

### ***HARDCORE* an essay by Reba Maybury**

Discomfort links arms with curiosity. Pleasure holds hands with disgust.

Unnamed urgencies emerge in short fuzes that become hard to dodge.

Heat rises from the follicles of the body into waves of lucid conflict.

Skin murmurs, fur erects, organs simmer, teeth empty then genitals dazzle.

The brain forgets itself.



In this state, thinking has a holiday reverting itself to the animal. An orgasm is ecstasy and probably the best thing in the world because orgasms are never moral, they arrive in their own world within the human, indifferent to social rules. For too long this sublime chaos has predominantly been told to us by one type of human. Their story is often one of failure for the recipient in its inability to share bliss and its success in selfish satisfactions. This heat does not belong to just one type of person. It exists in everyone.

A hardcore rejects niceties because to be hardcore is to never fall into the safe and simple parameters of right or wrong. Today this seems to be an unnecessarily rare, even brave position to take. Sexuality is a limitless arena yet those who have told these stories away from mainstream pleasures have historically been belittled for examining desire and pleasure. Often these makers are considered vain, immature, frivolous, decadent, or perverse. They are told that they cannot be trusted with the weight of this subject. They will likewise be condemned as being solicitous and those who hold this judgement would never think of themselves as square.

This exhibition has no straight lines and sex is never identical, it is always unique. To make work from the position of a subjective sexuality is not easy. It takes a hardcore to swerve the inevitable variations of sensation that others choose to project upon these artists. Choosing to create from this place could be considered a vulnerable decision but vulnerability is, after all, the ultimate power. Historically, mainstream renditions of vulnerability have been praised when already in the hands of the status quo, this has led for vulnerability to only look one way and this is quite pathetic. Vulnerability is a rainbow.

Not all of the works in *Hardcore* are necessarily pornographic in its most robust understanding of the word. Instead, the works tow a line where the intention is to occupy the infinite contradictions that sex inhabits because sex has an undeniable urgency, and this urgency is never a frail thing. Sex exhilarates us. Consequently, the policing of who is allowed to possess sex will be endless. This is the power play of who can feel the most alive. The socially non-dominant perspective understands that they can be reduced to a piece of meat and that degradation is always abstract. There is no one singular sexual morality although we are all led to believe that there is.

Shame is not an easy thing to discard but the works in this exhibition thoroughly consider this. The artists in *Hardcore* work from this way of living. A calibration of taking an autonomous stance for non-narrative pleasure and an emancipation from prudency and self-righteousness. Sexuality and violence co-exist along a knife edge of the human condition. The works in the exhibition reclaim the convention of who is supposed to be passive and indulge in the rejection of sentimental and conformist gratifications. The thought that sexual content usually first takes up is that of revolt and these artists stand openly to revulsion. More importantly, this show stands for pleasure as something to take seriously.

Calling these artists powerful would be a frugal statement.

The topics in this exhibition cannot escape provocation. To be inside the body rather than the mind is to refuse the banality of sophistication and instead embrace the unpredictability of viscerality. These works are not seducing you, because they are not about you. We each have the right to decide what is truly upsetting or alluring or grotesque or fantastic. Sensationalism is, unbelievably to some, actually subjective and this is something to protect.

Sometimes I wonder what an orgasm looks like.

The brain forgets itself.

– Reba Maybury, May 2023

Reba Maybury is an artist, writer and political dominatrix sometimes working under the name Mistress Rebecca. Her work explores the tension between her perceived strength as an object of transactional fantasy and how, through the reality of sex work, she attempts to turn this power into something tangible. She is the author of *Dining with Humpty Dumpty* (Wet Satin Press, 2017) and *Faster than an erection* (MACRO, 2021). Recent exhibitions include *From Paris With Love*, Treize, Paris (2022) and *Faster than an erection*, MACRO, Rome (2021).

### About the exhibition:

Opening in May 2023, *Hardcore* is a group exhibition including 18 artists whose works centre on the power dynamics of sex, the diverse nature of intimacy, and our reaction to it. The era of cancel culture has produced a timidly lower volume for discussions around difficult and more nuanced examinations of sexuality, and the works in this show unapologetically test the parameters of the human experience, challenge social convention, and create space for psychological exploration. These artists provoke reaction, thought and important discussion around essential human questions: Darja Bajagić, Monica Bonvicini, Miriam Cahn, Elaine Cameron-Weir, KING COBRA (documented as Doreen Lynette Garner), Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose, Maryam Hoseini, Tishan Hsu, Stanislava Kovalcikova, Bruce LaBruce, Tayeba Begum Lipi, Monica Majoli, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Carolee Schneemann, Joan Semmel, Cindy Sherman and Andra Ursuța.

*Hardcore* is curated by Sadie Coles and John O'Doherty.

### CLIMAX books, videos and more for *Hardcore*

Ground floor, 62 Kingly Street, London W1

25 May - 05 August 2023

To coincide with *Hardcore*, Sadie Coles HQ presents a collaboration with Climax Books with a specially curated selection of artist books and cultural ephemera in response to the exhibition. Founded by Isabella Burley in 2020, Climax Books is a London-based distributor of specialist materials with a focus on rare and out-of-print ephemera, periodicals, erotica, VHS tapes, anthologies and books on art, photography and counterculture. The collection will be displayed on the ground floor at 62 Kingly Street for the full duration of the *Hardcore* exhibition with all items available for purchase.

Image: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #257*, 1992. Chromogenic color print. 172.7 x 114.3 cm / 68 x 45 in. © Cindy Sherman, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

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