushes sex work further underground. Stateside, an August 2016 Department of Justice investigation of the Baltimore Police Department found that some officers had targeted “people involved in the sex trade...to coerce sexual favors from them.” Similar acts were discovered during a scandal involving the Oakland Police Department and an underage prostitute in June of the same year.

Lawmakers seem to be aware of the problem but unable to find solutions. A bill that California legislators introduced last year would have allowed individual police officers to decide whether to send prostitutes to jail or offer them counseling, advancing the assumption that they need either mental health care or a prison cell instead of access to the same support systems as other workers in the state.

It took Schulz a while to come around to Amnesty International’s point of view, but after learning about the experiences of sex workers around the world—from Kenya to Thailand to the U.K. to Canada—the choice became clear.

“This is my personal view,” she says. “You can’t on the one hand say that every woman has the right to decide whether or not to have children, to decide about the spacing of the birth of their children, to decide on an abortion, and on the other hand say that no woman can decide for herself to engage in whichever activity she decides to engage in. There is an element of autonomy that I have recognized. Who am I to say this is a choice they should not have?” ■



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SEX

THE UNITED STATES OF

Nudity

You've got to love a country that prohibits the sale of breast-themed pillows on one hand and sanctions liquor-drenched live sex shows on the other. Here in America, our wild pioneer spirit continues to clash with our Puritan paranoia; we've lurched into a 21st century that offers unlimited hardcore pornography at our fingertips but by and large grants only one sex the right to go shirtless in public, and with movements such as #FreeTheNipple making their way into the national discussion, it's a good time to get the lay of the land. Here, then, is a map of the totally schizophrenic, often inspiring and always entertaining laws governing how, when and where we can be naked in America.

PORTLAND, OR

NUDES AGAINST THE MACHINE

Public nudity is illegal, but courts have made exceptions for naked protestors.

OREGON

STRIP-CLUB PARADISE

Oregon has the most liberal strip-club laws in the country, allowing alcohol, fully nude performers and live sex shows.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

OF ALL PLACES

A law banning public nudity went into effect in 2013, at a time of soaring real-estate prices. Coincidence?

BAKERSFIELD, CA

WAIT—BOOBIE PILLOWS?

An ordinance states that "no vendor shall vend stuffed articles depicting the female breasts (sold as 'boobie pillows') within one thousand (1,000) feet of any county highway."

SPANISH FORK, UT

BE ADVISED

A sign at Diamond Fork hot springs warns, "Although nudity is not prohibited on Forest Service land, discretion is advised." Yes, and try not to think about snakes.

CALIFORNIA

LEGAL NAKED HIKING

In 2006, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department wrote a letter to a California attorney stating that "simply hiking in the forest, in the nude, is not a violation of the law."

GARDEN GROVE, CA

CURSE THIS STIFLING LINGERIE

In 2011, Garden Grove was home to lingerie coffeehouses whose waitresses worked in the buff—until the city voted unanimously to shut them down.

HAWAII

MARRIED AND NUDE

The law explicitly (get it?) states that public indecency is illegal if the parties involved are not married. Otherwise, game on.

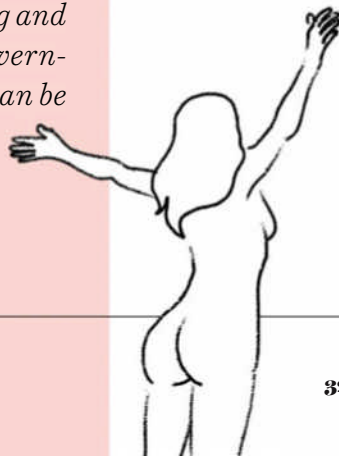


ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT HARKNESS

WILLIAMS COUNTY, ND

FEAR OF MILK

Dancers have been asked to cover their nipples with a nonporous material to ensure against unwanted lactation dripping onto clients. Lest you find this unreasonable, dancers' areolae may remain exposed.

MANY STATES

PUBLIC PISSER = SEX OFFENDER?

In at least 12 states you can be put on the sex-offender list for peeing in public. There must be a Starbucks around here somewhere.

CAMBRIDGE, MA

FREEDOM TO DANCE NAKED

Nude dancing is protected under the First Amendment except when "imposed on an unsuspecting or unwilling audience." God bless America!

FLINT, MI
ILLEGAL BUTT CLEAVAGE

In 2008, a Flint police chief decreed that sagging was a form of indecent exposure.

OHIO
ILLEGAL UNDERBOOB

The state forbids showing a "female breast with less than a full, opaque covering of any portion thereof below the top of the nipple."

IOWA

MANDATORY THONGS

There are no legal all-nude establishments in the entire state. Thank God for the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

CHICAGO, IL
PRIVATES IN PRIVATE

Here and elsewhere, nudity in the privacy of your home can be illegal if you intentionally put on a show for unwitting passersby.

KENTUCKY
BIKINI BODYGUARDS

Until 1975, appearing on the highway in bathing garb without an escort was a crime for women—unless they were armed with clubs.

SEMINOLE COUNTY, FL
HIGHBROW NUDITY

Women must wear pasties and G-strings onstage unless they're involved in a "bona fide" theatrical production—a definition three strippers tested in 1999 by mounting a nude production of *Macbeth*.

HARRIS COUNTY, TX

STRIPPER NAME TAGS

Licensed sex-oriented business workers "shall wear a clearly visible badge issued by the Sheriff." Where?

LOUISIANA
NO SEXY STREAKING

You will be fined for appearing naked in public "with the intent of arousing sexual desire."

TAMPA, FL
"TOPLESS" WITH A TOP ON

Women must cover up "while performing customary 'barroom' type of nude dancing commonly referred to as 'topless' and/or 'bottomless' dancing." So...no topless "topless" dancing? Go figure.

NY, OH, ME, TX, HI

NIPPLE FREEDOM!

Each of these states has laws that expressly allow women to go topless in any location where men can do so legally. May their example light the way.



LIFESTYLE

Whenever we see someone smoking a cigar, we know it's not just an indulgence; it's a symbol. But of what? Traditionally, the cigar has been cultural shorthand for sex, power, wealth and

BY **ELIZABETH YUKO**

American masculinity. But throw in blurred gender lines, an increas-

ingly health-obsessed society and the crosswinds of legalization, and things get more complicated.

Although they had been in the United States since long before the country itself existed, cigars really took off after the Civil War (thank you, Ulysses S. Grant) and hit their peak at the turn of the 20th century. They remained popular until President John F. Kennedy imposed an embargo on Cuba in 1962—the day after he had his press secretary scour Washington, D.C. for 1,000 H. Upmann Cuban cigars.

As American mores loosened up, the gendered component of cigars became inescapable. Unlike cigarettes, cigars were never successfully marketed to or adopted by women. To this day, women are rarely shown smoking cigars, and when they are, they're portrayed as unfeminine—except for the effortlessly cool bombshells who can hang with the guys. Picture *Seinfeld's* Elaine Benes blowing smoke with her feet propped up on her editor's desk, or Dita Von Teese posing as a classic Hollywood pinup seductively holding a cigar.

Of course, cigars are undeniably phallic, which is only reinforced by the image of a bunch of guys man-spreading around a smoky lounge full of dark wood and leather furniture, puffing away without a woman in sight. Other times it's more literal: Cigars play a supporting role in the Starr Report, which details sexual encounters between President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. In one such instance, a cigar literally subs for a penis—which, as we learned, does not meet the Clintonian definition of sexual relations.

Today, with legalized marijuana getting all the attention, weed cigars have come along to appease those who want the classiness of a cigar as well as the heady benefits of cannabis. And with President Barack Obama's 2016 lifting of the Cuba embargo, it's possible we're about to witness a cigar renaissance—one that eschews macho symbolism and leans toward the small batch, the handmade, the simple reconnection with pure pleasure. Meanwhile, as long as there are weddings, newborns and NBA championships to celebrate, cigars aren't going away anytime soon.

ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTIN METZ



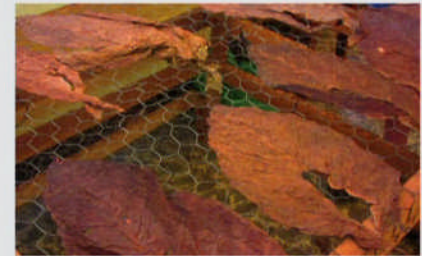
Is the *Cigar* Burning Out?

From legalization to a lifted embargo, it's reinvention time for the age-old symbol of manhood

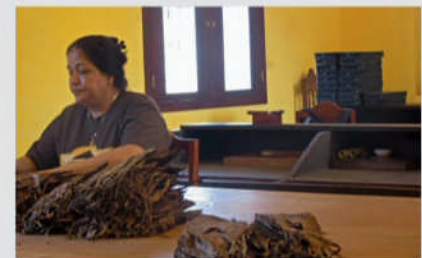


Learn How to Roll Your Own

I recently visited the Mombacho cigar factory in Granada, Nicaragua. The business operates out of a Spanish colonial mansion built in 1925 by Mario Favilli. There, a small staff produces more than 1,000 cigars each day.



Each room has a specific purpose. This one is dedicated to drying the tobacco leaves.



A Mombacho employee sorts leaves according to their quality.



The rolled and pressed cigars are stored in rooms with strictly controlled temperature and humidity.

TOUR THESE CIGAR FACTORIES

TABACALERA DE GARCÍA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Take a look behind the scenes at the largest handmade-cigar facility in the world, where visitors learn about the entire process—from the properties of the tobacco leaves to the quirks of the final product.

REAL FÁBRICA DE TABACOS PARTAGÁS, CUBA

Visit one of Cuba's most famous cigar factories (pictured below), dating back to 1845. Partagás spans five floors in a historic and architecturally stunning building in Old Havana.



LA CORONA, CUBA

Not only can you tour this massive multistory operation, but visitors are encouraged to ask questions and interact with employees.

TABACALERA SANTIAGO, NICARAGUA

One of several cigar factories in Nicaragua owned by Cubans who escaped during the revolution, Santiago offers free tours and puffs of the merchandise along the way.

ON SITE CIGARS, UNITED STATES

Visitors to this Miami institution get the full sensory experience, starting with Cuban coffee and concluding with a complimentary cigar, Cuban soft drinks and traditional *pastelitos* and *croquetas*.

J.C. NEWMAN CIGAR COMPANY, UNITED STATES

The last remaining cigar factory in Tampa's Ybor City area houses a museum of cigar history. Brands produced here include Diamond Crown, Brick House and El Baton.

THE CIGAR'S SMOKE-SHROUDED JOURNEY THROUGH THE MILLENNIA

THE PREHISTORY

A ceramic pot that dates back to 10th century Guatemala is decorated with an image of a Mayan smoking a cigar.

THE VOYAGE

Christopher Columbus catches wind of cigars and ushers them from the New World to Europe, where they proliferate.

THE SPREAD

By the mid-19th century, more than 300 million cigars have been smoked in the U.S., becoming incredibly popular during the Civil War.

THE LEVELING

Marlene Dietrich coolly puffs a stogie in Orson Welles's 1958 noir classic *Touch of Evil*, striking a blow for the female smoker.

THE EMBARGO

President John F. Kennedy, himself an enthusiast, imposes the 1962 embargo on Cuba, marking the cigar's decline in the U.S.

THE RETURN

In 2016 the Obama administration lifts decades-long restrictions, permitting U.S. travelers to bring back unlimited cigars from Cuba.

Playboy Advisor

Columnist Bridget Phetasy on cheating with camgirls. Plus, advice for a guy obsessed with manscaping and a lesson for all in upping your game between the sheets



Q: *I'm in an exclusive relationship. Would it be considered cheating if I paid to watch a camgirl when my girlfriend isn't around? Essentially, I see it as being the same as watching porn by myself—and that's definitely not cheating, in my opinion. But I've heard differing opinions when it comes to interacting with camgirls.—E.C., Chandler, Arizona*

A: If I had a dollar for every time someone asked me “Is X considered cheating?” in the digital era, I'd be J.K. Rowling rich.



Honestly, it doesn't matter what you think "in your opinion." It's her opinion that counts. If you feel you need to hide your desire for something you do when she's not around, that's a strong sign she won't be cool with it. What's considered "cheating" should always be defined by the couple, not by the individuals, so you need to discuss this with your partner. Camgirls differ from porn in many respects, but mainly, the level of interaction and intimacy, especially if you pay for a private performance, is different from that of adult videos. In terms of the access you get when you buy a private show, the camgirl experience can feel more like being in a strip club. For many women, that's not okay, but some are cool with it. It all depends on the boundaries you set together. If you haven't had the talk, I suggest you get to communicating. And finally, know that camboys have their own thriving industry, so if you spend time with a camgirl, permit your girlfriend the same freedom.

Q: *I've been dating someone long-distance for almost a year. He lives in Chicago; I live in Los Angeles, and we see each other about twice a month. He recently made the decision to move to L.A. "for us," as he puts it. Now the conversation has shifted toward whether we should live together when he arrives or each have our own place while he acclimates to a new city. I think he should rent a one-bedroom that I can move into down the road; he wants to live together right away. Thoughts?*—S.M., Los Angeles, California

A: Whether you realize it or not, your answer is in your question. You already know what you want to do, and my thought is that you need to honor that instinct and insist on living separately when he first arrives so he can establish his own life in L.A. Otherwise you may end up feeling suffocated or realize you aren't ready for the responsibility and restrictions of cohabiting with someone who's fresh off the boat and suddenly dependent on you. To go from seeing each other twice a month to living together is a pretty drastic change. You're right to want to see how the relationship progresses once you're both in the same town. Sometimes, a long-distance arrangement is the perfect solution for those of us who, because of our work, are too busy to devote the proper attention to a full-time partner but still want intimacy and love.

Your boyfriend also needs to make sure his decision isn't all about you and that he has other interests to pursue in L.A. in the unfortunate event that things don't work out. Putting that kind of pressure on a relationship is almost always a recipe for resentment and hurt.

It generally doesn't end well when someone makes a huge life change—like moving from one city to another—"for us" instead of "for me," because the person making the change comes with expectations that are often too lofty for his or her significant other to live up to. I've lived in L.A. for a decade, and nine times out of 10, when someone moves here for a partner, it ends in disaster. (Apologies for the ice-cold dose of reality.) I suggest you have a heart-to-heart. Hopefully he'll understand that you're also only trying to do what's best "for us" in the long run.

Q: *I recently started taking Zoloft and have noticed a huge decline in my libido, which my doctor warned is a side effect for new users. The last time I had sex, I couldn't finish. Afterward, I was conflicted about saving myself from embarrassment by telling her the truth—thereby admitting to someone I don't know very well that I've been depressed—or just passing it off as nerves. If it happens again, should I tell my sex partner the truth or just swallow my pride?*—J.R., Akron, Ohio

A: If it happens again with a stranger, just swallow your pride. You aren't obligated to tell every one-night stand that you're on antidepressants. If it happens again with the same woman, however, tell her the truth. Personally, I'd rather know your "nerves" are due to SSRI-induced erectile dysfunction as opposed to free-floating performance anxiety. Women worry about pleasing their man just as much as men should worry about pleasing a woman. If you can't finish, most women will wonder if it's because of them. (I know I would.) But if I'm aware you're on Zoloft, I won't take it personally.

Q: *I have a phobia of body hair, both on my partners and on myself, that has made dating difficult. Most women will remove all their body hair once our relationship starts. But I need to remove all of mine below my neck, and the women I've dated find this weird. Have you ever met another guy like me? Is it wrong to expect a woman to understand my preference?*—C.H., Peachtree City, Georgia

A: To answer your first question: No, I've never met a man with that phobia. I wish. They've all been hairy motherfuckers. It sounds like *chaetophobia* (fear of hair) to me, but I'm not licensed to diagnose you; it's above my pay grade. My suggestion is to see a therapist who can help you get to the root of your phobia. You can't expect a woman to understand something you don't comprehend yourself. The better you can articulate the reasons for your preference, the more likely you'll be able to find a woman who will empathize.

Q: *When it comes to sex, a lot of women say they want an experienced lover. But what constitutes an experienced lover, and how can I become one if women won't give me a shot?*—L.S., Seattle, Washington

A: Ah yes, an age-old catch-22. There's no way to learn how to drive a car other than by driving a car. An experienced lover could be someone who has driven a lot of cars in varying conditions or someone who has driven one car they know really well. But first you have to get that permit, right? The key to becoming an experienced lover is finding a woman you trust and with whom you can explore the boundaries of your sexuality—and hers.

First things first: Be realistic. Are you pursuing the right women, or are you fixating on ones who are out of your league? Are you attracted to narcissistic attention whores and ignoring sweet women who show interest in you? I'm not saying abandon your standards, but when you're in the recon phase of the sexual wilderness, flirting with different shapes, sizes and colors of women who aren't necessarily your type can render a lot of valuable information about the opposite sex.

Second, stop acting like a victim. You aren't doing yourself any favors by thinking you're an amateur. Chemistry is what attracts a woman, but confidence is what keeps her attention. So fake it till you make it, baby, and educate yourself on female anatomy and psychology. Many adult sex shops offer classes loaded with tips and tricks for becoming a fantastic lover. You don't even need a partner to attend.

If revisiting sex ed is too intimidating, the internet can help. For example, the website OMGYes.com has turned vaginal stimulation into a game. YouTube has given a young generation of "sexperts" a platform for video tutorials on everything from online dating to cunnilingus to BDSM. Knowledge is power. Just as you should read up on the rules of the road before getting behind the wheel, learning some how-tos will give you an advantage many men don't have.

Finally, most women aren't looking for a porn star in bed. I know a lot of men who have plenty of notches on their belt but are selfish assholes who suck in the sack. We're looking for a man who's interested in what makes us tick. There's no magic formula that works on every woman. Instead, we're attracted to those determined to find the perfect combination of licking and flicking that makes our clit swell and our eyes roll to the back of our heads, the man who can make us orgasm because he knows our bodies intimately. And that, my friend, requires no experience—just attentiveness and curiosity.

Questions? E-mail advisor@playboy.com.

ILLUSTRATION BY ZOHAR LAZAR

A man with short brown hair and blue eyes is sitting on a wooden chair, leaning forward. He is wearing a dark blue pinstriped suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a dark tie. He is also wearing patterned socks with black, white, and grey designs. The background is a plain, light grey wall. The text "CHANGE YOUR UNDERWEAR." is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

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PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: EZRA KLEIN

A candid conversation with the Vox.com founder and former Washington Post Wonkblogger about fighting fake news, shunning social media and taking on Trump

Whatever the issue of the day is, Ezra Klein has an explanation. Since founding the news and opinion site Vox.com just three years ago, Klein has turned the concept of “explanatory journalism” into a winning formula in a media industry often reported to be #failing. Driving the success is Klein’s coveted audience: Vox’s articles, how-tos, videos, podcasts and content collections (known as “card stacks”) draw more millennials than free wi-fi at a Grumpy Cat convention. The website’s slick and addictive explainer videos—everything from *How Steve Bannon Sees the World to Here’s What Happens to Your Knuckles When You Crack Them*—have been viewed nearly 400 million times on YouTube alone.

At 32, Klein is just old enough to remember life before the internet, and he got into journalism when news organizations were still mostly setting aside *This Day in History*-type drivel “for online.” Born and raised in Irvine, California, where his father was a mathematician and his mother an artist, Klein, who

studied politics at the University of California, Santa Cruz and UCLA, didn’t really find his footing until he moved east and became a full-time wonk. He briefly interned on Howard Dean’s presidential campaign in 2003 and, the following year, ran a blog—still called a “weblog” back then—from the Democratic National Convention.

With a mind for large numbers and an ability to write fluently and fast on many topics, Klein was hired by *The Washington Post* in 2009 and soon gained a following with his intelligent, nuanced posts on Obama-era politics for Wonkblog, which he launched in 2011. When he left to start his own news operation in 2014, Klein was one of the country’s top political commentators—at least among those who appreciate five-alarm coverage of the ever-hardening right. Typical Vox video headline: THE REPUBLICAN HEALTH CARE BILL MAKES NO SENSE.

Today at Vox.com—part of the billion-dollar Vox Media empire, which also encompasses

Curbed, Eater, SB Nation, the Verge, Recode and other brands—Klein oversees roughly 100 employees on a site that garners 175 million monthly content views and nearly 70 million average monthly video views and is one of the 10 fastest-growing general-news properties. Vox regularly surpasses top-tier competitors such as Politico, the Atlantic and CNN Politics in audience size, often outdoes Vice on video views even though Vice is much bigger, and is constantly popping open new media portals, whether it’s live conferences, podcasts or special Snapchat editions and Instagram stories. If you’ve scrolled through Facebook in recent months, you’ve no doubt seen a Vox video—*Kellyanne Conway’s Interview Tricks, Explained* was a popular one—even if you didn’t notice the little Vox logo.

What’s impressive about Klein isn’t that he finds ways to capture clicks; it’s that he brings audiences in so deep. His weekly podcast conversations on both *The Weeds* and *The Ezra Klein Show* demonstrate a level of curiosity



“You need to figure out the truth and not get distracted by the lies. Donald Trump wants a fight with the media. What he does not want is the media reporting on his administration.”



“The constant diet of social media is like dumping toxins into your veins. I don’t know how long people will voluntarily expose themselves to things that make them feel so bad.”



“I think it’s fascinating to know how David Blaine barfs frogs. Are you not interested in how David Blaine barfs frogs? I’m not condescending or elitist about which stories to do.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK DAVIS



and an emotional openness that are rare in our ADHD era. Klein spoke for more than an hour with author Ta-Nehisi Coates about Obama, atheism and becoming the guy “white people read to show they know something.” *The 4-Hour Workweek* author Tim Ferriss held forth for nearly two hours on psychedelics and why he “fills his home with reminders of his eventual death.” Bill Gates talked to Klein about robots. In every encounter, Klein is as interested as he is interesting: He runs Vox as the site’s editor in chief but distrusts social media; he’s an entrepreneur who doesn’t like managing people; he’s a wunderkind who once had a 2.2 GPA.

Contributing writer **David Hochman**, who last interviewed Billy Bob Thornton for **PLAYBOY**, visited Klein at Vox’s hivelike, open-plan D.C. headquarters, not far from the White House. (Klein lives in the Adams Morgan neighborhood with his wife, Annie Lowrey, who writes for *The Atlantic*, and their two dogs.) “Klein comes off as slightly awkward at first,” says Hochman, who describes him as “antsy and good-looking in a Clark-Kent-searching-for-a-phone-booth sort of way.” But once he gets past the small talk, the charming brainiac emerges. “Whether he’s talking about the perils of American isolationism or the future of porn, Klein is formidably smart and endlessly provocative. A few minutes in, you want him to explain everything to you.”

PLAYBOY: Distrust in the media is at an all-time high. The White House dismisses the press as the opposition party and purveyors of fake news. Explain how the media can get its groove back.

KLEIN: I think the media actually has a lot of mojo right now. Vox and many of our colleagues elsewhere are doing incredible work. Never before in my lifetime have people been as focused as they are now on what is being reported in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* and on CNN. It’s clear what the media’s role is in a democracy, and I think as an institution the media is living up to it.

So many folks in the media now are worth reading and watching, all across the spectrum. I make it a point to read people on the right like David Frum, Ross Douthat and David Brooks. You have political reporters like Molly Ball, who is doing fantastic work. We’re seeing writers on the left and right push for a broader way of thinking. Yes, there’s an acute problem for local news and smaller newspapers, but with national and international news the situation has never been better. For those of us who enjoy swimming in those informational waters, there’s a lot to be grateful for right now.

PLAYBOY: It’s not easy, though.

KLEIN: It’s not easy, but it’s never dull.

PLAYBOY: What’s the best way to deal with an administration that lies all the time?

KLEIN: You need to figure out the truth and not get distracted by the lies. Donald Trump wants a fight with the media. What he does not want is the media reporting on his administration. The fight between Trump and the media is like a WWE fight. In some ways, that’s good for the media. It drives eyeballs. It drives subscriptions. It drives a backlash among people who don’t like Trump. But it can distract from the work of actually figuring out what’s in Trump’s policies, what’s in his regulations, who he’s appointing to key offices. What is going on in his White House? Every day that the conversation is about the media versus Trump is a day that it’s not about Trump and what he’s doing.

It’s easy to get overwhelmed with the amount

If the fucking baby boomers hadn’t lit everything on fire, maybe we’d have the luxury of apathy.

of news coming at everyone right now. A lot of traditional media is not built to promote understanding; it’s built to offer new pieces of information. But the benefit of the internet and digital media is the ability to put things into a visual context. Vox has found a foothold in bringing to bear a body of knowledge, as well as context, reporting and research, so people leave a story feeling like experts themselves. That makes them better able to understand all the new information that comes out around a story. Our task is to present whatever we create in a way that’s interesting, appealing and clear. **PLAYBOY:** One of Vox’s most viewed videos is a five-minute deep dive on the Syrian war. Sounds like a bit of a hard sell.

KLEIN: Yes, and it’s been watched 50 million or 60 million times. It’s a huge hit. If you take important things and make them vivid and understandable and go into them in depth, people feel they comprehend these topics. The audience responds.

The biggest mistake we make in the media is worrying our audience will think a topic is boring or too complicated and so we don’t put the time into presenting it clearly. If there’s one thing I’ve learned at Vox, it is to never underestimate the audience. People think the Syrian war is too depressing? That’s bullshit. Our audience cares about it and wants to know more.

PLAYBOY: So it’s a myth that millennials are apathetic and care only about selfies and Kardashians?

KLEIN: Well, speaking as a millennial [laughs], I can say that no one thing defines us all. It’s a large group. I find that kind of exoticization very strange, and I don’t like it. Millennials are incredibly engaged. If the fucking baby boomers hadn’t lit everything on fire, maybe we’d have the luxury of apathy. But now we have to figure out where we’re heading.

From what I see over and over again at Vox and before that at Wonkblog, the media is just wrong about what millennials and news consumers in general are interested in. People didn’t think writing about policy would be a great traffic strategy. It turns out it is, and not because it’s some kind of cynical ploy but because people want to know more—even those people between the ages of 18 and 35.

PLAYBOY: Who could have predicted the popularity of long-form podcasts, for instance?

KLEIN: I definitely felt a craving to go deeper, especially in politics. Most interviews with political figures are garbage. They’re too fast, they’re obvious, they’re shallow. In a long-form podcast, you get to stretch out and get inside someone’s head. I’ve become a fan of the format.

PLAYBOY: Which ones do you love?

KLEIN: I love *The Tim Ferriss Show*, *You Made It Weird* with Pete Holmes, Marc Maron’s *WTF*, *The Joe Rogan Experience*. It was clear to me that bringing some of that flavor and those techniques into my world would lead to some interesting places.

PLAYBOY: You have had Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, among many other guests, on *The Ezra Klein Show* in the past year. Who were your personal favorites?

