

# A Sideshow on a Trip to the Abyss

An exclusive photo-video installation

It was with great pleasure that I accepted to co-curate the LUFF exhibition of Stephen Sayadian's *A Side Show on a Trip to the Abyss*. Immersing myself in Sayadian's universe was an exciting & absurd time-travel experience that concluded in "1980-2022, same fight". As a queer sexologist and pro-sex performer, I saw Sayadian's desire (in 1980) for more fluid human existences and to consider sex as a solution to the anguish of capitalism and the existence of totalitarian states. Sex and the intense desire of people with vulvas would be a way of healing for a sick humanity consumed by the desire to capitalize.

Indeed, Stephen Sayadian, master of the absurd, of satire and of experimental porn, gives us in *A Sideshow on a trip to the Abyss* images from his photographic productions (sometimes unpublished and exclusive for LUFF), from film posters made for John Carpenter or Brian de Palma, from music videos and from his films (*Night Dreams* (1981), *Café Flesh* (1982), *Dr Caligari* (1989) & *Night Dreams 2* (1990)). Visionary artist, his favourite themes are: consumerism, sex, illness and surrealism-psyche.

Beyond the unavoidable male gaze of the mainstream or alternative film industry from yesterday and today, we see in Stephen's work explorations much more existential than just pornographic. The thread that runs through all of his work is that of questioning the role of sexuality in terms of "physical & psychic health" on an individual and human scale.

In his films and in some of his photographic works, Sayadian's female characters are meticulously choreographed and magnified by sharp lights, in powerful and mostly active postures. In *Dr. Caligari*, the sexuality of people with vulvas is represented as a remedy for cruelty (a man's cannibalism is cured by the intracerebral injection of a woman's "nymphomania" (Mrs. Van Houten), thus creating a new form of sexuality. Van Houten), thus creating more fluid and healthier beings); sometimes "untamable" in the mise en abyme of Mrs. Van Houten's insatiable desire, or in an excerpt from *Night Dreams 2* represented by the turgidity of a worm-shaped "super clitoris" (one can also see in it a representation of "queer/trans/non-binary genitality").

The dark humour, choreographic staging, and surrealism of the scenes soften Sayadian's most abrupt subjects, such as the capitalization of bodies. In *Café Flesh*, "healthy" people (i.e., those who can practice sexuality) are forced to perform on stages where pornographic performances take place. A post-apocalyptic totalitarian state forces these people to perform sexuality for the benefit of people who are sick and unable to practice sexuality. In this particular case, sexuality seems to be a curse reduced to its orchestrated and meticulous representation to entertain a sick audience. *Café Flesh* then becomes "meta-porn" and places us, spectators, in the shoes of those who watch and do not do: passive, submissive and unable to touch themselves for fear of dying (doesn't this remind you of the Covid crisis or the AIDS epidemic?). The subject of the capitalization of the bodies and the submission to sexuality through monetization also appears in Sayadian's photographs via the representations of American advertising icons such as "Aunt Jemina" or "Bob's Big Boy", constantly reminding us of the intertwining of power, money, body and sexuality.

In Sayadian's work, the "male entities" hardly exist, without faces and bodies, they are subjected, with a quasi-relent of "fragile masculinity", to the capital and the powerful sexuality of women/vulvas. One of the *Night Dreams* videos shows us a "dead man or mannequin" who does not respond to sexual stimulation and whose penis has been replaced by a foetus. As Virginie Despentes wrote in *King Kong Theory*: "Meanwhile, men, at least those of my age and older, have no body. No age, no corpulence". In this case, the implacable observation is made: 1980-2022, same fight...

Sayadian's porn is not so much a visual masturbatory support but a real critique of the Western societies of the 80's as well as the expression of a certain fascination for the desire of people with vulvas, staging them as powerful performers who desire, masturbate and cum....

Viv Dellamore/Fiona Bourdon

#### **About Viv Dellamore:**

Viv Dellamore/Fiona Bourdon (they), has been a sexpositive performer for over 8 years and has performed throughout Europe and Canada. From neo-burlesque striptease to drag king to experimental and explicit performance, they are one of the most innovative artists in her field. Viv is also an instructor and teaches workshops on auto-eroticism, anger expression and raw stripping. Beyond stage performance, Fiona is a sexologist specialized in psychotraumatology and works at the Sexopraxis center in Lausanne. Dusting off sexology, breaking the taboos on experiences of violence and sexuality with a sexually positive and inclusive attitude, these are Viv/Fiona's kicks.

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#### **Images source :**

##### Channel 1 :

- *To Rinse Dream, Thanks for Everything! Laura Mulvey* – re-edited from *Night Dreams* (1981)
- *Do it Again and Again* – re-edited from the music video *Do it Again* by Wall of Voodoo (1987)
- *Dolly Birds* - re-edited from *Party Doll A Go Go* (1991)
- *Clit Flick* - re-edited from *Night Dreams 2* (1990)

##### Channel 2 :

Three spreads created for Hustler magazine during Sayadian's stint as Creative Director during the 1980s

- *My Red and White Acrylic Dream* (1984)
- *Untitled Black and White Shoot* (1986) - never been published or seen
- *Pavlov's Dream* (1984)

Production stills and frames from:

- *Dr. Caligari* (1989)

##### Channel 3 :

- Photos for film posters photographed by Francis Delia
- Frames taken from the scan of *Café Flesh*, on which Delia also served as the cinematographer under the alias of F X Pope.
- Photos from *Chicken Series* (1981-83) - appeared in French photo magazine ZOOM, Issue 133, 1985
- Stills created for the *Do it Again*.

Thanks : Stephen Sayadian, Daniel Bird