

Arts :: Arts And Culture

**Money shots**

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When viewers stop by the South End's Samson Project art gallery, their reactions to the current photography exhibit ("Self Portraits by Heterosexual Men" by Gabriel Martinez) could run the gamut from intrigue to titillation to horror. Whatever the ultimate reaction, Martinez admits that sometimes it takes a

little time for the content and context of the exhibit to hit its viewers.

Says Martinez, "I'm always surprised by how long it takes [the viewer] to figure out what's taking place in the photographs!"

Indeed, while a sign on the gallery's Thayer Street entrance advises that risque content might exist inside, initial entry to the Samson Project's contemporary art space reveals a seemingly innocuous sight: One hundred pairs of splayed male legs. Arranged in tight, squared geometric unity - like an anatomical Hollywood Squares - Martinez's sharply photographed 20-by-30-inch pieces flank the viewer on both sides in "a tunnel effect," as Samson Gallery owner and director Camilo Alvarez puts it. The exhibit of faceless subjects displays a diverse array of limbed representations: The complexions of these legs range from pale to dark, their musculature varies, and their surrounding environments range from bedrooms to bathrooms to automobiles. Some legs dangle from bedsides, others stand firm on even ground. Some are nude, some are not, and some show puddles of discarded clothing - jeans, shorts and underwear - gathered casually around bare feet. In each case, the photograph is teasingly cropped within a hair's breadth of the subject's (frequently nude) crotch. Many toes are flexed, as if in tense concentration, while others seem limply relaxed. And each piece is solely identified by the first name of its faceless, semi-anonymous subject: Brent, Dave, Zachary, Benjamin, Todd...

But upon closer examination, subtle cues reveal a common, provocative thread linking each man together: Some photographs reveal a pornographic magazine casually tossed to the subject's side. Others contain silky white traces of liquid clinging to the couch, floor or leg. And suddenly, the context becomes disarmingly clear. "There's going to be a strange reaction from the viewer when they realize they're in a situation where they're forced to be a voyeur," says Martinez of his exhibit, an arduously culled series of self-portraits taken by men in their moment of sexual climax. "I think some will appreciate it," says the artist of viewer responses, reactions likely heightened by the "subservient," panoramic perspective of a low-angled camera that places its audience squarely between the subject's trembling legs. "Others might find it uncomfortable or unnerving to be so close - so intimate - to a stranger who just so happens to be [masturbating] on you, in a sense."

"It's visceral," says Alvarez of his gallery's latest exhibit. "His [Martinez] work is always about making the audience feel, and getting the audience involved in the project." Even Alvarez is involved in the provocative exhibit; the Dominican gallery owner and former New Yorker (he opened Samson Projects in Boston three years ago) is also

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**Quick Poll**

**Madonna recently lip-locked with a female back-up dancer at a show. What other career stunt from her past will Madge recycle to promote her new album?**

Shoot another naked photo spread with Vanilla Ice

Team up with Rosanna Arquette for Desperately Seeking Estrogen

Beg Andrew Lloyd Webber for the lead in a

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one of the long limbed, self-pleasuring subjects.

"Performers," is how Martinez refers to his masturbating males. While approximately half of the photographs feature the artist's actual acquaintances, friends and friends-of-friends, as if enlisted via a masturbatory referral system, the other half is comprised of total strangers found through ad postings on internet message boards. The concept was simple: Martinez provided the men with a remote controlled Nikon D-80 digital camera setup (capable of taking multiple, rapid fire exposures). In turn, they supplied him with a selection of images capturing their lower limbs in the fleeting moment of orgasm. Martinez then selected the one shot that best captured the individuality of each subject. "All of the gentlemen that approached me were exhibitionists at heart," he says of the participants' motivation. "There was kind of a thrill of stepping into this pseudo amateur-porn situation, knowing that there would be so many eyes in the future watching this very intimate act."

With Self Portraits of Heterosexual Men, Martinez, who is the Director of Graduate Photography at the University of Pennsylvania, has created a show that explores the nuanced relationship between exhibitionist and voyeur. The artist has a history of provocative art that examines issues of gender and sexuality in contemporary culture, and this latest exhibit also comments on the way 21st century technology - especially the proliferation of amateur online porn - has redefined eroticism. Martinez admits to being "fascinated by the images people put out there of themselves," via online networking and sex sites. While Self Portraits revisits one of Martinez's past projects, one that previously enshrouded the subject's surroundings, the 2007 installation is "equally concerned with what's going on in the environment." The result reveals an even more voyeuristic glimpse into the life of the subject, one that Martinez likens to a CSI examination. While we may never see the face of the subject identified only as "Bob," his reading habits are revealed by the hardcover novels tossed beneath his bed. A computer monitor by his heel reveals that "Bill" prefers Macs to PCs, and we can assume "Ken" enjoys a good workout, given his choice to pose atop a rubber exercise ball.

The exhibition also focuses exclusively on self-identified heterosexual men, says Martinez (who is openly gay and partnered), as an opportunity to comment on the notion that "the unattainable is much more desirable."

Okay, then. But social commentary and sexual politics aside ... why feet?

"Really, the project has nothing to do with feet," says Martinez. Instead, he says, the focus was in capturing the essence of the performers' body language. "When one is ascending to the realm of the spiritual through orgasm, we have no idea what our body is doing. There are some really interesting things that are happening with our body, and we're just not aware of it. I thought feet, specifically, could be the least cliché and most expressive [body part] to demonstrate that kind of tension or exhilaration."

Tension and exhilaration might also describe the reactions of prospective visitors. But to those who might disregard the exhibition's artistic merit out of misplaced prudery, Martinez has one response:

"It's just feet!"

Self Portraits by Heterosexual Men by Gabriel Martinez runs through Dec. 8 at Samson Projects, 450 Harrison Ave. (pedestrian entrance on Thayer Street). An opening reception with artist will be held Fri., Nov. 2 from 6-8 p.m. at the gallery. Free. Info: 617.357.7177 or [www.samsonprojects.com](http://www.samsonprojects.com)

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