KLEIN: I did one with Senator Cory Booker that I really love. I love how open he was about the spiritual foundations of his politics and the way that influences his thinking. A lot of politicians speak the language of religion and spirituality without appearing to be informed by them in a deep way. With Cory you can see him struggling in real time with questions of how to be a good person and how to be a moral politician and what his duty is in the world, given the particular set of gifts, responsibilities and powers he has. That’s really interesting.



Ta-Nehisi Coates is another extraordinary guy. I've known him for a long time and I don't think there's anybody in the game right now better at conveying his intellectual journey than he is. It's one reason people respond to his work so much. He tells you how he learns and he lets you come with him. That's different from presenting yourself as the expert. He's not coming out and saying, "I already know this and now I'm going to teach it to you."

PLAYBOY: It's interesting you say that, since Vox is all about explaining things to people. One of the criticisms of your organization is that Vox is premised on the idea that experts have the answers and we as the audience need help understanding the facts. Isn't that just pushing an opinion, and one that tends to come, in your case, with a liberal slant?

KLEIN: I think people have a confused way of thinking about this. I've worked at *The Washington Post*, and a lot of my best friends are journalists, but I don't believe straight news is straight. Which story you choose to do, who you choose to quote, the order you choose to put the paragraphs in—journalists leave the reader with the ideas they want the reader left with. At Vox I try to make sure we are transparent about what we learned, how we learned it, who we talked to and what we found. Then you can decide if you agree with us. By the end of a Vox article, you should have all the information to take whatever opinion you want. Even if you end up here and I end up there, we both learned a lot along the way.

I don't see that as being opinionated. Part of our relationship with the audience is saying, "You hired us to do this job, to find out the answer, and here's what we found. Maybe you don't agree with it. Maybe you go a different way, but we did our best." We have to do the reporting, and that creates a product that's both useful and trustworthy, even if the truth feels slippery these days.

PLAYBOY: Since the election, conspiracy theories have shifted from conservatives digging up things on Hillary Clinton's e-mails to progressives obsessing over Donald Trump's scandals and corruption. What's your political paranoia level these days?

KLEIN: I must admit, I am in general not a conspiracy theorist, but I feel Trump is doing his damndest to turn me into one. This administration sure seems to be covering a lot up and willing to take a lot of damage to not reveal what it is they're covering up. When you watch that happen over and over again on the tax returns or on the Russia stuff, at some point you're not a conspiracy theorist to think there's something concerning in there. They could easily say, "This is clearly all bullshit.

Let's just appoint a prosecutor and get it out there. Let's move on." But that's not the case. Even on the tax returns, how hard would it be to say, "Okay, we gave the returns to an independent group. They looked at them. Everything's fine." It makes you suspicious.

PLAYBOY: And why don't people care?

KLEIN: I think people do care.

PLAYBOY: Not enough to be storming the gates at the White House. I walked by this morning, and there was one homeless vet in a wheelchair with a sign that said *NEED WEED MONEY*. That was it.

KLEIN: I think about this in two ways. First, don't underestimate how unprecedented the political mobilization has been so far in the Trump era. There have been a ton of protests—in some cases the biggest single-day coordinated protests ever. Compared with a typical honeymoon run for a first-term president,

What keeps me up at night is the question "What does Donald Trump's version of the Patriot Act look like?"

people absolutely care. They're showing up at Republican town halls, they're organizing, they're flooding congressional phone banks, they're out there with pink pussy hats.

PLAYBOY: David Brooks calls it a lot of liberal feel-goodism.

KLEIN: That's just not the case. Being politically active is not feel-goodism. If nothing else, it's a powerful message that dissent will be a constant part of this era in American politics, as it should be of every era in American politics, as the Tea Party was to Obama—though I don't think Obama had quite the same tendencies to delegitimize as Trump does. Organizing is powerful, and a lot of that organizing is now turning its attention to members of the House and the Senate. They listen, they're accountable, and they come up for reelection. Every voting member of the House is up for reelection in 2018, and the groundswell against Trump is already influencing the choices those legislators are making.

At the same time, caring can be binary. Either you're uninterested or you need to literally be dodging snipers on the White House lawn. People care, but they have lives. When you leave this interview you'll probably go home, not throw rocks over the White House gate. People cared enough to vote against this guy—not enough people in the places where it counted but enough to have him lose the popular vote pretty decisively. We haven't yet seen what protests can do.

PLAYBOY: Do you ever worry about being a journalist in these polarized times?

KLEIN: I do. All the time. I think things could go in very dark directions.

PLAYBOY: You're scaring me a little.

KLEIN: The president has a lot of power and a lot of information, and a president who wanted to use that power and information for vengeance, if he had control of the bureaucracy and the bureaucracy was willing to do what he wanted, could do tremendous damage. Trump also has a mob-incitement dimension to him. I think a lot about when Trump was told that two of his supporters had been accused of beating up a homeless Hispanic man because "Donald Trump was right; all these illegals need to be deported." Trump's response was shocking. He said, "I will say that people who are following me are very passionate." He has talked at his rallies about paying the legal fees of anybody who punches a protestor. He has a comfort with violence from his crowds, and that is scary. Ninety-five to one it's all fine, but low-probability things do happen.

I worry about a world where Trump has spent two or three years being frustrated by his own incompetence, by Congress, by the media, by the courts, by America's political institutions, by public opinion. If some kind of terrorist attack or moment of opportunity happens, he can all of a sudden make a lot of change. If you ask what keeps me up at night, lately it's the question "What does Donald Trump's version of the Patriot Act look like?"

PLAYBOY: What would you ask Trump in an interview?

KLEIN: I've thought a lot about how to interview Trump. I don't think he gets asked enough basic questions on how he does things and what he wants to do. He's difficult because he doesn't care about having good answers to those. But I'd keep the focus on some simple, straightforward questions: How does his tax plan work? How does his health care plan work? I think people get bored by that stuff, so they don't ask.

PLAYBOY: I think Trump gets bored by that stuff.

KLEIN: Maybe so. In general there's a premium in political interviewing on asking



questions that sound tough but are actually easy. The hard-hitting question on the controversy of the day is the question politicians are always prepared for. The question they're not prepared for is the open-ended query about how some basic part of American public policy works and what they think about it.

PLAYBOY: You mentioned getting inside people's heads. What's going on inside Trump's?

KLEIN: Tough one. Trump is extraordinarily talented in some very specific ways and also extraordinarily limited. I've rarely seen quite the combination he presents. He's a great entertainer with an instinct for navigating the American psyche. He's masterful. You can't look away from Trump. He is the best showman we've seen in a long time. But what you cannot underestimate is that he has no shame. Shame powerfully restrains many of us, but for him it's okay to get tons of negative press or have elders of his own party say he's destroying our democracy. That should make him feel bad. We're all social animals. Even politicians we think of as craven and cynical do things to avoid shaming themselves. With Trump, having zero shame gives him this range of motion nobody else has. He's willing to withstand any backlash as long as he's getting attention. Nothing fazes him. The flip side of that is he doesn't learn from his mistakes. He doesn't try to become better.

PLAYBOY: Have you not heard the phrase *Make America great again*?

KLEIN: I guess you could say Trump is ambitious but not aspirational. President Obama would say things like "You made me a better man," "Michelle has made me a better husband," "My daughters have made me a better father," or at the end, to the American people, "You made me a better president." Obama was constantly trying to be better.

PLAYBOY: That's standard political rhetoric.

KLEIN: Plenty of people on all sides of the political spectrum do it. Plenty of people are dedicated to their own personal improvement. George W. Bush's rhetoric was largely about being a better person, more compassionate, more humble. Trump doesn't think like that. Instead, he walls himself off from information that's negative to him. I think that's an important part of who he is. It's why he watches Fox News. It's why he pays attention to CNN and the *Times* and other mainstream sources but gets angry only about what they're not covering.

PLAYBOY: Incidentally, who else would you like on your podcast?

KLEIN: I want Joe Biden at some point. I think he would be 120 minutes of excellent tape. I'd like to do a really good interview with Robert Putnam, the Harvard political scientist,

who I think is brilliant. I wanted to do the one I did this February for a long time: Yuval Noah Harari, the author of *Sapiens*, on the rise of humankind. I want to interview Sonia Sotomayor. The Supreme Court justices are hard to get, but they read us. We've actually been cited in some of their decisions. I have a long list. I'm working on U.S. Representative John Lewis. There are a bunch of interesting Republican senators right now. Outside politics, Neil Gaiman is always fascinating. Oh, and Steve Bannon, of course.

PLAYBOY: Bannon is having a big year.

KLEIN: Bannon is someone who, like him or hate him, has a structured worldview and a pretty idiosyncratic one at that. When he's given speeches and gone off script, his ideology is interesting and worth understanding. I disagree with parts of it pretty profoundly, but he's having a lot of influence on the president, so I'd want to draw out as much of that as I could.

I graduated high school with a 2.2 GPA. I failed a bunch of classes. I was like the math-for-jocks poster boy.

PLAYBOY: Can we talk about you for a moment?

KLEIN: If we must.

PLAYBOY: I've heard you say you were overweight when you were growing up. You weren't popular with the girls?

KLEIN: Or the boys.

PLAYBOY: You seem quite well-adjusted now. What shifted?

KLEIN: It took me a long time to figure out social activities. I sometimes felt like a Martian who had to decode the language. I was a weird kid. I was argumentative. I was very overweight and dressed very badly. When I was 15 I weighed 50-ish pounds more than I do now, and I was a lot shorter then. It was a significant difference. I was insecure, and I didn't know what I was doing. I was desperate to be liked, but being a heavy kid with long hair who knows a lot of big words and keeps telling people they're wrong—it's not a recipe for popularity.

PLAYBOY: You did well in school, no doubt.

KLEIN: I did very badly, actually.

PLAYBOY: Is that like Gwyneth Paltrow saying she was the ugly duckling in high school?

KLEIN: No! I graduated high school with a 2.2 GPA. I failed a bunch of classes. I was like the math-for-jocks poster boy by the end of it.

PLAYBOY: Were you doing drugs or something?

KLEIN: It just took me a long time to figure out that I don't process information well auditorily. Even today as a reporter I can't call into a teleconference. I can't attend a talk and retain anything. I would go to class every day and just space. I have what you would now understand as a learning disability. It's funny: A therapist not that long ago said, "You have this myth about what happened to you in high school. Now we would just prescribe a bunch of Adderall and you'd go on your way." Instead, I just read a lot of comic books.

PLAYBOY: Who were your go-to superheroes?

KLEIN: I read a lot of *X-Men*. I read *Ghost Rider*. Adam Warlock was my favorite as a kid. As I've become an adult it's shocking to me to see how useful those stories are as allegories. Xenophobia, polarization, human rights—all those issues are in there. I didn't foresee that it would be worthwhile to know a whole lot about Wolverine and the Infinity Gauntlet as someone covering politics.

PLAYBOY: Did your family talk current events at the dinner table?

KLEIN: We got the *Los Angeles Times*, but we were not one of those news-junkie families. I only got into news after 9/11. I was in high school at the time. I remember I was in first period and saw the second plane crash. My brother gave me Noam Chomsky's book *9-11*, and I started arguing with my dad about the Afghanistan war. Then I found

Jack Germond's memoir *Fat Man in a Middle Seat*, about his time as a political journalist. We were in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was a moment when you realized that whether or not you were interested in world politics, world politics was interested in you.

PLAYBOY: You started blogging at 18. How are you different now?

KLEIN: I think I have a lot more humility. Look, when I was an 18-year-old blogger, nothing mattered. As a kid in college, writing for nobody, I didn't have the same weight on my shoulders. I'm humbled by how much I don't know and also by the fear of getting things wrong. My promise to my audience is that I'm not going to be wrong, or at least not factually wrong. I can be wrong in my predictions and extrapolations after doing my due diligence, but I need to get the facts right. People will let you know when you're wrong, and they don't like it. It betrays a trust.

PLAYBOY: Vox skews pretty far to the left.





How often do you talk to people who disagree with you?

KLEIN: Every day. I do much more reporting these days among Republicans than among Democrats. I like talking to people who disagree with me. It's interesting and informative. You can learn from people who agree with you, but you're not going to learn that much.

PLAYBOY: What underlies the tribal splits in America right now? We're divided into so many silos of thought and ideology.

KLEIN: We are polarized, but I think people miss something about polarization. It's not a measure of disagreement; it's a measure of how that disagreement is sorted. The fact that politics is more polarized now is a function of that disagreement being sorted by two parties that are then self-sorted by ideology.

PLAYBOY: So the divisions were always there and we just didn't recognize them?

KLEIN: Our differences used to be organized differently. Strom Thurmond was the second-most-conservative senator, but he started out as a Democrat. At that time, the most liberal senator was also a Democrat. We couldn't have that today with the lockstep, hyper-partisan way the parties work. Yes, if you go back 70 or 80 years you'll find huge fractures in our society. The United States wasn't united. We kept a stable political system for a long time based on white terrorism. We protected lynching for a lot of the mid-century period until politics calmed things down. You had a society that was in some ways on the verge of a crack-up.

But today we're seeing an ideological polarization of the parties that is a force multiplier for disagreement in the culture at large. Our party affiliation now falls in line with whatever we're angry about and whatever we believe. Politics takes on a much more important identity when that's the case. Democrats and Republicans had virtually the same views on the O.J. Simpson trial verdict and the Bernhard Goetz trial verdict. Now there are massive differences between the two parties on whether George Zimmerman was guilty or even whether *12 Years a Slave* should have won an Oscar. I don't think the country is more divided than it was, but those visions have been absorbed and sorted into two parties.

PLAYBOY: It doesn't take much of a spark to set a fire between the two sides these days.

KLEIN: That's right. Things escalate quickly, in part because our political identities are growing so strong they can absorb other things. Gamergate is a fascinating example; a dispute about sexist stereotypes of women in video-game culture becomes something that forms

ideological coalitions. It becomes a culture war.

Milo Yiannopoulos, who is now famous, got his big rise during Gamergate. You had all these political websites descending on the topic, and each one had a stance affiliated with a party. Now, on top of the party division itself, you stack division over attitudes about race, and it divides us even further. Then you stack the kind of videos you watch and enjoy, the kind of music you like, where you live, cities or rural areas, income levels. You stack these differences until you're living in a bubble of what's important to you.

PLAYBOY: Can't we all just get along?

KLEIN: I'm not particularly optimistic. I don't think we're going to get rid of polarization. I think it's going to get worse. We need to make sure politics doesn't break under its weight, which is possible. Other countries have polit-

***I need to get
the facts right.
People will let
you know when
you're wrong,
and they don't
like it.***

ical systems in which polarization has always been the norm, and those systems work better; they work more smoothly.

PLAYBOY: America has managed okay for a couple hundred years.

KLEIN: Fortunately, our political identity is not our only identity. We default to American. Think about what would happen if there was another terrorist attack on New York. Suddenly the entire country would love New York, correctly so. It would activate our national identity. A lot of life is about which identity is being activated at which moment. Different events externally call out different moods and allegiances for extended periods of time. Right now I think politics is going to keep us pretty divided. That could change if government functioned better and if people made better decisions. But you stack a financial crisis on top of wars, on top of very fast demographic changes, on top of feelings of fear and being threatened, on top of 30 years of wage

stagnation, and you begin to understand the morass we're in today.

PLAYBOY: Let's switch gears. You're an intelligent, sophisticated person. Do you ever cringe when you see Vox clickbait headlines like HOW DAVID BLAINE BARFS FROGS?

KLEIN: First of all, I don't see it as clickbait. I think it's fascinating to know how David Blaine barfs frogs. Are you not interested in how David Blaine barfs frogs?

PLAYBOY: Well, yeah, I guess it is pretty intriguing.

KLEIN: I care a lot about how well we do stories. I'm not condescending or elitist about which stories to do. It's important to me—genuinely important—that we cover celebrity news well. Just as we take a big complicated issue like health care and make it accessible and clear, we also take things that might seem trivial—barfing frogs, for instance—and show why they're reflecting America's subconscious in an important way. I mean, have you seen Vox's rap explainer?

PLAYBOY: Yes. It's a brilliant video. The breakdown on internal rhymes, multisyllabic rhymes, cross-the-bar lines. It really shows how hard it is to make rap look easy.

KLEIN: It's one of the best things we've ever done. It's one of the best things any human being has ever done. The explainer approach is an approach to information that we can apply to anything, not just rap and not just politics or foreign affairs. It works everywhere, and it can be on anything. We get massive engagement and readership on Apple News. On YouTube, we have more than 130 million minutes of watch time a month with an average watch of over

three minutes and 30 seconds. Think about that. The average time somebody spends on a video of ours on YouTube is more than three and a half minutes. In a world where everybody is constantly complaining about attention spans, that is amazing. And others are appropriating it now.

PLAYBOY: Who?

KLEIN: I've noticed *The New York Times* is learning a lot from Vox. I take this as high praise, but they've hired a few of our people and have made runs at a number more. Explanatory journalism is now a thing for them. I take a lot of pride in that. *The New York Times* is an amazing institution.

PLAYBOY: Would you ever want to run it or, say, *The Washington Post*?

KLEIN: I do not think so. I will run Vox, and one day I will not run Vox, and I will be surprised if I run anything after that.

PLAYBOY: Do you have any interest in running for public office?

KLEIN: None.



PLAYBOY: Can you imagine retiring by 40?
KLEIN: No, but I love creating and I miss it. I think I'm a good manager, but managing is hard on me in a way that writing and podcasting are not. Running Vox is worth it. We're building something that's worthwhile, but I'm not somebody who, if you ask me to fill out a task sheet, would want it to be filled with meetings and management. People sometimes call me an entrepreneur, but I don't have that impulse. It's super hard to build a company. There are easier ways to spend your time.

PLAYBOY: Then why did you start Vox?

KLEIN: I started Vox because I, along with my co-founders, Melissa Bell and Matthew Yglesias, got obsessed with the idea that the news was too focused on the new. Take Obamacare: At Wonkblog, we covered that intensely. I think we did a good job, day after day, answering the question, "What happened in Obamacare today?" But that isn't the question most people were asking. They were asking, "What is Obamacare? What are the subsidies? How do they work?" We had answered these questions, but it was all locked in archives. So I got interested in whether there were ways to reinvent what we were doing, to consistently surface more contextual information. When we were all on paper, that wasn't possible—pages were expensive, and old editions had to be thrown out. But since the new medium didn't have those limitations, it seemed possible to make sure there was always enough context in a story for someone new to the topic to figure out what was going on. Once I began thinking about that, I couldn't stop. I didn't abstractly want to start a new publication; I wanted to try to create this service, and doing that required starting a new publication.

PLAYBOY: Vox's parent company, Vox Media, runs popular websites including Curbed, Eater, Recode and SB Nation and is valued at \$1 billion. Now that you're making money, what do you splurge on?

KLEIN: I do well, but it's nothing crazy. The best situation you can have with money is to have enough so you don't worry too much about it. For instance, I never thought I'd be able to buy a house in D.C., and now we own a house. But we also have a pretty high savings rate, and we don't take expensive vacations. I have a lot of anxiety around spending serious money. I would sooner set my home on fire than spend \$1,000 on a douchey watch. And needless to say, technology makes it easier than ever to be smart about money, along with improving the rest of your life.

PLAYBOY: What apps do you love right now?

KLEIN: Let's see. *[takes out phone]* I like that

with HotelTonight you can find some pretty sweet last-minute discounts on hotel rooms. I use the Calm app, not for its guided meditations but more for its relaxing-to-the-rain sounds. I really love Marvel Unlimited. You pay 70 bucks a year and get access to thousands of Marvel issues up until six months ago. The problem with comics is you drill through them in a minute and they're three or four bucks a pop. I could easily read 12 or 15 comic books before going to bed. Marvel Unlimited makes that a reasonably priced proposition. Oh, and Instagram, of course. Instagram is one of the few happy places on the internet.

PLAYBOY: That's true. Explain why.

KLEIN: You can only put a heart on things. That's basically all you can do. You'd have to be a capital asshole to go on to somebody's picture

People call me an entrepreneur, but I don't have that impulse. There are easier ways to spend your time.

of their vacation or their baby or their dog and just start cursing at them. That's not to say that hasn't happened to me.

PLAYBOY: You have a troll problem?

KLEIN: We've never had comments at Vox, so that helps.

PLAYBOY: But the haters find you.

KLEIN: They find me, definitely. Let's just say I haven't looked at my Twitter mentions since 2012.

PLAYBOY: You have more than 1.6 million followers. Do you worry you're missing out?

KLEIN: No. It's the opposite. I think Twitter is negatively addicting. Same thing with Facebook. It's fine to look at it sometimes, but those kinds of information are built to make you addicted. They are built to form habits. They are built so you feel if you haven't checked in in the past hour that you will miss things forever. Meanwhile, the book on my nightstand is always going to be there, so it's easy for me to justify not picking it up.

Twitter is bad on a professional level too. It creates this herd mentality for journalists. Everybody is getting the same information, so they're all going to think the same things. I'm trying to pull myself back to books and papers and research. I'm challenging myself to spend an hour a day in the morning quietly reading a book and getting ideas and reporting. It is hard to do, but it's important. It's funny, though, because I'll sometimes retweet people and they'll come to me afterward and be like, "You turned my Twitter account into a sewer for 12 hours. Thanks a lot, dude."

PLAYBOY: What's your relationship with Snapchat?

KLEIN: I like Snapchat, but it's a very idiosyncratic interface. I think that's why people over 40 can't figure it out. People were wondering how the IPO could soar the way it did, but

I completely understand it. Like a lot of these technologies, Snapchat is valuable not because of the interface but because so many people contribute to it for free. Facebook and Twitter, the same. Uber similarly. That means the company gets to know a lot about you, and the technology becomes more useful as it learns where you are, where you're going, where you've been, where you might want to go.

PLAYBOY: Who needs Russian hackers when Facebook knows your every move?

KLEIN: The hacking problem is insidious and something I think about every day. I open my computer and a red bar on my Gmail comes up that says Google believes it has detected state-sponsored hackers trying to break into my account.

It comes back every couple of days.

I'm not the only journalist this happens to. This is a real thing. I've talked to Google about it. There's a lot I do around internet-security hygiene that I wish I didn't have to do, but these are the times we're in.

PLAYBOY: Your wife, Annie Lowrey, is a political journalist too. Do the two of you ever go on media fasts?

KLEIN: Well, in my job I really can't take a news fast. I have to know what's going on.

PLAYBOY: But you must need breaks from all the noise.

KLEIN: Annie will sometimes look at Twitter at night in bed, and if I know Twitter is open near me, cortisol floods my bloodstream. What's happening? It's amazing to me how physiological my response to that stuff is now. I see it and I can feel my blood pressure spike.

PLAYBOY: We all feel it at times. This can't be good for society.

KLEIN: The constant diet of social media is like dumping toxins into your veins. I think



it's a genuine threat to news and to some of these platforms. I don't know how long people will voluntarily expose themselves to things that make them feel so bad. The incredible levels of conflict, confrontation, controversy and outrage—if the conversation doesn't get more productive, I think there's going to be an exhaustion point.

PLAYBOY: What could you do better?

KLEIN: Everything. Literally everything. I would like to be a much better manager. I'm committed to more things at any given moment than I can manage effectively. I could be a better writer. I could spend more time reporting. I could be a better husband. I could be home more. I spend a lot of mental time in the space between where I am and where I think I could and should be. That's not a great habit. It has in some ways been adaptive for my professional career, but I have a very high negativity bias as a person. Positive things roll off my back and negative things stick.

PLAYBOY: You're a pretty strait-laced guy. Any vices? Don't say chocolate.

KLEIN: My real vices are things I'm embarrassed about.

PLAYBOY: This is **PLAYBOY**. Too much sex? Cocaine? Rock and roll?

KLEIN: I spend a lot of time at bad EDM shows. I'm a big fan of Auto-graf. I'm a big fan of Big Wild, Big Gigantic and other groups with the word *big* in them. Alle Farben, who is a German DJ. There's a lot of good stuff out there. I listen to it and I think it makes me disreputable in the eyes of others.

PLAYBOY: Any streaming binges you'd care to confess?

KLEIN: *Legion*, the new FX show, is excellent. I started watching *The OA* on Netflix recently, which has been weird and good so far. I think *Saturday Night Live* has been good lately, and not just on the political side. But there's nothing I love more than *Bob's Burgers*. Somehow they have constructed a family dynamic that is sweet and affirming with a sense of absurdist humor that is really funny. There's not much in culture that I think is perfect. There's a lot of culture I think is good. I think *Bob's Burgers* is a perfect piece of culture.

PLAYBOY: What are your thoughts on porn?

KLEIN: I appreciate the interviews they do. [laughs] Porn. Okay, I'll give you an answer that is maybe a bit off topic but is related. I am not a believer in most of the sci-fi dystopias that people believe in. I don't think AI is going to become super intelligent and destroy us all. I don't think the singularity is on the near horizon. I am a bit of a believer, though, in VR dystopia. I put on an Oculus VR headset not too long ago and was stunned to realize that

we had actually invented virtual reality and nobody told me. I think I expected it to be like an old Virtual Boy, if you remember that Nintendo product. I was sitting on the edge of a building, looking down, and I jumped back because I thought I might fall. The rate at which that technology will improve, the rate at which the screens will improve, at which we will be able to get better rigs, at which those rigs will come down in price, at which we will be able to invent content for those....

PLAYBOY: It's all going to be driven by sex. Is that what you're suggesting?

KLEIN: Well, I'll say that if you live in a declining town where there are no great jobs, and you can click on this headset and have incredibly orgasmic sex with someone beautiful or have real communication—we haven't begun to see where pornography can go. I saw a demo where you're talking to an alien, and

The stakes are high, and I think people are tired. In the midst of all that, it's easy to not be your best self.

the alien's eyes track you. The realism of that interaction took my breath away. When we all have our avatars and those avatars can track and interact with one another, it's going to be appealing beyond belief to people.

I don't think we're ready for what pornography is going to be able to do with that. It's coming faster than we can handle. Those kinds of innovations have the qualities, when you think about them economically, of drugs, but we don't treat them like drugs. I'm not even sure we should treat drugs the way we treat drugs, but that's a different issue. Not to reveal too much of my own college experience, but psilocybin mushrooms are illegal and you don't want to be doing them every day. With these consumer electronics, they're going to be legal and they're going to be celebrated and you're going to want to use them every day. You can see how addicted we are to screens. When VR and sex with avatars become immersive, well, does the world of

Ready Player One seem that unlikely to me? No, it doesn't.

PLAYBOY: What's the future going to say about this period of history?

KLEIN: I often think about the stories we're covering versus what historians will write about. Certain things won't get skipped over—Trump, the rise of right-wing populism across the advanced world. But there are times when I wonder if some things we think are important now will become afterthoughts and that all anybody is actually going to write about is CRISPR and the moment human beings took control of their own evolution. I'm not sure we always have a good sense of what's important in the moment in which we live. But I'm pretty sure we pay too much attention to taxes and not enough to technology.

