

ART

PORNOGRAPHY AND ART: A LOVE STORY

WITH PORNHUB OPENING AN EXHIBITION AT MACCARONE IN LOS ANGELES AND STACY SKOLNIK LAUNCHING AN ONLINE CHAPBOOK OF HER BANNED INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT IN NEW YORK THIS WEEK, ART AND PORNOGRAPHY ARE AGAIN CLIMBING INTO BED TOGETHER. BUT WHO'S ON TOP?

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Pornography has historically been defined against art, though lately those lines have become blurred. Search “art” on Pornhub and you’ll find videos with titles like “The art of emotional porn” and “Best sex art therapy ever” and “Swedish art singing pussies (behind the scenes),” as well as some videos of actual naked performance art practices from the likes of Spencer Tunick.

Art, like pornography, has long been organized around the male gaze, but Maccarone’s new show “The Pleasure Principle” features only female artists—Lynda Benglis, Amy Bessone, Louise Bourgeois, Delia Brown, Kathe Burkhart, Nao Bustamante, Cameron, Renee Cox, E.V. Day, Martha Edelheit, Mary Beth Edelson, Tracey Emin, Karen Finley, Trulee Hall, Hilary Harkness, Ann Hirsch, Narcissister, Bettie Page, Annie Sprinkle, Anita Steckel, Doris Wishman and Bunny Yeager—spanning several generations and each producing their own visions of desire.

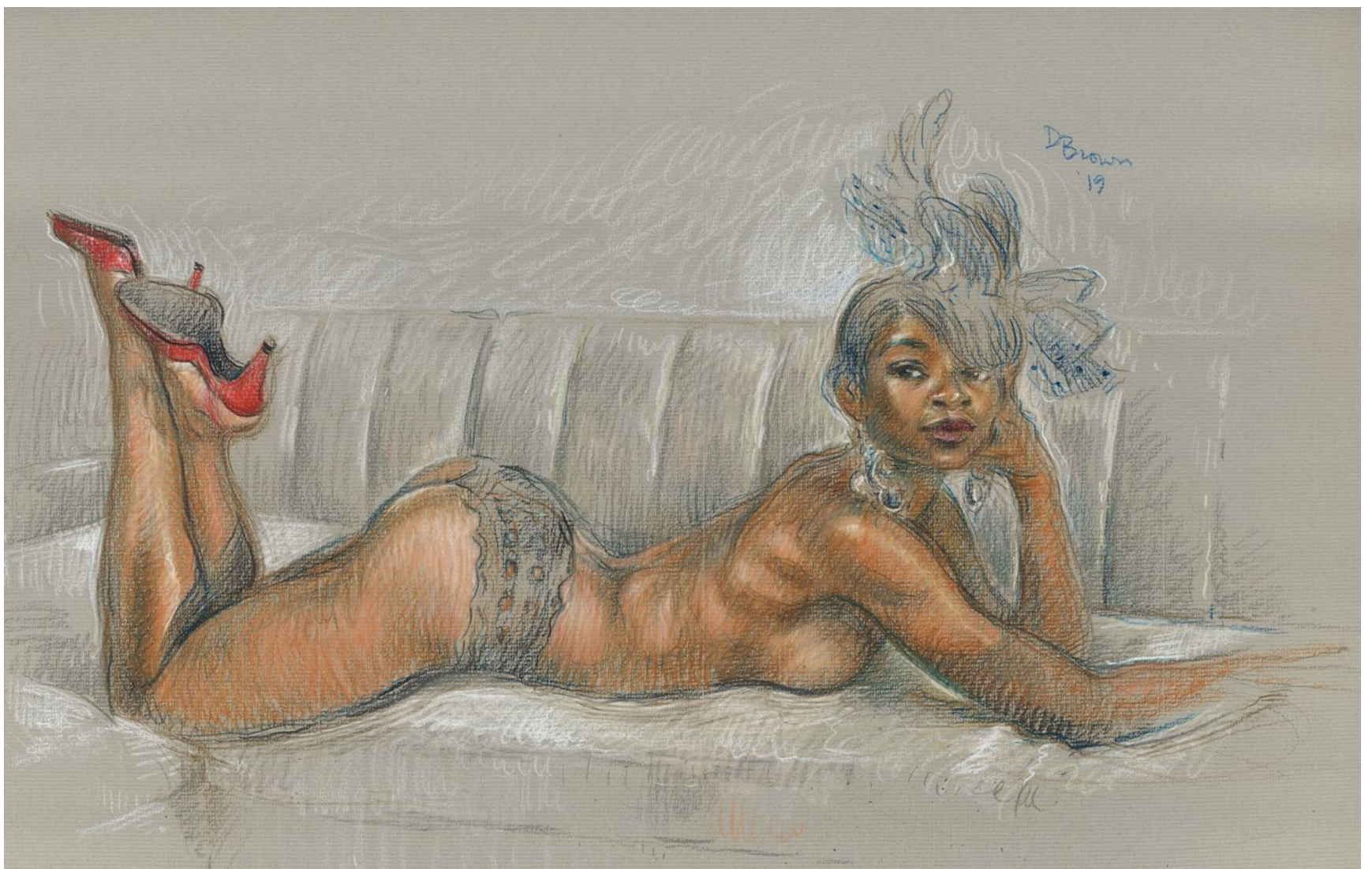
Pornhub, which commissioned the show, and Maccarone, which is hosting it, are described in their exhibition text as spaces of “uninhibited sexual content” and “unfettered artistic expression,” respectively—spaces in which one can be free. They’re also both spaces that curate other people’s content. Maccarone does not make its own art, and Pornhub does not make its own pornography. Given the overwhelming volume of pornography that now exists—far more than a person could watch in a lifetime—the role of pornography curator may be a boom job for the future (someone capable of choosing the right actors and films to satisfy particular tastes and understanding deep desires in a way that algorithms can’t yet) but for now we have a historical survey of high art erotica commissioned by the world’s largest pornography and tech company over in Los Angeles, where the porn industry remains far larger than that of art.

