

THE LOOK

## ‘Who Gets to Be Sexy?’

Technology has made it possible for just about anyone to shoot, direct and star in their own porn films. Women are leading the new guard.

Photographs by Molly Matalon Text by Amanda Hess Produced by Eve Lyons

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“I care about humanizing the people that we use every day for pleasure,” said Lotus Lain, who does performer outreach on behalf of the Free Speech Coalition. “I want to do what I can to amplify performers’ voices that are outside the mainstream

Kelly Shibari moved from Japan to the United States at 15 to attend college, toured as a roadie for rock bands and Broadway shows after graduation, and settled in Los Angeles, where she built a career as a film production designer. But in 2007, Hollywood writers went on strike, and work dried up. Ms. Shibari was commiserating with others in the industry, wondering how to make ends meet, when a friend dangled an idea: What about ... porn?

“My first reaction was, ‘There’s no fat girls in porn,’” Ms. Shibari said. And there were definitely no fat Asian girls. “The stereotype of Asians in porn is that they’re long and lean and not very curvy,” she said. “That’s how white Americans see Asian sexuality.”

Defying those conventions worked to Ms. Shibari’s advantage, and she staked a claim to a growing niche. By 2016, she had become the first plus-size model featured in the pages of Penthouse. But that recognition came after years of Ms. Shibari and other adult entertainers pushing against the industry’s boundaries.

Performers of her size were typically cast in fetish scenes that emphasized their weight — “feeding or gaining or squashing or face sitting,” as she put it. Ms. Shibari was more interested in sex. So she started making and distributing her own films, which gave her the freedom to produce the kind of material she would actually want to watch.

“I don’t have an agent. I book myself,” the performer Missy Martinez said. “Just a few years back, if you didn’t have an agent, you didn’t get work. Now performers are saying, ‘I can do this on my own.’” (Her dog's name is Miss Moo.)  
Molly Matalon for The New York Times

“Doing porn, in the beginning, was never about politics,” Ms. Shibari said. “I wasn’t trying to break any barriers. I just wanted to have a good time.” And make some money, too. She found that both were more attainable by striking out on her own.

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Ms. Shibari’s story, of economic crisis spawning creative solutions, is a familiar one in the porn industry, which is looking less and less like an industry these days. Amateurs are flooding the internet; piracy has addled the once-dominant studios; production has atomized and scattered. But along the way, something interesting has started to happen: Women are rising up.

“The decentralization of the industry is giving workers more power,” said Heather Berg, a lecturer in gender studies at the University of Southern California who studies labor issues in pornography. “It’s now so easy to produce and distribute your own content that workers are a lot less dependent on the boss.”

“I focus on the self-expression of the performers and their autonomy,” said Shine Louise Houston, a director. “I feel very aware of where the power is, and I never, ever want to cross anybody’s boundaries.” Molly Matalon for The New York Times

“I started shooting porn because I was curious,” said Ingrid Mouth, a performer. “It turned into a kind of experiment — I guess I was experimenting on myself, to see if I liked it. And I did.” Molly Matalon for The New York Times

That means performers can now run their own shows. The rise of webcam work has opened up a style of performance that can be totally controlled by the model in her bedroom. The accessibility of film cameras, alternative hosting sites and webcam tools like Skype have made way for a wider range of sexual and gender representations. And social media has given women a voice offscreen, where they're puncturing mainstream stereotypes while calling out destructive industry practices, too.

"Since the recession, we've seen this giant influx of women who are older, college educated and have backgrounds in business," said Ms. Shibari, who currently works mostly as a marketer. "Now we have all these empowered women who want to speak up."

Women have always capitalized on technological change to find a way into the male-dominated industry. The popularization of the VHS tape in the 1980s allowed them to experience pornography in their homes instead of in darkened theaters surrounded by guys. Newly affordable cameras made it possible for them to shoot and direct their own films. And even as studios have faltered, independent companies have gained footholds.

Take Pink and White Productions, which is run by the director Shine Louise Houston. In her time working for a sex shop, she had noticed a lack of queer material, so she decided to direct her own. In her first film, "Crash Pad" (2006), she cast Jiz Lee, a nonbinary artist and porn novice, to star.

“The more power we can put in the hands of performers, the better,” said Leigh Raven, left, here with her wife, Nikki Hearts. “Let the people who actually have to experience it be in control.” Molly Matalon for The New York Times

“I had always been interested in sex work, but I didn’t think I could do it without changing myself to present more in line with mainstream aesthetics — how I looked and how I had sex,” Mx. Lee said. “When I started, it seemed like everybody looked like Stormy Daniels.”

