

PLAYGIRL'S OUT OF STYLE, BUT NAKED IS STILL IN

Naked has been on my mind lately. Firstly, because the blustery days of winter have come, bringing with them streaking season. And secondly because Playgirl, women's first answer to men's pornography, has folded. I would mourn, but this supposed bastion of women's nudie mags has always puzzled me. It was founded as a feminist response to Playboy, but it is an uncreative one. It mimics rather than invents, as if to say that women like making people into sex objects just as much as men. Nudity, re-imagined by feminists, should speak from



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women's experiences and also subvert the patriarchal power structure. As we all know, Naked happens in more than just porn. Naked reveals itself in mainstream popular culture, dance, and daily life. So, you ask, how does one tell when naked bodies are progressive, versus when they perpetuate degrading and exploitative norms? Like telling "good" cholesterol from "bad" cholesterol, it's a subtle but potentially life-changing distinction.

I bought my first, and only, issue of Playgirl to celebrate my 18th birthday. It was disappointing — not only because they didn't card me, but because it just was not that hot. By the time I bought it, of course, it had veered considerably from its feminist origins. In early years, it included content by the likes of Raymond Carver and addressed abortion rights. Over the years, it became increasingly more popular with gay men than with women — raising a chicken-and-egg question of whether content or readership changed first. My issue, circa 2005, featured over-tanned, pumped up men lounging on sand dunes and duvets. It probably seemed strange to me partially because images of men in such passive poses are rare. I would also like to think that I required more to turn me on than a superficial incarnation of a Ken doll. The men in

Playgirl were not offering me anything human. They were static, two-dimensional. That's the bad kind of Naked.

Two good representatives of Naked in pop culture are Britney Spears and Pink. Both appear unclothed in their recent videos — Spears in the one for "Womanizer," and Pink in the one for "So What." But Spears' nudity, like most of the video, runs contrary to her supposedly anti-sexism anthem. She perches delicately on a bench, using her legs and arms to cover herself. If her facial expression is seductive, her body language is meek. This is a stark contrast to the attack-dog maliciousness of her other personas within the video. The best explanation for the nude scenes is that they are supposed to boost her back into the pop icon limelight. She had babies, she shaved her head; so now we must be reminded she is still youthful and traditionally feminine. And that means motionless, powerless, vulnerably naked instead of powerfully naked. Bad Naked.

Pink's nudity, however, is anything but those things. In her video, she dances around on a red carpet in front of cameras, flaunting her body with the abandon of a teenager mooning from a car window. Clearly, she is going for something other than come-hither sexiness. It is telling that she does this in front of press cameras. Rather than living up to the naked body that they want, she defies them. She is not the feminine ideal: her breasts are on the small side, her hair is short, and her screaming chorus is all but sweet and empathic. But rather than hide or change anything, she embraces it. Her belligerent dancing challenges a media that reduces women to bodies and then tells us exactly what that body better look like. And that looks great naked.

Nudity as confrontation, rather than sex appeal, is often used in performance art and modern dance. My first encounter with this was a one-man performance piece in Buenos Aires called "The Wolf." It consisted of a naked man in a bathroom leaping, rolling, and contorting, in the throws of heartbreak. And man, were his flopping genitals distracting. But they also made the piece interesting by challenging cultural norms of "decency," and making the audience re-examine its own reaction to nudity. That nakedness certainly spoke a hell of a lot more than Playgirl had three years before. A dance performance at the Schwartz center earlier this year used similar ideas — which according to The Sun, caused most of the audience to walk out. Such nakedness — whether it suits your tastes or not — is valuable because it challenges

the norm.

Some might protest that so far, my examples of positive nudity are not exactly sexy. I would first point out that nudity does not always mean sex, and sex does not always mean nudity. This is easy to forget. Perhaps our forgetfulness comes from the fact that sex is presented to us so often as bodies — usually female ones — instead of as human interaction. The very notion that "sex sells," applied to everything from watches to detergent implies that sex can be transmitted via a picture of a woman in lingerie, or a comparable lonely image. Sex, as a human rather than animal act, is multi-dimensional in a way that Playgirl, Playboy, and advertisers, cannot reproduce. It is far more than an unclothed body.

There are some instances in which nudity and real sex are still presented together. Some feature films, especially those directed by women, show realistic sex. Such scenes progress more slowly and less smoothly, and the woman tends not to have screaming, flailing orgasms of the "Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion" kind. I have heard that a new brand of porn, labeled feminist porn, gets closer to real sex. I cannot confirm this, due to my incompetence at surfing the web for porn (I know, I know, you would've pegged me for a pro), but the reports are inspiring.