I think we'll be remembered for our choices and ethics. The way we treat animals within the food system right now is unconscionable. I do not think that in the future any of our excuses about the fact that we cared more about eating chicken wings than about keeping chickens from being tortured will hold up. History will not judge us kindly for that.

PLAYBOY: Your Vox bio lists you as Head Vegetable Chef.

KLEIN: I'm vegan at home and vegan-vegetarian out in the world. If you're vegan, you have to go all the way, or you're not vegan. I don't mean to blur those lines. I eat fully plant-based at home and try to do that out in the world.

In the future we will all be eating differently. I really believe that. We will be held accountable for how we treat animals. But above all, we will be held accountable for how we treat people. That's something I think and worry about every single fucking day. I think the media industry and the news cycle and the world are pushing us to be bad people. I think Twitter makes people shitty. I think it rewards snark and glibness. Donald Trump every single day is modeling a politics of pettiness and vengeance unlike anything I've ever seen.

The stakes are high, and I think people are tired. In the midst of all that, it's easy to not be your best self. Oftentimes, the incentives aren't to be yourself at all. Maybe you'll get more shares or more retweets by being a jerk. But I do think we need to wage a daily fight to be better than that. I'm not sitting here on a soapbox, but it's something I'm deeply concerned about. When we fail at something as a culture, we need to think about how we can do better. That's how societies take care of themselves and improve. It's how we evolve. Our culture can't just take care of itself. It's something you have to be working on every single day. ■



PLAYBOY

Introducing the new Playboy bedding collaboration
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Photo: BadBoi



PLAYMATE of THE YEAR



ARTWORK BY **BROOK POWER** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DAVID BELLEMERE**

Raised on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, Brook Power—who made her PLAYBOY debut in our May 2016 issue—grew up reveling in the splendor of the ocean and the jungle. Now, when she’s not modeling, she’s riding her horse bareback on mountain trails or surfing in Malibu. She’s also a visual artist or, in her words, a “very nondigital collage-art maker,” whose intricately layered pieces may inspire feelings of surreal euphoria. Power connected with 2016 Playmate of the Year Eugena Washington, and the two opened up about the changing mores of modeling, the best things in life and the things that make them feel beautiful.





PMOY

EUGENA: *First of all, congratulations on being Playmate of the Year! How does it feel?*

BROOK: I love it! Honestly, I never thought I'd end up in PLAYBOY. I thought it was so out of my element. I'm just a surfer chick who rides horses.

EUGENA: *It's kind of interesting that you and I have now both posed twice for PLAYBOY—once nude and once non-nude. Do you think there's much of a difference between your two pictorials?*

BROOK: I actually didn't feel as though the two were very different—well, that's not true. David Bellemere, the photographer for my Playmate of the Year shoot, is French, so he thinks being naked all the time is not a big deal. But other than that, it's the same style of photography. It's modern. It's current.

EUGENA: *It's all about celebrating the body for its beauty, for the work of art that it is. The funny part is that, on most photo shoots, you end up walking around naked a lot anyway.*

BROOK: Right. When you're modeling, you're constantly getting undressed and changing in front of everyone. I also trusted the aesthetic that I knew the photographer would capture. I think you and I both knew this wasn't going to be something we would ever regret. It's something we're proud of doing.

EUGENA: *We're moving into a different time now.*

BROOK: It's interesting, because I do collages with old issues of the magazine, so I have copies of PLAYBOY from the 1960s through the 1990s. There will be ones from the 1970s that have full-on hippie babes with full bushes, and then you get to the 1990s and into the early 2000s and it becomes a whole other thing.

EUGENA: *The popular aesthetic has evolved, and so has the climate of the modeling industry. People are interested in people. There used to*

be more of a divide, but the internet has merged those lines. We're more connected now.

BROOK: Nowadays, a model is more of a personality, for sure. There are so many ways for us to express ourselves and put ourselves out there. It's more about relatability. We're curating our own careers, basically. I think women who are in any sort of spotlight now need to be interesting. Women are so multifaceted. Especially with



models—there's more than just a pretty face. Now we need to show it.

EUGENA: *We were never really able to do that until recently. Now, thanks to Instagram, we can show our own pictures. Speaking of which, you're also a visual artist. What inspires you to create?*

BROOK: I actually love working on rainy days. Whenever it rains in California, everyone gets so bummed, but

I love it. If it's sunny out, I just want to go outside and do stuff. If it's raining, I want to work. It's cozy, you know? If I'm trying to get my creative gears going, I start by sitting and looking through images for a few minutes, usually with a cup of coffee and a white tabletop. I take note of things I like—color combinations, maybe an interesting object or animal or potential backdrop—and put all those things to the side. Then I come up with an image in my head, or too many images. Sometimes I don't come up with anything; I don't force it. I'll just try again later, when my mind is less cluttered.

EUGENA: *Do you think growing up in Hawaii influenced who you are now?*

BROOK: Growing up in Hawaii was the best. I had a lot of siblings and friends around. We played on the beach and in the surf and in caves all day. We would become completely consumed by our imaginative world. I think it kept me silly and mellow. People really value family there. Also, the Hawaiian sense of humor is very self-deprecating and humble, which I think are good traits to have in our business.

EUGENA: *They're not the most common traits, though. Where do you see yourself in the next few months? The next year?*

BROOK: I would like to do some traveling this year—home to Hawaii and also to Tahiti, Thailand, Mexico, hopefully New Zealand and then Europe for a while. I just want to surf and explore a lot. I miss Mexican food so much I can't wait to head south.

EUGENA: *Finally, what makes you feel beautiful?*

BROOK: I probably feel the most beautiful when I'm surfing at home in Hawaii. That sounds so cheesy, but having that life force surrounding you and the water on your skin, moving under your feet, you definitely feel powerful, as though you've harnessed this great natural energy. You're not just a spectator—you're making it even more beautiful by being there. ■





















THE NEW CREATIVES

Art as resistance. Art as innovation. Art as delirious escape. In an age of “alternative facts,” we need it all—and the artists and designers on these pages deliver, using everything from acrylic paint to their own bodies in the service of pushing the boundaries of beauty

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RYAN LOWRY**

Natalie White

On a steamy New York City summer night in 2015, Natalie White stripped down in the middle of a bustling Bowery art gallery and stepped inside a Plexiglas box, its floor carpeted with an American flag. This performance piece marked the beginning of “Natalie White for Equal Rights,” the feminist artist’s ongoing campaign aimed at renewing enthusiasm for the 94-year-old unratified Equal Rights Amendment.

The proposed legislation, which would constitutionally guarantee equal rights for women, died in Congress after failing to receive enough state ratifications. Had it succeeded, it would have been the first piece of inclusive women’s

rights legislation in U.S. history. Now White, who has modeled nude for more than 50 photographers and was the first American woman featured in French *PLAYBOY*, is using her body in her own artwork to help carry gender equality across the finish line.

“People don’t want a lecture about women’s rights,” she says, “but I want to get the message out. So I’m using my sexuality as a tool. I’m taking back something that normally belongs to somebody else and turning my most vulnerable self into something that is empowering.”

White’s work takes an unapologetic approach to nudity. Consider the giant clothes-free self-portraits currently on view at Miami’s Bill

Brady Gallery. Last June, she debuted a bronze sculpture of herself—naked but for combat boots and holding an American flag. She also staged a march from New York to Washington, D.C. Upon arrival, she painted *E.R.A.* now in front of the U.S. Capitol. She was jailed, tried and ultimately convicted of “defacing public or private property.” Given the goal, few would say her crime was unjustified. White’s efforts have turned her into something of a cause célèbre; Patricia Arquette and Lizzy Jagger testified in her favor. “If women want equal rights, we have to stop asking for them and start demanding them,” White says. “And if politicians won’t support us, we won’t support them.” —*Liz Suman*





FABIAN WILLIAMS

Growing up in a military family in the town of Fayetteville, North Carolina, Fabian Williams answered a different call of duty. Drawing, painting, designing and writing, he diverged from his military upbringing but maintained a soldier's focus and determination. "I know what it's like to take orders," he says. "I didn't call a bathroom a bathroom; I called it a latrine."

Williams understands his work as a sort of military campaign, "a guerrilla war" against disinformation and the erosion of civil rights. "The time for doing bullshit is over," he says. "There is no more time to do art for the sake of art." This full embrace of art's political dimension is refreshingly up-front. Williams's work is not just commentary; it's ammunition.

Case in point: His *Race Card* series, which gained him some early notoriety, began during his years as a toiler in the advertising world, where people of color were few and the creative product was often questionable. The deceptively soft-hued pieces doubled as actionable objects that their owners could hold up in the face of racial fouls in the workplace—in Williams's words, "a way to address some uncomfortable things in a playful manner."

Having mostly left commercial work to pursue fine art, Williams can now be found painting murals on the streets or working in his Decatur, Georgia studio, where the news is always on in the background. "The artist's job is to make people feel the times," he says. "I'm trying to reach people who don't agree with me."—Kevin Shea Adams



DABS MYLA

For the married multimedia duo known as Dabs Myla, work and play often mean the same thing. Their immersive pieces incorporate bubbly letters, geometric patterns, kitschy motifs and anthropomorphic characters—impish hot dogs, cheerful cacti, sexy martinis. Whether reimagining a Hello Kitty character for Sanrio or erecting a cityscape for MTV, the Los Angeles-based pair are masters of recasting ordinary objects and ideas into sprawling Technicolor environments.

Their influences include Disneyland, graffiti, midcentury modernism, tattoo flash and vintage Hollywood. But while their visual tapestries suggest organized chaos—picture the Looney

Tunes cast cannonballing into a Slim Aarons pool for a taping of *MTV Spring Break*—nothing has a greater impact on their imaginary worlds than the real one they've created together.

The couple fell in love at art school in their native Melbourne 11 years ago. Dabs taught Myla how to draw graffiti, and they merged their noms de plume soon after. (They asked us not to reveal their full names.) These days, they finish each other's sentences and haven't spent more than 12 hours apart. "We're still two people, I think," Dabs says, "but just barely."

Dabs Myla have painted murals around the world, exhibited at galleries including MOCA, Jonathan LeVine and Known, and collaborated with global brands including Adidas, Viacom

and Vans. A request to design the set for the 2015 *MTV Movie Awards* came with a chance to realize their creations on a career-defining scale and generated momentum for their largest design job to date: transforming a 4,000-square-foot warehouse into a mixed-media wonderland with the furniture company Modernica.

Their current focus is on a pop-up installation coming this fall. The timing is appropriate: In an age of seething national animosity, Dabs Myla's designs can be seen as defiantly escapist. "The color and the luminosity of our work is what I see as beauty," Myla says. "And when I look at the world and I'm not thinking about all the fucked-up shit, that's what I see: all these incredible colors."—Liz Suman

“IF YOU JUST SWITCH YOUR BRAIN, YOU CAN SEE ALL OF THESE COLORS AND AMAZING THINGS IN THE WORLD.”





“BEAUTY IS PERSONAL. IT’S VISCERAL. IT’S UNIQUE TO EACH OF US BASED ON OUR CULTURE, OUR UPBRINGING, OUR PERSONAL BELIEFS, OUR FETISHES, WHATEVER.”

KERIN ROSE GOLD

Kerin Rose Gold has never had a taste for subtlety. Even if she were stripped bare, it would be impossible to ignore the tangerine locks that have become her personal trademark. Indeed, Gold, like her eyewear and accessories brand, A-Morir, has always thrived on embracing the bold and the unconventional. The native New Yorker muses on a moment from her teen years: “I remember fully embellishing a 1990s winter Olympics bootleg T-shirt,” she says with a slight grin, “with the reasoning of ‘Who would ever do this?’”

Gold graduated from NYU with a pop culture history degree that linked her loves of art, music and fashion. She formed A-Morir in 2009, infusing the world of true couture and bespoke manufacturing with her innate vibrance. To call her signature collections “eyewear” would be to commit a gross understatement: “Face art” would be closer to the mark. From oversize shields covered in black studs to lenses meticulously hand-embellished with Swarovski crystals, they’re both attention grabbing and functional. Gold insists her pieces are meant for everyday wear.

Her celebrity clientele includes Rihanna, Katy Perry and Lady Gaga; her accessories range from a patch-festooned denim vest for A-Trak to a crystal mouth guard for Teyana Taylor. And *Vogue Italia* has praised her as the “favorite [eyewear] brand of American stars.” Ultimately, though, Gold designs for herself and for everyone who shares a passion for what she calls “fuck-you glamour.” —*Dani Deahl*





“THE POLITICS OF THE CITY ARE VERY MUCH A PART OF MY WORK. I’M REALLY INTO CHOLO CULTURE, BUT I’M NOT A CHOLO. I’M STUDIO BANGING.”





WHITNEY BELL

Like most women with a smartphone and a social media account or two, Whitney Bell has received countless unsolicited dick pics. But instead of merely complaining about—or, let's be honest, mocking—them with her friends, Bell decided to turn these unwanted images into art, having been inspired by one particular photo she says was “so beautiful it should be in a museum.”

Enhancing her own collection with submissions from other women, Bell premiered her provocative art show, aptly titled *I Didn't Ask for This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, in Los Angeles last April and is now taking it north to San Francisco. “This isn't the same as revenge porn, and I'm not trying to shame genitalia,” she says. “I'm trying to show how ridiculous it is that this is a constant problem.”

The self-proclaimed “art school dropout” and “intersectional feminist bitch” also owns a loud-mouthed online boutique, *KiddBell.com*, which launched last year. The store offers unisex baseball caps proclaiming *LET BOYS BE FEMININE*, mock turtlenecks featuring commands like *RESIST* and *REVOLT*, and pins flaunting the word *CUNT*. Equal parts artist and activist, Bell explains her motivations: “It's easy to think something isn't an issue if you haven't experienced it, so a lot of men don't understand the myriad ways sexual harassment affects women. I want to show it's a lot more pervasive than they may know.”

Whether they're in a gallery or a web store, Bell's creations are informed by a desire to reap empowerment for women from that which is used against them, from the word *slut* to an unsolicited sext, showing how we can all create agency out of impotence.—*Anna del Gaizo*



ALEX BECERRA

There were no museums or galleries in Piru, California, the small town where artist Alex Becerra grew up. His aesthetic education came instead from perusing stacks of *Lowrider* and the Chicano erotic zine *Teen Angels*. When he discovered he could draw, he practiced by tattooing his peers.

“My junior year in high school, I fucked up everyone's skin at my job,” Becerra says. “I didn't realize how deep the needle should go.”

These elements—the erotic grist of adolescent fantasy, a homespun amateurism, the Chicano gang aesthetic—percolate through

the bold, messy paintings that have earned the flamboyant, thick-bearded Becerra a reputation as an outlaw in Los Angeles's art scene and one of the market's most sought-after young guns. The 28-year-old studied at Otis College of Art and Design and now lives in his Inglewood studio, where he produces work critics have compared to that of Philip Guston, Martin Kippenberger, Mike Kelley and Pablo Picasso.

Becerra still finds inspiration in the bric-a-brac of the erotic underworld. Escort ads in *LA Xpress* serve as models for figurative portraits—female nudes contorted in absurdist, hypersexualized poses and charged with electric pinks and thick smears of paint. They're abject and

witty, self-consciously kitschy and vulgar.

“Who knows what the fuck runs through people's minds when they see my work,” Becerra says. “People have thought I'm female because of how I handle the female form. A male wouldn't be this crude.”

It's that willingness to paint outside his comfort zone that makes Becerra's wild fantasies feel raw, intimate and authentic. And when he's not painting, making tacos for gallery hoppers from ingredients stuffed in his tool belt or sending stacks of drawings to his Chicago dealer in a greasy pizza box (“It's the best way to naturally patina them”), Becerra will still tattoo anyone who'll let him. Free of charge.—*Peter Simek*

**“VISUAL ART CAN
BE A DRUG—THAT
RUSH OF ENDOR-
PHINS. BEAUTY
CAN GIVE YOU A
PORTAL INTO A
DIFFERENT
PERSPECTIVE.”**





ABASI ROSBOROUGH

“In fashion, many big companies won’t take a stand politically because they don’t want to alienate consumers,” says Greg Rosborough. His menswear label, Abasi Rosborough, co-founded in 2013 with fellow Fashion Institute of Technology grad Abdul Abasi, isn’t so timid. The line’s collections have names such as Diaspora and Dissident, one of its lookbooks features a black model at the Lincoln Memorial, and the clothes are manufactured in New York City, largely by immigrants. “Our business revolves around working with immigrants,” says Rosborough. “They’re the epitome of the American dream.”

Both designers have a connection to the current immigration debate. Abasi, who spent nearly eight years in the Army, eventually working as a missile technician, is the son of Nigerians. Rosborough grew up in Arizona, close to the Mexican border. But more than a critique of public policy, their work is a revolt against the entire concept of menswear, the standards of which have barely changed in decades. “How is it possible that with everything evolving around us—communication, architecture, automobiles—the thing that’s closest to our skin hasn’t evolved in even the simplest way?” asks Rosborough.

By contrast, Abasi Rosborough clothing features all-natural fabrics that let the wearer move easily, seams that follow the body’s anatomy and magnets in lieu of buttons. Their futuristic vision is catching on: In February, the duo was nominated for the prestigious LVMH Prize for Young Fashion Designers, voted on this year by Marc Jacobs and Kendall Jenner, among others. But will fame make them less outspoken? “I don’t care if we alienate anybody,” says Rosborough. “If we’re ignoring what we’re actually thinking, the whole thing’s a sham.”—Sean Manning



SIGNE PIERCE

It’s not easy to categorize Signe Pierce’s work: Think Kardashians mixed with performance art, soaked in neon. Pierce, a former *Saturday Night Live* intern who cites a visit to psychedelic designer Lisa Frank’s house in Pierce’s native Tucson as an early inspiration, describes herself as a “reality artist.” Her photography and videos capture a hypersaturated milieu, like looking into a not-too-far-off dystopian future through rose-colored lenses on a selfie stick.

It’s no surprise rapper Big Sean tapped Pierce earlier this year to design the lighting for his “Halfway Off the Balcony” music video. The

product is a sumptuous palette of bright hues against banal settings: A suburban house suddenly becomes ethereal, as does a telephone booth and even wet pavement. She calls this “aesthetic direction,” or using her keenly attuned eye to illuminate beauty where you least expect it.

Pierce isn’t afraid to turn the camera on herself. *American Reflexxx*, a surreal short film that premiered at Art Basel Miami in 2013, follows Pierce as she walks down a Myrtle Beach, South Carolina street. The 14-minute video shows her being taunted and eventually attacked for wearing suggestive clothing and covering her face with a reflective mask that, ultimately, serves as a mirror of reality turned ugly.

“People are always so polarized when they’re confronted by new ideas or anything they don’t immediately recognize,” says Pierce, who had an engineer design a selfie stick that she could wear on her face while posing in the middle of Times Square. The resulting performance video, *Reality Is a Porno & Life Is But a Meme*, is another cautionary tale.

Much of Pierce’s work sets out to dismantle society’s preconceived fears and challenge what beauty looks like. “I’m not afraid to be an artist who embraces new media and uses social media as a platform,” she says. “The people who need to see art the most are the people who aren’t in the art world.”—Samantha Saiyavongsa



THE NEW CREATIVES

THE KAPLAN TWINS

Cheeky as they want to be, identical twins and New Jersey natives Allie and Lexi Kaplan forage through society's obsession with celebrity, social media and sex to make their own brand of shocking, playful and surprisingly relatable art.

Shortly after graduating from New York University, the pair, now 23, garnered attention for their series of oil paintings based on the infamous Kim Kardashian sex tape, Pornhub watermark and all. "We're super into the idea of celebrity culture, how the media can manipulate stories," they say. (The twins told us they don't mind being attributed as a singular "they"—a good thing, considering their voices are all but indistinguishable.) "We want to have control over the way we portray these stories, along with our own."

After working independently for a brief stretch, they realized they were using each other as muses. "We mix paints together, and we plan out our projects together," says Allie. "But when we're on the canvas together, it can get a little complicated. She literally sat on me one time."

A piece titled *It's Britney Bitch*, which captures Spears's moment making out with Madonna at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards, followed on the heels of the sex-tape paintings. *Censor the Twins*, a series of self-portraits depicting only the Kaplans' bare





PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BLAISE CEPIS**



THE NEW CREATIVES

torsos, is rendered Instagram-friendly by the use of skillfully placed streaks of silver and condom-sheathed bananas. Speaking of the photo-sharing platform, the twins' *Boy Toys* project had them collecting kids' toys, then sleeping naked with them and selling them on Instagram for \$333 each. They use the app as a tool to showcase both process and product. "We show everything so people not only see the work, they get to know us," Allie explains. "Otherwise, it's like going to see Kanye West perform, but he's not on stage. What's the point of that?"

Lexi adds, "I kind of think our entire life is a performance."

Case in point: a recent video of the women bouncing around their studio, wearing their trademark sports bras and thongs, applying brightly colored paint to each other's butt cheeks for a series called *#SatOnYourFace*.

Clearly the Kaplans are nothing if not self-aware. "We play into the concept of the fascination with twins," they say. "We have fun with it." They're also attuned to the inescapable fact that sex sells. And unsurprisingly, they're inspired by the first true celebrity artist, Andy Warhol. "People recognized his face. The same goes for Basquiat and Haring: They created their own celebrity."

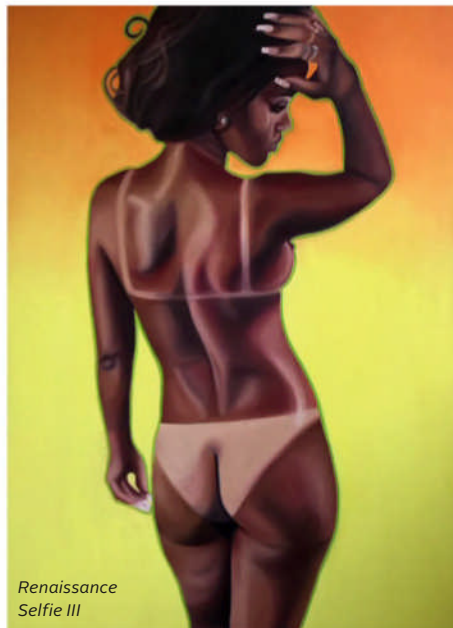
In-your-face sexuality aside, the twins insist their work is ultimately about connection. "We're not trying to offend people," Allie says. "We're just trying to generate a conversation. A lot of people are intimidated by the art world because it's a little isolating and unapproachable. Our goal is to create work that people will just *get* and not overanalyze."

Now based in Los Angeles, the Kaplans are working on an unorthodox coloring book. "The book in itself is an art object, but you can do what you want with it and make it your own. It's an opportunity for people to have fun with us." They're also exploring the concept of the omnipresent selfie. "You're looking at yourself while you're taking the photo, but then everyone can see it, so you're switching the gaze." Their newest project explores naked-celebrity selfies. "We just want to change the context. Obviously they've been leaked on the internet, but they feel like modern-day Renaissance paintings to us. They're controversial. They're scandalous. They're out there for everyone to see. Everyone can take a selfie, but not everyone makes it into a painting."—*Anna del Gaizo*



#SatOnYourFace Trump

"WE MIX PAINTS AND PLAN OUT OUR PROJECTS TOGETHER. BUT WHEN WE'RE ON THE CANVAS TOGETHER, IT CAN GET A LITTLE COMPLICATED."



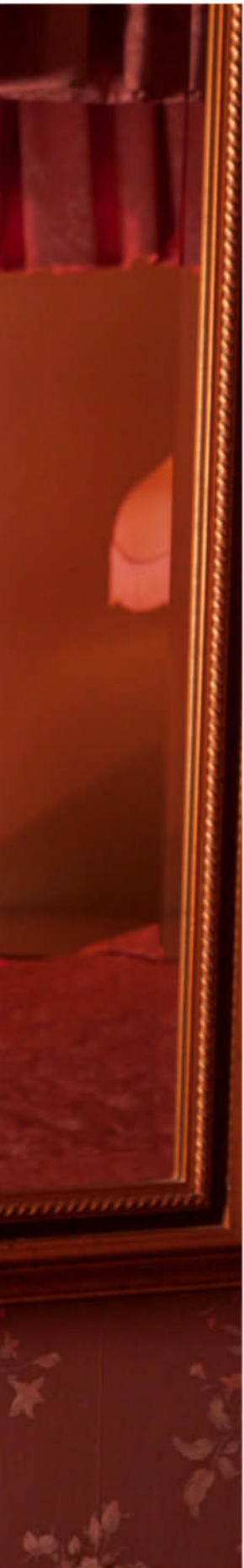
Renaissance Selfie III



Renaissance Selfie II













THE SPARROW

A friendly face from Rachel's past arrives unexpectedly just when she needs help—but is it too good to be true? An exclusive excerpt from best-selling author Dennis Lehane's latest novel



FICTION

Rachel Childs and Brian Delacroix crossed paths again six months after their last e-mail contact, in the spring, at a bar in the South End.

He ended up there because it was a few blocks from his apartment and that night, the first of the year to hint of summer, the streets smelled damp and hopeful. She went to the bar because she'd gotten divorced that afternoon and needed to feel brave. She worried her fear of people was metastasizing and she wanted to get on top of it, to prove to herself she was in command of her own neuroses. It was May, and she'd barely left the house since early winter.

She'd go out for groceries but only when the supermarket was at its emptiest. Seven o'clock on a Tuesday morning was ideal, the pallets of shrink-wrapped stock still waiting in the middle of the aisles, the dairy guys talking smack to the deli guys, the cashiers putting their purses away and yawning into cups of Dunkin's, bitching about the commute, the weather, their impossible kids, their impossible husbands.

When she needed her hair cut, she always scheduled the last appointment of the day. Same for the rare manicure or pedicure. Most other wants could be satisfied online. Soon, what started as a choice—staying out of the public eye to avoid scrutiny or its bedfellow, judgment—grew into a habit that bordered on addiction. Before Sebastian officially left her, he'd been sleeping in the guest room for six months; throughout the summer prior to that, he'd slept on his boat in the South River, a tidal flat that emptied into Massachusetts Bay. It was fitting—Sebastian had probably never loved her, probably never loved any human being, but, man, he loved that boat. Once he was gone, though, her primary motivation for leaving the house—to escape him and all his toxic disregard—was neutralized.

But spring hit, and she could hear voices, un-hurried and pleasant, return to the street along with the shouts of children, the clack of stroller wheels along the sidewalk, the squeak and snap of screen doors. The house she'd purchased with Sebastian was 30 miles south of Boston in Marshfield. It was a seaside town, though their house sat a full mile inland, which was fine because Rachel wasn't a fan of the ocean.

