

From Porn to Art

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Manet's *Olympia* was painted in 1863 and images of sexual exploitation have been popular among artists ever since. Although art has long provided the bashful with illicit kicks under the guise of self-improvement, it is only more recently that porn stars began making the transition from the video underground to the cultural mainstream. Nevertheless, sustaining a straight movie career can be difficult. Teenage porn sensation Traci Lords was elevated to matinee status thanks to a role in *Cry Baby*, but currently makes techno records after several box-office flops.

Pornography is an integral part of the entertainment business, and the vehicles created for its stars are every bit as formulaic as Hollywood blockbusters. While there may be less money in more experimental areas like performance, such genres offer a freedom that is attractive to individuals who are sick of being type-cast. Porn veteran Annie Sprinkle is typical of those who want to escape the limitations imposed on them by mass culture: "The reason I got out of porn and moved into art is because there's more room for experimentation in art. I can be myself."

Gay porn stars are making this transition too. Aiden Shaw whose autobiography *Brutal* was published last year, has been pulling in punters at prestigious venues such as the ICA. Shaw's act, which lies somewhere between performance art and Chippendale-style pop, has been packaged as part of a musical review that also features cult rockers Minty. While cynics see these gallery escapades as a neat way of marketing over-exposed sex stars to a fresh audience, a trooper like Annie Sprinkle radiates sincerity as she hard sells 'post-porn modernism' as a 'new age sexuality'; "sex is a path to enlightenment. Women producing porn will push things in a positive direction."

One woman who relishes breaking down sexual boundaries is Cosey Fanni Tutti, born Christine Carol Newby in 1951. Between 1974 and 76, Tutti worked as a glamour model for *Fiesta*, *Curious* and *Ladybirds*, then exhibited her centre-spreads in art galleries. Tutti also toured London pubs as a stripper, as well as appearing in films such as *Confessions Of A Superstud* and *I'm Not Feeling Myself Tonight*, all in the name of art. These activities are currently being researched by Simon Ford, a post-graduate student at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

"The strength of Tutti's work lies in its play on artistic authenticity," Ford explains. "For this to register there had to be a certain loss of agency in the studio stages of its production. It was the ability to draw on real experiences as a real model in the fantasy world of pornography that made it so hard for critics to deal with in the seventies. It is the explicit play on notions of authenticity and identity through a foregrounding of pornography as a signifying system, that marks out Tutti's work as a significant contribution to the feminist critique of an essentialised femininity."

Tutti favours plainer words when defending her activities: "You get feminists saying you're being exploited and all the rest of it. But it's not like that. It's a total power trip. When you're being exploited, it's when you're doing something you're not comfortable with. When it's not you. When someone is saying do this." Porn queen La Cicciolina, whose stormy relationship with Jeff Koons was recorded in a series of hardcore poses that her partner marketed as art, seems to have been more ruthlessly exploited on the gallery circuit than during her glory years in glamour. Since the breakdown of her marriage, Cicciolina Cicciolina has disappeared into a post-porn wilderness.

Art and porn are mirror images of each other. Sex sells and the main thing distinguishing these two genres is the more open and honest approach of the sleaze merchants. Nevertheless, even someone as pretentious as film-maker Michael Winner was able to begin his career with the nudie abomination *Some Like It Cool*, while numerous struggling actresses have made ends meet by appearing in blue movies. Elaine Page of *Evita* fame cameos in *Adventures Of A Plumbers Mate*, while Joanna Lumley features in *Games That Lovers Play*. Both the art and pornographic worlds are fashion based. In each there is a constant turn over of faces. While former porn stars make adequate artists, let's hope there isn't a widespread attempt at reversing the process.