In the examples above, as well as in everyday life, it's not just being naked that counts: it's about how you're naked. How we view nakedness in others, whether they are porn stars, pop stars, or dancers, informs how we view our own nakedness. Women tend to be more critical of their bodies, and less comfortable being naked, largely because of the emphasis put on the ideal female body in the media. Most women just do not see bodies like theirs represented as sexy, except for one or two Dove ad-type exceptions. And plenty of men have doubts about their bodies, too, although it tends to be less damaging because their self-image is tied less tightly to the physical. All this means that it can be a struggle to just be comfortable in our skin, whether alone or around others. So, Playgirl's folding is not a tragedy. Women can do better than mirror a shabby male-created version of Naked. Naked exists in many more forms than a glossy centerfold — just ask a stalker.

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WOKE UP NOV. 5, GOT YOURSELF A GUN

I've never understood the victim-complex gun owners inflict on themselves. Politicians of both parties pander to them shamelessly, assuring them in the condescending tone of a mother to her toddler that the big bad government would never take away their guns. We celebrate hunting as a fundamental American tradition on par with setting off 4th of July fireworks or mumbling the Pledge of Allegiance everyday before class. It's as if shooting, skinning and bloodletting an animal for sport and going out in the backyard to throw the old baseball around with dad are qualitatively equivalent. There are over 200 million guns in this country. Gun ownership is roundly accepted. And anti-gun activists are dismissed as hippie-pussies who hate America and want to strip people of their god-given right to shoot shit and are



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probably communists.

Yet, ignorant of reality, gun freaks have this pathology in which they are convinced that there is a shadowy faction of the American left that's plotting to come in the night and take their firearms, rendering them defenseless against the make-believe armed gangs that will subsequently slither up from the sewers and take over the country. This pathology has manifested itself in the two weeks since Barack Obama's election. Reports have cropped up from all corners of the country chronicling a post-election boom in gun sales. From Nov. 3 through Nov. 9 the FBI received 374,000 background check requests for prospective gun buyers,

a nearly 50 percent increase from last year. The idea is that once the Big O hits the White House bullets are going to cost five grand a piece and semi-automatic AK-47s will, outrageously, no longer be for sale.

A nightmare. Might as well scoop up the weapons while you still can, the logic suggests.

This gun boom has hit despite the fact that Obama has repeatedly professed his support for gun ownership. In addition, any change to current firearm policy is nearly impossible to enact considering the power and influence of the thugs at the NRA and the fact that only a small minority of Americans want to change our current firearm policy. We live in a country where it's not only legal but praiseworthy to shoot a wolf with a semi-automatic rifle from an airplane, yet these people are afraid that three months from now they won't be able to pick up a 9mm. Only the cognitive processes of true psychotics would be so obscured by blatant ignorance.

I've been down this road before. Whenever I so much as utter the word gun a troupe of pro-gunners materialize with their own set of statistics and antique talking points that leave my article and me looking silly and stupid and amateurish. Their claims may be baseless and incoherent but the net effect is intimidating nonetheless. The swiftness of their response and emotion they feel for their beloved firearms borders on creepy. Obama's "cling" is far too gentle a description of the relationship between these people and their guns. They take on a subservient role, defending not guns but themselves. Every argument funnels back to the personal, as they aren't arguing public policy as much as human rights. I don't know how or why gun freaks see firearms policy as a human rights issue, but they do. Perhaps the weapon has become a necessary part of their being. And the prospect of having that weapon taken away is the prospect of having a part of how you identify yourself as a person taken away. It an irrational notion, but a very real notion, and it explains

the wild passion which informs contemporary debates on firearm policy.

But this article isn't just about the stupidity of gun owners who think that Obama is going to take their guns away, it's also about the fact that he should. Take them away, take them all away. Don't throw the Constitution at me. 200 million guns aren't making us any safer. Don't wave the flag of American tradition. Little kids who aren't old enough to spell "gun" are blowing bits of their still-moldable skulls all over their cribs. You want to get the second-rate orgasm you get after going out into the wilderness and killing an animal? Try it with a Bowie knife while looking the innocent beast in the eye.

We're conditioned to believe that the gun debate is far more enormous and complicated than it seems. There's this vague notion that's been pounded into us saying that our intuitions are deceiving us; that the right to bear arms is a necessary component of living in a free society, and besides, guns actually make us safer. It's all bullshit. Murder in the streets of Philadelphia — you cannot tell me gun control wouldn't change that. You can throw around numbers and studies and credible sources but you cannot tell me more people aren't dead in America because of our firearms policy.

I'm not arguing the constitutionality of the right to bear arms; I'm questioning the rationality of a society that gives its citizens a short cut to killing each other in the name of freedom and tradition. What does that say about us? I've seen mounds of praise heaped on the goodness and dignity of the American people following the election of our first black president. But how good and dignified is a nation that allows its citizens to kill each other with the movement of a finger?

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