

Photo Books

VINCE ALETTI

Although the evangelical conservatives who helped swing the U.S. decidedly right in the presidential elections haven't yet imposed their family values on the publishing industry, the culture wars are bound to erupt in censorship skirmishes in the coming years. Even if this reactionary new morality is sure to provoke a raunchy backlash, it could still have a chilling effect on one of publishing's all-time hottest topics: sex. Will the flood of full-frontal photo books that turned fall 2004 unseasonably steamy be reduced to a trickle? If so, here's a sampling of the sort of thing we'd be missing.

The slickest, shrewdest exploitation book of the year was Timothy Greenfield-Sanders's *XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits* (Bulfinch), which anchored its tasteful color diptychs with a windy Gore Vidal introduction and mostly superfluous texts by Salman Rushdie, John Waters, Lou Reed, Karen Finley, JT Leroy, and 10 others. Like all of Greenfield-Sanders's formal studio portraiture, these are the contemporary equivalent of classic ethnographic studies—dry, deliberate documents of an exotic tribe, here photographed both clothed and naked so that we can see their identifying characteristics (shaved pubes, pneumatic breasts, navel piercing). Because this tribe exerts more than the usual libidinous fascination, the photos have a certain subversive tug, but the only shocking thing about the work is its bland discretion.

For a more pungent whiff of eroticism, open any one of the three recent Bettina Rheims books: *Chambre Close* (a collaboration with writer Serge Bramly published by Gina Kahayoff in Munich), *Retrospective*, and *More Trouble* (both from Schirmer/Mosele). Rheims clicks off reliably sharp takes on androgyny and celebrity, but when it comes to an inside view of female sexuality, she's just about unbeatable. Sexy, canny, and thrillingly unromantic, her pictures of women are at once calculated and out of control. If Helmut Newton projects a forbiddingly chilly chic, Rheims maintains an invitingly lewd rolling boil. Matthias Herrmann's *B x 10'* (Fotohof), the latest installment of his ongoing self-portrait project, is even more radically nude. Although Herrmann appears naked in many of the photos here, many more feature only his hard, disembodied cock thrust into unlikely still life arrangements. Herrmann is as relentless as Paul McCarthy, always pushing past our comfort level, but his work's balls-out aggressiveness is tempered by a truly eccentric hilarity. If Fischli & Weiss directed gay porn, it might look like this.

To put these and other stimulating titles by Newton (*Sex and Landscapes*, Taschen), Terry Richardson (*Terryworld*, Taschen), Mona Kuhn (*Photographs*, Steidl), and Andy Warhol (*Polaroids from the "Ladies & Gentlemen," "Sex Parts,"* and *"Torso"* series, Jablonka Galerie/D.A.P.) in art-historical perspective, pick up a pair of savvy surveys. *The Nude: Ideal and Reality* (Skira), the catalogue of a show mounted in Bologna's Galleria d'Arte Moderna by its director, the indefatigable Peter Weiermair, is especially valuable for its wide range and the intelligence of its choices. Weiermair never fails to turn up fresh material to flesh out his ever-evolving history of the body in photography. Just as ambitious and even more explicit is the selection in *Stripped Bare: The Body Revealed in Contemporary Art* (Merrell), whose polemical essays can't cool down the accompanying images by artists and photographers like Nobuyoshi Araki, Marlene Dumas, Larry Clark, Thomas Ruff, Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, and Robert Mapplethorpe. □