



Girrlly Pictures

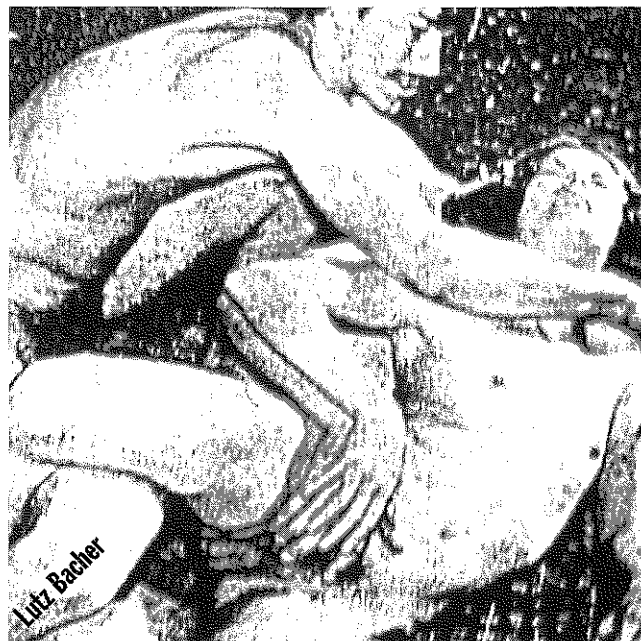
Girrlly Pictures is a series of five exhibitions curated by Shonagh Adelman and coordinated by Mercer Union.

Julie Zardo
Abigail Child
Lutz Bacher
Su Friedrich
A.K. Summers
C.B. Jones
Kiss & Tell

by Shonagh Adelman



Girly Pictures features an irreverent breed of feminist art practice fueled by twenty years of political activism and discourse. Within the current contradictory climate of simultaneous socio-political transformation and backlash, contemporary mainstream culture depicts dykes as chic and bad girls as good (or at least those who make good). Meanwhile, gay bashing is rampant and we are still eons away from the decriminalization of the sex trade industry. *Girly Pictures* came out of a desire to exhibit contemporary feminist work which isn't just in your face but sits on your face. A far cry from sugar and spice - disdainful of or indifferent to normative femininity and to the fear of turning men off, of being too bitchy - the aggressive tone of this work takes niceness out of the equation. These girls will be *girrls*.



publishing market, Hollywood and MTV, it has only recently gained some cachet within the hallowed halls of high art institutions – illustrated by the exhibitions, *Bad Girls/Bad Girls West* curated by Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner, mounted in 1994 at the New Museum and UCLA's Wight Art Gallery, and the ICA exhibition in London also called *Bad Girls*. Typically the term bad girl connotes sexual misbehaviour - sluts and whores, vamps and tramps. Occupying an active sexual role (whether for work or play) the bad girl appropriates power.

As Tucker explains in her catalogue essay, the American Bad Girls shows brought together a range of feminist art which uses humour and goes "too far." The controversial response to the exhibitions and particularly their titles points to the difficulty of using humour and hyperbole within a political context and of re-appropriating the term "bad girl." The exhibitions' title and humorous premise were viewed by some critics as a co-optation and trivialization of feminist art. Taking on a bad girl persona is a complex proposition now, since it is so quickly defanged and commodified. Bad is good as long as it can be confined (as it is in the sex trade industry) or assimilated (as it is in Hollywood depictions of sex trade workers) - as long as it is titillating and not too threatening: e.g., at the end of *Basic Instinct* Sharon Stone opts for heterosexuality and drops the ice pick. Ubiquitous colonization has effectively stripped the "bad girl" of irony and generally conjured up something along the lines of naughty but nice.

It comes as no surprise that a *real* bad girl like Eileen Wurnos, dubbed the first woman serial killer, is worth more (to the entertainment industry) dead than alive. While the demise of one bad girl is eagerly awaited by culture vultures, other bad girls are implicated in the incitement of violence against women including themselves. For instance, one of the (presumably male) respondents to Kiss N' Tell's earlier interactive photo series *Drawing the Line* wrote "I feel the need to rape some girls." Kiss N' Tell along

with the other artists in this series haven't balked at the prospect of prurient or more pernicious responses to their work. They start from a position which overrides any squeamishness around the depiction of explicit sex and power play.

