

Facing up to erotica

'Taste' has traditionally been the difference between erotica and pornography but, says [Dian Hanson](#) in *The New Erotic Photography*, the definitions need rethinking

By now everyone is familiar with porn publisher Gloria Leonard's quote that 'the difference between pornography and erotica is lighting'. As far as quotes go it's a great one: glib, concise and memorable. But is it true? While I was making this book [*The New Erotic Photography*, published by Taschen] people asked how I tell the erotic photography from the porn, and invariably the lighting question would come up. At first I just said that I go by my gut – and adjacent organs – but

after looking at thousands of purported erotic photos I have some better answers, and they have very little to do with lights.

What are my qualifications? I've seen a lot of pictures of naked women. In 1976 I was one of the founding editors of *Puritan*, a self-consciously 'classy' hardcore magazine with more pretension than actual artistic merit. After two years of that I plunged happily into editing men's magazines with inelegant titles like *Hooker*, *Big Butt* and

Juggs, where I was seldom called upon to decide whether a photographic submission was erotic or porn. During these years I felt more kinship with Gloria Leonard than with erotic photographers, and the photographers didn't like me any better.

Then in 1987 I became the editor of *Leg Show* magazine and for the first time encountered a genuinely discerning readership who cared as much about the photography as the allure of the models. As I started to tailor the

magazine to their needs I began receiving submissions from some of those erotic photographers I'd scorned, and discovered there was more to the genre than shadowy 'art nudes'. I began to see how lighting, composition and creative vision could add up to a more intimate photograph, enhancing the viewer's connection to the model and increasing the sexual impact.

At first my publisher worried I'd gone soft, as in core, but when I added photos by Elmer

Right: *Saucer kitten* © Jeremy
M F Thompson. Far right:
Untitled © Tony Stamos.

Batters, Eric Kroll, Roy Stuart, Richard Kern and Ed Fox to *Leg Show* it wasn't to reduce the sexual quotient; I believed the magazine would be more stimulating with photographs created out of passion for women rather than simply for money, and increased sales proved me right. Just working without expectation of payment isn't what separates erotica from porn, though. If it were that easy every husband who sends a photo in to 'readers' wives' would be a great artist. Not that some aren't.

Art vs porn

This debate about what distinguishes artistic nudity from base pornography is as old as the first nude photograph, meaning nearly as old as photography itself. To the puritan all nudes are filth; to the libertine all are defensible. Most people fall somewhere in between, but there is so much in between that there's seldom agreement. We asked every photographer included in this book to draw the line between erotica and pornography, and few lines were in the same place.

We also asked if a photo could, or should, be called erotic if it doesn't arouse lust. Here there was more consensus. Nearly all said that lust is unimportant because erotic photography is about beauty, or sensuality or psychological stimulation, and that arousing the viewer was just an occasional unplanned side effect. Curious, since the definition of erotic is 'of or pertaining to the sexual passion' (*The Oxford Universal Dictionary*), or 'arousing, or designed to arouse, feelings of sexual desire' (*Microsoft Word Dictionary*).

Would the photographers be so at odds with the dictionaries if crass, uninspired sexual imagery were less culturally ubiquitous? Of course they want to distinguish themselves from the glut of generic porn, but if the point of separation is the viewer's zipper the genre becomes a contradiction in terms. It's this discomfort with the word factor that has made erotic sound snobbish and outdated to many.

Several of the photographers interviewed for this book said they disliked the word and didn't want it associated with their work. Who can blame them when porn is chic and erotic photography sounds like the art books in

the back of grandpa's closet? So how does erotic photography maintain its dignity while staying true to its sexual roots? Perhaps by embracing its undoubted potential to be more arousing than pornography.

Eros was, after all, not just the God of love, but of sexual love, the most sublime form. Passionate love is such a dizzying, transcendent union of heart, mind, body and soul that erotic photographers should be oversupplied with inspiration and, by extension, fans. Pornography's supposed appeal of sex reduced to its physical mechanics, divorced from emotional commitment, seems faint by comparison.

I say 'supposed', however, because my years editing a variety of porn magazines taught me that men do weave fantasies of love around models in even the crudest pornography. I have read scores of tender, heartfelt letters

sent to women known only to the writers from their photographs in *Hefty Mamas* or *Black Tail*, enough to convince me that the male ability to separate sex and love is way overrated. If anything, men are particularly vulnerable to falling for women who fulfill their sexual fantasies. Consider how often you hear tales of a man leaving his wife for a new woman because she makes more money.

So if men can fall in love with hardened porn models, you'd think the fresh-faced amateurs often found in erotic photography would reduce them to jelly. And they do, when the women are allowed to show those faces.

Face off

Why do so many photographers think the way to invest a nude with artistic integrity is to cut her head off? Oh, they'll tell you they love and respect women and find pornography hateful

and degrading, but I can't be the only one who sees a headless woman as more of an object than a complete woman with her legs spread. Some photographers even describe their work as 'bodyscape', because they've made the poor models look like boulders or sand dunes instead of human beings.

I've heard the explanations that these headless bodies maintain mystery or modesty, but I still feel cheated. The photographer, after all, got to see everything. He enjoyed his model's blush as she undressed for the camera the first time. He saw her anxiety as she searched his face for approval and watched her confidence grow when she found it. If he was lucky he also caught the glow when she discovered her exhibitionistic streak.

Then he, or she, keeps all that for himself and just gives us a bodyscape? This is why romantic

men are buying porn instead of erotic photography. The camera work may be uninspired, but at least there are faces to search for a spark of passion, for some hint of genuine sexual response.

