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where is the sex in art?

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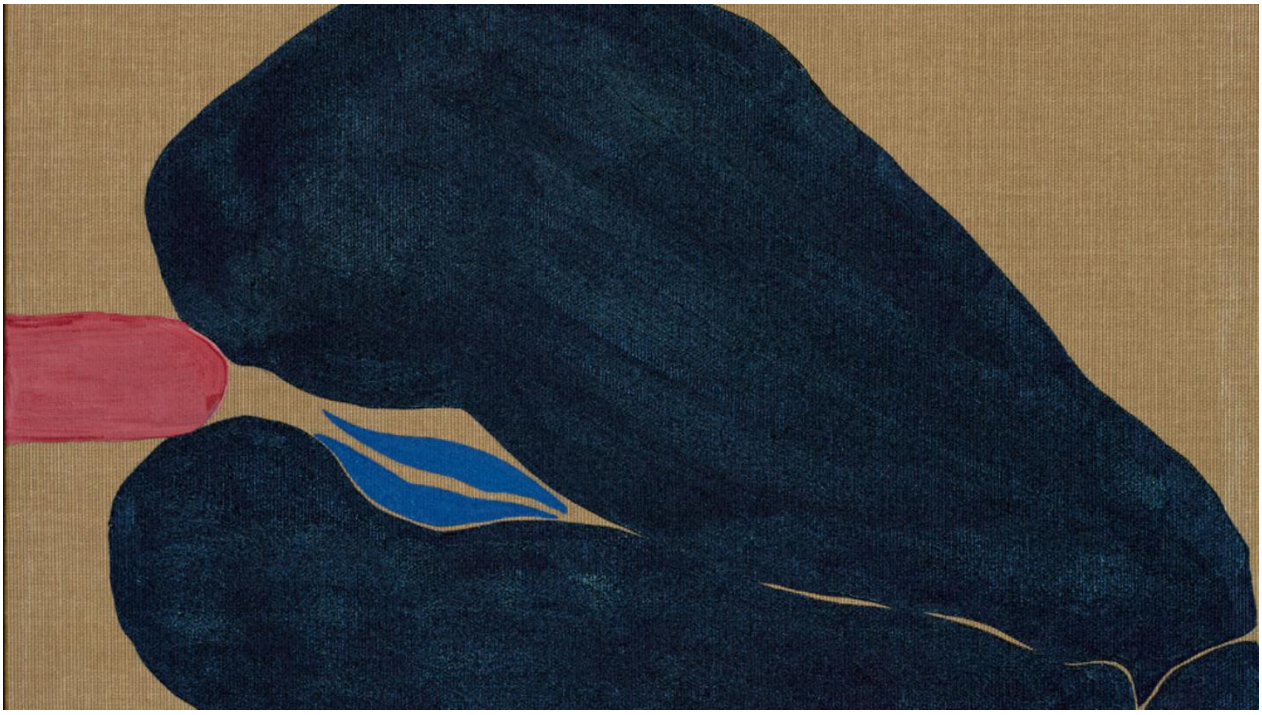

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We are all sex obsessed. It's everywhere, used by everyone to sell any product. Porn use equates to approximately one third of internet traffic. Endless dating apps abound for users with one thing on their mind, as do websites geared towards enabling "safe" sex work. Cam girls, dick pics, sexting… Sex doesn't just sell, it permeates all media and every creative or image-based industry. In a new exhibition at Cob Gallery in Camden, London-born painter Alba Hodsoll presents an alternative vision, an arresting collection of paintings that deftly implicate both the viewer and the artist simultaneously within an array of just-recognisable explicit activity. In her work, physical pleasure and the emotional ramifications of sex are inherently entwined and inextricable, calling into question our casual sexual consumption of one another. Feminist pornographer Erika Lust insists that society's obsession with sex embodies a natural predilection: "We come from sex. Sex

is the source of life, it's everything. And still there are so many people out there not wanting to acknowledge that." Lust's assertion illuminates an astonishing discrepancy. While sex pervades every crevice of society and occupies each of our minds as well as our Instagram feeds, it remains enormously underrepresented in contemporary culture. Where is the sex in art?

