



# M A L E R I E M A R D E R T I M E O F F

Portrait by Tatiana Leshkina

**Where and how did you first develop your interest in nude photography? What attracted you to the idea of nude photographs?**

When I was young I was lucky enough to travel with my family quite a lot. My mother worked for Pan Am and we went all over the world. We visited museums and I saw the Sistine Chapel multiple times and the statue of David multiple times, and endless Courbet's, all before puberty. I think it implanted a strange deviation in my brain that the figure wasn't something I needed to avoid. When I was a freshman at Bard College, fate intervened, a close family friend who was like a sister to me asked me to photograph her and her lover. I was nervous but ended up taking pictures that led me out of my comfort zone and into oblivion. That said, I'm more of a fan of Lucien Freud's idea of a "naked portrait" rather than a "nude."

**Your photographs often have a voyeuristic quality. Where does this come from? Do you see photography as an inherently voyeuristic medium?**

Yes, absolutely. Even the anatomical elements of a camera are voyeuristic—turning the knob of my view camera to focus on the ground glass feels strangely creepy like I am freezing or pinpointing a scene (or psyche). The bellows look like an elongated musical instrument/periscope. The lens distorts your perception and in essence makes you feel like you are observing a scene, rather than a player in it.

**Anatomy features photographs of prostitutes in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. What drew you to this subject matter?**

I began by imagining a body of work solely of women that were part hallucinatory, part real, who intrinsically have a different relationship to their bodies. On museum placards you can read of Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of prostitutes and how their bodies were less forced and expected. I found myself similarly mesmerized by the idea of how one person's survival could also be their art.

**How do you compare the experience of photographing people close to you versus that of photographing strangers?**

For myself, I don't think there's much of a difference. You have the same obstacles to overcome. Just because you know someone intimately doesn't inherently turn into fascination and likewise just because someone is a stranger doesn't necessarily make a situation compelling. I think there are misconceptions or even pretensions around the nature of photography and its ability to glean insight. The moment you frame and freeze a moment that is unfolding is the precise beat that it becomes relative. It's all terribly subjective.

**There is an intense intimacy within your pictures. How did you achieve this moment with and between your subjects? How did you gain access to this world?**



The access took time. My first trip was unsuccessful. Not a single frame exposed. But in my last days, I made connections through two Dutch collectors; one who had a past relationship with a woman who ran a club (brothel) in Rotterdam and the other who knew an artist who knew an addict who knew a gay couple who knew boys on the street who knew women in an erotic wrestling network in Amsterdam. So, one approach was direct and the other circuitous. The intimacy gained was willful luck. There were women that immediately intrigued me that became muses and others took more effort. Some, I failed completely.

**You have said that you find some discomfort in being photographed yourself. How do you overcome this? How do you help your subjects do the same?**

Most of the women were comfortable with the camera though there were exceptions- some were cautious, a little guarded and some a little nervous. I generally shoot long exposures and my process is slow and meditative. It takes time. I try to lull my subjects into a daydream. The women really liked being photographed. They would come to watch their friends. I'm a quiet presence. I'm more of an observer. With myself as the subject, I'm ruthless. I'm a mean dictator. I demand things of myself I could never demand in another person.

**Unlike some of your previous work, *Anatomy* focuses exclusively on the female nude. What drew you to focus on this specifically? What kind of feminine sexuality did these women embody for you?**

For me, women carry around more secrets, just naturally, because men don't confide in each other the way women do. So, their bodies hide as much as they reveal. I thought of Venus and Aphrodite, working, single mothers, odalisques, adulterers, and enigmas.

**The women in your photographs appear strong and confident, unabashed of their bodies and sexuality. Was this a significant feature of your subjects? How do you think your work subverts traditional ideas of prostitution and femininity?**

Many of the women had a strong veneer. They would have been insulted if I had approached them with pity. It was a very delicate situation; my instinct was to protect them and they felt similarly protective of me. I often meditated on the thin separation between the two sides of my camera, that sliver of fortune that separated me from the world of these women. They understood as well. Their laughter would turn off once we would begin shooting, "think of all our sad stories" a woman once whispered to her girlfriend as they lay on top of each other, sequestered away, their noses nuzzled in each other's flesh. I realized they have a similar bag of tricks as I do. I bathe my subjects in light the same way they apply eyeliner. I wanted them to appear strong and unabashed even when they weren't. One woman had literally just kicked heroin and lost her best friend; she was at her most vulnerable, but in a parallel realm she was a warrior returning from battle.