The controversial conference at Barnard College in 1982, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," marked an ideological split cast as the "sex wars" which hinged on a resistance to and rebellion against 1970's lesbian feminist orthodoxy. The ensuing debates revolved primarily around the question of whether S/M (and to a lesser extent butch/femme and lesbian porn) duplicates or plays with oppressive power inequities. Although the 'radical sex' camp made forceful arguments against its detractors based on the consensuality of sex/gender power play, these arguments have tended to fall into some of the overdetermined assumptions they purport to critique - for instance, that S/M offers a libertarian promise of transcendence from sexual repression. Sex radicals, backed up against the wall by political imperatives, may have felt impelled to legitimate their sexual desires on ontological grounds which assume a self-determining, autonomous sexual subject.

The investigation of sex and power in the pictorial realm is important because of its dialogical possibility. While there are certainly examples of images which are anchored within a didactic frame, the work in *Girly Pictures* makes no claims to "the truth about sexuality" and therefore evades a direct or prescriptive correlation between political and psycho-sexual imaginaries. Although not all of the artists in this series of exhibitions are explicitly or even remotely aligned with a 'radical sex' perspective, they all employ a discursive approach using various aesthetic means to dramatize the impact of technologies of power on sexuality.

Kiss & Tell's 1992 videotape *True Inversions* examines the way in which sexuality is mediated by personal histories and by political, moral and educational institutions. Sex scenes are intercepted by a range of captions which use key words - masturbation, unsafe sex and



range of captions which use key words - masturbation, unsafe sex and censorship - to signify a diversity of meanings and perspectives. For instance, the caption "censored," qualified by an addendum - the criminal code section, "unsafe sex" and "politically incorrect" - points to the regulation and complexity of the discursive field in which images of sex are made and looked at. The image is also periodically disrupted by keyed-in commentaries from the director and crew members who are identified by name and position. This device foregrounds a personal perspective which displaces the standard mode of anonymous, authoritative commentary. It also establishes the video production itself as an amalgamation of multiple points of view. In the same way that the crew's *inverted* appearance in front of the camera undermines the illusionistic form of linear narrative, fictional lovers are juxtaposed with real lovers who differ about the prospect of having sex in front of the camera. Keyed-into the scene, the director questions the assumed speciousness of sex between the long-term on-camera-only lovers in contrast to sex between the recently coupled real lovers. *True inversions* uses Brechtian and video art strategies to situate sex and images of sex within a pleasurable and contesting field of vision.

G.B. Jones' work, explicitly employing a 'radical sex' vernacular, represents sex/power play as an aspect of subcultural lifestyle. Jones' super 8 film, *The Yo Yo Gang* (1992), is an out-of-sync pot-pourri of hand-held camera shots, zooms and jump cuts organized around the activities of a girl-gang who play and make war with yo-yos. Drawing on a *West Side Story* parable of gang combat, Jones' campy home-movie-come-experimental-aesthetic collapses art and real life, fantasy and lifestyle. Similarly, her drawings, many of them directly modeled on those of Tom of Finland, display a "homocore" taxonomy of punk and S/M motifs - tattoos, leather, uniforms, chopper chicks and prison scenes. The home-brewed anarchism of Jones' aesthetic boosts the transgressive status of the content targeting conventions of art etiquette as much as social and political decorum.

