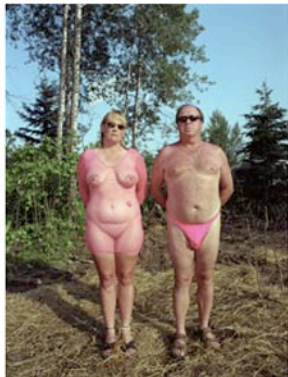


Sex Swingers As Seen By Naomi Harris

by Vladimir Birgus FOTOGRAF 10/2007



Most Europeans see the United States under the ultra-conservative administration of George W. Bush as a prudish country, where millions of citizens are outraged by a fleeting glimpse of singer Janet Jackson's nipple during a live TV broadcast, where there is an ongoing struggle to ban the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in schools, where exhibitions featuring provocative works are censored, and where a growing number of young people voluntarily maintain sexual abstinence before marriage. However, there exists a different United States – a country of a flourishing pornographic industry, a United States of sex clubs behind whose doors the wildest erotic dreams are made reality, a United States of millions of swingers, people who swap sexual partners and voluntarily have sex in front of an audience at a variety of parties and camps.



It is this part of America that the thirty-four year old Canadian photographer Naomi Harris depicts in her cycle *Swingers*, which is to be brought out in book form in 2008 by the renowned Cologne publishers Taschen, with a foreword by the famous US artist Richard Prince. In 1997 Naomi Harris, a graduate of art and psychology at York University in Toronto, enrolled in a nine-month course of photojournalism and photographic documentary at the International Center for Photography in New York, and since that time she has lived in America's largest city, where she makes a living largely from photographic work for a variety of periodicals – her pictures have been published for instance in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Out*, and *Vanity Fair*; in 2001 she was short-listed for the Eugene Smith Award. Alongside work on commission she also pursues her own work, mostly portraits and documentary projects. Among the best of those is her cycle *Haddon Hall*, capturing the inhabitants of a hotel of that name in Miami Beach, who are spending their retirement years under the Florida sun.



Her sharply colored images are unflinching in showing the wrinkled skin, thick layers of make-up and affected smiles, and yet the cycle does not come across as sarcastic or mocking, since the artist's sympathy for these people who do not give in to infirmity and old age, instead wanting to enjoy life to the full, is palpable. During her sojourns in Miami Beach, which she revisited over the course of two and a half years, Harris began taking photographs at the local nudist beach, becoming alive to the fact that even the most banal activities when conducted by people stripped of their clothes often look comical. This she later confirmed in her most extensive cycle so far, *Swingers*. The exchange of sexual partners and group sex at various swingers parties, swingers conventions, or *Miss Swingers USA* or *Canada*, are more widespread than most local citizens suspect – according to the North American Swing Association there are around three million swingers in America. Many of those live neither in Manhattan nor in Hollywood, but in somnolent suburbs, among regular, middle class folk. As Naomi Harris describes them thus – they are your schoolteachers, your doctors, your bank clerks, your cops. They are not perverts or porn stars.



You pass them every day in the supermarket, on the highway, in an airport, in the post office line. These very same inconspicuous and ordinary people every now and then leave their kids at home and set out on wild parties and weekend revelries, where they realize their sexual longings with a number of different partners. Looking at these people, often neither young nor attractive, as captured by Naomi Harris in situations evoking scenes from porn films, we may ask how is it possible that the photographer ever gained their consent to be photographed and even have the images published. Though most swingers are possessed with a powerful degree of exhibitionism, many – and in the vast majority the younger ones – in fact refused to be photographed. Sander-like in composition, the portraits of the people in the center of the image staring directly into the camera are reminiscent of the photographs of Diane Arbus, incidentally an artist whom Naomi Harris holds in great respect.

The people in front of the camera believe they look attractive and dignified, while in fact they strike the viewer as bizarre, grotesque, and often also desperately lonely. This impression is frequently assisted by their ridiculous costumes, designed to gain attention at theme-oriented parties. Even more absurd, however, are the images of various sexual acts, in which the artist pointedly juxtaposes parallel actions (e.g., a supine woman is being orally aroused, while another woman looks on, cleaning her teeth), or action and environment (sexual revelry in a swimming pool with a floating plastic duck). The people in front of the camera know that it is there, yet they ignore its presence; so great is the trust that Naomi Harris has succeeded to win, and so scant is their sense of shame, overridden by their pride in their sexual prowess and ability to carry out the wildest of fantasies. The visual qualities of *Swingers* also play an important role, with their imaginative use of color and natural lighting, as well as compelling composition, which often present but a fragment of the dramatic action, leaving wide open space for imagination.

Naomi Harris claims that in her photographs she does not want to pass judgment, merely to document this fast growing yet so far little publicly presented phenomenon of contemporary American life, so full of sexual gymnastics, and so devoid of eroticism.