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PHOTOGRAPHING THE FEMALE FORM

As good as the real thing?

BY STEPHEN LEMONS

[10.05.99]



anning Gold lives with eight women. Too bad they're not alive. He keeps the bodies in his living room along with some of the surreal, hand-tinted photos he creates after he's dressed them in swimsuits or bondage gear and posed their rigid forms into various kinky tableaux.

No, he's not a serial killer. He's an artist. The women he specializes in are mannequins, but beautiful nonetheless.

"Right now they're in bathing suits 'cause I'm starting a new series on seascapes," explains Gold, a tall, handsome thirtysomething who bears resemblance to a young Michael Caine. "Some are in fetishwear. That's always fun. My problem is that I have them divided into Naughty and Nice Girls, but I've got too many Nice."

Tonight Gold and I are hitting the streets of L.A., searching the lingerie shop windows on Melrose, Wilshire, and Beverly -- looking for some nasty chicks to add to Gold's oeuvre. It's 11:00 p.m., and our plan is to prowl for a couple of hours and then make Jumbo's Clown Room before last call -- Jumbo's being the infamous Hollywood strip club where Courtney Love supposedly disrobed for cash long before Kurt pulled his Papa Hemingway impersonation.

Outside, Gold's abode looks like any other in this predominantly upper middle-class L.A. neighborhood. Inside, it's part Twilight Zone, part Addams Family. The place is dimly lit, filled with Gold's eerie, heavily framed prints, his photographic materials, and his "girls."

Sometimes he shoots at his home in black-and-white, using oil paints with Q-tips to color them after they're developed. Other times, he gets from the street what he can't get at home.

A while back, Gold got pegged with the term Galateaphilia, a.k.a. mannequin worship, and it stuck. The word refers to the Greek myth where Pygmalion crafts a perfect woman from clay and asks Aphrodite to give her life. She grants his wish and he gets to bone his Galatea. But Gold doesn't like the suggestion that he might like to do the same to his life-sized marionettes.

"I'm just an artist looking for provocative material," he says, adjusting the blouse on a blonde with perky tits.

We leave, jumping in Gold's black sports car. He drives like a maniac until we get to some place called Ecstasy. There, a gilded, naked female mannequin squats obscenely with a strobe light flashing behind her ass. She's bald with large, glittering wings on her back like a cyborg sex-toy. Her legs are splayed open, inviting insertion. Unfortunately, where her vagina should be there's just smooth, hard plastic. The most effective chastity belt -- no pussy at all.

Gold takes some shots, but he thinks the strobe will ruin them. So we move down the street to another shop which will remain nameless because they always give Gold shit, asking him for money. The store is closed, security bars lowered for the night.