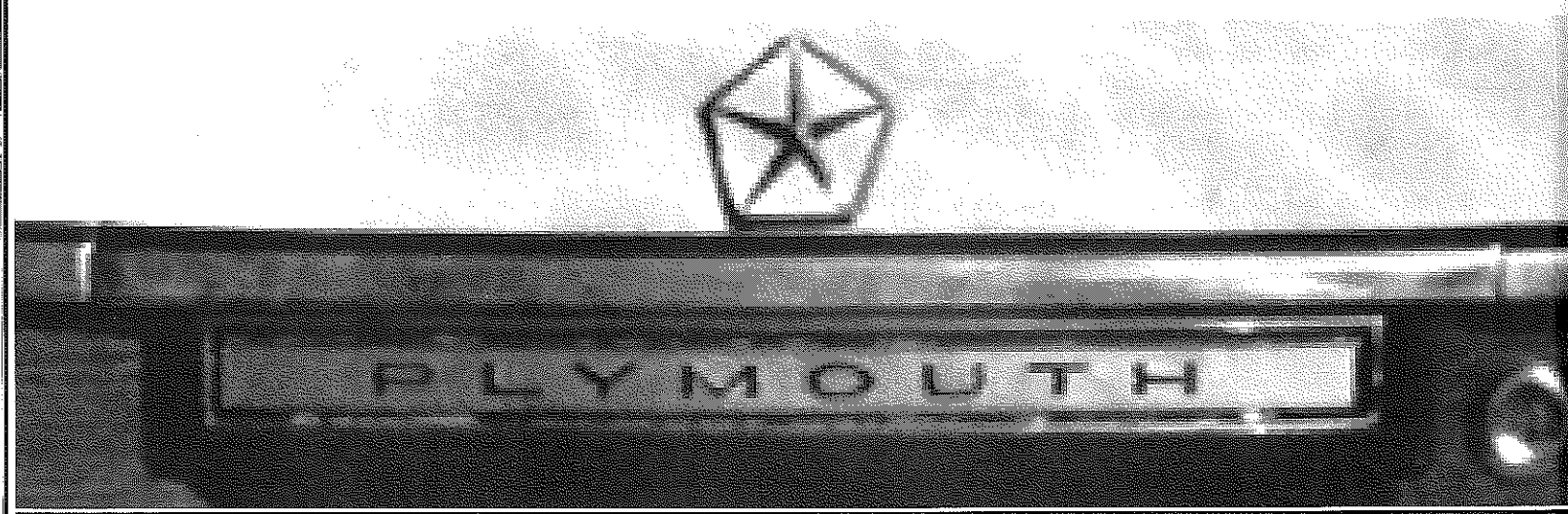
Likewise, sex toys, bondage and discipline scenes as well as

butch/femme role-playing populate A.K. Summers' black and white animation, *Topless, Dickless and Clueless* (1994). The association of power with masculinity is inverted in Summers' tape. Although the self-identified, bald-headed butch top Libra is in hot pursuit of a futuristic femme who continually eludes her, the femme is revealed as an undercover agent who eventually captures the protagonist, ties her up and tortures her by penetrating her pussy with extra long fingernails. Playing with a range of ironies, Summers' comic animation uses repetition and conventional cartoon sound motifs to spoof subcultural dyke life and satirize stereotypical dichotomies: butch/femme, clued-in/clueless, top/bottom (topped/topless).

Using narrated text from the classic pornographic novel, *The Story of O*, Julie Zando's videotape, *Uh, Oh!* (1994), similarly takes up the rubric of 'radical sex' recasting the narrative of sexual submission in butch/femme terms. Contrary to Summers' videotape, *Uh, Oh!* exaggerates the stereotypical correlation of butch/femme with conventional heterosexual power dynamics by retaining the names used in the original novel, casting O as a waitress in a roadside diner and Sir Stephen as a cowboy and using a man's voice for Sir Stephen's narration. Lesbian S/M dungeon scenes are intercut with airplane safety demonstrations invoking the importance of consent, suspense and trepidation in S/M practice. Like the title of the videotape, images of risk and peril - amusement park rides and O's account of a recurring dream in which she is in an airplane on the verge of crashing - metaphorically illustrate the pleasure accrued from danger in masochistic fantasy. As in *The Story of O*, the ego-loss associated with masochism is portrayed as a euphoric experience symbolized at the end of the videotape by the image of a roller-coaster ride shot from a subjective perspective accompanied by O's description of free-falling.

While Zando represents the dynamics of sexual domination and submission as "the ultimate expression of romantic love," Su Friedrich's film, *Rules of the Road* (1993) tells a classically romantic

St. Friedrich



tale of emotional obsession. In contrast to the trajectory of ego-loss in *Uh Oh, Rules of the Road* recounts the familiar experience of emotional loss prompted by the dissolution of a relationship. Longing is represented by the off-screen narrator's fixation on "a sensible family car" - a 1983 beige Oldsmobile Cutlass cruiser with a luggage rack and fake wood siding. The stark image of a pair of hands playing solitaire punctuates the camera's fetishistic perusal of the endless gamut of station wagons. Provoking ecological concerns, memories of family outings and reflections on instilled puritanical values, the station wagon becomes a Mobius strip of associations. Recalling the vehicle's genesis within the relationship, its absorption of cigarette smoke as well as good and bad memories, the solitary narrator muses over the car's symbolic association with a coupled past and future. The camera lingers over lurid detailing, while the narrator attests to the car's deceptive appearance, fondly itemizing its comfortable and efficient attributes. Glibly recollecting her disappointment with the car's homeliness she professes that she was "consoled by the thought that it was unique." And yet, the subjective gaze of the camera, mimicking her vision, is over-populated with '83 Oldsmobile wagons with fake wood siding. Anticipating the anguish of catching a glimpse of her ex-lover in the driver's seat, she resists looking but finds her nemesis unavoidable. Ironically, perpetually frozen in her tracks by the procession of sensible family cars, she is constantly on the alert for the signature license plate, just as O, chained to the door frame, waits in rapt agony for the return of her cowboy. The car, its simultaneous elusiveness and prevalence, personifies the fusion of pleasure and pain provoked by longing.