Art history is peppered with of sexual activity. Plenty of artists allude to sexuality in their work, either through intricate systems of subtle signifiers in imagery, colour or material; or the less disguised imagery of related activities, not to mention the phallic imagery and various slits abounding the walls of our galleries and museums. It wasn't until after the sexual liberation of the latter half of the 20th century that a miscellany of artists gradually began to approach sex with a less abashed confidence. Whether the homoerotic hunks of Tom of Finland; the pulsing muscular forms of Robert Mapplethorpe; Tracey Emin's stitched sexual history in Everyone I Have Ever Slept With (1995) or Nobuyoshi Araki's series of girls roped up in traditional Japanese bondage, sexual content by implication or anticipation fast became a familiar trope. Such instances of implied sex solidified a divide between erotic art and pornography, assuming that where the pornographic reveals, the erotic conceals.

The inherently instant nature and mobility of the camera made photography the supreme medium with which to immortalise any sexual interaction. For Larry Clark, Nan Goldin and Ryan McGinley, photographing their immediate world and what the saw sexually meant they captured the most unsuspecting subjects in images, with an energetic anticipation of youth. They present a different type of sex: carefree and liberated from the emotional restraints and responsibilities of adulthood.

If these photographers display sex and intimacy at its most fleeting, by contrast Jeff Koons and Andres Serrano instantiate just how constructed sexual fantasies can be. The former pseudo-narcissistically implicates himself in his own work in a series of dreamlike yet explicit self-portraits with his porn star wife "La Cicciolina" in a series of photographs entitled Made in Heaven (1991). Similarly confronting, Serrano presents a series of staged photographic portraits, where his nude protagonists' glare outwards, regardless of their scatological occupation. Both render sex sexless, making no attempt to titillate their audience, nor to either exalt or condemn the lewd activities they so starkly present.

As pornographic imagery quickly began to engulf mass media, it soon became increasingly relevant as artistic material. John Currin insists porn offers the only poses contorted enough to display limbs akin to those found in classical paintings, while Marilyn Minter's glistening Porn Grids (1989) drippy enamel literally ooze and seep, easily recreating the cum-shots they depict. Both Thomas Ruff and Jeff Burton utilise porn as source material by reproducing or blurring it almost unrecognisably, with their audience complicit in completing the remainder of his pornographic image in their own mind. If representations of sex are painted, they apparently escape censorship. Betty Tompkins' enormous graphic Fuck Paintings (1969-1974), boldly present the precise moment of penetrative heterosexual entry. Despite calculated exclusion of the identity of any figures, these images were denied entry into Japan for exhibition in 2006. However, this blatant lack of specification makes it much easier for the viewer to relate and involve themselves in the depicted sexual activity.

In recent years, the porn industry has come under intense scrutiny, with various governmental rulings rightfully moving to police the inclusion of underage girls and other unlawful practices. Feminist debates surrounding its moral legitimacy equally abound. Pro-sex and pro-porn feminists have begun to offer an alternative to the male-centric viewpoint that most porn found online offers. According to Lily Bones, "Art acts as a mirror to the culture of it's time. As our attitude towards sex becomes more inclusive, art continues to include sex in its canon with increasing, although tentative, acceptance." Sex is relevant and can no longer be overlooked: doing so constitutes not

only censorship, but denial. As attitudes towards sex become more liberal, and sex becomes more prominent in popular culture, so do its depictions. Cue a new generation of young artists exploring expanded notions of sex in their work.

In Natalie Krim's dreamlike drawings, multiple figures, limbs and shapes blossom out of one another, describing ecstatic sessions of romantic copulation in a single image. The priority Krim gives to the female form in her compositions, as well as an emphasis on female pleasuring, creates delicate pictorial visions of bursting female orgasms. With a similar focus on feminine rapture, Yulia Nefedova draws cartoon-like nude figures mostly of single women or two together, locked in embraces and pleasuring themselves or each other with various junk food or candy-related props. Taking this cutesy, candy-coloured palette further into a sexually deviant realm, last year Carly Mark presented Does This Make You Feel Primal, eight hand-blown teddy-bear-shaped glass dildos topped off with rainbow-coloured synthetic hair. While not depicting sexual activity so explicitly, the contrast of the girliness of these sculptural sex toys feminizes them, reclaiming the dildo or butt plug as a potential tool in female pleasure.

