

COMMENT

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AMERICAN CONNECTION

An invitation to visit a brothel inspired **Victory Tischler-Blue** to authentically document the lives of its workers, resulting in an ongoing series that forced her to cast aside any preconceived notions. Susan Burnstine reports.



Victory Tischler-Blue's powerful series *Wild Dogs* focuses on a traditional Nevada brothel,

the stories of the women who work there and the culture that surrounds and supports both. Perhaps the most striking element of this work is that at face value it focuses on sex workers, but on close inspection, it has little to do with sex. Instead, the heart of this story is about meaningful connections, relationships, compassion and community.

Tischler-Blue developed a love for photography at a young age, but wasn't able to comprehend various technical elements such as how to use a light meter, since she suffered from number math dyslexia. At the age of 17, she became the

bassist for iconic all-girl rock band the Runaways. During that time, she came to recognise the full extent of her passion for photography after realising she enjoyed being in a photographic studio far more than being on stage with the band.

After the Runaways broke up in 1980, she acted in a few notable movies and transitioned from being a musician to directing music videos. In the 1990s she got her first digital camera, which proved to be a gamechanger for her. She says, 'I was able to reverse engineer how to manually control exposure by seeing what I was doing in real time through the viewfinder and was finally able to control my own vision the way I saw it in my mind's eye.' Afterwards, photography became her principal expression.

In 2015 Tischler-Blue set out on a road trip with her partner and happened upon Bella's Hacienda Ranch purely by chance. 'We had stopped at a little café in the middle of nowhere,' she says. 'I asked the owner, whose name was Bella, what people did out there for a living and she told me that they either work there at the café, or the truck stop or at the brothel across the street, which she also owned. Then she invited us to the brothel for a tour.'

Upon entering the brothel, Tischler-Blue recalls, 'Madam Bella rang a bell that sounded throughout the building and several girls dressed in beautiful, sexy lingerie and heels appeared and lined up in front of us and introduced themselves,' she says. 'We were each told to choose a girl. I chose Bobbie, an older blonde with massive G cups and

a sexy smile. Bobbie took me by the hand and led me down a darkened hallway. Our first stop was the ATM machine, the next stop was the dungeon – Bobbie's domain. After that, we ended up in the "negotiation" room, where Bobbie engaged me in a discussion about my hopes and dreams. From there, she led me back into her dungeon and the rest I captured on my Leica Monochrom.'

She photographed Bobbie for an hour and then continued their road trip to Wyoming. A few days later, she downloaded the files and was 'blown away' when she reviewed what she had shot.

Throughout the five or so years she's been working on *Wild Dogs*, Tischler-Blue came up against a number of

personal challenges and real-life struggles. 'The two biggest challenges were gaining the kind of behind-the-scenes access to the brothel that would allow me to authentically document it in-depth, and earning the trust of the ladies who worked there. Both took a lot of time and patience,' she says.

When Tischler-Blue first arrived at the brothel, she confesses, 'I walked in with judgement and a preconceived notion of who these ladies were, where they must have

come from and how they live their lives. However, what I left with was a completely different understanding. The ladies came from all different backgrounds and were there for a variety of reasons – some which were predictable and other reasons that really surprised me. For instance, one was earning extra money to pay for her PhD because she didn't want the burden of student loans, another was a former ER nurse who was burnt out and looking for new experiences, a third

was a dental hygienist working three jobs to earn enough money to buy a house, but still couldn't afford it, so she became a courtesan, and so on.'

Currently, Tischler-Blue is compiling a book for the ongoing *Wild Dogs* series that will include images, interviews and text documenting her experiences over the past five years. Additionally, she is turning it into an eight-episode limited drama for cable television.

▣ desertstudiosllc.com



EXHIBITIONS USA

ASHEVILLE

Asheville Art Museum
Until 10 October
Draped and Veiled: 20x24 Polaroid
Photographs by Joyce Tenneson
▣ ashevilleart.org

CHICAGO

Art Institute of Chicago
Until 1 August
Judy Fiskin: On Photography
▣ artic.edu

DENVER

Denver Art Museum
Until 6 November
Georgia O'Keeffe, Photographer
▣ denverartmuseum.org

HOUSTON

Catherine Couturier Gallery
Until 3 September
Wendi Schneider: Into the Mist
▣ catherinecouturier.com

LOS ANGELES

Getty Center
Until 2 October
In Focus: Sound
▣ getty.edu

NEW YORK CITY

Museum of Modern Art
Until 1 January 2023
Wolfgang Tillmans: To Look Without Fear
▣ moma.org

Morgan Library & Museum
Until 2 October
Please Send to Real Life:
Ray Johnson Photographs
▣ themorgan.org

Fotografiska New York
Until 14 August
James Nachtwey: Memoria
▣ Fotografiska.com

SAN JOSE

San Jose Museum of Art
Until 22 January 2023
Brett Weston
▣ sjmusart.org

WASHINGTON DC

National Gallery of Art
Until 2 October
American Silence:
The Photographs of Robert Adams
▣ nga.gov