

## Artist interview Natacha Merritt's Sexual Self-Portraits: Empowerment through Pornography?

Natacha MERRITT  
American photographer, artist and biologist

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Natacha Merritt is a pioneer both in self-representation and digital technology. Indeed, her book of photography, Digital Diaries, published by Taschen in 2000, was the first book published entirely from digital content. But her work is even more groundbreaking in the fact that she places herself at the heart of her sexually explicit work.

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**On your website, your latest project seems to be about VR, or virtual reality. To me the concept is quite mysterious. Is it mysterious on purpose? If that is not the case, can you explain what the VR project consists in?**

I tried an early version of the Oculus Rift in mid 2014. I have lots of access to the latest technologies since I live in San Francisco. This one though was spectacular and life-changing. I was stunned at the urgency and presence I felt during this first experience in Virtual Reality.

Although it was a violent computer-generated experience in a cave running from a monster, I knew it was a matter of time before I would be creating in the medium. I didn't know how hard it would be! Turns out that video content (as opposed to computer-generated content) is quite challenging to create in Virtual Reality. It's a nascent technology and none of it is "consumer ready". All the components are custom made. Everything about it I had to build (with the help of some engineers from Copenhagen and Germany). The cameras are held together by rubber bands on a 3D printed rig, the stitching is run via a python script, the interactions are built with lines of code... all these steps to get the content into these clunky virtual reality headsets, but then when you put it on the result is truly unforgettable and awe inspiring. By creating in Virtual Reality I'm able to enter my own art, which is an unbelievably satisfying experience. It takes the concept of self portraiture to another level.

In the experiences I create you put on a headset and *enter* my body. You have the feeling of having my body as your own. In this way you experience a series of intimate adventures with

me. The feeling of intimacy is so strong and unexpected. I imagine it's what people felt the first time they saw themselves in a mirror or in a photograph. My first release is called "Nature" and explores the conflict between arousal culture and fear in an enchanted forest; it's also a very new take on the first person shooter experience.... I can't tell you more yet!

**Can you take us through the chronology of your photographic career? Do you separate your work into different series?**

*Digital Diaries* is a chronology of my first intimate adventures as an adult. The chapters are separated by camera. I've always been passionate about technical constraints and how they shape my imagery. This body of work also is the more explicit simply because my sex life was pretty much the only thing I was passionate about in those days. I was also obsessed with eternalizing the moments of pleasure and orgasm. Digital photography was the medium of choice at the time.

I next worked with *Cirque du Soleil* and was one of the creators of their erotic show "Zumanity". During this period my photographs were third person, polished, sleek and somewhat more "safe". I have not published much of that period since I have yet to understand it.

My second published body of work, *Sexual Selection* was published much later. This is a celebration of all forms of sex and was mostly captured while I received a degree in biology. Why biology? I knew I was passionate about sex, fetish, desire... This led me to want to understand these desires on a deeper level. So I ended up diving into evolutionary biology and eventually into genetics, where I finally satiated my need to understand the driving forces behind desire. Along the way I photographed many spider genitals and flowers as well as quite a few of the female botanists. I put these all together along with my reflections about evolution and science into my second book.

**As you have read in my article, I have rather chosen to focus on the works of *Digital Diaries* and, in them, on the self-portraits. Is it a common response? Do early self-portraits have a special meaning for you, or for your critics and commentators?**

I feel like my presence in my work is constantly evolving. I have just read that in Nan Goldin's self-portraiture she never actually reveals herself. My work is the opposite. I use it to search for my present identity and to explore myself. I use it to find myself in the moment. Sometimes it's a form of psychoanalysis. I appear and disappear from my own lens for personal reasons. When I'm frequently in my imagery I tend to be in an exciting space of progress and adventure. I also use self portraiture to appreciate myself. There is so much beauty to celebrate, even though so often self critique is louder than admiration...

Self-portraits are loud intense creatures that grow and reveal much more with age. My favorite self-portrait, the one called rope with a bound cock in my mouth, has not only grown in its intensity and artistic merit, but it's also sustained me in many ways. Seeing myself so proud in what could be such a compromising situation always reminds me that all these social

constructs are arbitrary and often ridiculous. It reminds me to not be afraid to find beauty in unexpected unconventional ways. It also reminds me to not self censor and to embrace the discomfort that my art may cause others. The image keeps me in check, and kept me in check throughout many phases in my life that were more muddled (pregnancy, motherhood, marriage). It's a huge print on the wall that regardless of who our guests are, we leave up.