NARCISSISTER’S *THE FACE*
(*PERFORMING MALE FACIAL FEATURES*),
2019. SCRAP METAL. PHOTO BY CHRIS
CASTILLO; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.
COMMISSIONED AND PRODUCED BY
ARTPACE SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS.

Pornhub is doing this for marketing purposes, but also because it allows them to throw a glamorous public celebration of their interests without straying outside of the laws governing obscenity. During the opening there’ll be screenings of films by Doris Wiseman and performances by Karen Finley, Delia Brown and Narcissister; the latter will be climbing over her large sculptural installation, *The Face (Performing male facial features)*, which resembles a large man made out of trash with a smaller female figure straddling his nose, and literally sitting

on his face. As it's Narcissister, those attending can expect disorientating costumes with many faces and limbs, and a uniquely burlesque approach to performance art that will likely involve pulling surprise props from her vagina like rabbits from a top hat. And it's with gestures like these that art can offer Pornhub a warm, shimmering glaze of sophistication. While both art and pornography have grown massively in popularity this century, they occupy opposite positions in the spectrum of cultural status, with art at the top and pornography the bottom. This show seems to imagine that art might return some of the old cultural cachet and allure that erotica used to have in the golden age of *Playboy*. As hardcore pornography moves closer and closer to the mainstream, art might perhaps give it some gravitas and context.

But the art world has much to gain and to learn from pornography also. If we go back and revisit the beginnings of modern art in 19th-century Paris, we'll find the likes of Édouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Pablo Picasso all taking inspiration from the city's sex workers and making them into some of the most famous paintings in history. Many artists since have lived out their sexual fantasies in their work, like Jeff Koons, who married the porn star Cicciolina and made sculptures of the pair of them fucking. During the opening of "The Pleasure Principle," Delia Brown will be drawing models in the gallery for her performance. Who these life models will be has not yet been revealed, but presumably there will be some porn stars at the opening; some of whom might wish to become a different kind of subject for the night.



