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EROS IN NEW ART

By Lisa Paul Streitfeld

We're now in New York amid a renaissance in erotic art, a phenomenon stemming from the collusion of two elements: the return of realism (and its greatest medium, photography), and the prominence of pornography in visual culture.

Deciding to investigate this phenomenon, I began my incursion on June 11 at the Naked Duck Gallery in Williamsburg, where **Marni Kotak**, complete with headdress, and feathers spilling out of her crotch, presented her new multimedia installation/performance, *Pleasure War*. Accompanied by her cross-gendered People's Pleasure Brigade, Kotak dared expose the 21st century challenge of being sexually open while also being sexually protected.

I returned to Williamsburg on June 26 for The Moral Values Festival at the Brick Theater. The hilarious *My Year in Porn* by **Cole Kazdin**, about her adventure as producer of a porn documentary, raised a key question: How does an artist investigate porn without participating in porn? The explicit answer is to be found in something like an Uncertainty Principle, wherein the consciousness of the artist affects the outcome of the creative experiment. Writer/director **Michael Schwartz** addressed this implicitly in *Coney Island Last Stop*, which risked combining enacted sexuality (actors masturbating on stage) with emotional authenticity, indicating where we were headed—an honest examination of human desire.

The June 30 opening of *It's Not About Sex* at Luxe Gallery on 57th Street was a seductive event filled with European accents, a custom wine label and purple wrapped chocolate kisses. I was there to view *Whack Attack: Homage to Mondrian*, a painting by the improbably named **Nancy Drew**, whose style transforms the works of modernist masters as well as instruments of female exploitation, like cardboard packaging for porn videos, into icons of feminine pleasure.

My survey came to a climax on July 1, when I attended the Art@Large opening of *The New Erotix*, a national competition juried by **Grady Turner**, a curator from the Museum of Sex. Here the image that stopped me cold was the visual alchemy of *Amor Fati*, a subdued oval portrait of an absolutely stunning androgynous figure with eyes closed and an open-mouthed expression reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe, simultaneously ecstatic and agonized. "I don't like porn," said **Chawky Frenn**, the artist of this new aesthetic of gender balance. "It isn't about standing in front of a painting and drooling. Eros is deeper than skin. It poses questions."

I went from there to the Lab Gallery in the Roger Smith Hotel, where artist, publisher, lover and provocateur **Abraham Lubelski** lay naked on a bed, performing a Manet-inspired picnic with a skeleton while 25 audience members pointedly ignored the critical question of vulnerability that performance artists are posing anew.