Sebastian, of course, loved the sea, had even taught her to scuba back in the early days of their courtship. When she finally admitted to him that she hated being submerged in liquid as potential predators watched her from the depths, instead of being flattered she'd temporarily conquered her fear to make him happy, he accused her of pretending to love the things he loved in order to "trap" him. She'd retorted that one only trapped things one wanted to eat and she'd lost her appetite for him a long time ago. It was a nasty thing to say but when a relationship collapsed with the speed and severity of her and Sebastian's, nasty became the norm.

Once the divorce was final, they would put the house on the market and split any profit to be had, and she'd need to find another place.

Which was fine. She missed the city, had never taken to having to drive everywhere. And if her notoriety was difficult to escape in the city, it was impossible in a small town, where gazes came steeped in gradations of provincialism. Just a couple of weeks back, she'd been caught out in the open while pumping gas; she hadn't realized until she pulled in with a bone-dry tank that the station was self-serve only. Three high school girls, reality-TV-ready in their push-up bras, yoga pants, satiny blowouts and diamond-cut cheekbones, exited the Food Mart on their way to a boy in a skintight thermal sweatshirt and distressed jeans, who pumped gas into a pristine Lexus SUV. As soon as they noticed Rachel, the trio started whispering and shoving each other. When she looked over, one of them reddened and dropped her gaze but the other two doubled down. The dark-haired one with the peach highlights mimed someone guzzling from a bottle and her honey-blonde partner-in-bitch screwed up her features into a pantomime of helpless weeping, then wrung her hands in the air as if freeing them of seaweed.

The third one said, "Guys, stop," but it came out half lament, half giggle and then the laughter broke from all their pretty-ugly mouths like Friday night Kahlúa vomit.

Rachel hadn't left the house since. She almost ran out of food. She did run out of wine. Then vodka. She ran out of sites to surf and shows to watch. Then Sebastian called to

remind her the divorce hearing was scheduled for that Tuesday, May 17, at 3:30.

She made herself presentable and drove into the city. She realized only after she'd gotten on Route 3 heading north that it had been six months since she'd driven on a highway. The other cars raced and revved and swarmed. Their bodies gleamed like knives in the harsh sunlight. They engulfed her, stabbing at the air, surging and stabbing and braking, red taillights flashing like furious eyes. *Great*, Rachel thought as the anxiety found her throat and her skin and the roots of her hair, *now I'm afraid of driving*.

She managed to make it into the city, and it felt like she was getting away with something because she shouldn't have been on the road, not feeling this vulnerable, this hysterical. But she made it. And no one was the wiser. She left the garage and walked across the street and appeared at the appointed time at Suffolk Probate and Family Court on New Chardon Street.

The proceedings were a lot like the marriage and a lot like Sebastian—perfunctory and bloodless. After it was over and their union was, as far as the Commonwealth was concerned, legally dissolved, she turned to share a look with her newly minted ex-husband, a look if not of two soldiers who'd found a modicum of victory in walking off the battlefield with their limbs intact, at least of common decency. But Sebastian wasn't across the aisle any longer. He was already halfway out of the courtroom, his back to her, head up, strides long and purposeful. And once he was through the doors, the rest of the people in the courtroom were looking at her with pity or revulsion.

That's who I've become, she thought, *a creature below contempt*.

Her car was parked at the garage across the street, and from there it was two right turns and a merge onto 93 South to head home. But she thought of all those cars merging and speeding, tapping their brakes and switching lanes with violent jerks of the wheel, and she turned west into the city instead and drove over Beacon Hill, through Back Bay and farther on until she reached the South End. She felt okay during the drive. Only once, when she thought a Nissan was going to pass her on the right as she approached an intersection, did her palms sweat. After a few minutes of driving around, she found the rarest of all things for

BY **DENNIS
LEHANE**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SIMON PRADES



FICTION

this neighborhood, a parking spot, and pulled into it. She sat there and reminded herself to breathe. She waved on two cars that mistook her for someone who was about to depart, not someone who'd just arrived.

"Turn off your fucking engine then," the driver of the second car yelled, and left a burnt-rubber vapor in his wake that smelled like a smoker's burp.

She left her car and wandered the neighborhood, not entirely aimless but close, remembering that somewhere around here was a bar where she'd once spent a happy night. That was when she was still in print journalism with *The Globe*. Rumors had circulated that the series she'd written on the Mary Ellen McCormack housing project might be nominated for a Pulitzer. It wasn't (though she did win the Horace Greeley Award and the PEN/Winship for excellence in investigative journalism) but she didn't care in the end; she knew she'd done good work, and back then, that was enough. It was an old-man bar with a red door called Kenneally's Tap, tucked in one of the last ungentrified blocks in the neighborhood, if she remembered correctly, the name itself a throwback to a time before all Irish bars had to sound vaguely literary like St. James's Gate, Elysian Fields, the Isle of Statues.

She eventually found the red door on a block she hadn't initially recognized because its Toyotas and Volvos had been replaced with Benzes and Range Rover Sports, and the functional bars on the windows had been replaced by filigreed ones with more substantial aesthetic appeal. Kenneally's was still there, but its menu was posted out front now, and they'd gotten rid of the mozzarella sticks and the deep-fried chicken poppers and replaced them with pork cheeks and braised kale.

She walked straight to a free chair in the far corner near the waitstaff station, and when the bartender found her, she ordered a vodka-

rocks and asked if he had the day's paper lying around. She wore a gray hoodie over a white V-neck T-shirt and dark blue jeans. The flats on her feet were black, scuffed and as forgettable as the rest of her ensemble. It didn't matter. For all the talk of progress, of equal footing, of a post-sexist generation, a woman still couldn't sit alone at a bar and have a drink without drawing stares. She kept her head down and read *The Globe* and sipped her vodka and tried to keep the addled sparrow in her chest from flapping its wings.

The bar wasn't more than a quarter full, which was good, but the clientele was a lot younger than she'd counted on, which wasn't. The old-timers she'd expected to find had been reduced to a quartet of geezers who sat at a scarred table near the back room and slipped out for frequent smoke breaks. It had been naive to think that here, in the trendiest of all Boston neighborhoods, the shot-'n'-a-beer crowd could have held the line against the single-malt cohort.

Old-timers who embraced day drinking and swilled PBRs and 'Gansett tall boys without an irony chaser rarely watched the six o'clock news. The younger crowd didn't watch it either, at least not in real time, but they might DVR it or stream it through their laptops later. And they certainly accessed YouTube on a regular basis. When the clip of Rachel's meltdown went viral last fall, there were 80,000 hits in the first 12 hours. Within 24, there were seven memes and a video mash-up of Rachel blinking, sweating, stuttering and hyperventilating, backed by a remix of Beyoncé's "Drunk in Love." That's how it had played out—a drunk reporter loses control during a live report from a Port-au-Prince ghetto. Within 36 hours of the incident, the video had 270,000 hits.

Her few friends told Rachel she likely overestimated the number of people who recognized her in public. They assured her that the

very nature of the viral age, its need for constant replenishment of content, ensured that the video, while watched by many, was remembered by few.

It was fair to assume, however, that half the people in the bar under 35 had seen it. They may have been stoned or drunk at the time, which raised the possibility they'd see the single woman at the bar in the baseball cap reading the newspaper and make no connection. But then again, maybe a few of them had been sober and possessed strong memories.

With a few swift upticks of her gaze, she got a sense of the other people at the bar itself: two office women sipping martinis with an added splash of something pink; five male brokers who pounded beers and fist-bumped over whatever game was on the TV above them; a mixed-sex group of techies in their late 20s who managed to keep their shoulders hunched even when they drank; and a well-dressed and well-groomed couple in their early 30s, the male clearly drunk, the woman clearly disgusted and a little afraid. Those two were the nearest to Rachel—four seats to her right—and at one point one of those seats half toppled into another two, the front pair of legs rising off the floor. The woman said, "Jesus, *enough*," and it was in her voice as it had been in her eyes, the fear and disgust. When the guy said, "Fuckin' calm yourself, you spoiled fuckin'—" Rachel accidentally caught his eye, then his girlfriend's, and they all pretended it didn't happen as he righted the chair.

She neared the end of her drink and decided this had been a bad idea. Her fear of particular people—i.e., people who'd seen her have an unrestrained panic attack on the six o'clock news—had blinded her to her terror of people in general, an ever-burgeoning phobia she was only now beginning to suspect the breadth of. She should have run back to the house after court. She never should have sat at a bar. Jesus. The sparrow flapped its wings.

**She couldn't imagine waiting.
Couldn't sit a second longer. Her
throat closed. Her vision blurred.**



FICTION

Not too spastically, not frantically, not yet. But the tempo was increasing. She was aware of her heart dangling in her chest, suspended from cords of blood. The eyes of the bar were on her, and in the garble of a group of voices behind her, she was nearly positive she heard someone whisper, “That reporter.”

She put a \$10 bill on the bar, relieved she had one, because she couldn't imagine waiting for change. Couldn't sit in this seat a second longer. Her throat closed. Her vision blurred at the edges. The air looked as if it had been smelted. She went to stand but the bartender placed a drink in front of her.

“A gentleman sent this over with his ‘respect.’”

The group of suit-clad guys across the bar watched the game.

They gave off a former-frat-boy-rapist vibe. Early to mid-30s, the five of them, two going fleshy, all with eyes that were too small and too bright at the same time. The tallest of them gave her a chin tilt of recognition and raised his glass.

She said to the bartender, “Him?”

The bartender looked over his shoulder. “No. Not the group. Another guy.” He scanned the bar. “He must have hit the head.”

“Well, tell him thank you, but—”

Shit. Now the drunken boyfriend who'd knocked over the chair was approaching, pointing at her like he was a game show host and she'd just won a dinette set. His disgusted and frightened girlfriend was nowhere to be seen. The closer he got, the less good-looking he was. It wasn't that he wasn't fit or didn't have a luxurious tousle of dark hair and full lips draped over a white, wholesome smile, or that he didn't move with a certain style, because all of that was part of the package. As were the eyes, as rich and brown as English toffee, but, oh my, Rachel, what lies behind them—what lies *in* them—is cruelty. Self-impressed, unreflective cruelty.

You have seen this look before. In Felix Browner. In Josué Dacelus. In projects and high rises. In self-satisfied predators.

“Hey, sorry about that.”

“About what?”

“My girlfriend. My now *ex-girlfriend* and that's been a long time coming. She's got a thing for drama. Everything's drama.”

“I think she was just worried you'd had too much to drink.”

Why are you even talking, Rachel? Walk away.

He opened his arms wide. “Some people

when they have an extra one or two, they get mean, ya know? That's a problem drunk. Me? I get happy. I'm just a happy guy looking to make friends and have a fun night. I don't see how that can be a problem.”

“Well, good luck. I gotta—”

He pointed at her drink. “You gotta finish that. Be a crime to let it go to waste.” He held out his hand. “I'm Lander.”

“Actually, I'm good.”

He dropped his hand and turned his head to the bartender. “A Patrón Silver, my good man.” He turned back to her. “Why were you watching us?”

“I wasn't watching you.”

The bartender brought his drink.

He took a sip. “But you were. I caught your eye.”

“You guys were getting a little loud and I looked up.”

“We were loud?” he smirked.

“Yes.”

“Offended your sense of proprietary, did it?”

“No.” She didn't correct his malapropism but she did fail to stifle a sigh.

“Am I boring you?”

“No, you seem like a nice guy, but I've got to go.”

He gave her a big friendly smile. “No, you don't. Have that drink.”



The bird was starting to flap hard now, its head and beak rising to the base of her throat.

“I'm going to go. Thank you.” She slung her bag over her shoulder.

He said, “You're the woman on the news.”

She didn't feel like living through the five or 10 minutes it would take to deny it and then re-deney it and then ultimately give him his due, and yet she still played dumb. “What woman?”

“The one who flipped out.” He glanced at the drink in front of her that she still hadn't touched. “Were you drunk? Or high? Which was it? Come on. You can tell me.”

She gave him a tight smile and went to move past him.

Lander said, “Hey, hey, hey,” and put his chest between her and the door. “I just want to know....” He took one step back and squinted at her. “Just want to know what you were thinking. I mean, I want to be friends.”

“I'd like to go.” She gestured with her right hand for him to step aside.

He reared his head back, curled his lower lip and mimicked her gesture. “I'm just asking a question. People put their trust in you.” He tapped a single finger off her shoulder. “I know, I know, I know, you think I'm drunk and maybe, you know, maybe I am. But what I'm saying is important. I'm a fun guy, I'm a nice guy, my friends think I'm hilarious. I got three sisters.



FICTION

Nobody was moving. No one was trying to help. They were all just watching the show.

Thing is, point is here, that you think like it's okay to start throwing back the sauce on the job because you probably got a net to land in if it backfires. Am I right? Some doctor or venture capitalist hubby who...." He lost the thought, then caught it again, splayed his pink fingers against the base of his pink throat. "I *can't* do that. I gotta go make the money. I bet you got some sugar daddy pays for your Pilates and your Lex and the lunches where you hang with your homegirls and shit all over everything he does for you. Have that drink, bitch. Somebody bought it for you. Show some respect."

He wavered in front of her. She wondered what she'd do if he touched her shoulder again. Nobody was moving in the bar. No one was saying anything. No one was trying to help. They were all just watching the show.

"I'd like to go," she repeated and took a step toward the door.

He put that single finger on her shoulder again. "One more minute. Have a drink with me. With us." He waved at the bar. "Don't make us feel like you think bad of me. You don't think bad of me, right? I'm just a guy in the street. I'm just a regular dude. I'm just—"

"Rachel!" Brian Delacroix materialized by Lander's left shoulder, slid past his hip and was suddenly standing beside her. "I'm so sorry. I got hung up." He gave Lander a distant smile before turning back to her. "Look, we're late, I'm sorry. Doors were at eight. We gotta go." He took her vodka off the bar and downed it in one easy swallow.

Brian wore a navy blue suit, white shirt with the top button undone, black tie loosened and slightly askew. He remained quite handsome but not in the way that made you think he'd hold up the bathroom every morning. His look was more rugged, his face just on the right side of craggy, his smile a bit crooked, his wavy black hair not fully tamed. Weathered skin, crow's-feet around the eyes, strong chin and nose. His blue eyes were open and amused, as if he were

perpetually surprised to find himself in situations such as these.

"You look spectacular by the way," he said. "Again, sorry I got held up. No excuse."

"Whoa, whoa." Lander squinted at his own drink for a moment. "Okay?"

This could easily be a scam perpetrated by the both of them. Lander played the wolf, she was the unwitting sheep, and the part of the shepherd was played by Brian Delacroix. She found their just happening to find each other on the day of her divorce a bit too coincidental.

She decided not to play along. She held up her hands. "Guys, I think I'm just gonna—"

But Lander didn't hear her because he pushed Brian. "Yo, bro, you need to step off."

Brian gave her an amused cock of the eyebrow when Lander called him "bro." She had to work at it to keep her own smile from breaking out.

He turned to Lander. "Dude, I would, but I can't. I know, I know, you're disappointed but, hey, you didn't know she was waiting on me. You're a fun guy, though, I can tell. And the night's young." He indicated the bartender. "Tom knows me. Right, Tom?"

Tom said, "I do indeed."

"So—what's your name?"

"Lander."

"Cool name."

"Thanks."

"Honey," he said to Rachel, "why don't you pull the car around?"

Rachel heard herself say, "Sure."

"Lander," he said, but met Rachel's eyes and flicked his own toward the door, "your money's no good here tonight. Whatever you imbibe, Tom will put it on my tab." He flicked his eyes at her again, a little bit more insistently, and this time she moved. "You want to buy a round for those girls over there by the pool table? That's on me too. The one in the green flannel and the black jeans has been looking at you since I came through the door..."

She made the door and didn't glance back,

though she wanted to. But the last look she'd caught on Lander's face was of a dog waiting, head cocked, for either a treat or a command. In under a minute, Brian Delacroix had taken ownership of him.

She couldn't find her car. She walked block after block. She cut east, then west, turned north, retraced her steps south. Somewhere in this collection of wrought-iron fences and railings and chocolate or red brick townhouses was a light gray 2010 Prius.

It was Brian's voice, she decided as she headed up a side street toward the lights of Copley Square. It was warm, confident and smooth, but not huckster-smooth. It was the voice of a friend you'd been hoping to meet your whole life or a caring uncle who'd left your life too soon but had now returned. It was the voice of home, but not home the reality, home as a construct, home as an ideal.

A few minutes later, that voice entered the air behind her: "I won't take it personally if you think I'm a stalker and pick up your pace. I won't. I'll stay planted to this spot and never see you again."

She stopped. Turned. Saw him standing back at the mouth of the alley she'd crossed 30 seconds before. He stood under the street-light with his hands clasped in front of him, and he didn't move. He'd added a raincoat over the suit.

"But if you're open to a little more of the evening, I'll stay 10 paces back and follow you wherever you'll let me buy you a drink."

She looked at him for a long time, long enough for her to notice that the sparrow had stopped flapping in her chest and the base of her throat had come unblocked. She felt as calm as she'd felt since she was last safe behind closed doors in her own home.

"Make it five paces," she said.

From Since We Fell by Dennis Lehane, out May 9 from HarperCollins.



“Funny—just the other day the queen asked for a similar poison.”



PLAYMATE

Old Lada!

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE DELEU

The authentically humble model: a unicorn-like myth or a real, if rare, phenomenon? Moscow-born May Playmate Lada Kravchenko will have you convinced such beings walk among us. Her cool, classical beauty may conjure such words as *flawless* and *intimidating*, but she would like you to know things aren't always what they seem. "Many girls judge themselves harshly because they look at other people on Instagram and think, 'She's living the perfect life.' Nobody lives a perfect life."

While her life may not be perfect, Lada, who currently resides in Manhattan, has created one full of variety. She has lived in Paris (she speaks "a really tiny bit" of French), Milan and Hong Kong, and she's a three-time attendee of Burning Man. Broad-minded and independent, she's also currently single. "Half my friends are like, 'What's wrong with you?'—like I'm supposed to have some guy with me," she says. "My response is, 'You know what? I just want to be by myself. I'm fine.' I like to dance. I like to go out with my friends. So many girls fixate on guys and don't make a life for themselves."

Innocent flirting, on the other hand, makes her feel sexy. "I know

it's ridiculous, but I have a best friend who's a guy and I flirt with him all the time," she says. "I know nothing's going to happen because we're like brother and sister, but it just feels good. It's fun." Surprisingly, Lada isn't used to guys hitting on her. "If I waited to be approached, God, I would waste my life, for sure. It doesn't even depend on how good you look. Guys are intimidated. They don't approach girls."

This means she's well-practiced at taking matters into her own hands. "I'm very straightforward, so my flirting unfortunately looks more like an attack," she admits with a sheepish smile. "I make eye contact, right? And then I come up and just start making small talk, asking what he's drinking, how his day was, all these questions." Whether or not she employs her assertive-flirting tactics, Lada loves a proper night out. "I'm completely obsessed because when I was younger I was a nerd and spent a lot of time at home, studying and cooking." It's clear a livelier existence is better suited to her dauntless personality. "Security is the most boring thing on earth for me," she says. "I just want adventures all the time."





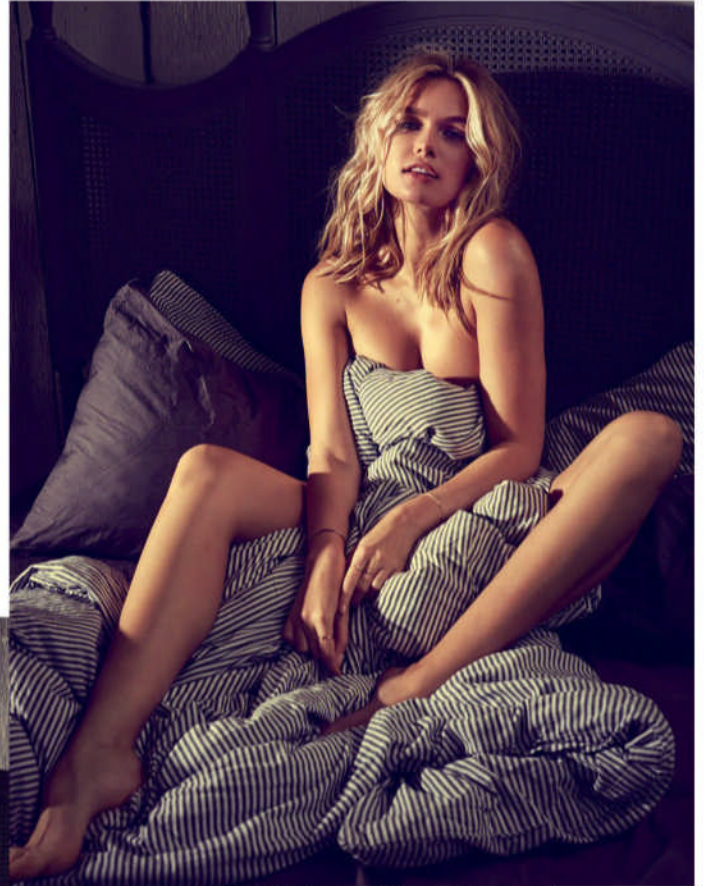














NISHANT







DATA SHEET



AGE: 24 **BIRTHPLACE:** Moscow, Russia **CURRENT CITY:** New York City

DALERT

I studied computer technology, so I was the only girl in my whole class in college. I'm a programmer. Yeah, database systems and computer tech—that's my profession. I told you I'm a nerd!

HERE TO NEXT?

Number one is India. It's fraught with beauty and sex but not in the Western style. I want to explore. I'm trying to pitch it to every single editor: "Okay, so what about India for a shoot?" And they're like, "Let's do the Bahamas."

NUDE REALLY IS NORMAL

We're all born this way, right? It's not something to be ashamed of. These are our bodies. Sometimes it's much easier for girls to be nude than for guys to be around nude girls—especially on a shoot. They become very shy and try not

to look at you, but then they bump into you and mumble something. They don't know what to say.

MY PERSONAL STYLE

I'm a jeans-and-T-shirt kind of girl—very simple. But I love to dress up. I love red lipstick; it's my favorite. Almost every single night now, I have different shades of red, and that's my thing. Of course, it's not very comfortable for kissing. Then again, I don't make out that much in public.

LIVE TO EAT

I think you should follow what your body wants and just enjoy it. If you don't enjoy your life, why are you here?

MY DRINK OF CHOICE

I drink because I'm Russian. We know how to party, and vodka is a big part of our culture. But I'm a

bit weird because my go-to drinks are champagne and beer.

FAMILY TIES

When I was a kid, I dreamed of being a ballerina, but it never happened. Then I wanted to be a preschool teacher. Finally, I wanted to be a makeup artist. When my father heard that, he said, "Okay, I'm going to choose for you. You'll be an IT girl." My dad's the best. He taught me everything, and he's the most loving person on earth, so I don't argue with my dad.

A RUSSIAN IN TRUMP'S AMERICA

After the election, I was so confused. I look at myself as American, even though I have a Russian passport. After the election, I was like, "Actually, I'm Russian! I'm fine!" At least we have Justin Trudeau in Canada. He's not my celebrity crush, but he's my politician crush.

Lada K

@lada_k_





PLAYBOY'S PARTY JOKES

I cried a lot at my wedding. Turns out it was good practice.

When I was a kid I went to fat camp—or, as my parents referred to it, “We get to do it in the kitchen for three weeks fest.”



Believing that male workers are more focused after they've pleased themselves, a company in Norway has proposed setting aside employee “masturbation rooms”—what workers in the U.S. call “rooms.”

Sex tip: Intercourse should never end with a “check, please” gesture.

When taking pictures of your manhood, holding it next to something that's six or 12 inches long for scale is the best way to give a sense of its size. It's also the best way to get kicked out of Subway.

Five months after our wedding, my wife left me for another man. That's actually the perfect duration of a marriage: long enough to keep the gifts but short and sad enough that nobody expects a thank-you note.

Sexting may be skyrocketing among the elderly, but they're not very good at it. I caught my 90-year-old grandfather trying to send a pic to his lady friend. It took the two of us half an hour to get his penis out of the toaster.

A wife asked her husband, “Be honest, do you ever think about me when you masturbate?” The husband replied, “Always, honey. I'm usually afraid you'll wake up.”

If your eyes are the window to your soul, we're pretty sure your testicles are the French doors to your taint.

A recent study shows that couples have sex an average of 56 times a year. In a different study, Netflix reports its video stream freezes an average of 56 times a year.

Head of the new app that lets you summon a hearse? It's called Uber My Dead Body.

An oblivious dad accidentally enters the wrong chat room....

SexKitten69: Hey baby im in studio city want to see me.

Carl_818: No kidding! I'm technically in Sherman Oaks, but we're neighbors!

SexKitten69: Ur making me hot. bad boy....

Carl_818: Ha! Okay! One way to cool down: Do you ever go to that frozen yogurt place on Ventura and Fulton? It's the best “basic” fro-yo shop, but for specialty flavors I have a better place.

SexKitten69: Mmmm i like you bb. Log in and lets chat i hav pics

He leaves to buy frozen yogurt.

Next time you want to spice things up in the bedroom, ask your wife to wear a thick, lustrous wig. If that doesn't work, try putting it on her head.

When sexting becomes passé, here's hoping we return to the simpler times of sending pictures of our genitalia via fax.

The year 1997: “What's the 411?”
The year 2017: “What's 411?”

Ernest Hemingway once had to examine F. Scott Fitzgerald's penis in a Parisian café and assure him it was a normal size. You can read more about this in Hemingway's book *The Only Thing in Paris I Wouldn't Put in My Mouth*.

It's Just Laundry is not a good dating service. Neither is It's Just Taxes. Neither is It's Just Meeting My Parents.

Remember, ladies: Whenever you wear perfume on a date, there's a small chance his mom or sister wears the same scent. Good luck!

A man and a woman were on a first date.

“I hope you're not a Scorpio,” she said. “I will not date another Scorpio.”

“I think people who believe in astrology are idiots,” he replied.

“Wow, seriously? How can you be that rude?”

“I'm a Scorpio.”

In the summer, it's nice to leave your windows open during sex. Enjoy the sultry breeze and the exhaust of other vehicles as you pass them on the freeway.



Whenever you see a guy not masturbating, he's trying not to masturbate.





***MDMA's Long,
Strange Trip***

With its growing reputation among veterans and abuse survivors as a PTSD cure, the drug is about to complete its journey from the counterculture (and the club) to the mainstream



My first MDMA-assisted psychotherapy session took place in my apartment on a sunny winter morning. I bought fresh-cut flowers, filled the fridge with vegetables, made hot tea from my garden and listened to Exile on Main Street. My months-long search to find a male-female therapy team who would agree to do the illegal treatment with me had led me underground. Meanwhile, my symptoms had grown extreme. My post-traumatic stress disorder had me suicidal, anxious, almost housebound. I had become obsessed with the cutting-edge therapy while researching an article on the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies,

or MAPS, an organization that conducts Food and Drug Administration–approved clinical studies on treating PTSD with MDMA. Preliminary findings show that, combined with psychotherapy, the drug—more commonly known as ecstasy—can help people overcome chronic PTSD in just a few eight-hour sessions. A tantalizing thought, especially since nothing else had worked on me.

