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ALTERNA-PORN: A TATTOOED PORTRAIT OF THE TABOO
by MEREDITH TURITS

There's a possibility that what you're about to read may make you hot. And frankly, that's okay. In a society that's wrought with an administration looking to cause a throwback to regimentation and chastity belts, censorship, in many ways, deserves a breath of fresh air. It seems as though we're constantly spiraling into the taboo, with sexuality and identity as the sacrifices at the helm. But there's always that beat below the surface that looks to cause a little dissonance and push the limit. Meet the new images of the underground.

There's a possibility she still stands tall, like the images you're used to, hovering near 5'10". Long, lean, flawless skin. But this girl is different. Her hair, black and pink, is chopped in different directions. She has images of sparrows on her hips, a trail of nautical stars extending down from her navel, and a perfectly anatomical heart blazing in bright color across her entire sternum. There's a 16-gauge horseshoe hanging down from her septum and her ear lobes are stretched to the diameter of a prescription bottle. And every day, thousands of people ditch the pictures of the runway girls to watch her illuminate a set of photographs in which she poses with a shed full of dirty tools and empty paint cans. She, like hundreds – no, thousands – of girls, is the face of alterna-porn, a sub-culture of websites and live burlesque shows looking to put a new twist on conventional standards of beauty. Though they've been stakeholders for a while – classically, pin-up style in the 40s and 50s and, more recently, with sites like superpower Suicide Girls, which launched in 2001 – the breadth of their influence has evolved in the last few years.

The investigations into whether or not pin-up truly does redefine conventions of beauty is a fairly tired discussion at this point. Perhaps it's trite and belabored, but beauty really does seem to be in the eye of the beholder. Whether looking at tattooed punk rock girls walking down the street or the epitome of the Hollywood starlet walking down a red carpet,

one is going to be relatively cognizant of his or her own perception of attractiveness.

What's far more engaging is the sociocultural aspect of standards of beauty, particularly stereotypes perpetuated by the pornography industry. Let me preface this by saying that in no way am I a porn connoisseur, nor

am I in the industry as a model or someone who works from the inside. Rather, the stake I hold is far more common, and just as important: I am a consumer. My perspective comes as someone who loves taking time to browse the photosets up on SuicideGirls or Supercult, and indulge in the play worlds of these girls who I find to be captivating. Yet, though I hold the alterna-porn models up on a sort of pedestal, I still find myself being incredibly judgmental towards models in the mainstream porn industry. I'll freely admit I pin them with unfair negative stereotypes and consider them "dirty" or "classless," despite the fact that they're doing the same job in a different skin. But the question is "Why?"

Perhaps the answer is simple. Maybe as a woman who is much more inclined to identify with a punk rock aesthetic, I won't jump to judge the girls who look similar to me because of my own fear of being judged. But that seems to only tackle one part of the puzzle. Simply because I don't contextualize myself with the media-perpetuated ideal of beauty doesn't mean I can't recognize an attractive face or a beautiful body when I see it. So why, then, am I still so quick to

judge?

My personal biases seem to trace back to presentation. The more I think about the places in which I've encountered mainstream porn and the way it's packaged and sold to consumers, the more I feel smothered by an in-your-face type of sexuality that's about *getting the job done*. We rouse images of cheesy porn soundtracks and fabricated dialogues play-



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ing at volume 11 in frat house basements. The associations undoubtedly make me shiver; this is not something in which I would voluntarily engage myself.

Then there's the notion of accessibility. Mainstream pornography is nearly everywhere; from newsstands in Grand Central Station to Google Sponsored Links, the industry is easily commodified. As a result, it heightens a consumer's tendency to objectify. It's almost too easy to imagine that Amber Jaye Snowflake doesn't have a life outside of her starring roles, and that the facets of her personality are demonstrated best from her three main interests: top, bottom, and on her knees. Yep, there's Captain Judgmental coming out in full-force again.

Bottom line? To me, there seem to be few prerequisites and fewer risks associated with mainstream porn as long as you fit the part: be long,



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lean, and...er...limber. And assuming the political mentality of the nation doesn't reset to 1802, there will always be a market and forum for the distribution of mainstream porn, however creepy it may be.

And, of course, then there are the alterna-porn girls. I am initially inclined to contextualize these girls in a completely different way, and I attribute it to the entire subculture surrounding the alternative side of the industry.

First, it seems as though the girls have to have a level of confidence somewhat unique because of all of the risks associated with looking outside of the norm, as well as posing sans trousers. The fact that they may not be accepted because they don't fit conventional standards of beauty is incredibly pertinent, and, in many ways, it seems like it would take a certain personality to brave the waters.

Next, the more covert presence of alterna-porn manifests itself in a very different way than mainstream porn; for the most part, the images are more like playful pin-ups than videos of blatant races to climax. Sure, sites like Burning Angel contain plenty such media, but for the most part, the prevalence is pin-up. And pin-up is, often times, as much about the expressive, artistic side of the photograph as it is about the human form. Pin-up has the personality that mainstream porn and spread-eagle shots in adult magazines kill dead.

But the more I think about it, the icing on the cake is really the community aspect of it all. Wait, what? A community of porn enthusiasts infusing legitimacy into an "illicit" industry? Yep. Most of the alterna-porn sites are member-only sites in which the models have profiles and blogs that turn them into humans and reject their degraded status as merely sex toys. When a girl poses with a digital SLR camera in one of her photosets, you can read about the fact that she is indeed a professional photographer, see her portfolio and interact with her on a personal level. There's a distinct type of intimacy relayed by these alterna-porn

communities that takes away from the commodification of the women. And, less commodification often means less misogyny. That notion, hand in hand with all of the other politically-charged messages that creep into photosets — things like animal rights and feminism, often launched by the models' personal perspectives — gives the industry a second purpose. It is, if you'll go for the idea, more socially responsible pornography.

Sugarcoated messages aside, when it comes down to it, porn is porn. Both the alternative and mainstream sides of the industry are just that — an *industry* looking to serve a purpose (one that is, in this case, sexually charged) for a specific niche of people. People understand the aesthetic to which they are drawn, and seek out satisfaction accordingly.

"I don't really think the porn world shapes people's perceptions much at all. I think the perceptions that have already been shaped in someone by the outside world are then sought out in porn," an ex-Burning Angel model told me via e-mail.

Regardless of what we're seeking, it's more about looking at the way we consume and how we allow sociocultural stereotypes to shape our perceptions. Maybe we're not directly affected by the porn industry, but we can't deny we all have our own opinions, however fair they may or may not be. And, c'mon, admit it: it totally gets your blood flowing to all the right places, doesn't it?

I won't tell. I promise. □

◀ **Meredith Turits** is a sophomore who, majoring in something resembling Philosophy, has begun mastering the fine art of panhandling. She is pleased that this issue of *Melisma* has only reduced her nightly sleep by three hours and that Viva La Vinyl has only made fun of her four times this week. Her next endeavor is trying to survive living in Williamsburg without acquiring a medium format camera or a septum ring. Yeah, right.