**I sometimes used the term "pornographic" to describe your self-portraits. Do you accept this term? Would you define them as erotic? Sexual? Something else?**

I think the term pornographic is a fascinating term in that it slips and slides around our society and keeps refusing to be cornered. I think pornography is truly in the eye of the beholder and is more a reflection of the person using the term and the society in which they live. All logic aside though if you were to flash hundreds of photos in front of me and ask me which ones are porn, I personally would say those in which the actors look sad and exploited are porn.

My images are art. It took me a long time to admit this but that's what they are. Now for a description, I like the term explicit. They explore part of society that's not usually exposed day to day.

**I have compared your self-portraits to those by Jeff Koons, wondering whether they were disempowering to women in the person of Ilona Staller, the female model. Do you think posing nude in sexual circumstances is disempowering? Have you been criticized for exploiting or disempowering your models, male or female?**

One of my most spectacular life changing realizations came to me after the book *Digital Diaries* was released and reached bestseller mainstream success. A few friends voiced concern that I may be putting myself at risk, that the images may make me a target. It's the idea that you hear that if you wear a sexy skirt you're more likely to be assaulted. Well, hard data aside, I feel like it's quite the opposite. I received at the height of the book's success upwards of 40 emails a day. None were rude. Nearly all were a version of "thank you". I realized that by putting all of it out there and owning it, I actually made myself less of a target for such attacks. My female peers who published in other areas, from video games to non-erotic books and films, were subject to much more woman bashing and slut shaming than I was. So on the contrary, I think that posing in nude sexual circumstances is extremely empowering. Nearly all of my models thank me over the years and love the work we created together. I now think that as supposedly "free" women it's our duty to pose naked and show it to the world if we want to. I often wonder what society would look like if women were expected to be as sexual and forward as men, if we refused to be ashamed of our bodies and desires... When will an actress whose sextape is released stand up and say "so, what, I love having sex!" If we (western privileged women) don't do it, who will?

**Do you think of yourself as a feminist? Do you think of your photography as feminist photography?**

I am absolutely a feminist. I love all forms of feminism even though I know we are often a divided bunch, I think those divisions are minor. I do remember in my early twenties being terrified of being called a feminist, but now I see how absurd that was and how my sense of being part of a larger community of women had been infiltrated by complete media-driven trash. I didn't realize to what extent I was a feminist until I became a mom. You can spend your twenties in big cities feeling like you are equal to men but then no matter where you are as soon as there is a baby in your belly you see just how unequal the playing field is. The paternalism is everywhere, and the baby's needs are supposed to come first. It's total bullshit but fascinating. The pressure to sacrifice yourself for the child is so prevalent that it's toxic. And then I realized that there were glass ceilings everywhere. The fact that people discuss motherhood as a "choice between family and career" is completely sexist and ridiculous. This concept favors men's success over ours. It's all connected to censorship of sex. I'm just starting to connect more deeply with these topics and am exploring them more in my images.

**Talking about paternalism and that kind of criticism, do you pay a lot of attention to what is written or said about your work? Is there a general response? What comments surprised, or angered, or pleased you most?**

No, I don't pay much attention, but your article stood out in that it led me to a deeper understanding of my earlier work. Thanks.

**I link your self-portraits to a form of empowerment. It is the impression I personally get from them anyway. Is it also the motive for them, do you shoot sexual self-portrait as a means of empowerment?**

Sexual moments are magical to me. They make me feel stronger, and make me deeply happy. They are also so elusive and layered. Some people see landscapes and have the urge to capture it. I see arousal, emotion, lust, erections as one of the most beautiful parts of humanity and I need to capture it. And yes, there is nothing more empowering than a sexual self-portrait. Truly, human reproduction is one of our biggest successes!

**What about nudity? In what ways do you think it can be empowering or disempowering?**

I've always hated clothes. Nearly everything we buy makes us look like everyone else around us. When we are naked we are unique. I like small touches of clothing but only when it serves to frame the body.