Mx. Lee has since performed in many of Ms. Houston’s films, but also for mainstream companies like Vivid, and now manages marketing for Pink and White. These days, “we’re seeing more trans people in porn, people of color, queer people, people of size, older people, people with disabilities,” Mx. Lee said. “We have a much more expansive vision of what’s possible.”

The rise of webcams has meant a boon in one-woman shops that can accommodate potentially endless performances. “I tend to not maintain the standard of beauty that the industry is looking for,” said Ingrid Mouth, who started performing on webcams when chronic illness made it difficult for her to sustain her career as an illustrator. “When you’re shooting your own content, you’re creating your own narrative. You’re building your own audience. It’s totally open-ended.”

This creative disruption isn’t contained to explicitly feminist and queer productions. When Constance Penley, a film scholar at the University of California, Santa Barbara, co-edited the 2013 anthology “The Feminist Porn Book,” she focused on figures with overt politics, like Mx. Lee, the performer Nina Hartley and the feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino.

But more recently, Ms. Penley said, “I’m impressed how these efforts cross much of the industry, from Stoya to Stormy Daniels, from the cammers to the sex toy companies.” There is a growing sense that there is no bright line between feminist material and mainstream material.

“Who gets to be sexy? When I started, it seemed like everybody looked like Stormy Daniels,” Jiz Lee said. “Now we’re seeing more trans people, people of color, queer people, people of size, older

people, people with disabilities. We have a much more expansive vision of what's possible."  
Molly Matalon for The New York Times

"Doing porn, in the beginning, was never about politics. I wasn't trying to break any barriers. I just wanted to have a good time," Kelly Shibari said. "But the longer you're in the industry, the more you see the disparities. The whole idea that you couldn't do something because you're fat really started to bug me." Molly Matalon for The New York Times

“My mantra from the very beginning was this: If I don’t do something at home for free and for fun, I don’t do it on camera for money,” said Nina Hartley, a performer, sex educator and author.

Pornographic actresses are edging into the mainstream media, too, including Ms. Daniels, whose battle with the president has become national news, and Stoya, who writes thoughtful essays using the lens of porn performance to examine issues of sex education and privacy.

Their rising profiles have also given them opportunities to act as change agents within the industry. Recently the performer and activist Lotus Lain leveraged Twitter to speak directly to her fans, explaining that she had stopped shooting scenes with men because she was too often cast in racist scenarios. “There are all kinds of kinks in the world,” Ms. Lain said. “I don’t understand why our industry chooses to play into the racist ones.”

The increasing visibility of these women has dovetailed with a growing willingness to see sex work as work, and to put its potential exploitations into a larger class framework. As the performer Missy Martinez said on Twitter recently, “People always feel the need to ask porn stars with the concern if they ‘actually like their job.’ Dude, you work at Verizon. Are YOU okay is the real question.”

The porn industry had a moment of reckoning with sexual misconduct this year when the performer Leigh Raven and her wife, the director Nikki Hearts, posted a wrenching hourlong video to YouTube, in which Ms. Raven described being coerced and abused on a porn set.

Taking a stand has cost them some work. But their story has also complicated prevailing narratives about pornography and abuse, which situate performers as either perpetual victims or asking for it. We now know similar abuses happen on Hollywood film sets and in hotel rooms, on production lines and in offices across America. It’s harder than ever to paint porn as uniquely exploitative — or to ignore abuses that do happen.

“Our lives are normal,” Ms. Lain said. “We’re just like people that work in the malls and work in fast food joints.”  
Molly Matalon for The New York Times

None of this is to say that these changes have been an unqualified good for women and other marginalized people. Seizing more control over the material often requires women to work more for less. Niche queer and feminist productions tend to serve smaller audiences and pay less, too. And a new law ostensibly passed to crack down on sex trafficking also risks sending all sex work underground, forcing women to again work through intermediaries and walk back the freedoms they have gained online.

Even social media exposure is a double-edged sword, as women in pornography have to work overtime to combat mainstream stigmas. And of course, whenever women rise, a male backlash awaits. For women, making it in porn is more of a hustle than ever.

But even that has its way of challenging stereotypes. It’s harder and harder to argue that porn performers are desperate people lured in by easy cash and coerced into submission. There’s just too little money in it — and women have to work too creatively to make it — for that to stand.

The past few years have shown a glimmer of what's possible in porn. Now, as Ms. Hearts said, "we're just waiting for these old white men to die off."

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