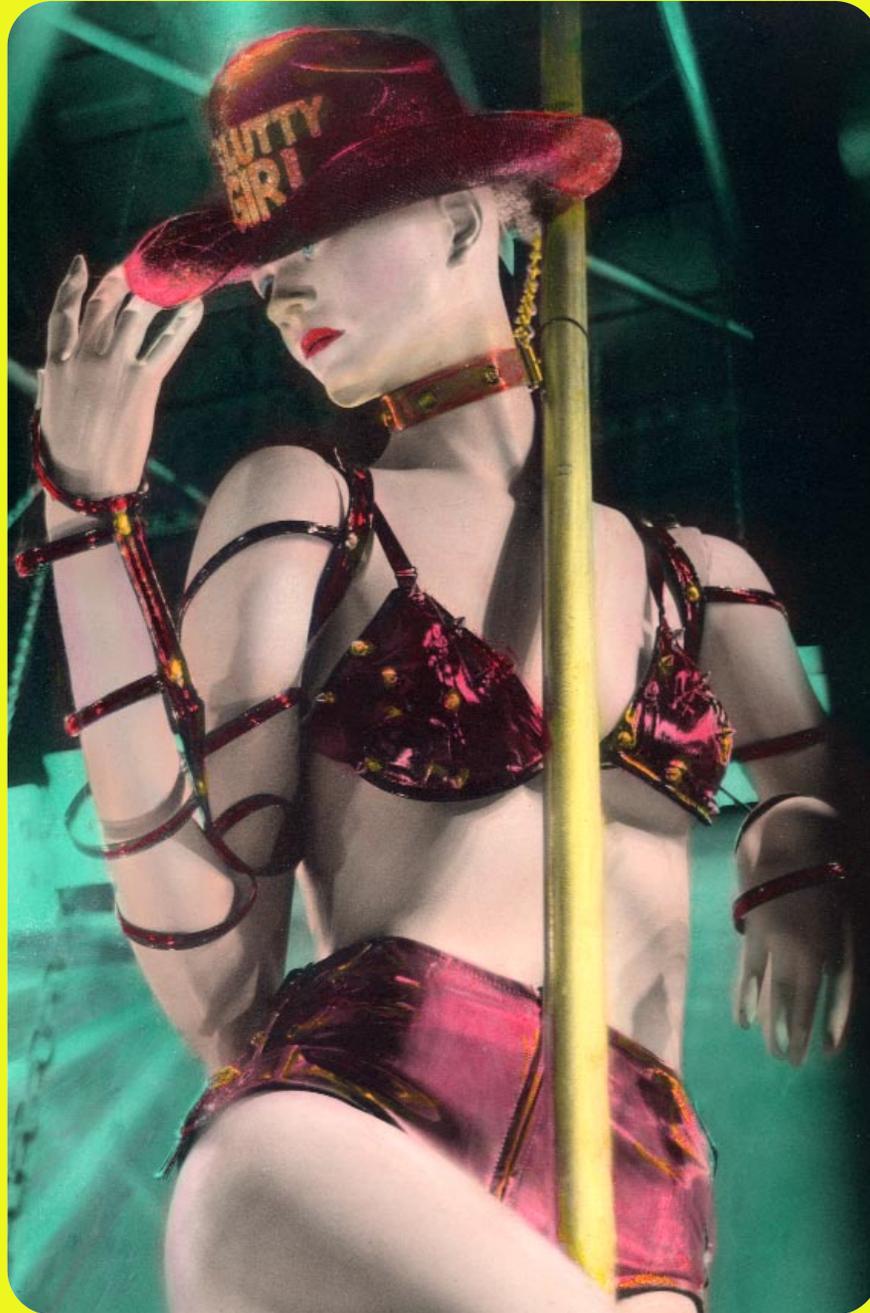
The window displays a fantastic striptease theme. Three mannequins in latex and leather prance around fireman's poles, strutting their stuff. One is really hot, wearing a cowboy hat that reads "Slutty Girl." Gold has to shoot her.

He works like a weasel in heat to get around the bars. Afterwards, he lets me look through the sight as the camera sits on a tripod. Gold's managed to get a great angle, so "Slutty Girl" doesn't look like she's in jail.

"The constraints forced me to work with what I've got," he says. "And in this case, it's interesting in a way I wouldn't necessarily have thought of."

We hit a few more spots. One mannequin, which Gold names "Thai Foo Mary," appears Amerasian. A Chinese umbrella hangs behind her. She's terrific, but probably another Nice Girl. Like Svidrigailov in Crime and Punishment, we like our sewers filthy. So we're off, hunting for "hos."

We strike gold, so to speak, at a warehouse-sized trashy underwear outlet on La Cienega. A perverse Dynamic Duo, we hop out after plastic booty. Gold focuses on one with a big afro wig, and a chrome get-up consisting of hot-pants and bustier with steel nipples. She's our dream woman. Gold christens her "Steel Bullets."



Slutty Girl

We make quite a spectacle -- Gold taking photos, me taking notes. The woman in the white Acura seems to be looking at us as she plows into the back of a black BMW. The BMW is barely scratched. Her car is an accordion. They get out to trade insurance information before us.

"I feel bad about that," Gold says. "It's kind of our fault." We agree, it's Jumbo's-time.

At the seedy little flesh palace, we watch the girls and talk about Gold's past exhibits in L.A. and San Francisco, his time at Berkeley studying visual arts, his [Web site](#), and his five-years being The Mannequin Man. We even discuss his youthful dedication to Judaism.

"But you don't want to write about that," he says, taking a sip of his Greyhound." You want a story about some sleazy guy who drives around at night and takes dirty pictures."

I swallow some beer, and look at a redhead on stage by the name of Pepper. Dolls may be cool, but they'll never reproduce such gloriously freckled skin.

"Well," I respond. "Of course."

See several of [Gold's photographs](#). (Approximately 1.5 minutes on a 28.8 modem.)

Stephen Lemons is a writer who lives in Burbank, CA. He's written for the L.A. Times, SOMA, Art Connoisseur, and New Times L.A. Unlike Lanning, he'd gladly hump a mannequin if it were just a little softer and had all the right parts.

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