DELIA BROWN'S *ERIKA MUSE (RED SHOES)*, FROM LIVE DRAWING

PERFORMANCE, 2019. COLORED PENCIL
ON PAPER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND MACCARONE, LOS ANGELES.

Artists might also look to pornography to take the mood of the time. The “pleasure principle,” in Freudian psychoanalytic terms, is the driving force guiding our id and how we instinctively seek pleasure in the hopes of satisfying our biological and psychological needs; porn can help us to understand those changing needs as they grow ever more complicated and weird. We’re living, after all, in what Maureen O’Connor described in her essay “Pornhub Is the Kinsey Report of Our Time” for *The Cut*, as “a golden age of sexual creativity—an erotic renaissance.”

Pornography is where new ideas are tried out and where the rest of us can go to find these provocations and watch things go beyond the pale. These sites can show us the contemporary id unveiled in all its glory and terror—whether that’s stepsister porn or cum-eating cuckoldry or torn yoga pants or Japanese hentai, all of which have spiked in popularity over the course of this decade. Pornography shows us contemporary desires and desires are, by some reckonings, what construct our reality.

Furthermore, on the subject of hentai (the tenth-most-popular Pornhub category of all time): pornography has itself grown more artistic through the rise of these animated Japanese sexual fantasies, which are full of transformation and invention and continue a lineage reaching back to erotic shunga woodcut prints from many centuries ago. So pornographers might also turn to today’s artists for some new ideas. For instance, to E.V. Day, who wraps a pair of red crotchless silk panties around blown glass to form a floating spaceship architecture in her sculpture Saarinen’s *Mother I* (2008), which is on show at Maccarone. Or to Mary Beth Edelson’s naked photographs of herself in which she sits with her legs open, smeared in spirals of body paint in a ceremonial circle of flames, or drawn over with strange masked figures with upturned butts.

STILL FROM STACY SKOLNIK’S
MRSBLUEEYES123.COM. COURTESY OF
THE ARTIST AND MX GALLERY, NY.

Those behind “The Pleasure Principle” say they want “to disrupt the historical status of the carnal form as passive object of pleasure.” They want to give the erotic subject back its agency; and the same might be said of poet and performance artist Stacy Skolnik, who’s about to launch her interactive online chapbook mrsblueeyes123.com at MX Gallery in New York. For months she wrote and performed on a platform that’s not so relaxed as Pornhub—Instagram—posting the sorts of pictures and poems you’d usually only send by direct message, or at least not share to your main, until her account was banned for obscenity. The result is a diary of sexual desire and ambition: nudes covered with kisses and tagged with prominent literary journals; a mouth dripping with cum; the artist posing as a dog while a naked man looks at his laptop. The captions are short poems. While pornography multinationals are moving into the gallery, she’s going in the opposite direction, into the virtual world of thirst traps:

“Fuck my image

Cut a #hole in your #phone and fuck my image.”

For a while now I’ve had a theory that not many people masturbate to Instagram; but when I read things like this, I’m no longer so sure.

By indulging the sorts of exhibitionist and confessional tendencies that Instagram so encourages, but also likes to punish, Stacy seems to question how much you can really represent your own sexuality, and identity, on platforms that issue community guidelines and bans. We might also wonder to what extent our desires are our own, now that we’re tied up in these huge, complicated desiring machines that pull us in every direction and encourage us to make ourselves into pictures and objects for the consumption of others. Maybe Instagram and Pornhub and the art industry have made exhibitionists of us all. Maybe we’re all porn stars or performance artists now, following our pleasures down the most winding alleys.

mrsblueeyes123.com launches with an evening of performances by Stacy Skolnik, Vanessa Place and Abby Lloyd and at MX Gallery, New York, this Thursday September 19.

The Pleasure Principle opens at Maccarone, Los Angeles, on Saturday September 21.

The logo consists of a solid black square. Inside the square, the words "MOR", "ON", and "ART" are stacked vertically in a white, bold, sans-serif font. Each word is centered horizontally within the square.