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ADAM MAGAZINE
Veronica Vera's New York
The Devil in Ms. Nitke

Veronica reflects on the sex biz with Barbara Nitke, the still photographer on 72 Manhattan-made porn flicks.



Barbara Nitke & Veronica Vera

Photography: Barbara Nitke

From the moment I received the invitation, I knew that this was one show I wanted to see. Barbara Nitke was the still photographer on 72 hardcore movies made in New York from 1982 to the present. She'd also been the wife of Herbert Nitke, a member of the porno aristocracy, who when he was alive was involved with many X-rated productions beginning with the very first *Devil in Miss Jones*. I had heard Barbara was working on a book and this show offered a sneak preview.

The press release from the New York Camera Club promised a narrated slide show from Barbara with excerpts from some of the interviews she had conducted. Until that time, all I had seen of her work was a great portrait of Gloria Leonard wrapped in only an American Flag, and Barbara's Christmas card on which a harried mom dressed in an evening gown is about to accidentally toss baby into the pasta pot. Barbara Nitke appeared to be a woman of style and wit. I wondered what her take would be on life in the sex biz.

It's standing room only that night at the New York Camera Club. I notice performer Jose Duvall in the crowd. He looks like he's back in fucking form after cleaning up his act. Costumer Jeffrey Wallach flashes a welcoming smile as I squeeze my way to the last seat in the house. Barbara's at the front, next to the screen. No sexy clothes for this girl, she's tailored and casual. The only reckless thing about her is a long mane of freshly shampooed hair that covers one eye. Once the lights go off and the slides begin, it's clear that hair notwithstanding, Barbara Nitke doesn't miss a trick.

"There are two types of images I like," she tells me later in an interview. "I like very erotic shots of people engaged in sex. Sometimes they're hardcore, sometimes just body parts, sometimes you don't see a head. The other shot I like is the one that tells me who this person really is."



Ron Sullivan (Henri Packard) directs Nina Hartley and Damian Cashmere in *Passion Chain*.

Her images reflect all of that and more. They reflect Barbara's affection for her subjects and they reveal her passion. The shots range from the sublime to the ridiculous. One image from *Our Naked Eyes* shows a Rubenesque woman seated on a man's dick. All you see is the front of her body and his knees, but there is a sense of movement, a certain curve to her body and the way she is lit, that turns this very erotic image into an old master painting. Then there's Ron Sullivan in baseball cap and relaxed belly in conference with Nina Hartley as she sits astride Damian Cashmere who is busily munching her cunt.

The photographs tell a story of fun, of irony, of vulnerability. They reveal adult children at work and at play. "Often I came away from the set feeling, 'This is so infantile,'" Barbara tells me. In order to get the shots she did Barbara had to be practically invisible, often an essential trait for a photographer. Yet, she had to inspire the trust of her subjects in order to capture them in those unguarded moments, like bare-legged Siobhan Hunter relaxing between takes on the lap of Randy Paul, making him feel like a million bucks.

The motivation for the male performers in this business, says Barbara, is the need for security. For women, the driving force is attention, often



Siobhan Hunter and Jeanna Fine between takes of *Parted Lips*.

motivated by a low sense of self-esteem. "I share in all of these traits," says Barbara. "I don't think these traits are restricted to the X-rated industry. If I spent five years in a bank learning about people, I think I'd come up with the same story." But, we agree, it would never be as much fun.

"The performers are exhibitionists motivated by a need to be loved," says Barbara during her presentation. Later I ask her if she would call herself a voyeur. "Yes," she says, "I am definitely the other side, I am the voyeur."

"What motivates the voyeur?"

"I don't know...a fascination with other people. Maybe it's a connection. I certainly feel a connection when I photograph another person, and if I don't it's going to be a lousy picture."