When I was researching *Naked as a Jaybird*, my book on 1960s hippie nudist magazines, I interviewed a photographer in his late 80s who had worked for nudist, girlie and art photo magazines back in the 1950s. One company in Chicago owned all the titles and issued a separate set of photographer's guidelines for each.

For the nudist magazines the model was to be completely naked, with one leg angled to hide her pubic region, smiling at the viewer to show her healthy innocence. For the girlie magazines the model was partially dressed, to add sexual tension, with provocative eye contact to make the viewer feel desired. And for the figure art magazines the model was to be completely nude but subsequently air-brushed, with her head turned away from the viewer.

'So she would look like a statue,' said the old photographer, 'and that's what made it art.' Fifty years later and photographers are still using this tired old formula for art nudes. Isn't it time for a change?

Gut's guide

Here, then, is my gut's guide to telling erotic photography from pornography. First, toss out all the bodyscapes. Take what remains and study the model's figure. Is it frozen in a pose that serves no useful purpose in everyday life? Do the breasts project from the body with a taut buoyancy inconsistent with the laws of gravity? Are the fingers of one hand formed in a V and used to separate the labia for no apparent reason? These may be the subtle signs of porn.

Now the really important part: Examine the face. Is it expertly painted to Barbie doll perfection? Do the lips resemble an inflatable hemorrhoid pillow? Does the overall expression suggest smoldering passion, while the eyes say nobody's home? Regardless of the lighting, I'd say you've got some pornography here.

Erotic photography, on the other hand, should show the body in believable positions, and hopefully, equipped with most original parts. More important, it must capture some genuine emotion on the model's face. Ideally, we'll see her pleasure at sharing herself with the viewer, but I will



Above: *Olga* © Robert Chouraqui.
Left: *Untitled* © Ben Marcato.

About the author

Dian Hanson began her publishing career at *Puritan Magazine* in 1976 and went on to edit a variety of adult titles, including *Oui*, *Jiggs* and *Leg Show* magazine. She has authored a number of Taschen titles, and now writes and edits all of Taschen's erotic publications. This article is a reprint of her introduction to *The New Erotic Photography*.

accept embarrassment, uncertainty, even anger, as long as there's something looking back at me to say a living, breathing woman was part of the photographic process.

Contrary to the contention of some glamour photographers, this realism doesn't exclude beauty, just the standardised, production-line beauty one buys from a Beverly Hills surgeon. Erotic photography at its best should reveal the small imperfections that make a woman unique and memorable, and provide the hook to grab your heart. Only when these elements are in place is it time to check out the lighting.

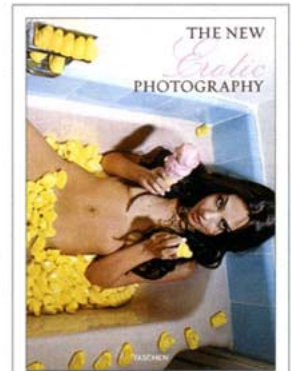
If it sounds like I think erotic photography is as much about the model as the photographer, I've made myself clear. When I look at a sexy photograph I don't want to see technical tricks. I want to be sucked in by the woman in the picture and fooled into feeling a part of her sexual agenda. Making that trick work takes talent some way beyond moving lights.

Face it: very few professional nude models can be honest in front of a camera. They quickly

learn to hit their poses and cover their vulnerability with a simulacrum of passion that makes real eroticism impossible. A great photographer has to recognise the woman who can truly share herself with the camera, then he or she must be able to tease out that feeling and catch it on film, a skill not taught in photo school. In my experience this requires an intimate connection with the model, not necessarily physical intimacy, but an emotional bond to fuel the creative relationship.

One of the most accomplished erotic photographers I know tells me he's emotionally drained after every photo session because he projects his own feelings and energy onto his models to propel the shoot forward. That's far more personal investment than shouting, 'Now arch your back! Yeah, make me want it, baby!' while running your model through glamour poses one through ten. But maybe how much self you're willing to sacrifice is, in the end, the real separation between erotica and porn.

All of the above is why you'll find this a book of faces as much as figures.



In Print

The New Erotic Photography is edited by Dian Hanson and Eric Kroll and is published by Taschen (ISBN 978-3-8228-4924-8), priced £30. For more information, visit www.taschen.com.

Emotive issue

Benedikt Taschen, Eric Kroll and I agree about the importance of the face in sexual attraction, so we sought out photographers who share our vision to make what we consider the ultimate collection of contemporary erotic photography. It must be said there are a few artists who deserve to be included who declined for one reason or another: Nobuyoshi Araki, Ellen von Unwerth, Tony Ward, Roy Stuart and Gilles Berquet, most prominently.

There are also a small number included who don't include the face, such as the master Ralph Gibson, who can find Eros in a foot or a black glove, and Hervé Lewis, whose argument that a woman's personality is in her butt we found, if not entirely convincing, so passionately heartfelt he won us over.

I hope we've succeeded in making a book you can enjoy with your mind, and your body. Perhaps you will discover a few photos in here that haunt your imagination and draw you back time after time until the book automatically falls open to those special pages. I hope you construct elaborate fantasies about the women in those photos and feel that if you two ever met the chemistry would be instant, mutual and all consuming. I hope that you'll even feel tempted to write a few love letters. Then I'll know that we, and all the photographers who made this big, beautiful book, have done our part to dispel the myth that all it takes to raise Eros is the right light. **BJP**