**I also link your works to a certain form of religious feeling. Are you inspired by religious iconography? Do you enjoy the clash between pornography and religion?**

I have never thought about religion. My mom was a strict atheist. I expect that I will explore it soon. (Although, if religion is not a conscious thought, we can note that one of the current top pictures in Merritt's official website was shot in a confessional, and is entitled "Confession", as she later highlighted in a mail message.)

**One of the goals of my research is to discuss the power of images, more precisely the politics of self-portraits, meaning that they convey a political message, more so than any other kind of photography. In what ways do you think self-portraits can change the politics of representation? Is there a political agenda in your works? If so, what is it?**

I have strong feelings about self portraiture. I only post my self-portraits to my own website or published books and exhibits. Control over my own privacy and creative expression are indissociably interdependent concepts to me. I can only express myself fully if I control not only what I shoot but also when and where I choose to show it. The idea of a social media site having any rights over the images I post is abhorrent to me. Not only because of the censorship of the human body but also because what's posted in essence no longer belongs to me. I disagree with their terms of use and therefore I don't use it.

Furthermore when an image is part of a social media network I feel like the image ceases to become art and instead becomes a low value commodity. Especially given the nature of my self-portraiture, I would feel violated if my images were part of these networks. I furthermore can't shake the idea that content posted on such networks is in essence a form of data gathering for add sales. I feel more exploited by being on Facebook than by having a cock in my mouth in an image I create and control, by a long shot!

**With the pioneering use of both sexual content and the digital medium, did you consciously want to reconfigure the limits of art?**

I wasn't conscious of any of this when I was first published in the late 1990s. But I do remember the sense of total freedom and independence when I created my first online gallery. I was 20. I think it was using html. And I remember thinking, "wow, if I can control the distribution with nearly nobody overhead and make money like this I can truly be free."

Now I have a much deeper understanding of the power of technology to reconfigure not only the limits of art but the limits of human emotion. New technologies make images more crisp, more immediate more accessible, more layered. All of this adds to the spectrum of human emotion and this fascinates me. The intimacy that I first felt with my first low resolution digital camera was magical, it changed what I chose to photograph. And when you photograph something and you discover a new kind of emotion in that photograph, it's there forever.

These days I have the same sense of awe and of magic with my new virtual reality creative pipeline. My fetish for new technology has always been as strong as any sexual fetish.

I have a preference for being on the fringe of art and pornography. The biggest challenge for me is capturing an image that arouses me in new ways and that has an iconic harmony. That's what I strive for.

**Did you experience any troubles in the context of the Culture Wars, such as cancelled exhibitions or censorship?**

I've felt more sexism than censorship.

The most important part of our human evolution is sex. Yet sex and the body have recently received the least artistic attention. I do not believe that we as a population can be free if we are repressed sexually. If you put anything in a dark corner it rots. That's what the heterocentric monogamous American culture does, and I deeply disagree with it. Sex and the body should be celebrated. I adore the range of sexual fetishes that people have. I respect and admire nearly all that is consensual between adults.

I do feel increasingly that my most important art is my sexual content. I grew up in a sexually liberated bubble. I grew up in the Castro district of San Francisco, taking for granted how progressive my life was. My mother was a sensual sex positive French woman who I remember on a few occasions would help other women discover orgasms. My live-in nanny was a gay man. I was his prized daughter that he would bring to many social gatherings. I could be as sexy as I wanted to be, without shame. By the time I was ten I knew everything about all kinds of sex. Later, I had the power and the knowledge as a young woman to never be coerced into anything. I published my book thinking that it was quite normal. Then I moved to New York and was completely stunned that so many conservative people even existed, and this was Manhattan!

I'm proud that my work often expands viewers' acceptance of their own arousal and desire.

**Do you have influences in the fields of photography and art?**

I'm completely enamored by Otto Dix at the moment. I admire the beauty he brings to what we would in this day and age call horrific. The light, the colors, the different inks and medium, but also the humor and stories that are often all compacted into one piece. I cannot say that he has influenced me much yet, but it's a direction I'm attracted to.

Over the past five years I've been inspired by Vermeer, playing with light and painting images with shadows. But lately I feel a huge break with that aesthetic, I feel drawn to a more impressionist color palette. I've been shooting a lot more outdoors and often refer to Renoir in terms of color and light.

**Do you have a pillow book?**

I read science magazines for “fun” at night to go to sleep.

### **Bibliography**

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