The therapists arrived around 10 A.M. They suggested I lie on the sofa. They sat on the rug in front of me; my dog lay down beside them. My female therapist handed me two capsules of pharmaceutical-grade MDMA. At 125 milligrams, my dose fell on the light end of the recreational-use spectrum, which can range up to 200 milligrams.

It didn't take long. I got quiet, stopped talking mid-thought. After some time, they asked how I was feeling. I put my head down and told them I was "understanding something." Inside, I felt as if a dark spell was lifting. I felt light and free.

Later, I regressed to the age of seven. That's how old I was when I followed my mother from my hometown of Berkeley, California to Los Angeles. I didn't want to move, I told them, but I did it for my mom, who was an actress and wanted to become a star. The seven-year-old me was smart, playful, intuitive. She had a funny way of talking; I had never heard myself talk in that voice before. She liked the therapists, and also a sock monkey that happened to be sitting on the sofa and that quickly proved to be a faithful servant, helping seven-year-old me say things I didn't want to say.

Soon I became overwhelmed with grief. I was sad about my mother and all the times she left me alone. Once, I whispered as my breath grew labored, I was locked out of my house in the rain. "You guys," I said in my strange new voice, "do you know what? I stayed there all night." I started remembering something. "Oh no, this is so sad. You guys, she didn't come home until the morning, until the sun came out. When she got home she just opened the door, irritated, and told me to go inside. She never said sorry or anything. *Isn't that sad?*"

One of the therapists suggested that we pull the grief out of me. Making motions in the air with her hands, she helped me drag it out. I joined her and we pulled until my arms grew tired. I said it might take a very long time to get it all out.

Full disclosure: I was molested when I was a preverbal infant. I didn't remember that until much later, after I was date-raped at the age of 20 by a man I'd met in Narcotics Anonymous. Four years after that, a stranger broke into my apartment in the middle of the night and attempted to rape me in my bed. These and other traumatic incidents contribute to my PTSD, which lay dormant for decades but a few years ago began to emerge.

Before the session was over, the female therapist asked if I would like to see what kind of agreement I had with my mother. She called it "a contract." I excitedly told them I knew how to read and write contracts. She offered to take dictation. As we discussed the terms of my relationship with my mother, from whom

I've been estranged most of my life, it became clear that the contract wasn't mutually beneficial. I was sacrificing things, such as my own happiness, to avoid upsetting her. So we made some changes. I put my head down and thought about it.

The medicine was wearing off. They made a light vegetable soup. We sat at my kitchen table together. I wasn't hungry, but I enjoyed being there with them. A friend came over, and we took the dog for a walk.

I've always liked psychedelics. I did a lot of them as a teenager in northern California—LSD, mushrooms, mescaline, ecstasy. But before the MDMA therapy, I hadn't done any psychedelics in decades; as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, I practiced total sobriety. In the name of health, I've done a lot of "work" on myself. I eat locally grown organic food and was a vegetarian for 30 years. I practice yoga and meditate. I've been in and out of traditional and nontraditional talk therapy for most of my life. I lived in an ashram in the Bahamas for more than a year. I've read the Bible cover to cover twice and have studied Sanskrit and Buddhism, Vedanta and Hinduism. I've been rebirthed and given two spiritual names by two different gurus. I've done countless hours of deep body work, acupuncture, energy healing and eye movement desensitization reprocessing. I've practiced both silence and celibacy. All these things provided rich experiences and deep understandings, but none of them helped me locate and integrate the different parts of myself that trauma, meteorlike, had splintered off. None

BY **SEVEN MCDONALD**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAM CHIRNSIDE



gave me the perspective that started to come to me that day in my apartment.

• • •

According to the National Center for PTSD, 8 million adults suffer from the disorder in any given year. Not everyone who experiences trauma will develop PTSD; in fact, only 10 percent of women and four percent of men experience PTSD after a traumatic event. Some groups—minorities, the impoverished, the less educated and those with other mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and alcoholism—are more prone to PTSD than others. And those with PTSD are significantly more likely to suffer from addiction, as well as suicidal tendencies.

This summer, MAPS will begin phase III of its study, treating hundreds of subjects with PTSD stemming from various forms of trauma. Although the subjects for the newest round have not yet been selected, they will most likely include individuals who have suffered trauma linked to childhood abuse, sexual assault, combat, working as a first responder, loss, natural disasters, hate crimes and other causes. If all continues to go well, MAPS founder and executive director Rick Doblin estimates that MDMA will be an FDA-approved prescription medicine by the year 2021.

Psychedelic drugs are making a comeback in the world of neuroscience and medicine. Clinical tests are being conducted across the globe, using LSD, MDMA, psilocybin, ayahuasca, ibo-

laboratory. Recognizing its therapeutic potential, Shulgin shared it with his friend Leo Zeff, a psychologist who had previously used LSD legally in his practice. As the story goes, Zeff was so inspired by the new psychedelic, which he nicknamed ADAM after the original man, that he decided to postpone retirement and incorporate it into his work. He also made it a point to spread the word to as many people as possible, so much so that he's often referred to as the Johnny Appleseed of MDMA. By 1984 an estimated 4,000 therapists were using the drug in their practice.

MDMA simultaneously became a popular street drug or, more aptly, club drug, thanks in no small part to a Texan seminary student named Michael Clegg, who had started selling it, under the name ecstasy, through a booming mail-order business. Clegg was making a fortune before the Drug Enforcement Administration stepped in, classifying MDMA as a Schedule I drug in 1985. (Clarification: Drugs commonly sold on the street under the name molly or ecstasy frequently contain unknown and dangerous adulterants and may contain no MDMA at all.)

Today's psychedelic renaissance began in 1989 with a restructuring at the FDA, when the newly formed Pilot Drug Evaluation Staff decided to reopen the doors to both psychedelic and marijuana research—exactly what many enthusiasts, including Doblin, had been waiting for. Some of the current psychedelic

high-level processing. MDMA, on the other hand, decreases activity in the amygdala while increasing activity in the prefrontal cortex. MDMA also activates the hippocampus, the part of the brain that deals with memory, so it can help dislodge what its users have repressed. At the same time, the drug creates a feeling of extreme well-being, or even love, by flooding the system with the neurotransmitters serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine, as well as the hormone prolactin. What this means is that subjects who have been traumatized, in some cases for decades, can suddenly relax and trust other human beings. In the case of MAPS therapy, those trusted human beings are a male-female therapy team who are there with patients as they revisit the trauma, allowing them to finally process and integrate the experiences that are at the root of their condition.

Of course other drugs, namely benzodiazepines, also reduce anxiety. The problem with those drugs is they interfere with memory and act as sedatives, whereas MDMA effectively reduces anxiety in a manner that still allows subjects to connect to their emotions without being overwhelmed by them. According to Dr. Michael Mithoefer, Doblin's partner in the study, MDMA also provides subjects and therapists four to six hours of what is considered an "optimal arousal zone." The idea here is if subjects are too anxious or over-aroused during therapy, they won't be able to process it effectively; the anxiety hijacks the experi-

ence, and they may even become retraumatized. Conversely, if a subject is too shut down or numb while discussing trauma, it is also not therapeutic.

In addition to those who've experienced sexual trauma—the National Sexual Violence Resource Center has found that one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18—another large

and vulnerable group makes this research all the more urgent. A 2008 RAND study found that nearly 20 percent of military veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD. As of September 2014, veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan alone number some 2.7 million. About 22 U.S. military veterans commit suicide each day, and though not all of them would fit the criteria for PTSD, many would—and a veteran named James Hardin might have been one of them.

• • •

James "CJ" Hardin, 37, served for more than seven years in the U.S. Army, half that time in

INSIDE, I FELT AS IF A DARK SPELL WAS LIFTING. I FELT LIGHT AND FREE. LATER, I REGRESSED TO THE AGE OF SEVEN.

gaine and ketamine to treat illnesses and conditions as common as cluster headaches and nicotine addiction. Microdosing LSD has also become popular, thanks in part to high-profile supporters such as author Ayelet Waldman, whose book *A Really Good Day: How Microdosing Made a Mega Difference in My Mood, My Marriage and My Life* came out earlier this year.

MDMA, or 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, was developed by German pharmaceutical company Merck in 1912. The drug existed with little fanfare until 1976, when American chemist Alexander "Sasha" Shulgin synthesized a batch in his Berkeley backyard

research is funded by governmental agencies, though most is sponsored by nonprofit organizations such as MAPS, the Heffter Research Institute and the U.K.'s Beckley Foundation.

According to Doblin, pure MDMA is good for "a million things," including assisting in couples therapy and treating eating disorders, anxiety associated with life-threatening diseases and possibly even schizophrenia. The correlation between what MDMA and PTSD do to the brain is particularly remarkable. PTSD increases activity in the amygdala, the brain's fear center, and decreases activity in the prefrontal cortex, the part responsible for



heavy combat zones: a year at Qayyarah Airfield West and a year at Camp Speicher, both in northern Iraq, and another year at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan. It goes without saying that he saw a lot of death, both in combat and while working in a mortuary in Iraq.

Hardin was one of 24 veterans and first responders accepted into the second MAPS MDMA study for PTSD in 2013. (The first study treated 20 victims of sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse.) Multiple tours and some trauma he experienced before entering the military left him with “treatment-resistant” PTSD, meaning he hadn’t responded to medication or therapy, just as I hadn’t. He had opted for an early administrative discharge, leaving behind a military career he’d been planning since he was a 13-year-old Air Force cadet.

Sipping a mimosa at a creek-side restaurant in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, Hardin is polite and personable. He looks you in the eye when he talks and smiles whenever he mentions his wife, Erin, an accountant for a coastal-conservation organization who bellydances and volunteers for a local sea-turtle rescue organization in her spare time; Hardin calls her Shine. They live 20 minutes away in a rental with a backyard garden and two cats and two dogs, one of which he rescued while stationed in Korea.

Thanks to the GI Bill, he has an associate’s degree in avionics, a field he has dreamed about since he first saw the film *Top Gun* as a boy. Down the line, when he and Shine are making more money, they might adopt a child. Right now they’re just enjoying spending time together, seeing friends, eating good food and being out in nature.

Prior to the study, Hardin spent almost a year hardly ever leaving an eight-by-10-foot Shasta camper he shared with his dog, and another year in a cabin with spotty heating and running water, three miles off the nearest road. He moved there after the lights from passing cars and some run-ins with the Ku Klux Klan made living closer to town difficult. Most days he drank a full bottle of vodka and smoked two packs of American Spirits and a lot of pot. If he did go out, he couldn’t look people in the eye. He was suicidal and suffering from a dissociative phenomenon called depersonalization, which caused him to experience himself in the third person.

The Veterans Administration had misdiagnosed Hardin as bipolar and denied him disability benefits. He had tried Alcoholics Anonymous as well as the VA’s group therapy and spent close to five years on an assortment of prescribed drugs: Ambien, Effexor, Ritalin



Top: James “CJ” Hardin. **Bottom:** Dr. Michael Mithoefer and Annie Mithoefer.

and a blood pressure medicine to stop the nightmares. None of them helped.

During his first MDMA session, Hardin felt safe for the first time in years, perhaps in his life. He tells me that he had resigned himself to never feeling safe again. By the time he had completed his third MDMA session, he and Shine had started talking about the future: relocating to Mount Pleasant and maybe even getting married (both of which they have since done).

Today Hardin is off all prescription medication. He has quit smoking, and if he does drink he keeps to a two-drink maximum. He says the PTSD is gone. None of this would have been possible if he hadn’t participated in a study conducted less than a mile away in the homey offices of Dr. Michael Mithoefer.

...

Michael Mithoefer and his wife, Annie Mithoefer, who conduct and oversee MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for PTSD in Mount

Pleasant, might be the ideal co-therapy team. He’s a psychiatrist specializing in PTSD and trained in eye movement desensitization reprocessing; he is also board certified in emergency medicine and was previously a clinical assistant professor at the Medical University of South Carolina. She’s a psychiatric and cardiac nurse. Michael Mithoefer maintains a small private practice specializing in PTSD while monitoring all MAPS-sponsored clinical trials.

Married 43 years, the Mithoefers have raised a family together, and both studied with Stanislav Grof, an early psychedelic pioneer and one of the founders of transpersonal psychology. Compassionate, intelligent, respectful of each other, they’re not the people you think of when you think of MDMA; they’re who you think of when you imagine ideal parents. That’s no accident: In a nod to the early researchers into psychedelics, many of them married couples—including Alexander and Ann Shulgin and Grof and his wife,

Christina—MAPS MDMA-assisted psychotherapy calls for a male-female co-therapy team. The reason for this is that it allows the subject to feel safe at all times. It also allows those who may regress during sessions to have corrective experiences with both of their “parents.”

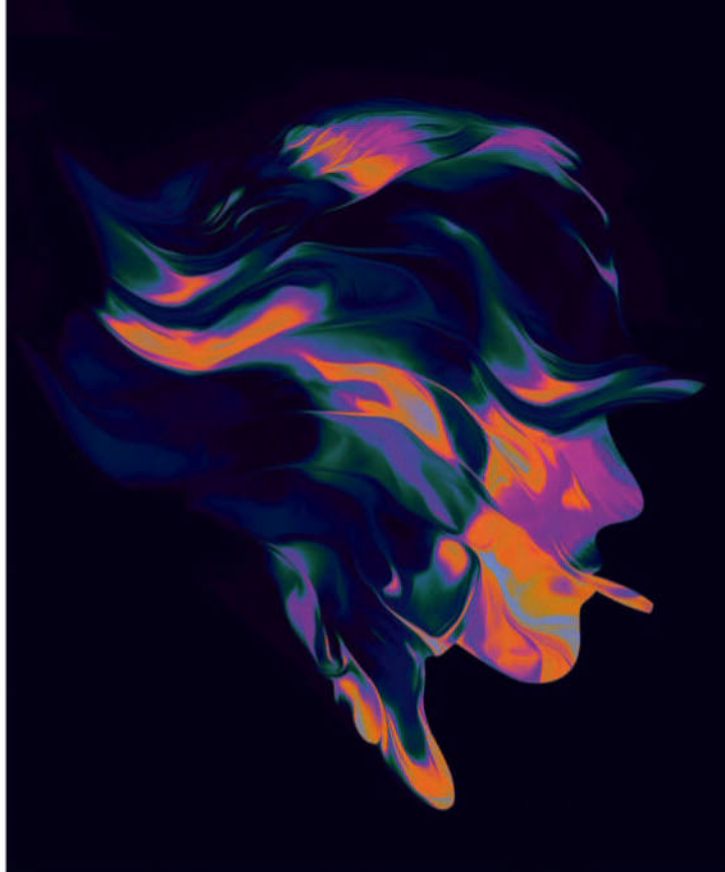
“We’re happy there are other treatments available,” says Michael Mithoefer, seated in the warmly lit office that doubles as his test site. “We’re not claiming this is the only treatment. It’s clear that a substantial proportion of people don’t respond to existing treatments, and that’s why we need more choice.”

Beyond the various therapeutic approaches, including eye movement desensitization reprocessing, cognitive behavioral therapy and prolonged exposure, the most common pharmaceutical treatments for PTSD are the antidepressants Zoloft and Prozac. Although they’re effective in decreasing suicidal thoughts, they appear to address only the symptoms and not the underlying causes of PTSD. As Doblin points out, the medications result in only about a six- to 10-point drop in the Clinical-Administered PTSD Scale for DSM-5, the VA’s standard for assessing the illness. MDMA-assisted psychotherapy has shown a 50-point drop on average. (The scale ranges from zero to 136.)

“People ask all the time if this is a cure,” says Michael Mithoefer. “I think a better term is maybe *durable remission*, because we don’t know. People can make so much progress and be free of symptoms that were debilitating before, yet if they get a strong enough trigger, it can happen that the symptoms come back.”

By the time I met the Mithoefers, I had been researching PTSD for months but had yet to begin my illicit sessions. My personal identification with the study’s subjects had become overwhelming. My anxiety was interfering with my cognitive abilities, something I hadn’t experienced before. I was having panic attacks and was also having trouble writing.

I arrived at Michael Mithoefer’s office on a muggy afternoon. Sinking into the sofa, I felt confident his glowing reputation was well earned. When Annie explained that many sexual-assault and childhood-abuse victims



suffer for decades, whereas veterans often find help sooner, usually after a decade, my heart dropped. I continued to interview them for my article, wanting to be professional. I never asked if they could help me because I didn’t want to jeopardize their practice.

The MAPS psychotherapy treatment includes three sessions with MDMA; the rest of the sessions involve 90 minutes of integrative talk therapy. Because it’s a double-blind clinical study, some subjects are initially administered a placebo and later given the option of participating again with full-dose (125 milligrams) MDMA sessions.

An MDMA-assisted psychotherapy session lasts eight hours. The therapeutic approach is nondirective; the idea is to let the subject’s unconscious lead the way, without therapists forcing any particular issue.

Subjects stay overnight with an attendant in case they need anything. The next day, they spend a few hours with the therapists, discussing what came up for them the day before. As Doblin explains—and I can attest—the initial integration process that takes place on that second day is essential to the subjects’ overall progress. Afterward, they return home, or to a nearby hotel if they’ve traveled for the study, and for a week they receive a daily call from the therapy team. Then they shift to weekly talk sessions until the next MDMA session is scheduled.

One of the reasons Doblin and Michael Mithoefer settled on MDMA for PTSD was

the existence of extensive clinical research showing that, when taken in moderate doses and in limited sessions, MDMA is sufficiently safe. Doblin estimates that governments all over the world have conducted \$300 million worth of research on the safety of the drug—including investigations into neurotoxicity, serotonin levels, driving under the influence and emotional processing, the findings of which are now all in the public domain.

Organized opposition to the research is all but nonexistent. In fact, marijuana research is far more contested. The biggest hurdle seems to be the enduring stigma that surrounds MDMA because of the cultural associations with being a Schedule I “drug of abuse.” Brad Burge, MAPS

director of communications, hopes that as people learn more about PTSD they will come to understand the importance of finding an effective additional treatment.

The work of making a drug into a medicine is scientific, but everything else—from the subjects you select to whom you choose to build alliances with—is political, not to mention part of a fraught cultural landscape that must be navigated with care. Ironically, some of the greatest roadblocks the treatment faces en route to the mainstream were laid down by Timothy Leary, whose pioneering work in the field of psychedelics was colored by his devotion to fighting the system.

“One of the big mistakes of the 1960s was people identifying as the counterculture,” Doblin says. “When the crackdown happened, psychedelics got wrapped up with Timothy Leary and the cultural revolution. When you self-identify as part of the counterculture, you check yourself out of things; you kind of marginalize yourself. You don’t ask the system to grow and change.”

It has been a year since I completed my MDMA-assisted psychotherapy. Like Hardin, I have experienced relief from my PTSD. I often think about the afternoon I spent with him, and my mind is still blown by the extent of his transformation. Now that I too am transformed, I know that MDMA-assisted psychotherapy is not an escape from reality. I believe it’s the opposite. It’s a reentry. ■



VICTOR KERLOW

"Sometimes I feel like she's just using me for sex...."



*Inspired by Renaissance painting and the glow of a perfect California day, our photographer follows Turkish American beauty **Sera Mann** through a villa nestled in the hills of Los Feliz. If life imitates art, consider this a very sincere form of flattery*



M U S I N G S

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
CHRISTOPHER VON STEINBACH

















KUMAIL NANJIANI

*With **The Big Sick**, the Silicon Valley scene-stealer weaves together an indie comedy, a love story and a hospital drama whose most harrowing turns come directly from his own life*

BY **SAM FRAGOSO** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHLOE AFTEL**

Q1: *In the movie of your life, what's the defining childhood scene we flash back to?*

NANJIANI: I was in the second grade, and the teacher wasn't in the classroom yet. We weren't supposed to leave or go to the restroom if the teacher wasn't there, but I had to pee really, really bad. The teacher just never came back, and then I was like, "All right, I have to run to the bathroom and do it." So I ran to the front of the class, but it was too late—I just started peeing. And I was making this sound while I was peeing, "Ahhhhhhh!" Everyone just shut up and watched me. It was like stand-up. I was standing in front, facing them. In a way, it was my first performance.

Q2: *Your career has progressed from stand-up comedy to TV to a leading role in a movie. How do you feel about acting?*

NANJIANI: Acting at its core is silly. It's like you're playing pretend. Ulti-

mately it's lame and stupid, but I love it and it's important to me, so I take it seriously. There will always be someone who talks about the importance of acting, but then you'll see their movie and it's fucking horrible. You don't get to talk like this, you know?

Q3: *What do you say to your friends when they make something bad?*

NANJIANI: I'll find the right thing to say that's not really lying and not really a compliment. It's the kind of lie that wouldn't hold up in court but would hold up on *The People's Court*—like, we know what you fucking did, but you don't go to jail for it. I'll say something like "That was such an interesting story."

Q4: *Are you hard on yourself when it comes to your own output?*

NANJIANI: I try not to be too hard on myself about stuff I've done in the past.

I'm always hard on myself in the present. But once it's done, if you're judging it, you're just living in regret, you know? I don't think being hard on myself is necessarily a good thing; I just can't avoid it.

Q5: *You and your wife, Emily Gordon, wrote **The Big Sick** together. It's your love story—including Emily being in a coma for a week. When Emily was really sick, was there a part of you that thought she wouldn't make it?*

NANJIANI: Oh yes. The hardest thing is when it's something that's such a big part of your life. Someone's sick and there's truly nothing you can do about it. It's such a profound helplessness. It's a person you love, a person who's normally responsive and has feelings, who might go away because of some body thing. The truth of it feels so vulgar—the fact that we come down to some





fucking cells not working right and then this beautiful world just goes away.

Q6: *There's a scene in which you ask your friends, "Is it okay that I'm not there right now?" Emily is in a coma, your relationship is on-again, off-again, and you're doing comedy. Do you ever contemplate an alternative time line in which you don't go back?*

NANJIANI: Emily and I talk about that. She's like, "What if I hadn't gotten sick? Would we still be together?" I don't know. And you can't say, "Well, thank God you got sick." She would say, "When we were dating, the idea that you would tell your parents about us seemed so outside your reality that unless something like this had happened, I don't think we'd ever have done it." Maybe we wouldn't be together. I was just scared. I didn't know what the fuck. I had no version of my life that made sense. I was just living day to day.

Q7: *So what made you go back?*

NANJIANI: When she was going under, I remember thinking, If she comes out of this, I'm going to marry her. It's like being in a horror movie, but it's also devastatingly sad. Part of it is that you get sucked in. In the movie, I go back because of guilt, but then I stay because I realize I'm in love with her. In reality, I think it was both. I had this guilt that was so self-involved, that guilt of "I should've been able to see this coming; why did I not understand how sick she was?" I still have that.

Q8: *The film doubles as a story about young creative people trying to make it. When did you know you had the goods to succeed in comedy?*

NANJIANI: It must have been in Chicago. I started in comedy at a point when there were a lot of people who were very good at it. I was lucky in that I didn't have a bad set until I'd been doing it for three or four months, whether it was because of my nervous energy or the fact that I really worked on my jokes. I wasn't ever like, "Oh, I'm going to make it"—and whatever "making it" means keeps evolving—but

in the beginning I realized I have the ability to write jokes that are different from other people's.

Q9: *Do you think any of the roles you've played are racist?*

NANJIANI: I play a lot of food-delivery guys. I've never played a 7-Eleven clerk; I've never played a fucking Dunkin' Donuts guy. I try to do parts that aren't defined by ethnicity. I did a string of small parts in big comedies—too many of them, and I'm not going to do those anymore—like *Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates*, *Central Intelligence* and *Fist Fight*. I did them because I wanted to get better at acting and make connections. I was trying to find stuff where the joke is not my character mispronouncing words or swearing wrong.

Q10: *What's the funniest experience you've had on a big-budget set?*

NANJIANI: I've definitely worked with people multiple days in a row and then realized they think I'm Kal Penn. They would talk about how much they loved *Harold & Kumar*. The number of us is so small that people just think "brown guy." The guy from *Life of Pi*—I get confused with him all the time. I was working with Karan Soni, who's a very funny Indian actor, and he said he'd done some movie and someone thought he was me. I was like, *All right, finally!*

Q11: *Do you dislike confrontation?*

NANJIANI: It depends on the day. Like, what the fuck is it going to take for you to see me as *me* and not some other person? Sometimes people will come up to me and say, "Hey, that joke of yours is really good" and it's Aziz Ansari's joke. I'll be like, "Oh, that wasn't me. That's the other one." I say that a lot. It's me being like, You know what? This awkwardness is going to be all yours. I'm not going to feel awkward about it.

Q12: *Does it frighten you to be a visible person of color in the age of Trump?*

NANJIANI: I think it would be more scary if I *wasn't* a visible person of color. I think being a known figure pro-

fects me a little more. It's much scarier to be like that guy who got killed in Oklahoma—it's fucking terrifying. I'm a lot more aware of my ethnicity in other states and cities than I am in Los Angeles. We have a vague, quick little joke about that in the movie. My brother and I are arguing when a family looks at us, and we say, "It's okay. We hate terrorists." That's basically a little joke, but as a brown person in America, you are aware of your ethnicity every waking moment.

Q13: *Since you have a sizable platform, do you feel you have a political obligation to speak out?*

NANJIANI: I used to think I didn't have any duty to stand up for anybody, but things are so scary now, I just feel the urge to do it as a person. It's crazy, but I also feel I'm probably not convincing anybody with this stuff. I don't think if I tweet, "Hey, Trump is causing brown people to be demonized in America; it makes us feel unsafe and my mom is scared to leave her house," it will convince anybody who's a major Trump supporter. I'm preaching to the choir.

Q14: *How do you stay sane in this climate?*

NANJIANI: I think you have to find balance. I was reading an interview with an expert on totalitarian regimes. He was saying you should give yourself a half hour a day to look up stuff that's going on and focus on one thing that can be your thing. Focus on health care, art, transgender rights, Islamophobia. Have that be the thing you want to try to protect in what little way you can.

Q15: *In the film, you're an Uber driver. Have you had any other bad employers in your life?*

NANJIANI: [*Laughs*] I had a shitty boss who was just a dick. She loved the power she had. I was working at the University of Chicago, and she would write letters and put them in my record like I was a fucking kid and she was a principal. I made the websites. Yeah, I know it's stereotypical, but I was bad at it.

Q16: *Do you have any unfinished comedy bits that you haven't been able to crack?*

I'VE NEVER PLAYED A 7-ELEVEN CLERK OR A DUNKIN' DONUTS GUY. I TRY TO DO PARTS NOT DEFINED BY ETHNICITY.