Photography remains incendiary in depicting sexual relations between two individuals, but this content remains challenging to publicise. Now that the dissemination of images online has become increasingly problematic, with the widespread sharing of a single image now immediate, people's paranoia skyrockets. Artists turn again towards their friends. With ample Goldin-esque grit, in Amy and Jack (Sex 2), Chad Moore allows his audience to witness a young couple at their most intimate. According to Moore, "My work has a common theme of connection and leaving out the sexual element of everyday human life wouldn't make sense, as it's the one of the highest forms of trust." Sex represents more than a physical exchange of pleasure.

By contrast, for Julia Fox, sex offers the potential for monetary exchange. Last summer, the artist prostituted herself for one night and documented it with her camera. She openly explains the casual attitude of this project: "This rich guy wanted to fuck me and I was like only if you pay me and let me take pictures. I'd never done it and I've been into prostitution porn for a while so I just had to live the fantasy." Exuding an unparalleled bravery, Fox's life and her work are so closely intertwined that it remains challenging to divide the two. To protect her sexual partner's identity, no photos of him aside from a few glimpses of his genitals appear. Instead, Fox mostly modelled, directing the shots herself, posing nude while covered in sprays of hundred-dollar bills. Fox takes control of the situation, stealing his gaze back from him. By using a 35mm film camera, the incapacity to see the image you've just captured renders it less of a threat, irreproducible and unsharable immediately. For Fox, the film camera afforded her not only control of her images, but greater freedom in what they depict.

In Gut Feeling (2016), a giant engulfing screen-printed canvas at 2.5 metres high, Kingsley Ifill immerses us into an uncomfortable pornographic image of a seated male penetrating a female sexual partner dressed in stockings, suspenders and stilettos. Legs spread, with her "dignity" covered by a giant UHU glue logo that explains the painting's sickly yellow colouring, the faces of Prince Harry and his brother's wife Princess Kate crown the bodies of the lovers. In reproducing an image doctored from its original state by an anonymous author, Ifill implores us to reconsider our assumption of the reliability and veracity of what we find on the Internet.

Similarly piecing together bodily fragments, at Cob Gallery, Hodsoll constructs the forms in her compositions out of negative space. Entangled figures appear out of gaps, creases, slits and cracks, and the spaces between them represent painted expressions of physical intimacy. While seducing the viewer through her languorous lines, subtle colour palette and juicily curvaceous forms, the artist depicts sexual activity from unidealised angles. Hodsoll confronts our expectations of visual

depictions of sex, as well as of the act itself. For her, sex is not grotesque, but even in its awkwardness or occasional ugliness, something beautifully intimate can prevail.

The figures in Hodsoll's images writhe together, but as with Tompkins et al, their identities remain ambiguous. Headless figures lock limbs as we automatically implicate ourselves in her sex scenes. A third figure appears, looming lonely in a corner or turning shyly away from a tumbling couple. Hodsoll delves into our collective psyche and examines an irony so often pervading sex today: despite our physical presence, our minds remain absent, instead residing more comfortably in varying degrees of emotional detachment.

The title of the exhibition - PoV - borrows an acronym that describes a genre of pornography in which sexual acts are filmed and watched from the point of view of one partner. Hodsoll's heavily cropped and zoomed-in explicit scenes inch towards abstraction, igniting an inner voyeuristic desire to understand precisely who's point of view these paintings display. Deliberately leaving this question unanswered, the artist allows herself to remain enmeshed with her figures. She insists that, "Everyone I've slept with recently is technically in the show." Hodsoll's entanglement of the psychological and the personal in relation to sex indicates a deep concern with our easy consumption of sexual imagery.

Whether liberating feminine pleasure, calling out the falsities of pornography, unpicking our complex sexual psychologies or examining the empowering allure of prostitution, a sexually liberated generation of contemporary artists no longer merely allude to sex by visual symbolism or implication. In a society so consumed with sex, we've seen it all. Confrontational images that once relied on shock factor as a means to place "scenes of a sexual nature" in a gallery context now feel basic and irrelevant, as immature as dick doodles jizzing all over our maths homework. As our understanding of sex, fantasy and desire becomes more complex and nuanced, so do artists' depictions, with a distinct, fearless and crucial involvement of themselves and by consequence, each of us, in their visual narratives.

Alba Hodsoll "PoV" will be on view at Cob Gallery in Camden until 25 February 2016.