

Meliksetian MB Briggs

X·TRA

REVIEW

Picturing La Petite Mort

Aura Rosenberg: *Head Shots (1991-1996)*

JOAN, Los Angeles

April 30–June 12, 2016

-Kate Wolf

In 2015, a novel called *A Little Life*, by the author Hanya Yanagihara, became a surprise bestseller. Its 720 pages feature excruciatingly detailed accounts of sexual abuse, mutilation, and other forms of physical violence amidst the story of a friendship between four men over the course of multiple decades. In addition to commenting on Yanagihara's devastating prose, many reviewers also noted the aptness of the book's cover, a 1969 black-and-white photograph by Peter Hujar titled *Orgasmic Man*. Yanagihara told the *Wall Street Journal* that she was set on using the photograph: "I really hung on for the cover," she said. "I love the intimacy, the emotion, what looks like anguish. There's something so visceral about it."¹

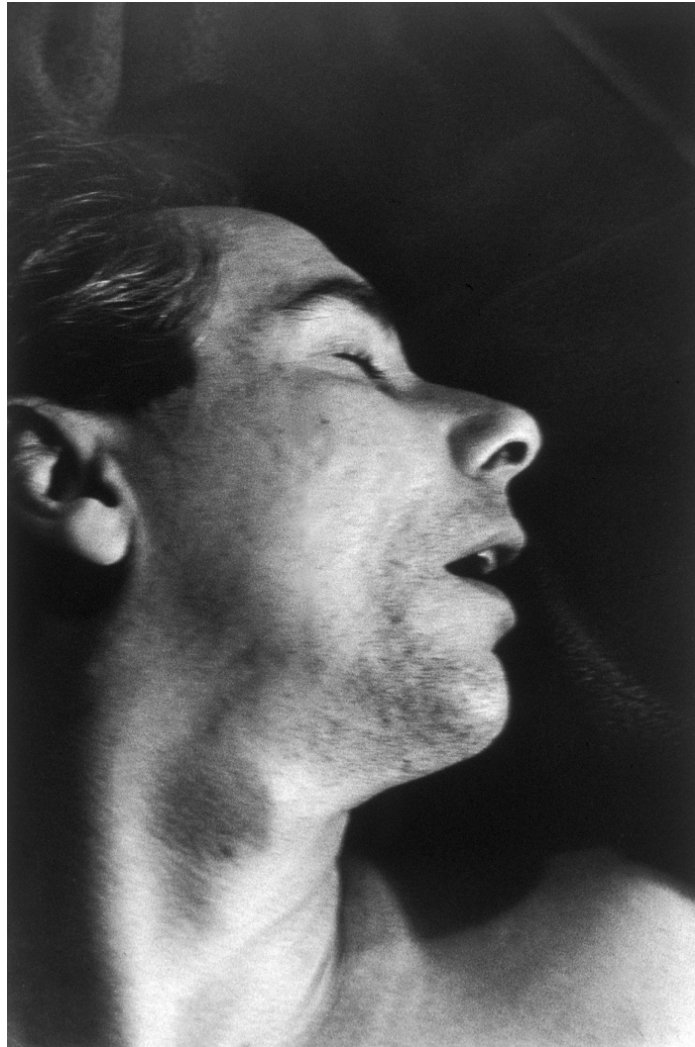
Without the telling title, it would be easy to mistake the expression in Hujar's photograph for intense distress, as opposed to pleasure. The tight close-up shows a man with his eyes crushed

Meliksetian MB Briggs

closed, a pathetic whimper passing across his mouth, and his right hand jammed up against the side of his cheek, as if to keep his head up. More substantially than other photographs Hujar produced with similar conceits, the picture reinforces a deeply held connection between agony and ecstasy, between orgasm and death. Here the viewer seems to be witnessing a true *la petite mort*—the expression that is not just an synonym for climax but also an acknowledgement of death and orgasm’s shared state of ego dissolution—a moment of absolute transcendence of oneself, from which only in the second case are we able to return.