NANJIANI: There's one story about how Emily woke me up in the middle of the night and said, "What's that smell?" She couldn't figure out what it was because it's hard to google a smell. There's no Shazam for smells, you know? And anything in Google is like "Are you the only one who can smell it? You're going to die." Or "Can other people smell it? Everyone's going to die." But she convinced herself it was probably a wire inside the wall that was on fire. So we called 911 and were like, "This isn't serious. Please don't send anybody, but we think there's something." Two minutes later, three fire trucks show up at our house and I have to open the door. I'm like this little guy, and these fucking fire-

men say, "Oh, the smell—do you mean the skunk?" I yell up to Emily, "Honey, it was a skunk!" And she says, "Oh right. Yup, that's what that is."

Q17: *Comedians are known for being sharply attuned to pain. Is it worth it?*

NANJIANI: I'm fairly neurotic. I'm a worrier. I feel a lot of guilt over *everything*. And honestly, this election has changed me. I'm a generally optimistic person and I think things are going to turn out fine. Last year, seeing all the negativity flying around changed my outlook. I realized that progress isn't guaranteed. People have to work for it. Since World War II, the world sort of knew what was right and what was wrong—we were moving in the right

direction. Now it feels as though we're going backward.

Q18: *You and Emily got married almost exactly 10 years before *The Big Sick's* premiere date. What have you learned after being with someone for a decade?*

NANJIANI: What's been good about marriage is that it allows us both to be better versions of ourselves. She allows me to be a better person, and I hope I allow her to do the same. The other thing I learned is that relationships aren't static; they're always evolving. We've gotten better at being married to each other. I'm also excited to see where it goes. We're going to be together forever. My parents are still together and her parents are still together. I've always thought of marriage as something you do only when you definitely want to stay with the person.

Q19: *With all that has happened—a marriage your family considered sacrilegious, a career in comedy instead of medicine—how are you getting along with your parents?*

NANJIANI: For them, my life didn't make a lot of sense, which I understand because it *doesn't* make any sense. They would watch my stuff and not talk about it, but they visited me on the set of this movie—the first time they ever visited me on a set. I didn't give my parents enough credit. I really thought this was something we wouldn't be able to work out, and we're still working it out, but the fact that our relationship has evolved in this way means they've made compromises I didn't think they were capable of. I underestimated them.

Q20: *Getting back to the movie, Emily's mom, played by Holly Hunter, has this great line: "We're all just winging it." Is that a personal motto?*

NANJIANI: Yeah. I think that's one of the things the movie is about. You know when you're a kid and your parents are superheroes who can do anything, and then you grow up and realize they're just trying to figure it out? I have friends who now have kids and they're like, "I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm just trying to keep this thing alive!" My mom was 17 when she had me, and I think one of the challenges of my life has been figuring out how to grow up. You have to figure out how to have an adult relationship with your parents, how to see them as peers. Part of seeing each other as grown-ups is knowing that nobody knows the secret. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
**JENNIFER
STENGLIN**

Court

and Spark

Summer comes early when model, poet and songwriter *Jessi M'Bengue* takes a day off to revel in the California sun



















A close-up, dark, and grainy photograph of a person's eye peering through a small, irregular hole in a textured, brownish-grey wall. The lighting is dramatic, with the eye being the brightest point in the scene. The overall mood is mysterious and unsettling.

Monsters

SOMETIMES LOVE EMERGES
FROM THE STRANGEST OF PLACES



After the Super Bowl I shot my dog and was fired from the NFL. By the following winter I had lost all my money and friends and was roaming the earth homeless and hated. No longer a football star, I was seen as a hulking, dog-killing monster with a deformed and hideous face. I was beaten so badly by the people of a town in New Jersey that I nearly died. Cold, bruised and wretched, I came to rest in a hole.

When I regained consciousness I found myself in total darkness. Feeling around, I discovered I was in a tiny room whose only egress was an air duct near the floor. I squeezed my bruised body into the duct and crawled until I reached a metal wall. A thin space between duct and wall allowed me to slide out. I stood in a small alley. What I had thought was the wall was an industrial-size Dumpster. I shoved it against the opening of the duct to seal off my hiding place. The sky was dark. I saw streetlights in the distance.

I ventured out from the alley and found a sleeping town with strip malls, mom-and-pop shops, a few apartment buildings and family homes with small green lawns. The license plates of parked cars told me I was still in New Jersey. A clock on a bank said three A.M.

Skulking in the dark, I avoided being seen by the few people who were out at that hour. From Dumpsters behind convenience stores and restaurants I gathered loaves of bread past their sell-by date and containers of half-eaten chicken fried rice. I climbed back into my air duct before dawn and pulled the Dumpster up against it before I retreated to my pitch-black enclosure, an empty closet or laundry room whose doorway must have been sealed off at some point. I ate and slept.

I woke, crawled out of my hole in the wee hours, foraged for food, returned to my hole and so on, for many days and nights until my sleep was disturbed one evening, earlier than I was accustomed to waking up, by the inhabitant of the apartment whose disused closet I had

made my home. Before then I must have slept so soundly in my wounds that her movements had not disturbed me. I saw a pinprick of light about chest-high on the wall between the apartment and my dark little space—a tiny hole. I stood up, hunched over awkwardly, and put my eye to the hole. The inhabitant was a young woman about my age, very small, with a grayish complexion and tiny needlelike features, the sort of person who, if I had condescended to notice her at all when I was a football star, I would have disdained and thought ugly. The apartment she lived in was small, with dingy beige walls not painted for many years, and cheap, worn, secondhand furniture.

I observed the woman that evening and many evenings after, from the time she came home until she went to bed. She made a simple meal of chicken or fish or hamburger—all of which came in shallow Styrofoam dishes wrapped tightly with transparent plastic—and ate it with a wilted salad, or a frozen vegetable that she invariably overcooked. She never made phone calls, so I did not hear her voice. She did not appear

to own a TV, radio, computer or smartphone. After dinner she remained at the dull wooden dining table of her one-room apartment beneath a lightbulb suspended from the ceiling and covered with a plastic shade. She stared at something I could not see and wept silently, shoulders shaking, her tiny needlelike features bunched together in anguish. Then she stood up, cleared and washed the dishes, changed into her nightgown, climbed into bed, turned out the light and went to sleep.

Her routine remained unvaried for at least a month—though my sense of the passage of time during that period was vague. My routine changed in that I became better at foraging for healthy food—thank you, NFL nutritionists, for teaching me about a balanced diet. I thought often about leaving fresh organically grown vegetables and quinoa salads in the refrigerator of my new housemate, but I sensed that would frighten her,

and not only did she seem to have enough emotional disturbance in her life already, but I had come to look forward so much to watching her nightly routine that I did not want to risk disrupting it. When she arrived home my heart rate increased. When she ate dinner I sighed at the blandness of her food. When she cried my heart swelled with sadness. When she climbed into her bed, whose headboard was directly below the hole through which I spied on her, I got tired, lay down on the closet floor and slept for an hour before rousing myself for my nightly excursion into the world. During the wee hours I now not only foraged for food, I also exercised. I did push-ups and pull-ups and crunches, I ran five miles and did yoga and qi-gong. I did not exchange a word with anyone and no one ever saw me up close. Mine was a lonely life, but not as lonely as when I'd been in the NFL and had an entourage of friends and a constantly changing roster of beautiful women to have sex with. I wouldn't say that I was happy during this time of living in the closet but I was less unhappy than before, despite having to shit between parked cars.

One evening the woman I lived with came home very agitated. She placed on her dining table a thin, rectangular object inside a brown paper bag. She sat in her little wooden chair at the table in front of the object and stared at it. She stood up and paced around, landing occasionally on her bed, or by the small window whose view I could not see from my vantage, or in front of the fridge, and then back to the dining table. She moved the object to her bed, hastily made and ate her drab dinner, did

ILLUSTRATION BY RODRIGO CORRAL STUDIO



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not linger at the table afterward, did not cry, but cleared and washed the dishes and went to bed earlier than usual. She did not immediately turn out the light as I had seen her do every night until now. She sat with her back against the headboard, holding her knees, rocking slightly and staring down at the parcel beside her. She did this for a long time, then placed the parcel on the floor beneath her bed and turned out the light. I became sleepy as I usually did, but lying on the floor of the closet, I heard her tossing about restlessly in bed on the other side of the wall. It took her—and me—hours to fall asleep that night. I ended up missing my nightly foray out of doors, and we both woke up the next morning exhausted, cranky and, in my case, hungry.

The following day was miserable for me. I had not eaten in more than 24 hours, I could not go outside for fear of being seen and brutalized, and I did not want to violate what had become for me the sanctified space of the young woman's apartment, so I spent the whole day in the small dark space that used to be a closet and now was my home, ravenous and unable to sleep. As the light began to wane in her apartment I knew she would be home soon. The muscles of my legs, which all day had felt tight and cramped, began to loosen and relax, and a general state of ease and well-being supplanted the angry and sorrowful thoughts that had taken root in me that morning. She walked in the door and looked around the place with quick movements of her head as if she knew someone was watching her. With her coat still on she sat abruptly at her table and remained immobile for some time, as if in deep meditation or a quandary. She stood up, made, ate and cleaned up her dinner more hastily than usual. Again she did not cry but rushed into her nightgown and sat on the edge of her bed, staring down at the brown parcel next to her. Her hands reached toward the parcel and drew back, several times. Finally she opened it, a lion tearing apart a gazelle. Inside was a book, a hardcover without a dust jacket. No title on the cover that I could see. She put it back down on the bed and sat next to it, rocking back and forth slightly, eyes squeezed shut. Her breathing was fast and on her gray cheeks two faint pink spots appeared. Finally she climbed into bed and opened the book to page one. I was in a good position to see the page she was reading, but my eyesight had been compromised in the beating I'd received, and the print was small, so I was unable to read it. From the bright page with its unintelligible markings, my gaze wandered to the top of her

head, thinly covered with dull brown hair; to the room, with its old worn carpet and yellowed walls dully illuminated by her bedside lamp; to her shoulders, covered by the threadbare nightgown and heaving up and down with her quick, labored breaths. After what could not have been more than 10 minutes of reading she threw the book on the floor. She turned off the light and, despite her apparent effort, was unable to sleep for several hours.

Hungry and weak, I tiptoed out into the night, retrieved my food and returned to my provisional home without jogging or doing calisthenics. After eating I fell asleep, angry with my companion for disrupting the routine that had helped me regain my equilibrium. But I was awakened soon after by a banging noise. I peered through the hole and in the brown light of dawn I saw her, still in bed, fighting off an invisible assailant. She woke with a start, looked around and launched into a particularly intense fit of her silent weeping. I felt now like an ass for having been angry with her. I didn't understand the significance of the book, or why she seemed to be forcing herself to read it, but I sensed she was deliberately undertaking a difficult labor, and I respected her for doing so.

The next several nights were the same: agitation, a hasty meal, nightgown, hesitation before the book, 10 minutes of reading, lights out, a poor night's sleep that I felt compelled to watch over, my quick foray into the world, her dawn nightmare, tears and off to work, or wherever she went during the day. I was so concerned for her that my own daytime sleeping was poor as well. We were both tired all the time now. Though I fought against this, my respect for her was waning. She had a goal, her attempts to achieve it were unsatisfactory, but she was doing the same thing over and over again. I've found, in life, that if you want to achieve something, you need a plan, and if your plan is not a success, you make another. I realized I would not be able to help her unless I knew what her book was about, so the following night, during one of her brief periods of fitful sleep, I crept out into the world, and in addition to gathering my usual vegetables, fruits and grains, I broke into a toy store and stole a children's telescope. I slept poorly that day, not, as on previous days, because I was concerned for her or annoyed with her, but because I was excited about being able to read her book with her, for the 10 or so minutes she could bear to read it.

When she arrived home she looked different. She had had her hair done and was wearing a new satin purple dress with a somewhat

abstracted floral print, not a beautiful dress—she had terrible taste, even someone on a budget didn't have to buy a dress like that. She also appeared calmer than I had seen her in days, maybe ever. She ate more slowly than she'd been doing, and at bedtime she put on a new nightgown—yellow, also ugly—which she'd evidently bought that day as well. She still paused on the edge of her bed before picking up the book, but her movements were more deliberate. She climbed into bed, turned on her bedside lamp and commenced reading. I brought my telescope up to the hole and read also. The book was evidently a novel narrated by a young woman. On the page my roommate was reading, the young woman spends an afternoon shopping, first for clothes, then for food. Then she is walking down the street thinking of her job and some minor problems she faces there. She arrives home and a man is sitting on her living room couch. She refers to him only as "he." She is frightened when she sees him, runs into her bedroom and closes her door. He is much stronger than she, and forces the door open, though she is holding it shut with all her might. He chases her around the room, grabs her, yanks her clothes off and throws her on the bed. She is frightened, but also aroused. I hadn't had a clue what she was reading, and would never have guessed it was this. I was appalled; this was not at all who I thought she was, or who I wanted her to be. She read for longer this time—until the sex between the narrator and "he" was over, the narrator deeply satisfied. Rather than throw the book to the floor, she put it down calmly next to her on the bed, opened to an especially sensational page. Then she reached under her nightgown and began slowly to touch herself. I couldn't believe it, I didn't know what to feel or think, I was numb, and continued to watch her through my telescope. Her movements became bigger and faster, her whole body involved now, her legs bent, her feet pushing against the mattress. A fury overtook her, and when she reached her climax, she uttered a long shout. Both my hands on the telescope, I climaxed too, having heard, for the first time, the sound of her voice. She wept again, with sounds this time, not in anguish, but in relief, or so I imagined. She turned out the light and fell asleep. I sat in the closet for an hour experiencing many and various feelings, and then went out into the night. Trying to calm down, I ran for hours until finally I exhausted myself. I didn't have the patience to eat my usual fruits and grains and vegetables, so I broke into a health food store, stole a few protein drinks and guzzled



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them. I came home to my closet and slept so hard I didn't hear her wake up and leave the apartment. I continued to sleep all day, like someone's well-cared-for pet cat.

When I woke up I knew what had happened the previous night. At some point, probably after she bought the book but before she bought the dress, nightgown and haircut, she'd figured out that I was in her closet watching her. And she liked it. I didn't know if she knew my identity, but I suspected she knew at least that I was a man. I associated sex with the miserable life I'd left behind and I hadn't been ready, the night before, for the boldness of her performance, or my reaction to it, but the following night I eagerly awaited her arrival.

She had another new dress on, red this time, and again ate her dinner slowly and deliberately, to tantalize me, which she succeeded in doing. She put on another new nightgown—she always changed into her nightgowns after her shower, in the bathroom, where I couldn't see her. She climbed into bed and picked up the book to-night with no hesitation. She had not once, in the time I'd known her, glanced up toward the hole in the wall through which I observed her. In bed, she began to read, and so, in the closet, with my telescope, did I. The book was banal. She rammed her up against a car this time. I was sure a scene on a horse was next. That didn't matter. What mattered was her excitement, and her dedication to her task. I realized now that she'd known I was in there before she bought the book, that I was the reason she'd bought the book, that all her fear and hesitation and seeming anguish in relation to the book was to do with shyness or embarrassment about performing for the eyes of a stranger who was watching her and whom she could not see. I appreciated how courageous she was and how dedicated to pleasing me, which clearly also pleased her.

Within five minutes of opening the book she was touching herself, and there was one clear course of action for me—what she had been waiting for me to do and what I had wanted to do without knowing it. I am very big and very strong. I burst through the wall next to the bed and was on her before she knew what was happening. She screamed. I'd expected her to but her scream did not arouse me as I'd thought it would. She

thrashed about beneath me and tried to punch me but couldn't—she is half my size. “No! No!” she cried. I thought this was playacting but I didn't love her voice as I had the previous night, and I just couldn't get going. She was crying, and I looked at her face, those little bunched-up pointy features, and saw real suffering. I had made a terrible mistake, worse, I felt, than any I'd made in my life. I retreated to the far corner of her apartment, sat on the floor, put my head in my hands and said “I'm sorry” over and over. From somewhere she produced a pistol, and walked slowly toward me, aiming it at my chest. “Get out!” Her face and her voice betrayed such pain that all I could do was weep.

SHE RETRIEVED HER PISTOL, STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM, AIMED.

“I don't imagine you'll ever believe me but I had no intention to hurt you. I made an awful mistake. I thought you knew I was there when you were reading. I thought you wanted me to.”

“What? Where?”

“In the little space that used to be a closet, behind your bed.”

“What space? You get out of my house now! Get out! Get out!”

She wept too, bitterly. I removed my head from my hands. She was standing over me now. I saw that she was weeping because she wanted to shoot me but she couldn't. I wished she could.

“I'm going, I'm going, and I'll never come back, I promise. I only hope that you can—”

“Don't you dare say it.”

“—that you can manage not to let my

mistake continue to hurt you. It's not.... I'm not worth it, I'm just a fool.”

“You're a lot worse than that,” she said, and kicked me in the back as I left her apartment through the door.

I spent the next two hours in the bushes across the street from the front of her building, waiting to see if she would call the police. She didn't. I then roamed around aimlessly for the rest of the night, imagining the terror and anguish she must have been feeling, alone in her room, and also knowing I had no idea what she was feeling, or who she was, or why she had behaved as she had during the months I'd watched her. These were, I am certain, more thoughts about another person, and more yearning to know another person, than I had experienced in my life. Accompanying them was the knowledge that I would never know her, could never go back to her apartment, could never try to find her outside of it.

But I could try to do one nice thing for her. I hunted up the supplies I needed, fell asleep in a bog at the edge of town, woke up and returned to the closet through the air duct in the alley, which luckily she had not secured. I set about repairing the hole I'd made in her wall, and plastered and painted my handiwork to match the rest of the room as best I could. Then I returned to the closet to await her reaction. She came in that evening, saw the new wall and stared at it for a long time. She shuddered. She

made dinner, that same lousy dinner she always made. She was back to wearing her drab clothes instead of the new ones, and her hair had lost its shape. There are no other words for it—I loved her. I wanted the best possible life for her, even though it would be a life without me. When she had cleaned up dinner, she went to the small table beside her bed, retrieved her pistol, stood in the middle of the room, aimed it at the tiny hole in the wall through which I peered at her and said, “You're in there, aren't you, Madame Bovary?”

“Madame who?”

“Oh, you're not a big reader? I thought you were.”

“You knew I was back there while you were reading?”

“No!”



"I thought you knew——"

"So you mentioned in our last conversation, the one after you tried to rape me."

"That's not what I was doing, I promise! I don't want to hurt you!"

"You mentioned that as well."

"I'm so sorry."

She stood silent for a long time. "The weird thing is I believe you."

"You believe I'm sorry?"

"And the other stuff."

"God, I'm an idiot."

"Yeah."

"I'll go now. I just wanted to repair the damage I'd done. To your wall."

"You wanted to see me too."

"Okay, yes. But I can go now."

"I've had a very messed-up life."

"What?"

"I've had a very messed-up life. So have you." She was still pointing the pistol at me, through the wall. "I was trying to work through something, with that book; it was personal and private, and you violated my privacy, and you violated me."

"Well, but——"

"*You violated me.*"

"I know."

We stood there a while longer.

"You can see me but I can't see you," she said.

"Do you want to see me?"

"You're pretty scary-looking."

"I know."

"Don't break down my wall again." We stood there some more. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

I went out through the back of the closet and came around to the front of the building. She buzzed me in. When I knocked on her apartment door she said, "It's open. Come in, lock it behind you and sit down at the table." I did. She was over by her bed, pointing the pistol at me. "I'll just keep pointing this at you."

"No problem."

"You can't ever do anything like that again."

"Okay."

We remained still for a full five minutes, looking at each other.

"Now get out of here."

She kicked me again on my way out the door. This time I enjoyed it.

Till two A.M. I lay on an abandoned, half-completed highway overpass and looked at the few stars visible in a sky dirtied by city

lights. Then I foraged twice my usual vegan banquet from the garbage bags behind the health food store, the problem of world hunger created and solved in miniature every night in this genteel suburb.

The following evening after the sun went down and before she returned from work, I moved the huge Dumpster in the alley, bricked up the old air vent and returned the Dumpster to its place. In the dense shrubs across from her building, I sat in the dirt awaiting her arrival. In every city and town are bogs, shrubs and drab one-room homes unobserved by most citizens. We monsters inhabit them, and pass quietly along the edges of life as it is generally understood.

She arrived at her building and went into her little room. For half an hour I felt her in

SHE KICKED ME AGAIN ON MY WAY OUT THE DOOR. THIS TIME I ENJOYED IT.

there moving around uncertainly, waiting for me. I rang her buzzer. She let me in. In silence I cooked our feast and we ate it. I cleared and washed the dishes and put them away. I sealed the leftovers and placed them in the fridge for her lunch the next day.

She stood up and told me to sit back down at the table in the little chair that faced away from the bed. I did. She retrieved the book and placed it on the table in front of me, open to the page where we'd left off.

"Read this aloud to me. Don't move from the chair. Don't turn around."

I nodded.

"I mean it."

"Okay."

I heard her walk to the bed behind me. The springs squeaked. Cloth rustled.

"Begin."

I tried to read aloud but shame and meager skills made my reading halting and slow. After a few minutes I heard her walk toward me. As she snatched the book from the table in front of me I caught a glimpse of her thin naked arm and breast. Never had I been so overwhelmed with desire. I gripped the edge of the table to prevent myself from moving. She returned to the bed, where I could not see her. She made hardly any noise for the next 10 minutes until she shouted once again as she came. A few minutes later she asked me gently to leave.

"May I kiss you good night?"

"Yes."

I tucked the blankets around her and she offered me her cheek.

We continued to do this every night for months until one night she invited me to disrobe and climb into her bed. My enormous convex body embraced her tiny angular body. Making love with her was very much like fucking all those voluptuous football enthusiasts, and it was also like an interspecies merger with a miniature Christmas tree whose roots went down into the earth, came out the other side and extended into space for millions of miles.

Now I live here in our little room. I cook breakfast and lunch at a soup kitchen. I've grown a beard and wear a hat. My hair has turned white. No one where I work seems to know who I am, and if they do they don't care, my brothers and sisters who after their meals disappear again through the cracks in the world.

I come home to her in the evening. I teach her about edible plants and fungi and she teaches me how to read and write. We have told each other a small fraction of the stories of our lives. Sometimes in the dark hours of the morning this strange, brave knight in the pathetic armor of her own skin wakes up next to me in terror. Some nights it is I who wake up in terror.

My nightmares are all the same. He is running toward me, happy to see me, and I shoot him. Not, as in real life, in a blind, drunken rage, but for no reason at all. He's running toward me and I'm shooting him and I can't not do it. I hold him in my arms as he dies. He looks up at me, bewildered and imploring. My poor dog, I loved him so. ■

That's
ART, mate....



Jim Murray
2017



PLAYMATE

R O A D

W A R R I O R

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **STEPHAN WÜRTH**





Elsie Hewitt is used to causing a little confusion. A rare amalgam of warmth, world-tested savvy and undeniable sex appeal, our June Playmate gets that people have a hard time accepting what they don't understand, especially when it comes to those who refuse to be lumped into society's rigid categories. The first thing you notice may be her body—curves that seemingly defy the laws of physics, or at least average genetics—but like any beautiful woman, Elsie is so much more than her corporeality.

Born and raised in London until the age of 10, when she moved to her current home of Los Angeles, Elsie is self-possessed and precocious, seemingly older than her 21 years. She carries herself with the air of a young woman who has *lived*, perhaps because she has. "I've been working since I was 15, and I'm totally independent," she explains. Then again, this old soul is not without an element of wide-eyed innocence. "Recently, I've been realizing not everyone has the same heart I do. There's a lot that people don't know about me," she admits. "I'm very sensitive, even though many people just see me as another sexy girl on Instagram."

Needless to say, Elsie's Insta feed doesn't tell the whole story. When she isn't modeling, she's absorbed in acting classes (she cites Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton and Faye Dunaway as three of her favorite actors), and she's the nurturer among her friends. "I always have advice to give," she says. "I'm like a mama." As for men, she doesn't have a type, but one physical trait stands out. "Teeth are important," she says. And when it comes to her own appearance, she's legitimately low-maintenance. "I don't care about looking perfect," she says. "I don't wear makeup. I just got my first haircut in six years. My hair was down to my butt. I chopped off 12, 13 inches, and it's still long."

Don't think Elsie isn't acutely aware of what she's doing when it comes to what she shows and doesn't show of herself—or the fact that a "sexy image" is often taken at face value. "Nude photography is about vulnerability, the beauty of the picture," she says. "It's not about sexualizing or objectifying myself. But everybody's going to have their own opinion. You can't please everyone. You just have to live your life and do what you want."







