

Rosenberg, Aura, "500 Words," *Art Forum International*, July 20, 2012.

ARTFORUM

Aura Rosenberg



Left: **Aura Rosenberg, *Sagittarius*, 2010**, acrylic paint on velvet, 8 x 4'. From the series "The Afronomical Ways," 2010–. Right: **Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (Faces in the Surf at Malibu)*, 1989**, C-print, 30 x 40". From the series "The Dialectical Porn Rock," 1988–.

This summer, the New York–based artist Aura Rosenberg is participating in four group exhibitions in various cities across the US. The shows will present works made over the past twenty-five years, from her investigations into pornography to her photographs with children. Here Rosenberg discusses the evolution of these practices.

SOME OF MY WORK has been inspired by a curiously dated source: "The Afronomical Ways," a black-light poster from 1972, which features fluorescent silhouettes of men and women posed in various sexual positions. Each position is supposed to represent a different sign of the zodiac, and each figure has an Afro. In the late 1980s, I made several body imprint paintings referencing that poster. I've recently returned to this work, but instead of using my own body, I've asked couples to make the imprints. Last spring, during the opening of my show at Sassa Trülzsch Gallery in Berlin, two dancers made one of these paintings that became part of the installation. This summer, Seth Kelly has included *Sagittarius*, a

new work from the series, in “These Transitional Spaces,” the show he curated at Franklin Street Works in Stamford, Connecticut.

In 1988 I began to work primarily with photography and sculpture. I was sharing a summer house in the Catskills with some friends, and, with the woods nearby, I wanted to make something overtly fetishistic from the natural materials at hand. My friend Mike Ballou was dividing his time between making his own work—sculptures with porn images—and fishing for trout in a stream on the property. One day I noticed the way light hitting the rocks in this stream brought images to mind. So as a practical joke, I glued his porn clippings onto the rocks, covered them in resin, and put them back in the water for him to find. Struck by the contrast between the altered rocks and their natural setting, I started to photograph them. Robert Smithson’s essay “The Dialectical Landscape” inspired the title of this series: “The Dialectical Porn Rock.” Back in Manhattan, I started to see the rocks as things in themselves and arranged them indoors in a variety of configurations. When I moved to Berlin in 1991, this city—filled with monuments to its sometimes troubled past—became a new context for my rock works. The connection of sexuality and nature, however mediated, gave way to a sense of opposition vis-à-vis the body and its control by the state. This summer, I’ll be showing outdoor installations of “The Dialectical Porn Rock” for the first time, in “Creature from the Blue Lagoon,” the show that Bob Nickas curated at Martos Gallery in Bridgehampton, New York.

In 1989 my daughter Carmen was born, and two long-term projects involving childhood overtook my work with porn. I titled the first *Berlin Childhood*, after Walter Benjamin’s allegorical memoir of the same name, a collection of forty-two texts written when he was in exile from the Third Reich. For this work, I shot photos of contemporary Berlin to match Benjamin’s entries from half a century earlier. The subtext to this work was my own family’s flight from Germany and my return to raise my daughter there. The second project, “Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?” is a series of photo portraits of children. As a gift, I had brought face paints for Carmen’s kindergarten in Berlin. Her teacher, Marie Schmitz, and the class had a lot of fun with them. For an exhibition at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, I chose to collaborate with Marie on portraits of the painted children. Back in New York, I wondered what it would look like if I asked artists to make these paintings, which I would again photograph. Of course, the artists I invited often approached portraiture via their own practices. The children, however, were not merely blank slates. Together, the artist, the child, and I shaped images that reflected us all. The series to date includes over eighty

collaborations. Because this work questioned normative relations between adults and children, it was regarded as more transgressive than my porn work. For example, some saw Mike Kelley's stylization of my daughter as a goth, or Laurie Simmons's portrayal of her daughter Lena as a marionette, as abusive. Ironically, in the latter case, the idea was Lena's. Three of these portraits will be included in "Too Old for Toys, Too Young for Boys," a show at LA's OHWOW gallery this summer, curated by Alex Gartenfeld.

With Carmen now grown up, I've gone back to working with pornography, to renegotiate aspects of this work that weren't fully explored. The terms, however, have changed. Just as my work with childhood spans a period of changing attitudes toward images of children, so too is my focus on pornography tied to a period shift. When I googled some of the actors whose images I used before, a website called The Golden Age of Porn came up. My old source material has become a relic. Nevertheless, the sense of lost time intrigues me, and I titled a new series of paintings, drawn from the same material, "The Golden Age."

This summer I'm also presenting a corner installation of porn rocks in "Buy My Bananas," Julia Trotta's selection of women artists working with sex and comedy, at Kate Werble Gallery's Annex Space in New York. Together these various shows offer a sampling of my oeuvre in different contexts. Hopefully, the connections will register how my work has grown organically out of lived experience and how it mirrors changes in our culture at large concerning the intersection of childhood and sexuality. At the very least, they are encouraging me to reflect on these questions.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*

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