Beyond its eroticism, Hujar’s image also evinces something fundamental about photography: the supremacy of the frame. Apart from sheer affect, it’s the exclusion of a larger context that gives *Orgasmic Man* its powerful ambiguity and, ultimately, its resonance. Hujar constructs a perspective that would occur in everyday life only in the most intimate of circumstances, but the meaning of his image would likely be altered if a viewer began to focus on actualities. (Did Hujar play a role in his subject’s orgasmic state? Was this state indeed orgasmic or was it feigned?) Actuality easily becomes the enemy of metaphor. In describing photographs, we use words like “pictured” to account for the distance between these two poles. In the post-mortem photography of the late 1800s, for example, deceased children are often “pictured” sleeping, lying in bed with their eyes closed. This manner of framing was not intended to mislead family members or conceal the sad reality, but instead to represent a gentler view of death, not as fiery paroxysm but as a long and peaceful slumber.

Meliksetian MB Briggs



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots* (1991–1996). Gelatin silver print, 16 x 12 inches.
Image courtesy the artist.

In a series of photographs entitled *Head Shots* (1991–96), Aura Rosenberg pictures men in orgasm. The suite of 61 black-and-white, vertical images were exhibited in their entirety, at JOAN, a nonprofit space in Los Angeles's West Adams neighborhood, for the first time in two decades. The photographs were hung in their original order, in a straight line at eye level across the gallery walls. Like Hujar, in *Orgasmic Man*, and Andy Warhol, in the film *Blow Job* (1964, a touchstone for *Head Shots*), Rosenberg trains

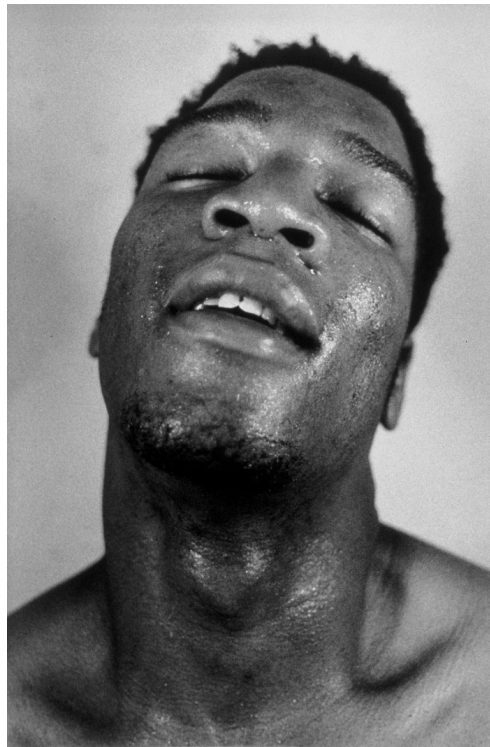
Meliksetian MB Briggs

her camera exclusively on the faces and upper bodies of her subjects, leaving everything else to conjecture. At times the stray body part of another person—toes, hands, a shadowy profile—tips the scale of inference directly toward sexual encounter, but mostly the men are shown alone. Orgiastic signifiers, the most common of which is the gaping mouth, à la Saint Theresa, also include torrents of sweat, closed or rolled back eyes, darting tongues, and private little smiles. Sometimes the men’s expressions verge on or arrive at abandon; others exhibit deep concentration that almost comes across as rumination. None of the subjects produces a countenance quite as indelible as the man in Hujar’s photograph, and a few even shirk the task completely, posing with cartoonishly bulging eyes in static faces that seem to announce artifice.

