

Femme Flesh

Feminist pornographers say "Fuck you" to their scissors-wielding sisters

by Rachel Giese
Canadian University Press

Marilyn leans back against a rock. Her eyes are closed. A tall, thin, dreadlocked Black woman, she is naked except for a pair of combat boots and white shorts pulled down around her ankles. Turning the page, there are more photographs of Marilyn. Showering, standing naked in a doorway, leaning up against a fence and looking seductively into the camera. Marilyn's a single farmer, a Scorpio. Her favourite part of a woman's body is "the curve of her waist" and her obsession is "girls who roll around in orchids."

Despite the *Playboy*-style spread, Marilyn is no bunny. She's the centrefold of *On Our Backs*, the magazine for "the adventurous lesbian."

While some feminists have been fighting

to censor pornography, other women have been busy creating it. *On Our Backs* is part of a growing genre of sexual material made by women for women.

"I feel my work is empowering to women," says Jasmin Sterling, publisher and editor of *Bad Attitude*, a sex magazine from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"Women are in control of the images in *Bad Attitude*. What could be more feminist than lesbians in charge of their own erotic fantasies?"

Energetic sex

Over the last decade, a battle over pornography and sexual expression has raged in women's communities. Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, the recognized leaders of the U.S. anti-pornography

So Sterling set out to create a new forum for women wanting access to pornography.

Susie Bright, editor of *On Our Backs*, began making porn films not only in response to the lack of representation of women's pornography in the heterosexual press, but also to satisfy a gap she saw in lesbian porn.

"Other lesbian filmmakers are very concerned about projecting tenderness, lover, and long-term relationships," Bright said in a recent magazine interview. But in her films, "sex is the core, and any of the softer elements are added as part of the eroticism, not as reassurance that it's okay to be watching this video, nothing bad will happen to you."

Both the hard-core magazines and the films have been a recent development, starting up in the early to mid 1980s. But

women-oriented erotic literature goes back further. It may have started with the publication in the 1940s of Anais Nin's *Delta of Venus* — a short story collection which is still widely read for its frequent depictions of explicit sexuality from a woman's perspective.

Collections of erotica for women are now published regularly. Their themes range from the lesbian S/M anthology *Macho Sluts*; to *Herotica* — a collection edited by Bright which contains both straight and lesbian writing — to *Intricate Passions*, an anthology of lesbian erotica by women of colour, white women and disabled women. Toronto-based Women's Press recently produced an anthology of lesbian erotica entitled *Getting Wet: Tales of Lesbian Seduction*.



One of the cleaner images from *Drawing the Line: an Interactive Photo Exhibit* • photo by Susan Stewart From *Drawing the Line: Kiss & Tell* • Press Gang Publishers 603 Powell Street, Vancouver, BC V6A 1H2

movement, argue that pornography demeans women and is, in part, the cause and symptom of sexist oppression. Or as the slogan says: "Porn is the theory; rape is the practice."

But feminist pornographers like Sterling say Dworkin and MacKinnon are taking an anti-sex stand.

"I think it's good to have pornography," says Kay Armitage, a women's studies professor at the University of Toronto. "Sexual experience, even if vicarious or solitary, is energizing and empowering."

On Our Backs and *Bad Attitude*, along with *Quim* from Britain, are the most popular and widely-distributed lesbian porn magazines. Similar in style, they include photographs, erotic short stories, sexual advice and interviews. The material ranges from hard-core sadomasochism to 'Marylin'-style cheesecake shots, exploring a whole spectrum of sexual expression.

"*Bad Attitude* shows women having sex in ways most [heterosexuals] aren't even aware of," says Sterling.

"The kind of sex in *Bad Attitude* is not the kind you would have every day — it requires too much energy," she adds.

"Fake-lesbian stuff"

When Sterling became involved in creating lesbian pornography in the late 1970s, it was because the only porn available to her was "heterosexual fake-lesbian stuff — Two girls getting it on for a man. There was nothing there for a gay woman."

lawyer and University of Calgary law professor Kathleen Mahoney explains how the ruling came about. "We showed [the court] the porn... and among the seized videos were some horrifically violent and degrading gay movies. We made the point that the abused men in these films were being treated like women — and the judges got it. Otherwise, men can't put themselves in our shoes. Porn makes women's subordination look sexy and appealing; it doesn't threaten men's jobs, safety, rights or credibility."