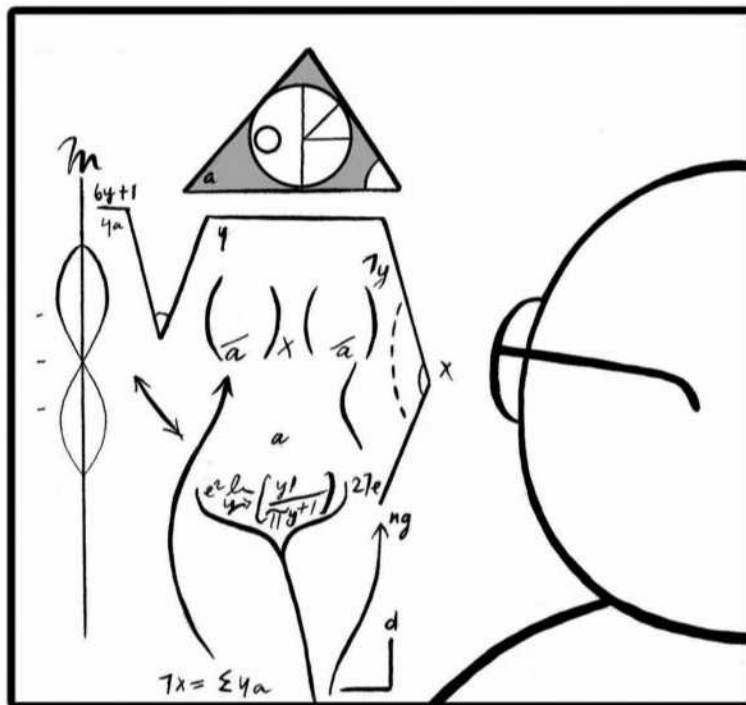
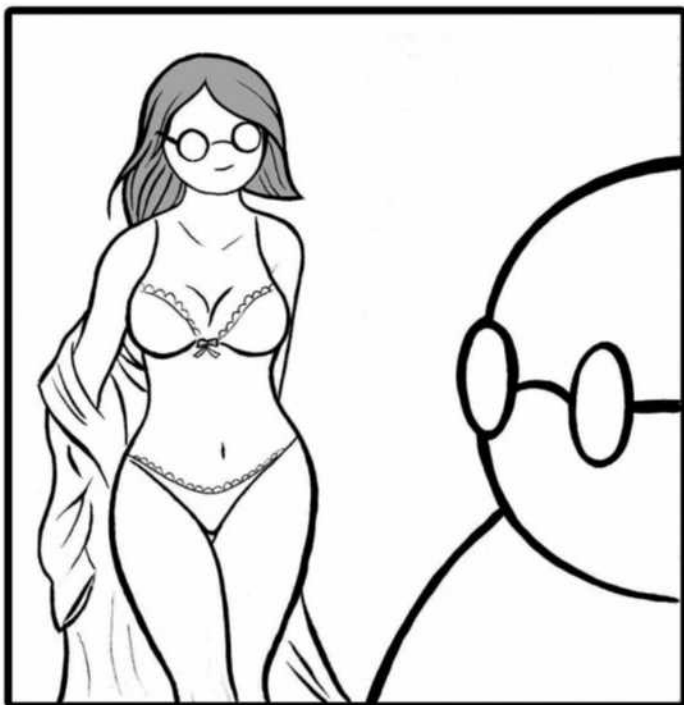
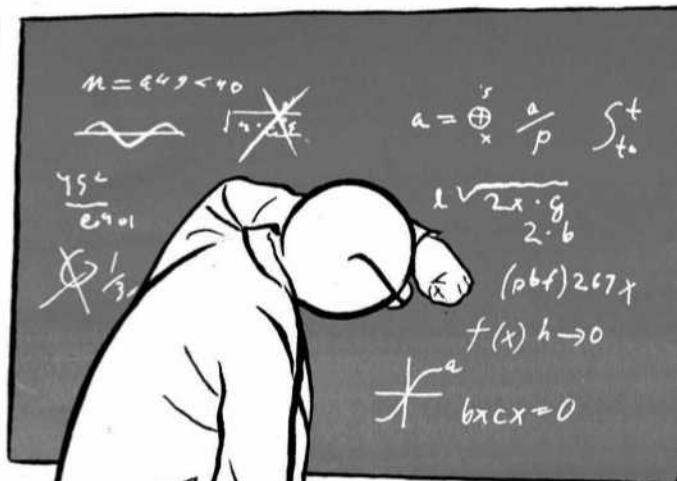


California
6MMR128





You know, Dr. Loring, there's more to life than math.

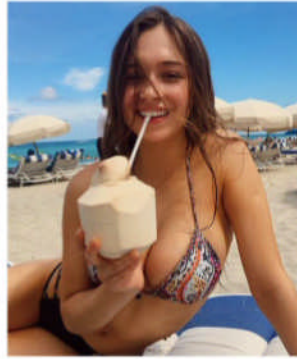
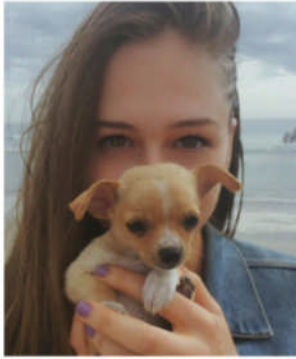








DATA SHEET



AGE: 21 **BIRTHPLACE:** London, U.K. **CURRENT CITY:** Los Angeles, California

LIVE AND HELP LIVE

No matter where I am, who I meet or what I'm doing, I'm always kind and warm to people, because you never know what's going on in someone else's life. There's so much hate and anger in the world as it is. Everybody should be lifting each other up, especially women. There are enough men who are awful to women; we all need to be nicer to each other.

INSTA-GIRL

Sometimes I wish Instagram didn't exist, but it's such a big part of the modeling industry and of our lives, so I use it to my advantage. I have the power in my own hands to show what I want to show. Pictures are often one-dimensional, but there's a personality behind the image. There's an essence and a spirit—that's what I love.

THE POWER OF NO

I've been told no countless times because of the way I look. If part of me feels discouraged by that, I use it as ammunition to work harder. I just continue to shoot and create on my own.

MY REAL PASSION

My favorite thing is going to restaurants to eat. Italian food is probably my favorite, especially pasta. I also love a really good steak. I like filet mignon with béarnaise sauce. And I have a huge sweet tooth. I love desserts. I love food.

MY IDEA OF ROMANCE

It doesn't have to be a grand gesture. It doesn't have to be expensive. I think time is the most valuable thing. More than anything, I appreciate quality time when you feel you're really connecting with someone.

MY TAKE ON LOVE

It's the best thing in the world. I love to love, but it's not replaceable. It's not rational. It's not something you can decide with your brain. Your brain will tell you one thing, but your heart will do something completely different. You know what's right. You know what's wrong. Sometimes it just gets to the point where you're like, "I don't even know what I'm doing."

PREACHING POSITIVITY

It's a cliché, but it's important to be positive and believe in yourself, because what you put out is exactly what you'll get back. Think how many unhappy people there are in the world who don't realize that happiness is a choice. I think life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent the way you react to it. If you believe and hope, things will be okay.

@elsiehewitt









Porn *to the* People

How Dan Savage's Hump! festival grew from an indie-porn bazaar into a righteous kink army

Our story begins two summers ago in a sweaty North Portland bar. I'm shouldering my way through a packed crowd, a pint glass dripping down my arm in the August heat, looking for people who seem like they would fuck on camera.

But what do porn stars in Portland, Oregon look like? Do they wear plaid shirts and thick-rimmed glasses? Do they have keys jittering from the loop of their blue jeans? Is it the girl with the deepest cleavage? The guy with the gropiest expression?

It turns out the porn stars are the quiet ones at the back table I've walked past twice already.

There's Jenna, a sparkly-eyed, blue-haired photographer in cat-eye glasses. There's Ryan, a PHP coder with a razor-sharp jawline who explains that before making porn he acted in a local *Star Trek* performance group. Amory Jane, or AJ, and her husband, Steven, are a polyamorous couple who've been married for more than five years. She's a 31-year-old sex educator with big blue doll eyes and a flashbulb smile. He's a lanky 37-year-old bartender and singer, a guy with aw-shucks good looks who can't keep his hands out of his mess of blond hair. Before we talk, AJ orders a hamburger and yanks up her skirt to show us the freshly inked flowers climbing her hip bone.

Looking at her bikini line so soon after shak-

ing her hand, I reflect that this is the sort of thing I expect when talking to a porn star—a feeling reinforced a few minutes later when someone pulls out a phone and queues up one of the amateur porn films they've made together. Suddenly, AJ is getting nailed in a shower by both Steven and Ryan as Steven sings Journey's "Any Way You Want It."

The group, along with friends, made this movie and others to submit to Hump!, an amateur film festival that started in Seattle, sprouted a Portland version a few years later and now tours the country. (In 2015 it played to 20,000 people in the Pacific Northwest alone; last year it hit 27 U.S. cities.) When we meet, AJ and her friends say they intend to make one more film—and this time they're determined to take Hump!'s top prize.

That was the story I planned to write: how an amateur porn gets made.

But in the nearly two years since that night at the bar, it became a lot more than a story about on-camera sex. It became a story about all the ways the world tells people to have sex, about the fear that comes with being honest about our most primal selves. It became a story about AJ, a woman who aggressively knows what sort of sex she wants to have, and the consequences that come with that knowledge. And it became a story about me, and all the things I didn't know I had to learn.

• • •

Dan Savage admits that the idea of starting an amateur porn festival was kind of a joke—a full-page advertisement he and a colleague placed in *The Stranger*, the Seattle newspaper he runs, "just to see what we could get." But when submissions started flooding into the office—movies of straight sex, gay sex, trans

sex, no sex and every sexual fetish from peeing on trampolines to being smeared with cake—Savage realized they'd unintentionally created a sex-positive celebration that cheers on every imaginable kink with equal vigor.

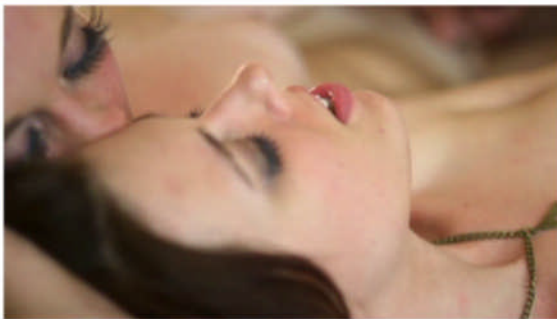
That tends to take first-time Hump! attendees by surprise. "Initially people are thrown back in their chairs. You're a straight guy watching hardcore gay porn, or you're a gay guy watching cunnilingus," Savage says. But then the mood changes.

"Everyone is cheering and clapping after every film. At first all anybody can see is the differences. And halfway through everyone starts to see the similarities, or that everything is exactly the same," he says.

Hump! offers its contributors the promise of on-camera sex with no nasty, long-lasting consequences. Cell phones are forbidden at the festival, and the films are destroyed after they're screened. As Savage often repeats, "Porn stars in a movie theater for a weekend," not "for all eternity on the internet."

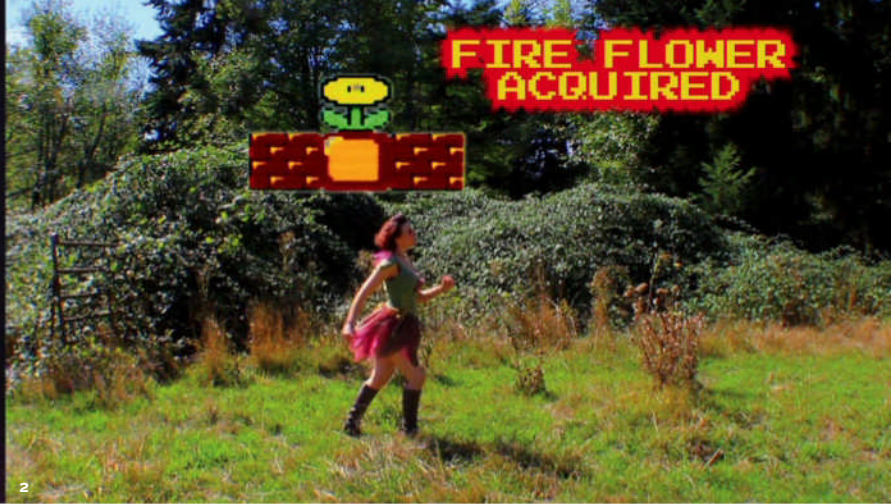
Because of that, in 12 years Hump! has become something of an artisanal counterpoint to the mainstream adult-film world. It is the porn of the people. Nine-to-fivers, parents, couples, bi, straight, gay, lesbian, queer, trans, polyamorous, kinky—people who would never spread their legs for the internet will do so, unblinkingly, for Hump! Savage says the films often steer clear of any resemblance to mainstream porn. That irks people who aren't used to porn that doesn't feature "a giant dick flying in and out of a pussy," he says, adding that "porn is in the eye of the beholder."

The audience votes on the sexiest, kinkiest and funniest films, which take home \$2,000 each; best in show gets \$5,000. Movies come from all over the country now, so to make it to the big screen, filmmakers had better have a hell of a good idea. And when we talk, AJ and her friends say they know they'll win.



A scene from *Level Up* starring Amory Jane.

ILLUSTRATION BY THE RED DRESS



“There should be porn out there that pushes some boundaries.”

For their first submission, the group made *D&D Orgy*, in which a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* turns into a 20-sided dice-throwing fuck pile. Two years later, they submitted *Humparaoke*. Both made it into Hump!, and both were a far cry from anything you'd find on Pornhub: The actors laugh and smile, and there are moments of awkwardness. That has always been the group's goal, they explain to me back at the bar: to show *real* sex, in all its rawness and honesty. Yes, there's a thrill in having sex on a big movie screen—but the point, for them, is to push a new brand of porn out into the world.

“Straight people are terribly behind everyone else in their porn,” AJ says between bites of her burger. “There should be porn out there that some straight people could enjoy and that pushes some boundaries.”

To this group, that means porn that shows consent and is ethically produced—porn with a message that goes beyond hot sex.

“We want to be the change we want to see in the world,” AJ says (and it's hard not to wonder for a moment if a Gandhi quote has been applied to porn before).

They have just six weeks to make a pornographic magnum opus.

On the way home from the bar, my mind is tangled up in something AJ said: that straight people like me are terribly behind. Lately in progressive Portland, the city where I grew up, to identify as a straight, married liberal female can feel almost conservative. I'm not young, and I'm not old, but I feel out of touch.

I acknowledge that's in part because my sexuality hasn't come with much struggle. I haven't had to come out to my family. I haven't had to fight with politicians over which bathroom I can pee in. I was never bullied because of my sexuality, never scared to be who I am.

Before I met AJ and her friends, I assumed that the straight monogamous sex I'd been having all my life was “normal” sex. By the 10th interview with a Hump! filmmaker, I felt abnormal. I became convinced everyone in the world—me excluded—was having kinky sex, much of it on camera, without a single hang-up.

• • •

One chilly fall afternoon, I sit outside a coffee shop with Zachary Brown, a 31-year-old filmmaker with piercing green eyes, and his partner, a 36-year-old Korean woman who goes by the name M. They have done *ayahuasca* and enjoy Chinese board games. They made a porn after one month of dating, a noir called *Lipstick* inspired by Quentin Tarantino and Alfred Hitchcock: five minutes of speeding in the rain, blurred headlights, thudding bass, piles of drugs and driver's-seat sex.

“It's art. It's beautiful,” Zachary says.

But do you feel any sort of shame having sex on film, I ask.

“I would show my grandmother it,” he answers calmly.

I phone a guy in Seattle who says to call him Peter Pinkpuss. He's translating a dream he had into a porn film. When he's done, he sends me the clip: an acid-trip kaleidoscope of a dildo being thrust in and out of a vagina. I e-mail him, asking to talk to the actress on-screen.

“I'm the actor in the film,” he e-mails me, a smiley-face with its tongue out following. I'm confused.

“I may have been mistaken about your gender—can you clarify?” I write back.

“I'm a female-to-male transsexual,” he says. “I haven't had any genital surgery yet.” I immediately feel like such an ignorant, clumsy newb.

Another guy calls me on his break from work at a call center. He and his friends got into the

festival one year when they made a fake infomercial for something they called “Anal Alley.” In it, they shoot butt plugs out of their assholes into a set of plastic bowling pins. They had a blast. I can almost hear him smiling over the phone as he recalls the experience.

I talk to a film director who reinterprets fairy tales as gay porn. He sends me a few to watch. I'm in my home office that night, watching his version of *Cinderella*: a janitor at a gay bar seeks the love of the tavern's hottest bear patron. It's touching, and hot.

I open the door to my office and call to my husband. He walks in carrying his bong and takes a seat next to me as I restart the movie. It's halfway done when I hit the spacebar to pause it.

“Do you realize we're watching gay porn together?” I ask him.

He shakes his head and laughs, takes a deep hit and blows it out our apartment window.

We'd been a couple for a total of 11 years by then, and this was the first time we'd ever watched porn together.

• • •

In Portland, AJ is something of an erotic missionary, proselytizing a gospel of sexual shamelessness. If anyone can make sex into polite dinner-table conversation, it's probably her.

She has delivered spoken-word performances about orgies, her polyamorous marriage with Steven, kissing new people. “I've made out with half of Portland,” she said in one performance. She holds a master's degree in counseling psychology and teaches classes around the city with names such as *BJs With AJ and Back That Ass Up! Anal Sex 101*.

Four weeks before the Hump! deadline, the cast is sitting around Steven and AJ's thick wooden dining-room table. They live in a small,



nondescript house in a half-gentrified North Portland neighborhood, with two dogs that roam around the front yard.

They're here to brainstorm. Flipping through her notes, Jenna proposes a kung fu porn. No one's into it. Ryan wants to do a series of quick trailers called "Cumming Attractions" with names like *The Bi-Curious Case of Ben-jammin Butthole* and *Die Hard With a Big Cock*.

"How can you have sex with tiny four-second snippets?" AJ says, a little exasperated, as everyone else cracks up. "It's a porn fest, not a comedy fest, you know? And that's what I'm good at. I'm good at having sex on film. Like, let me show this off!"

Jenna proposes a live-action video game, and AJ runs with it: What if they make a video-game-themed film in which she, the protagonist, overcomes cultural and patriarchal barriers that keep women from fully embracing their sexuality? And if she wins, she gets what she's always wanted the most.

"A surprise gang-bang birthday party!" she says, practically jumping out of her seat. "For me this seems like a feminist fairy tale."

The response around the table is tepid, but AJ doesn't seem to notice. It's decided.

A few days later, Ryan e-mails everyone to say he's out—too busy to make porn this year. Jenna is in, but she'd prefer to shoot and direct the film.

Just when I'm sure they'll drop out of the running for the festival, AJ and Steven find three Hump! virgins to participate: There's Calico, a 24-year-old caramel-skinned weight-lifting coach; Austin, a tattooed and pierced farmer who is down to get with both guys and girls on film; and Matias, a 22-year-old Chilean model and part-time house cleaner.

They're so good-looking—perfectly coiffed and tattooed, septum piercings dangling from aquiline noses, bodies like Adonises—it's

almost hilarious. If *Portlandia* were to make an amateur porn sketch, this would be the cast.

• • •

On a rainy night in November 2015, I see AJ, her husband and their porn recruits for what I think will be the last time: the night their latest movie is set to debut on the Hump! screen.

Before the show, AJ is dancing in the aisle of a converted school bus equipped with a karaoke machine and packed with 20 of her friends. In a long-sleeved lace dress and back-seam tights, she puffs on a vaporizer, the sweet-sour smell of weed adding to the mix of cologne, beer and tequila with Ocean Spray already hanging in the air. Someone is bellowing the words to the Violent Femmes' "Blister in the Sun." A woman in a red dress grinds up against a guy in a sport coat in the aisle. Steven is in the back, talking in another woman's ear.

AJ falls into a seat behind the driver, yelling over the music. She admits she's nervous. She and her friends have pulled off something of a pornographic miracle, filming a feminist video-game porn called *Level Up*. It's one of just 22 films accepted.

Trundling around Portland's potholed streets, I realize that throughout this whole process, I've been hung up on how unapologetic and vocal AJ is about sex. I've been surprised—and maybe a little threatened—by how forward she is about liking to have sex on camera, but I've never once thought that about any of the men in these movies. I've looked past them. AJ watches porn and likes group sex with men and women, and she's not ashamed to talk about it. *That* should be normal. That's the whole point of all this.

It's something Savage has heard before—that Hump! might not give people a desire to make porn, but it could give them the courage to ask for what they want. "Seeing a film at Hump! isn't going to give you a kink you don't have," he says. "What it can do is allow you to have a conversation that felt difficult."

Hump! is all about coming out of hiding, about removing the layers of shame around whatever sex we like to have. It creates a tiny

world where this societally agreed-upon shame about sex is just gone, a thing of the past.

Savage adds, "It can give you the courage to ask for that thing that you want."

• • •

Hump! 2015 is an hour and a half of vaginal sex, anal sex, oral sex, twosomes, threesomes, foursomes, fivesomes, group fistings, sex in masks, sex in tube socks and films with no sex at all. Beforehand Savage takes to the stage to lay down rules. "No assholes out there," he says, pointing to the crowd. "Assholes only up *here*," he gestures toward the movie screen behind him. The place shakes with applause and screams.

"You are going to watch porn that if you were at home watching, you wouldn't fucking click on," he says.

With that, he throws a dildo out into the audience, a wobbling trophy for a lucky attendee, and the lights go dark.

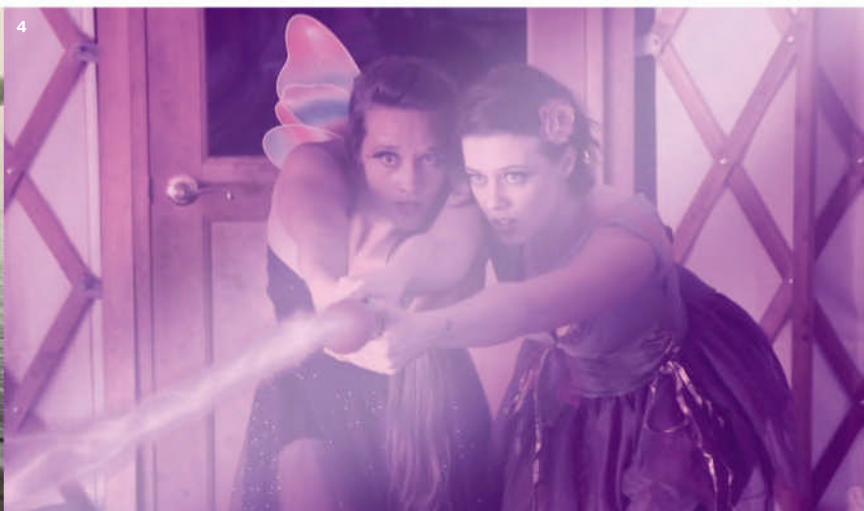
After midnight, when *Level Up*'s eight-bit title design lights up the screen, the entire balcony cheers.

On-screen, AJ falls out of the sky in a flash of pink light, dropping into a grassy meadow, wearing a short green Zelda-esque dress. She encounters a fairy, played by a sparkly, wing-wearing Calico, who tells her (in scrolling blocky captions) that it is her destiny to defeat the patriarchy. To win the game, AJ must pass three *Mortal Kombat*-style rounds that pit her against the enemies of feminism.

First, Matias: a visor-wearing dude-bro who grabs his crotch and catcalls her from his pickup truck. She shouts a ball of fire and lays him out flat. Next, Steven plays a white-suited preacher who hurls copies of the Bible, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Mike Huckabee's *God, Guns, Grips and Gravy* at her—which she boomerangs back at his crotch. He convulses and drops to the ground. Austin plays a sniveling plastic surgeon who wraps AJ in measuring tape and dots surgical suggestions across her skin. AJ unceremoniously knocks him out with a fleshy dildo.

In the final boss fight, Austin, Steven and Matias stand crammed into a pair of oversize men's

1. Dan Savage addresses the crowd at a Portland Hump! screening. 2. Amory Jane in *Level Up*. 3. A Hump! promo shoot on Sauvie Island. 4. A climactic scene from *Level Up*.





Amory Jane in civilian attire.

briefs adorned with felt letters that read PATRIARCHY. The men boo and shame AJ, and when it seems she might shrivel, Fairy Calico pops up at her side with a weapon. The women's eyes meet.

Together they grasp a vigorously shaking vibrator and direct a bright pink beam of light from its tip into the three-headed beast, vaporizing the giant underpants. She wins! And the men start making out!

Calico gestures toward the kissing men. "Go ahead," she tells AJ. "Fuck the patriarchy."

AJ smiles, gives a little shrug.

And then she does exactly that.

...

A week later, Savage leaves Jenna a voice-mail.

"You guys won best in show!" he says. "It's so deserved. *Level Up* is great, and really hot."

"There's defiance in joy and defiance in pleasure."

Jenna doles out checks to each member of the cast and crew. And their private Facebook group, where they have so vigorously discussed plans for their porn, falls silent by winter.

A year passes.

In February 2017, more than a year after I last saw the *Level Up* group, I check in with the cast and crew to see what they're up to. Jenna hasn't made any porn since but knows she will someday: "Once a porn director, always a porn director," she says. She didn't submit to Hump! 2016, though. All she could think about? "How the hell was I going to top winning with *Level Up*?"

Calico started going by that name shortly after *Level Up*, which was her first film. Now she regularly makes independent queer porn with her partner (who also starred in a Hump! film in 2015) for an online site called Crash Pad

Series. "Being able to boldly be on a screen saying, 'Here I am in all my natural glory, exploring myself and just having unabashed pleasure'—that's normalizing," she says. "And it hopefully helps someone out there who looks like me."

Savage recalls the launch of Hump! 2016, which took place the day after the presidential election: "I got up there and said, 'It's okay that you're here.' Part of what we're coming together and fighting for is this: people being able to share who they are politically and socially but also sexually."

According to Savage, that's the role this kind of porn can have in times as divisive as these. "We still have to make time in our lives for pleasure and joy and intimacy and pornography—and fun," he says. "There's defiance in joy and defiance in pleasure. It actually energizes you for the fight."

I meet up with Amory Jane on a drizzly day for Thai food. She peeks out from under a peacock-blue flapper hat.

"I'm trying not to sob right now," she says, explaining that just months after *Level Up* won the festival, she and Steven separated and then divorced. They just filed the final papers a week earlier. Making *Level Up* had nothing to do with their split, but it turns out it was a bit of a last hurrah, she says. After a decade together, infertility and AJ's desire to be a mother drove

a wedge between them. Steven, she says, wasn't always sure about parenthood.

When she and Steven broke up, AJ says, she was devastated. She took her savings and bought a 1987 Toyota "Toyhome" camper. She named it St. Edna the Sex Ed Mobile and drove it from Oregon to the Southeast, across Texas and up through California, teaching her brand of adult sex education. When St. Edna broke down for good on the freeway outside Portland, she was devastated again.

She started a podcast called *Sex on the Brain With Amory Jane*. For one recent episode, she did a live broadcast of a femme sex party, complete with spankings, fistings and squeals of glee. It's a monthly event AJ hosts at her house with a circle of other women, which started after the election.

After Trump's win was final, she says, "everyone felt so scared—like we don't know what this is going to mean for our community or queer people." At the parties, sometimes people are honest that they're not looking to fuck or be fucked. Sometimes, according to AJ, they'll say, "I've had a really hard week and I would just love cuddles and kisses and maybe to be spanked."

She also started a live erotic variety show, which sold out each of its first three monthly installments.

"Everyone was so sad about Trump, and they needed a boost," AJ says. "All of the acts are sex positive or body positive."

Although she hasn't made any porn lately, she'd like to run her own production studio one day. But right now, AJ knows she has to keep pushing feminist, sex-positive conversations in all the ways she can—to get people talking, to keep people united, to remind people that to love is bold and messy and worth fighting for.

"If I can't create a family, if I can't create children, I need to put some sort of creation into the world," she says. "If I can't have the traditional settled-down life that I was originally striving for, at least I'm going to have an epic, adventure-filled life."