Indeed, one way of looking at *Head Shots* is as a compendium of performances, the documentation of a group of men all interpreting and enacting the same directive. The title of the work seems to refer as much to the pictures actors use for representation (and the prints are only a few inches larger than the standard 8 × 10) as it does to pornography. Rosenberg has never divulged all the details about how the photographs were made, but her comments indicate that they were mostly staged. “I asked them to act out what they thought they looked like coming,” she told her partner, the artist John Miller, about the process in a 2013 interview.² The photographs’ kinetic, informal style—many of them have soft focus or are blurred by motion—gives the impression that these were extended sessions of simulation. And the inferred proximity of photographer to subject implies intense communion. In some shots, Rosenberg (who also credits twelve other photographers in the making of *Head Shots*)

Meliksetian MB Briggs

seems to hover directly above her subject, or kneel below him, or come within an inch of his breath. This produces extreme, sometimes unflattering, angles that reveal nose hair, double chins, wrinkles, scars, strains of saliva, and crooked teeth. The candid, snapshot quality of the grainy images, which project disinhibition, complicates and destabilizes the knowledge that as viewers we are seeing something that is most likely pretend. Whatever is taking place, though, the mode of posing alone suggests a base level of intimacy. “Shooting those pictures brought up a range of emotions for me and my models,” Rosenberg told Miller. “I realized that sexual exchanges can happen through the lens of a camera.”³



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots (1991–1996)*. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 12 inches.
Image courtesy the artist.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

The seeming disparity between what the photographs portray and what they document was noted when selections from *Head Shots* first began to surface in the early 1990s and when Rosenberg published a book of the same name in 1995. In the loft above the main gallery space at JOAN, artifacts from the project's lifespan, such as contact sheets, exhibition posters, publications, and a few testimonies from Rosenberg's subjects, were on view. Several contemporaneous reviews were also displayed, and they attest that the response from some critics at the time focused primarily on this aspect of the work. David Pagel, in a brief roundup of a group show Rosenberg appeared in at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, wrote: "The images are *supposedly* exposing a moment of naked intimacy, but they actually mask their subjects behind a list of clichéd conventions."⁴ "Rosenberg's images reek of insincerity and fraudulence—of men acting out stereotypical responses of ecstasy and release," offered a reviewer in *Art issues*.⁵ Another, though noting the series' inspired subversion of the male gaze and its reversal of pictorial depictions of female sexuality, still seems to have found the pictures distasteful: "interesting as these mechanisms are [they] take a backseat to the basic visual challenge, the ugly impact of the images...produced."⁶

But we could ask, do the photographs try to conceal their pretense, or do they instead brandish it as another element of their mingling of fiction and nonfiction? While pornography, though equally contrived, confirms what has taken place in the form of the obligatory climax shot, in *Head Shots* Rosenberg responds with uncertainty, allusion, even farce. The isolation of the men's faces requires the viewer to fill in what's left unseen. Roland Barthes writes: "The erotic photograph...does not make the sexual organs into the central object; it may very well not

Meliksetian MB Briggs

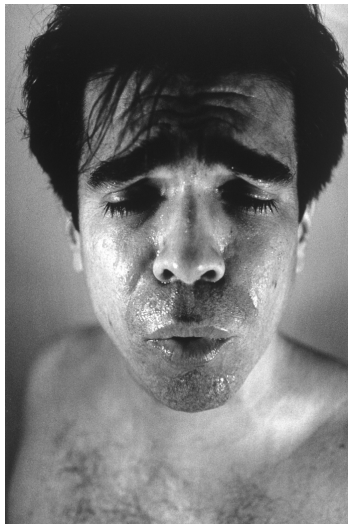
show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame and it is there that I animate this photograph and it animates me.”⁷ By insinuating a strong level of doubt in the series, Rosenberg expands past the most obvious corollary, in some ways severing male ecstasy (or at least the gesture towards it) from material emission alone, attempting to make the realm outside the frame not just an afterimage cast by pornography, but possibly something more subjective or even profound. “Not only toward ‘the rest’ of the nakedness,” as Barthes writes, “but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.”⁸



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (1991–1996)*, installation view, JOAN, Los Angeles, April 30–June 12, 2016. Image courtesy JOAN. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