The first part of Barbara's presentation is the narrated slide show. The second part highlights four subjects: Siobhan Hunter, Annie Sprinkle, Marc Stevens and Ron Sullivan. While Barbara's portraits of each person appear on the screen, an actress speaks for each of them using their own words. Ron expounds on, among other things, the virtues of older women as lovers and as sex performers. Marc speaks of the good ol' days of porno chic, how he was proud to have been one of the pioneers. He also describes his fascination with death, his romance with the drug angel dust, his fear of AIDS. Annie is just Annie, seeing the good with the bad and benefiting from it all, exuding love and a great sense of humor. Siobhan Hunter tells the saddest story - how her father often took her over his knee when she was fifteen and spanked her naked. This treatment prompted her to leave home. "There were a lot of things she was trying to say and just couldn't," Barbara tells me. "I think she must have had some horrible experiences within her family. She tended to fantasize a lot and I think that had to do with hiding something that was painful to her. Once she went off on an entire tour of Europe while I was talking to her. I read it as a cover-up."



Jillian Moorehead takes a ride in *Our Naked Eyes*.

WHO: Barbara Nitke

WHAT: Photographer. Now a commercial lensperson, she took the stills for 72 X-rated features made in New York

WHEN: From 1982 to the present

HOW: She was married to Herb Nitke, a member of the adult film aristocracy...but it wasn't that easy.

WHY: "I saw so many opportunities for photographs [on film sets] that were never exploited."

FAVORITE SUBJECTS: They include Siobhan Hunter, Annie Sprinkle, Marc Stevens, Ron Sullivan.

QUOTE: "The word that comes to my mind in describing sexuality in this country is 'repression.' I like that X-rated movies take a stand against repression, but at the same time, they play to it."

But Siobhan was Barbara's favorite model, "I used to love to photograph Siobhan. What I liked about photographing her was not her story, but the fact that she was a very sensual person, and she really enjoyed being in front of the camera. She used to ask me to take her picture. I felt that was the part of her that she hoped to reach, the sensual, free being. And photographing her, that's the person I would see."

Barbara's camera helped liberate others, but most of all it liberated her. Barbara grew up in Virginia and Alaska. Typical of most homes at the time, sex was not talked about. "It was more than a non-subject," says Barbara. "I sensed it was a subject people feared."

"I had sex for the first time at 18. I thought it was terrific. I did not come. I did not know what coming was until I was 19 and watched one of those porn films with a doctor in a white coat - the kind of films that were called marriage manuals, with socially redeeming values. In the second one I saw, they showed a woman masturbating. They showed her coming and I thought, 'Aha, that looks very interesting.'"

By age 18, Barbara had moved to New York and taken a job in the office of Herbert Nitke who was then president of a company that owned a chain of family movie theaters. She did not know she would be involved in the business of hardcore and neither did Herbert. By the time she was 20, they were living together. It was a May-December romance, for Herbert was 35 years her senior. They married when she was 27 and separated when she was 33. "It was a thirteen-year relationship," she says.

Twenty years ago, shopping malls had begun to take over America. "The theater chain that Herbert ran had a bunch of theaters in small towns in upstate New York. All of the theaters were in downtown areas which were quickly being abandoned in favor of the malls. In order to survive, a lot of exhibitors discovered you could have these theaters play X-rated pictures. *Deep Throat* had just come out and lots of people started going to movie theaters to watch X-rated films. So it was a very good business move."

Barbara admired Herbert. "He was certainly a father figure (my own father had died when I was 18), but he was also very intelligent and a fascinating person. He was an exciting guy to be with."

Despite the fact that Herbert influenced the making of many, X-rated movies, his interest, says Barbara, was as a businessman. "He did not really like the films themselves. He thought they were stupid. But they made a lot of money. I think he enjoyed being involved in the business because it gave him a certain kind of outlaw notoriety. He got a big kick out of that. He was also concerned with porn movies as a civil rights issue, but it was less about free speech for him and more about free enterprise." Meanwhile, Barbara was playing tennis with lawyers' wives and feeling very embarrassed when it came time to chit chat about whose hubby did what.