I can't comment on whether my pictures subvert convention. I don't have that vantage point.

**Some of the photographs suggest erotic relationships between your subjects. Was this a significant element of your experiences?**

I don't want to say too much. From my perspective, it was for some a safe haven.

**Some of your photographs seem to be quoting older works by post-impressionist artists (eg. Matisse's *La Danse*, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude With Black Stocking*). Was this deliberate? How do you think depictions of the female nude have evolved over the century?**

Yes, it was deliberate and I was thinking of post-impressionist works like Matisse's *La Danse* (I showed the women a reproduction for the picture around the tub) and Duchamp's *Nude With Black Stocking*, but also the earlier 17th century Dutch work of Jan Steen's, *Woman at her Toilet*, which is at the Rijksmuseum, and 19th century realist works like Gustave Courbet's, *L'Origine du Monde*, and on my last trip, surrealist works like Magritte's, *Dangerous Liaisons*. Duchamp may or may not have been contemplating Jan Steen's painting when he made his, but I feel the female nude is like a love story. The characters change, the plots evolve, but the endings are all similarly tragic.







**Where do you see the line between pornography and art? How do you think pornography and the mass media exposure of the female body have impacted the representation of the female nude in art?**

I never gave this much thought until recently when I did an art event for Playboy and was asked to photograph the "Playmate of the Year." Strangely it made me realize how big the divide is between art and pornography. Succinctly said, pornography has one message, "fuck me." Women are often photographed in a style that is rarely deviated from, with an arched back and eye contact with the camera. In art, the message to the viewer is layered, possibly unique, and hopefully mysterious. I can't think of any art that just communicates that one message. The impact of pornography on art is seen most flagrantly when art explores a desensitizing of culture like violence, where its' impact is in its' display of a fetish or stylization, but I feel like this is so purposeful, its' rendering and representation is fundamentally different than straight out pornography.

**Anatomy is both intimate and overtly sexual. Do you think this is representative of the nature of prostitution?**

I truly wouldn't know. My experience of prostitution is confined to my experiences I had while making the work, which was only as an observer and I'm not aware of all representation that exists.

**Has the world changed how it sees the naked body in terms of photographic and other visual arts? Has the way you see nudity changed? How so?**

Maybe it has allowed us to over-explore the body so sadly we become numb to what is elemental and fragile. Perhaps there's too much knowledge and manifestation; too much visual language to interpret, too many iPhones, digital cameras, and over-sharing.

**Mirrors feature prominently in Anatomy. Was this a conscious choice? Is there a duality that you think exists within the world of prostitution?**

Mirrors have always been a prominent feature in my pictures. They're part of my palette the same way color is. Anatomy has four salient colors – blue, yellow, orange, and red. I edited the book according to color. Each phase I was hoping to illicit a different mood. Mirrors are a bit of the same. They add space, they add reflection and yes – they do represent a duality, possible duplicity. I would imagine that is an integral aspect of a prostitute's survival.

**Anatomy features women from a number of different racial backgrounds. Was race and ethnicity an important consideration for your work?**

The Rotterdam club was a real melting pot, a mini UN. Race and ethnicity were important to me. It created more beauty for certain. I never felt it was a dividing force at the club. I imagine beauty played a more divisive role than race. It allowed for some a tangible exit, but was also a trap to stay. I didn't press any of the women for their stories, but of course it was concerning, particularly for the younger women in their twenties who were not Dutch. The thought of how they got there was deeply troubling. My camera was a passport into a gray, hidden world; the result of a liberal society where free will is a question mark.

**There is a very strong narrative quality to your photographs. Are you influenced by film and your experiences living in Los Angeles? Do you construct these narratives or do they occur organically?**

I've always been influenced by film, which may have been the underlying reason I moved to Los Angeles from the east coast. It's the perfect place for fiction; you can be on welfare and have a palm tree in your backyard. I think the narratives happen best when they are organic. A prostitute I photographed in Amsterdam had three rooms— one was a bondage room, one was a wrestling room, and one was an antique room. Of course, the antique room was most curious to me, so I asked her to dress in her outfit which was straight out of a 17th century Dutch painting; a long, flowing white dress with a high collar. I've formed so many narratives about her and her clients....

**What advice would you give a young photographer starting out today?**

Start a fight.