Meliksetian MB Briggs

On their surface, *Head Shots* form a loose portrait of an artistic community. In contrast to David Robbins's *Talent* (1986)—a collection of 18 professional head shots that cast well-known artists, mostly of the Pictures Generation, as entertainers, with their names printed bottom right—Rosenberg's choice of participants seems less a comment on art world affairs than a matter of friendship or propinquity. At JOAN, the men depicted were not identified, and the individual photos were exhibited without titles.⁹ Nevertheless, some of the artists in the series are recognizable, such as John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, and the elastic-faced Mike Smith, who appears a few times, once in a demonically makeshift Santa Claus suit. The close focus limits our access to the settings, which might tell us more about these men as individuals, but Rosenberg still captures small details: a painting here, a pet there, bookshelves, a phallic prong of cacti, the Empire State building in the distance, and a glass display case housing a collection of animal skulls, as well as blankets and sheets, as many of the men are shown in bed.



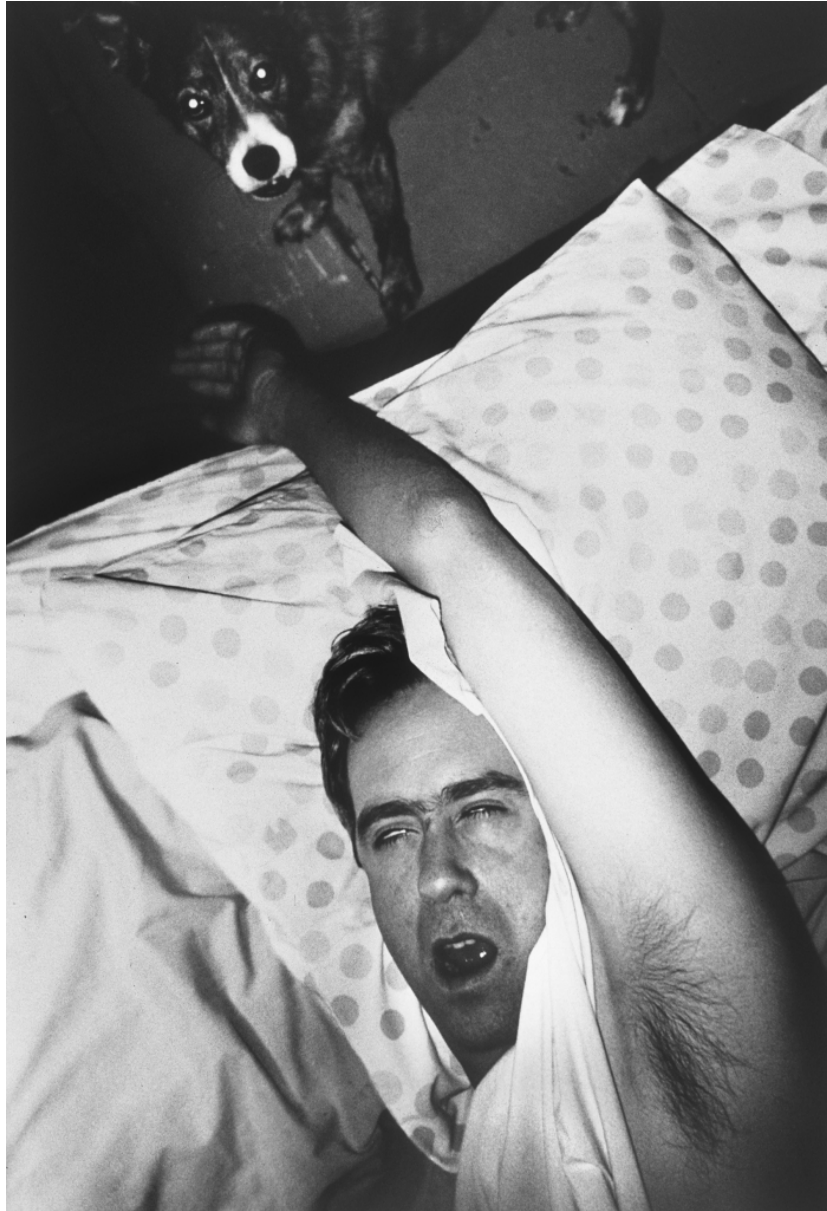
Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots* (1991–1996). Gelatin silver print, 16 x 12 inches.
Image courtesy the artist.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