Randy Paul and Siobhan Hunter relax on the set of *Shoot to Thrill*; Danielle takes direction from Sullivan/Pachard in *The Oddest Couple*.

Barbara Nitke: The Devil in Ms. Nitke, from Adam Magazine

When Barbara hit 30, she became more curious about sex. Photography had always been a serious hobby for her. In 1982 when *The Devil in Miss Jones Part 2* was announced, Herbert was a consultant to it. She asked if she could shoot the stills and she got the job. It was a ten day shoot, still the longest shoot she's ever worked. After that she was hired again and began to work regularly. From about the time of her second shoot, she knew she wanted to someday turn this experience into a book. "I knew that I loved the subject. It was fascinating to me. And I saw so many opportunities for photographs that were never exploited."

Two years later, she and Herbert separated. "At that point, he asked me not to work on the X-rated film sets. He said, 'I don't want to have an ex-wife who's in the porno business.' We argued about this for six months. He had me blackballed from the industry. Finally we sat down and had a talk. I said, 'Look, for ten years I put up with your involvement when I was embarrassed. But I finally got over it. Now you're turning around and doing the same thing to me.' Finally, he saw the light and realized he was being a hypocrite. So then I was allowed back into the business."

Following Barbara's presentation, I'm left with the feeling that, in her commentary, she placed a stronger emphasis on the negative sides of the business: the disappointed dreams... "Sometimes I get accused of being too positive, maybe this time I went too far in the other direction." Striking a balance is very important to Barbara in this project: how to honor the trust of her subjects, her X-rated family, and remain true to her own convictions.

She has strong feelings about the sex she has seen performed in movies. "I'd describe it as misogynistic. Not just concerned with the man's pleasure, I think it often expresses a certain anger. Take this classic shot: He comes in her face and she has an orgasm. This cracks me up. My kind of sex is romantic. Still, there is another facet to my sexuality - sex that has an edge of anger to it, sex that is unconnected, sex that says something other than 'I love you'. I think I am living out that part of my sexuality second hand when I shoot."

"X-rated movies offer that same release to our culture. The word that comes to my mind in describing sexuality in this country is 'repression'. I like that X-rated movies take a stand against repression, but at the same time, they play to it."

"Have you seen many women come on camera?"

"When a woman actually comes during the shooting, it is a moment of triumph on the set, because she has triumphed over all of the obstacles, and there are a lot of them. Usually it happens not because of her partner, but because the woman has decided she is going to enjoy this. I remember one scene when the director, the late Chris Covino, yelled 'Cut,' and Long Jean Silver kept the scene going until she came. It was wonderful. A great moment."

"Who was your sexiest male subject?"

"...Maybe Marc Stevens. Marc was a sexy guy and he wasn't immature. I think he had reached a certain level of comfort with himself, including his drug problems."

"Annie was one of the most fun people to interview. To me she is someone who took all of the good stuff and used it in a really great way."

"Ron Sullivan is a fascinating person, though he never really lets down his guard. He's always advertising himself and he has a certain persona, the outrageous Helmut Newton of porn. He's got a very cynical point of view, but there is a lot of truth to it."

We are in Barbara's apartment. There is a bed, a desk and dining table, and a few chairs. No clothes lying around, no mess. It's super tidy. She lives here and also uses the apartment as her studio. Rolls of seamless paper are anchored from the ceiling. One entire wall is covered with books by great writers: Ann Beattie, Donald Barthelme, Joan Didion and Nabokov, Hemingway, Chekhov...

Near the end of our interview, Barbara says, "The thing I always wonder is what would the X-rated business be like in a society that had a very high regard for sex and for sexual people?"

"People would see your photos as holy pictures."

"Yes," says Barbara Nitke, "wouldn't that be nice."



Barbara on *The Oddest Couple* set; The late Marc Stevens.