While some feminists have been celebrating the decision as a landmark victory for women, members of the lesbian and gay community have taken to the streets in protest of the new obscenity laws and the subsequent OPP raid of Glad Day. Many lesbians and gay men feel the new obscenity laws are being manipulated to censor lesbian and gay material while heterosexual pornography is ignored by police.

"Targeting *Bad Attitude* is not about pornography," says Sterling. "It's about an attack on gay rights. It's ridiculous for anyone to control images."

Glad Day manager Kimberley Mistysyn says the impact and influence of *Bad Attitude* is minimal compared to heterosexual pornography. "We get *Bad Attitude* about once every two months. We sell maybe 10 copies and we don't sell to minors. The lesbian magazines we sell are created by lesbians, for lesbians."

"It really pisses me off that the straight women at LEAF are saying that a lesbian sex magazine is degrading to women," Mistysyn adds. "It's not their community and it's not their business. Using gay porn to argue their case is particularly offensive and homophobic."

Strange bedfellows

This conflict has re-ignited the sex debates of the 1980s, with both sides as polarized and as entrenched as ever. The LEAF-style feminists argue that they alone are the defenders of women's rights. The anti-censorship feminists feel the way to liberation is through sex. And both groups find themselves with strange bedfellows. The conservative right has taken the arguments of pro-censorship feminists and attempted to use them to silence lesbians, gays, feminists, activists and other marginalized groups. Anti-censorship feminists have found themselves aligned with the creators of *Hustler* and *Screw*.

In 1990, Vancouver photographer Susan Stewart exhibited *Drawing the Line: an Interactive Photo Event*. She hung 100 photos of lesbian sexual images around the room, ordering them from the least to the most controversial. Visitors were asked to write comments and criticisms directly on the wall beside the photos — and literally to draw a line if they'd seen enough. The images ranged from kissing and nuzzling, masturbation and lingerie to threesomes, leather and fisting.

Under one photo of a woman's bare torso, the following dialogue was written:

-Great tits!
-If we say "great tits," aren't we just copying the patriarchal way of fetishizing bits and pieces and ignoring the woman as a whole?

-No, we're responding to a limited view of a whole woman, that invites us for a moment to focus on her tits.

-Can't we just admire her tits? Is this a crime?

It isn't a crime at the moment, although female sexuality has frequently been repressed as a crime or a taboo. Each issue of *Bad Attitude* contains this motto: "This magazine is called *Bad Attitude* because that's what women who take their sexuality into their own hands (so to speak) are told they have."

Banned in Canada

Sexually explicit material, whether it's a Bright film, a copy of *Bad Attitude*, or the more mainstream work by Madonna, is meeting the demands of a growing number of women. Increasingly, women's sexual pleasure is not as laden with guilt and sexual rhetoric it was in the past. Women are enjoying the gains made by feminism, and there is a resulting attitude of freedom and playfulness toward sexuality.

But not everyone's attitude has changed. The cover of the latest *Bad Attitude* features a dominatrix in full costume with a banner across her chest reading "BANNED IN CANADA." It's true. *Bad Attitude* can no longer be bought in Canadian stores. Only subscribers can get this issue.

On April 30, the Glad Day bookstore on Yonge Street was raided by the OPP's Project Pornography. Owner John Scythes was charged for selling obscene material. The material in question was an issue of *Bad Attitude*.

The charge was based on a ruling made in February by the Supreme Court of Canada. Encouraged by the Legal Equality Action Fund (LEAF), a feminist law-reform organization, the court ruled that obscenity was to be determined and defined by the threat it poses to women's equality. This was almost identical to the US rulings based on Dworkin and MacKinnon's writings.

In an article by Michelle Landsberg in the May issue of *Ms* magazine, LEAF