A bed, of course, conjures sex, fantasy, creativity, and the unleashing of the unconscious in dreams, but also illness. Rosenberg was photographing members of a community living through and likely touched by the devastation of AIDS, which, by 1995, had reached peak death rates in the United States.¹⁰ (That fact conspicuously went unmentioned when the work first appeared, but was highlighted by JOAN in their press release.) Looking at *Head Shots* in light of the AIDS epidemic reveals different layers of reference. Indeed, the work was created at a moment when the oppressive symbol of sex equaling death had jumped genders, from the syphilitic femme fatale of the nineteenth century to the promiscuous gay man of the twentieth; and when the image of a man lying in bed with a wrenched face, sweating profusely, may have had a slightly different resonance than it immediately would today. (One recalls another photograph: the shattering image of Hujar, with his mouth agape, on his deathbed, taken by David Wojnarowicz in 1989.) It seems fair to say it wasn't Rosenberg's aim to illustrate any of this, but the disease is present in a number of the photographs. In one, for instance, a seated man barely motioning toward climax holds a framed picture of Liberace. At first, it seems like a gag, until one remembers that the singer died of AIDS in 1987. Hunter Reynolds, the artist and AIDS activist, is photographed in the drag face of his persona, Patina Du Prey. And an image of the poet and performance artist Bob Flanagan (who had cystic fibrosis), with oxygen tubes up his nose, being asphyxiated by his partner Sheree Rose, demonstrates that the sick needn't forgo desire or agency in the face of disease. The many representations of men experiencing an ambiguous moment of release—a vaporous photograph of Mike Kelley with his eyes closed, leaning his head to one side in a transported pose against a sea of black, is a

Meliksetian MB Briggs

particularly resonant example—enable the series to hint at some of the darker edges of sex during the decade, while also advocating for pleasure, and treating it with humor and play. (In fact, some of Rosenberg’s *Head Shots* photographs ended up being used in a Swedish campaign for safe sex, in 2002.)



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled*, from *Head Shots* (1991–1996). Gelatin silver print, 16 x 12 inches.
Image courtesy the artist.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Rosenberg, who trained as a painter, began adapting pornographic images for a group of sculptures called *The Dialectal Porn Rock* (1989–2012), in which she pasted magazine cutouts onto rocks and encased them in resin, sometimes placing them back in natural settings. More recently, she has made paintings over images of vintage pornography culled from the Internet. Particularly with *The Dialectal Porn Rock* and *Head Shots*, she plays with notions of obscenity and objectification. In these works, Rosenberg ruptures a circuit of imagery that, while unbelievably vast and varied, can also be rigidly constrained. If *Head Shots* had been comprised of photographs of women or of less elliptically captured and perfectly statuesque men, perhaps it wouldn't hold our interest as much today. Instead, amidst the contemporary refrain of a phrase like "toxic masculinity," the photographs seem newly, even urgently, relevant. What would a culture look like, Rosenberg's pictures seem to ask, where men were not only sexualized to the same degree as women, but also depicted as porous and open, as equal in vulnerability and in capacity for feeling?

Meliksetian MB Briggs



Aura Rosenberg, *Untitled (Neu Palais, Potsdam)*, 1992. C-print, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Meliksetian/Briggs, Los Angeles.

“There are endless things we can do with our faces because we have endless motives,” the affect theorist Silvan Tompkins has said. “But nonetheless, a critical part of what we do with our faces, even when we pretend, is based on what we know to be

Meliksetian MB Briggs

innate.”¹¹ As Rosenberg suggests in *Head Shots*, perhaps the first step to answering the question about what such a culture could look like is simply suspending disbelief and assuming the position.”

Kate Wolf is a writer and an editor-at-large for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.