Abigail Child's two films, *Mayhem* (1987) and *Covert Action* (1984) dislodge and magnify undercurrents of seduction in social and cinematic narratives. Using found home-movie footage from the 50's of kissing, romping and various kinds of frenetic interaction, *Mayhem* restages "fragments of memory." Montage, repetition, abridged voice-over and cryptic silent movie-style intertitles create a disjunctive barrage of peripheral moments without the adhesive continuity of a story. As one of the intertitles professes, "My goal is to disarm my movies." Similarly, disarming both movie and spectator, *Covert Action* employs conventions of film noir to reveal and confound mechanisms of narrative pleasure and suspense. Recurring close-ups of women expressing apprehension, dread and panic, images of men walking/stalking and scenes of obviously staged sexual violence augmented by key lighting, dramatic sound and camera angles propel a familiar erotic and violent chain of events. The momentum of suspense is continually disrupted by match cuts, unexpected montage and auto-narrative sound bites. The gendered division of roles - female victim/male aggressor - is inverted near the end of the film with the introduction of a vintage Japanese porn clip of two women having sex. During their frolic, a spying thief is caught, held at gun point and forced to comply to their sexual demands. Although no doubt originally intended to cater to male fantasy, in this context, the scene explodes any singular or fixed meaning. Drawing analogies among the screen, the street and the bedroom, *Covert Action* manifests parallel and contradictory messages about sex and violence. Evolving a cinematic language based on repetition and metonymy, Child's work scrutinizing the paradoxical and repressed aspects of iconographic conventions.

Lutz Bacher's work, surveyed in the compilation videotape

which takes its title from Susan Sontag's text, "On Photography", investigates the latent connotations of notorious events circulated through printed or televised mass media (William Kennedy Smith's rape testimony, Jackie Onassis allegedly fleeing from paparazzo Ron Gallela, an interview with Lee Harvey Oswald, Jimi Hendrix destroying his guitar on-stage). Bacher's 1986 *Sex With Strangers*, drawing on a more obscure genre of circulated images, is a series of large scale black and white appropriations of simulated rape and oral sex imagery. The images are taken from a 1970's book which poses ambiguously as a sociology text. Though the images look like conventional porn, the original captions included in the appropriations situate them within a pseudo-pedagogical framework. While signaling that this framework provides a pretext for the circulation of "dirty pictures," Bacher's work also critically draws attention to the moral and cultural binding of sex with intimacy. Turning on the motif of estrangement, *Sex with Strangers* marks the axis of pleasure/danger both as end-points and as parallel conditions of possibility. Without the provision of ballast, the viewer is put in a position which mimics the condition of estrangement. Like the women in the images, the viewer becomes sexually involved with a stranger - the work.

All of the work in *Girly Pictures* operates in relation to a narrative structure, whether deconstructing or reconstructing familiar plot lines or working against the linearity or semiotic implications of conventional story-telling. The title, *Girly Pictures*, conjures the image of a pin-up and injects it with an aggressive and ironic nuance. It plays on the ambiguity around whether the girl *makes* the picture or the picture *makes* the girl. While the term girly picture typically conveys a soft-core pornographic image of a woman made for a heterosexual male gaze, the work in this series reframes the *picture* without denying the endemic effects of patriarchal and heterosexist power structures. Instead of dismissing or essentializing the dichotomy - male/subject/gaze: female/object/picture - this work recasts the eroticization of power as a political, aesthetic, dangerous and pleasurable venture. Confounding the dichotomy, women are aggressive, angry, obsessive, masochistic, sadistic, pining, seductive, apprehensive; they are also smutty subjects/objects of representation. Taking psycho-sexual dynamics within narrative as a point of departure, the work engages a mobility and interchange of subject positions. The diversity of perspectives and aesthetic practices illustrates a spectrum of approaches to the problem of integrating feminist theory and practice.





Abigail Child, *Covert Action*

