

Meliksetian MB Briggs

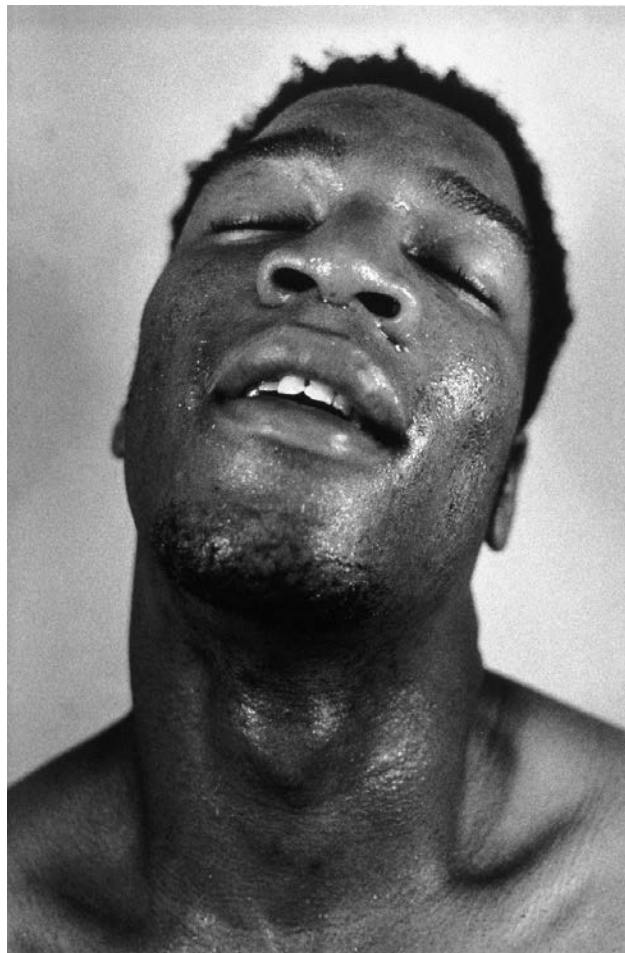
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**Aura Rosenberg  
at JOAN**

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Text by Catherine Wagley



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When Aura Rosenberg's book *Head Shots* came out in 1996, the alt press had fun. LA Weekly published a review called "Johnny Came Lately." The Swedish magazine ETC put a photograph of performance artist Mike Smith (sweaty, eyes closed) on its cover over the word "Orgasm!" These publications accompany Rosenberg's photographs on view at JOAN; all sixty-one of the black and white images the artist initially included in the series hang in tight succession, one after another.

Perhaps the best way to stumble upon these images, as with much good art, is unknowingly, with no expectation. The skin-baring close-ups take a minute to register, then you figure out exactly what you're looking at: men apparently in the throes of sexual pleasure. Some are noisier-looking than others; some figures are sweatier. Most eyes are closed.

The possibility that the men may be acting (many were) doesn't matter much. It would be self-exposing enough to act out this kind of experience in front of a camera, especially since the photos—while compelling—are not necessarily flattering. One man with his mouth half open looks as though his eyes have rolled up into his head.

When orgasms and and ecstasy appear in art—by Ann Hirsch, Clayton Cubitt, or Tracy Emin—women tend more often to be the subjects. And we often talk about male vulnerability as a rarity, as if showing or capturing it is in itself a feat. Rosenberg's project, with its many seemingly willing participants, turns said vulnerability into a given. This frees us to revel in the nuances and quirks of its expression: the thrown back heads, half smiles, stark shadows, and mussed-up hair.

*Head Shots* (1991-1996) runs April 29-June 12, 2016 at [JOAN](#) (4300 West Jefferson Boulevard #1, Los Angeles, CA 90016)

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**Aura Rosenberg, Head Shots (1991-1996), April 30-June 12, 2016 at JOAN, Los Angeles. Installation view. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.**