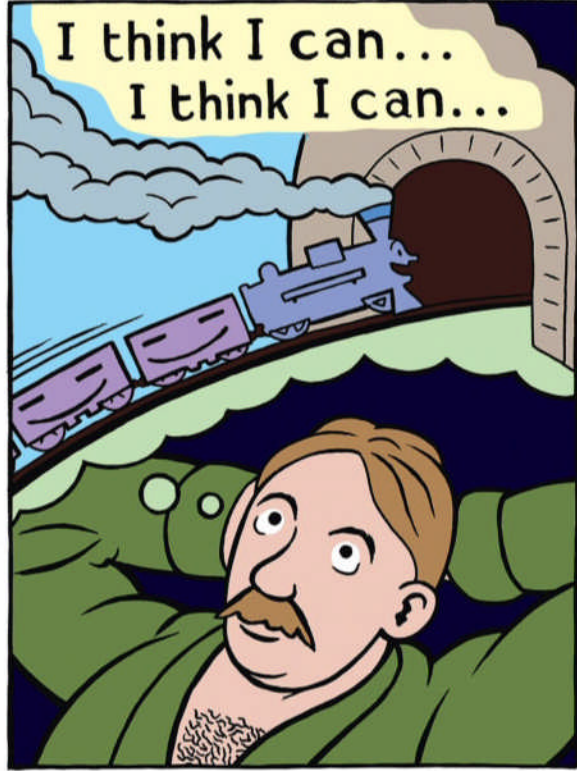
Like AJ and lots of other people, I spent 2016 thinking about the world breaking. Bowie. Prince. Carrie Fisher. On Election Day, I snapped a selfie with a fist raised and stopped a click short of posting it online because I thought there was still a chance America wasn't ready for a woman president.

I recall a thought I had while walking home after the Hump! 2015 screening. I realized that the only place I wanted to be was back in the crappy expensive apartment I share with my husband. Next to him. Eating snacks and watching TV and getting high and maybe having that married-couple sex we've come to know so well. Or maybe not.

When I got home that night, I climbed into bed, smiling to myself at the idea that AJ, Steven and the rest of the group were probably having an orgy on a party bus as it bounced across the city. And how the only place in the world I wanted to be was right there on our lumpy mattress, in a quiet room, where everything is familiar, where my own sexual revolution starts by kissing my husband on the head as he sleeps.

And though I know our sex doesn't look anything like what I saw on the Hump! screen that night, I caught a glimpse of it recently—our dark shapes moving in the mirrors that hang on the closet door in our bedroom.

One day, I think I'll have the courage to keep watching. ■





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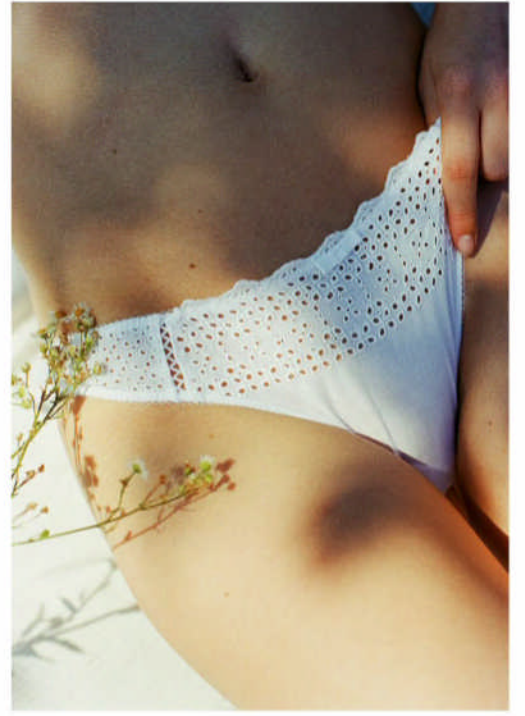


Quand l'eau est chaude
et le soleil brule









*Du paradis
avec l'amour*





HERB RITZ





HERITAGE

The **POP** Artists and *Playboy*

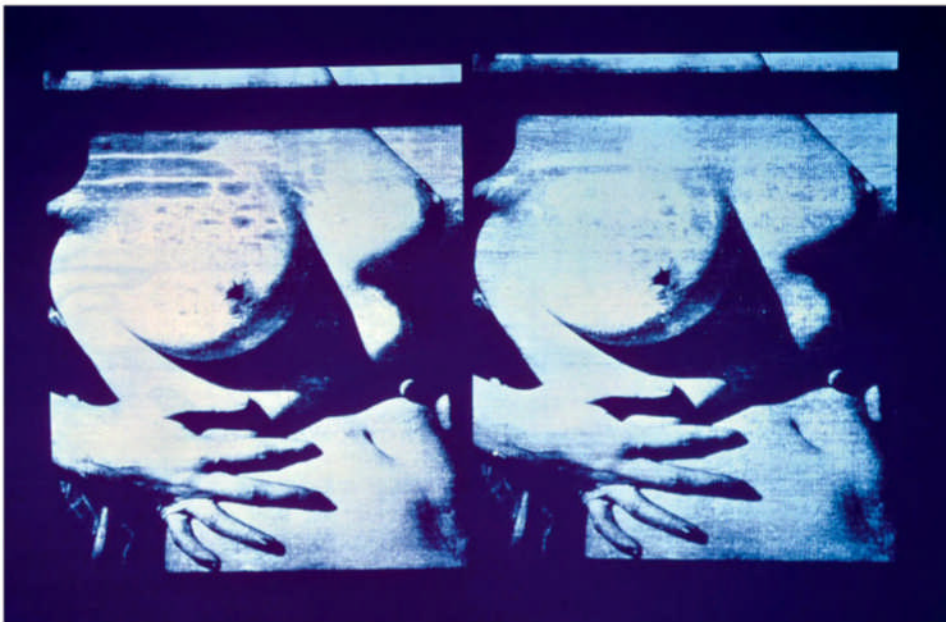
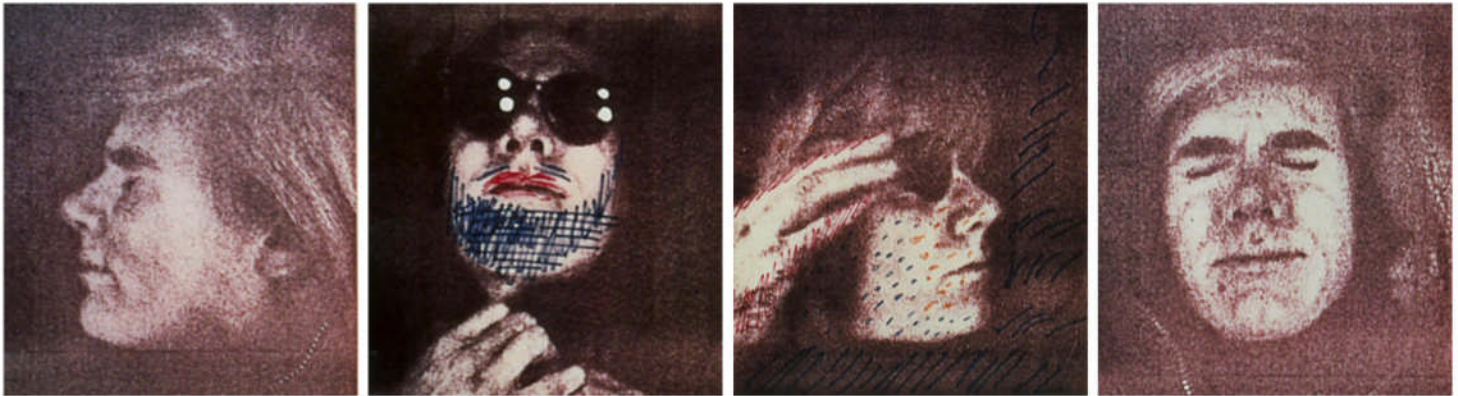
The magazine's history with a major art movement, in broad strokes

BY **CAT AUER**

The good looks of PLAYBOY have always extended beyond the pictorials. Art has been central to the spirit of the magazine ever since Hugh Hefner launched it in December 1953; Salvador Dalí, Alberto Vargas and Patrick Nagel are just a few of the game-changing artists whose work has adorned its pages. Soon

after Hef published our first issue, another cultural juggernaut began to emerge in the United States: pop art. As both the magazine and the movement evolved, it was perhaps inevitable that their paths would cross. “America’s prince of pop”—as PLAYBOY christened Andy Warhol in 1967—had a nearly 30-year relationship

with the magazine. Here, we revisit PLAYBOY’s history with Warhol and three other heavy-hitting artists associated with the pop movement: James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselmann and Keith Haring. Several of the pieces shown here, from Polaroids to prints, have never before been published.

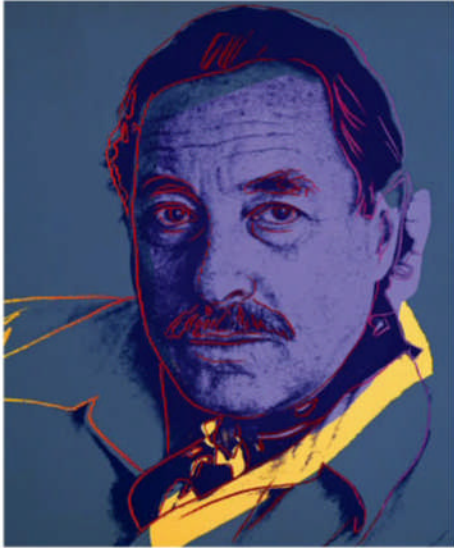


ANDY WARHOL

Warhol’s first Playboy commission came in 1961: a painting that ran in *Show Business Illustrated*, a short-lived Hefner publication. By 1967, when his first PLAYBOY piece appeared—a double silk screen of a female torso (left)—Warhol was a full-blown pop-art phenomenon. He also provided the artwork for a 1969 PLAYBOY profile of him (above). Created on a copy machine, the pieces were “perhaps the most extraordinary self-portraits that he ever made: a group of seven death-mask-like images,” writes curator Charles Stuckey in our January 1990 retrospective. Warhol’s only PLAYBOY pictorial appeared in 1974; *Instant Warhol* begins by introducing the “lensman who seldom goes a-hunting without his trusty Polaroid.” At far left with said camera, Warhol arranged the images into photo collages. The Polaroids of actresses Patti D’Arbanville and Dominique Darel are out-takes, unpublished until now.



HERITAGE



Talk about triple-strength star power: In the January 1984 *PLAYBOY*, infamous author Truman Capote memorialized playwright Tennessee Williams, and Warhol, art royalty at that point, illustrated the remembrance. He submitted two silk-screen prints built on out-takes from the portrait session for Williams's April 1973 *Playboy Interview*, including the purple-and-yellow version shown at left. The

black-and-white photo it's based on (below left) appears in the magazine for the first time. For the main image, Art Director Tom Staebler selected the more dynamic red- and blue-hued piece (below middle), a color scheme echoed two years later in Warhol's most famous work for *PLAYBOY*: his Rabbit Head (below right), which graces the January 1986 cover. "I've got bunnies on the brain," Warhol said at the time.



JAMES ROSENQUIST

"I'm the one who gave steroids to pop art," remarks James Rosenquist in his memoir. Indeed, his 16-by-seven-foot, two-canvas *Playmate as Fine Art*—named after the 1967 article it appears in—is on the small side for a Rosenquist; no wonder *PLAYBOY* described the erstwhile billboard painter as "one of the principal detonators of the pop explosion." With its depiction of glistening strawberries and cream, a wire basket, breasts and a pickle, *Playmate* tells a beguiling tale; in 2009 *The New York Times* homed in on its "basketball-size areolas." Rosenquist's diptych was displayed at the magazine's 25th anniversary party in the Chicago Cultural Center (above), where Hef, July 1977 *Playmate* Sondra Theodore and others celebrated.



TOM WESSELMANN

Wesselmann supersized a pair of luscious lips for *PLAYBOY*'s January 1967 feature *The Playmate as Fine Art*. "I chose to do a huge cutout mouth in order to isolate and make more intense the one body part that has a high degree of both sexual

and expressive connotations—but then painted a mouth with low degrees of each quality, to keep it, like the *Playmate*, somewhat glossy yet inviting," he said. The oil painting, *Mouth #8* (above), sold at auction in 2010 for \$1.9 million.



KEITH HARING

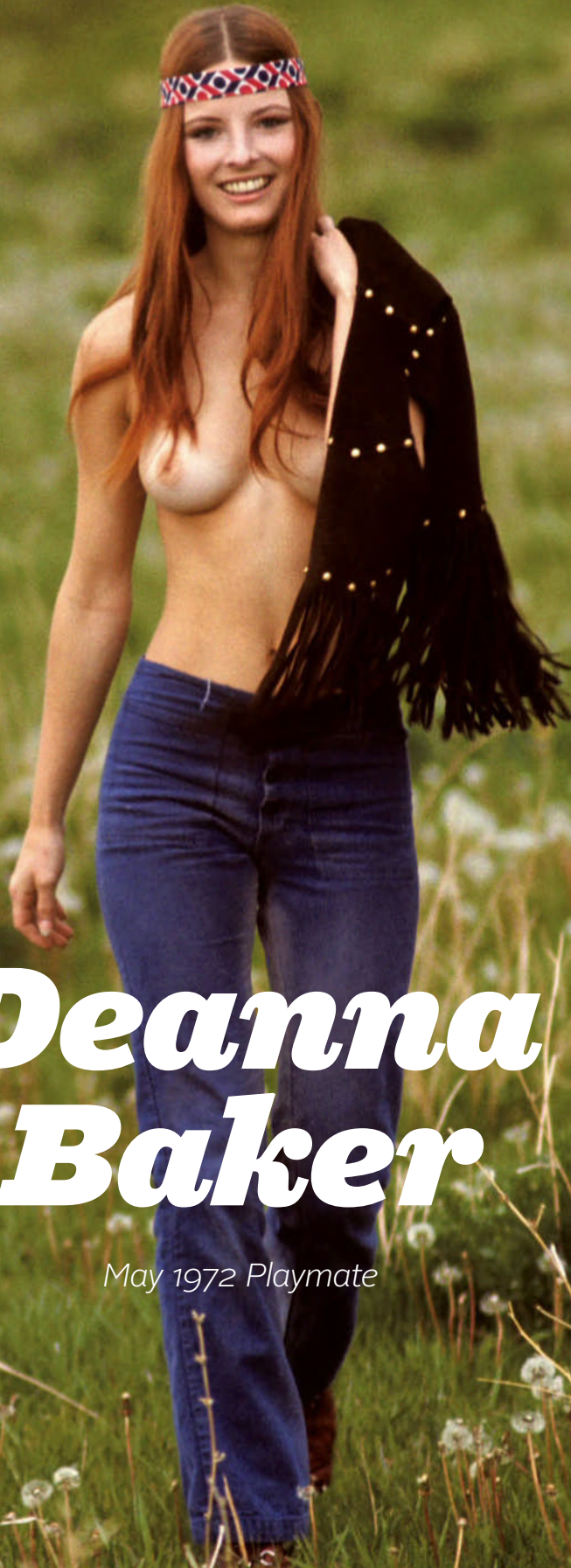
Haring rose to prominence in the 1980s as a muralist with a gift for bridging low and high art. His colorful graffiti-style pieces often tackled social and political issues—AIDS, drugs, inequality. PLAYBOY published several of his illustrations in 1986—in fact, works by both Haring and Warhol appear in that year’s January issue. Haring could be said to have picked up the pop mantle from Warhol, whom he considered a friend and mentor. “You see,” Haring says in his authorized biography, “whatever I’ve done would not have been possible without Andy. Had Andy not broken the concept of what art is supposed to be, I just wouldn’t have been able to exist.” Haring’s PLAYBOY illustrations accompanied both fiction (a comic story by Robert Sheckley, above) and nonfiction (a profile of self-help marketing genius Tom Peters, below). The magazine commissioned but never ran *Bunny #2* (top right), also known as *Bunny on the Move*; it appears here for the first time in PLAYBOY’s editorial pages.



A pop-out from the pop artist: PLAYBOY gave readers a Christmas treat in December 1986—an exclusive Haring-designed ornament printed on pre-cut paper. That same year Haring opened his famous SoHo store, Pop Shop, to bring his art to the public.



HERITAGE



Deanna Baker

May 1972 Playmate



Judo expert. Entrepreneur. Nature conservationist. Our May 1972 Centerfold embraced many personas, including Pool Bunny at the Denver Playboy Club. **Deanna Baker**, 22 years old at the time, relished the social aspect of the gig and knew what she didn't aspire to do: "I suppose the ambition of many Playmates is to model or act; the idea of having a regular career just doesn't turn me on." What did entice the Missouri native? The Rocky Mountains. "My personal dream is to restore a mountain area to its ecological balance—and I'm determined to do it, even if I have to move onto the property and do all the work myself."







Lourdes Estores

June 1982 Playmate

There's something to be said for a ravishing beauty who's all about the simple island life. There's a lot to be said for **Lourdes Estores**, a native of the tiny Hawaiian town of Haleiwa, where she grew up selling fresh-caught fish at local cock-fights. A "girls of Hawaii" talent hunt put the fitness trainer and cocktail waitress on PLAYBOY's radar; she was soon elevated to Playmate status. With her easygoing attitude, Lourdes likely took a relaxed approach to posing. "The Hawaiian way is to lie back—what's the rush? Don't be so up-tight!" When asked what it takes to maintain a sense of satisfaction, she offered up sound advice. "Practice. You have to practice enjoying life."



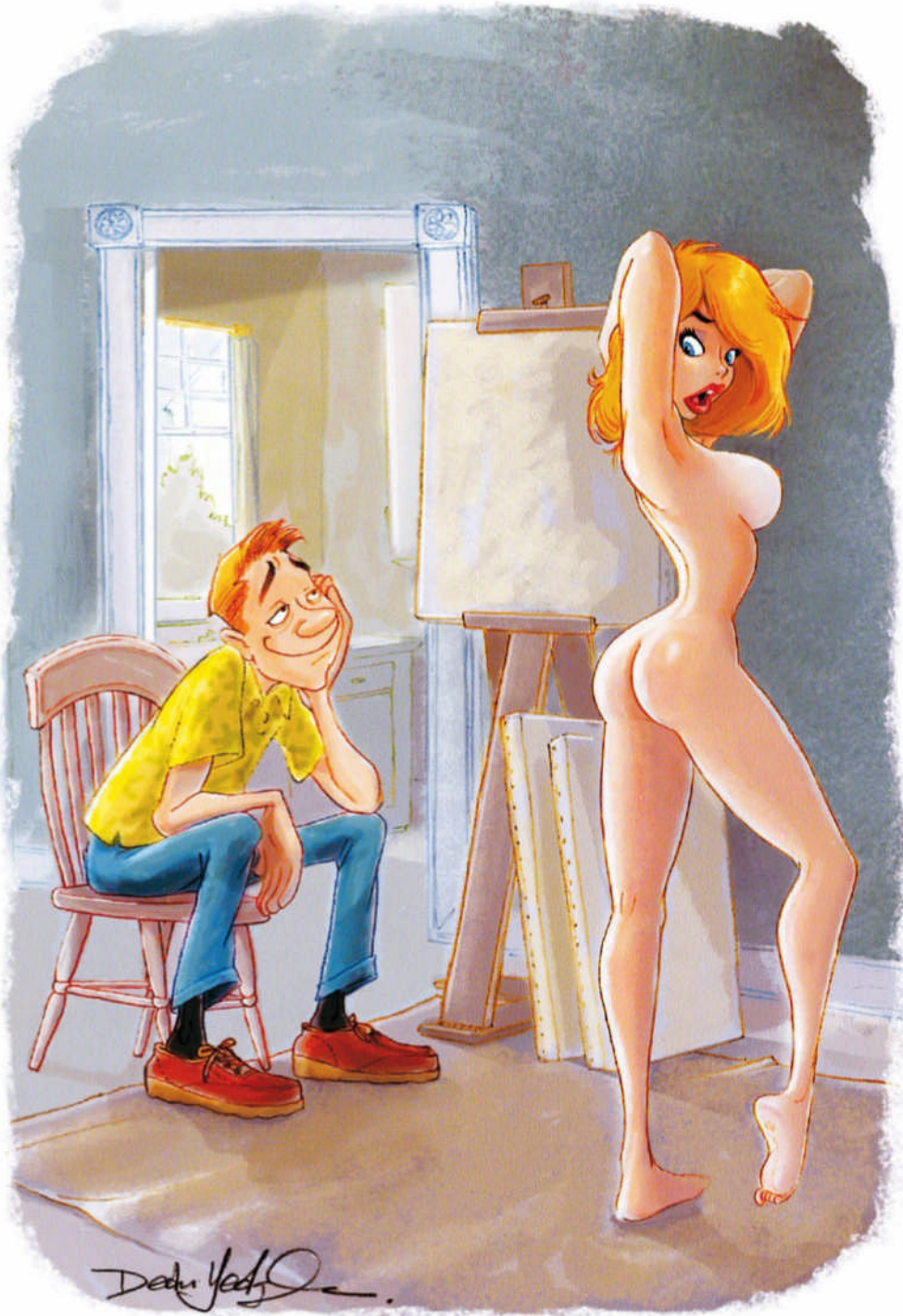






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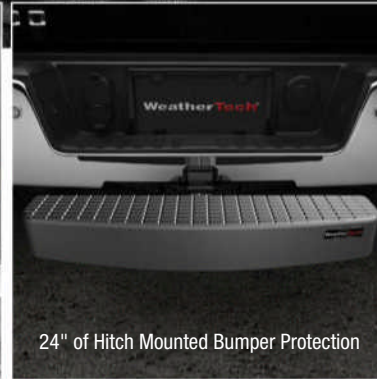
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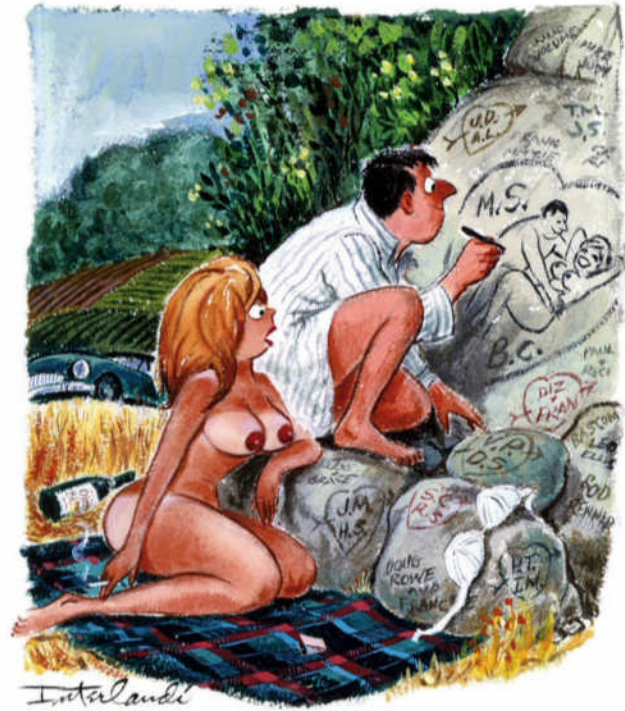
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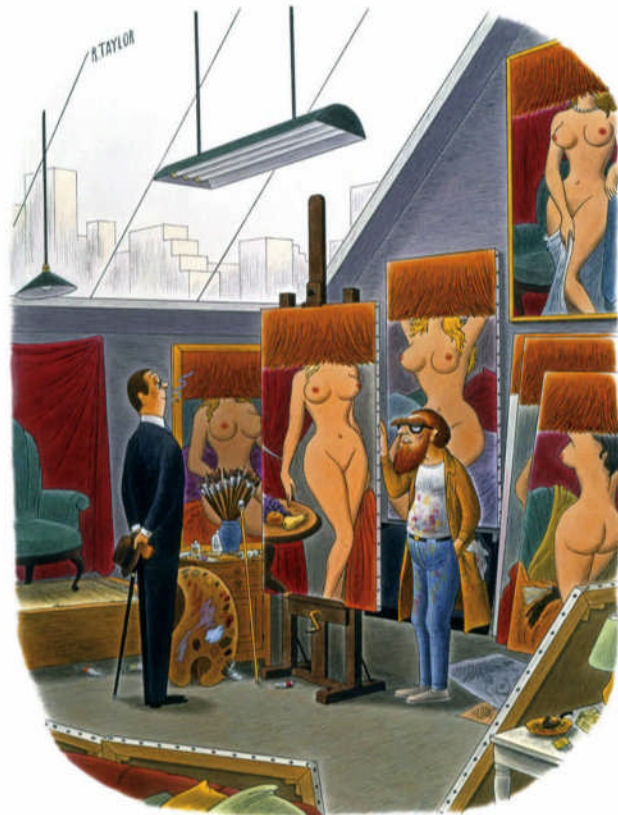
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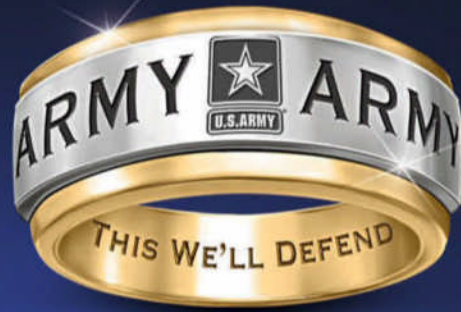
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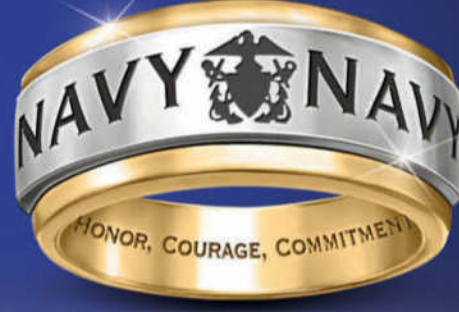
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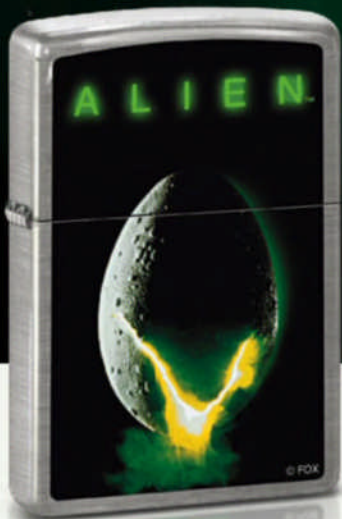
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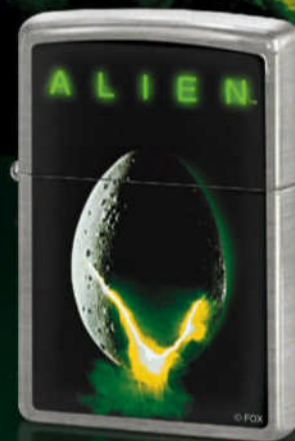
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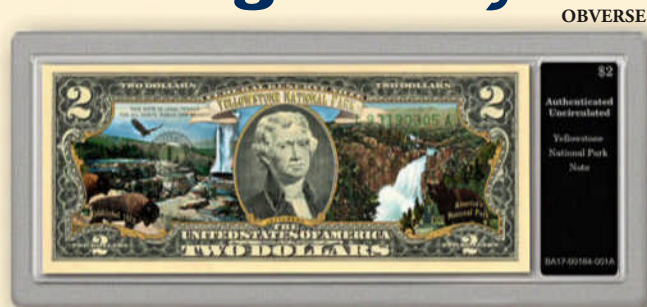
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