

‘They were creepy, a bit weird’: the mystery behind the ‘My TV Girls’ fetish archive

Tom Wilkins took photographs of famous women on his TV screen, often undressing. Was he a peeping tom? It seemed possible - until an astonishing self-portrait emerged

Photography

Charlotte Jansen

Mon 27 Nov 2023 13.39 CET



📷 Fuzzy, filmy images ... shots from the archive. Photograph: Courtesy Christian Berst Art Brut - Sébastien Girard

In 2011, Sebastien Girard, a French photographer, publisher and curator, purchased a milk crate packed with private photo albums from an American auction house. An avid collector of found photography archives, he had no real idea what he was buying, nor who had taken the pictures. But when the cache of 911 Polaroids arrived at his home in Paris - each meticulously numbered, dated and captioned by hand - he noticed they were united by the umbrella label: “My TV Girls.”

Taken between 1978 and 1982, the fuzzy, filmy images all depict the same TV screen, presumably shot from a sofa. On the screen, there is always a female character, often undressing or nude. These women may be from popular TV shows of the era - Dallas, Charlie’s Angels, Happy Days, Three’s Company - but there are also snapshots of adverts for bras and even pregnancy tests, as the handwritten annotations reveal.

■ ■ *Tom Wilkins was not a pervert. This archive was a documentation of what he wanted to become*
Sebastien Girard

“I started to look at the captions,” says Girard, “and they were creepy, a little bit weird.” The Frenchman took the images along to the recent Paris Photo exhibition, presenting them with Christian Berst gallery, which specialises in art brut. The captions, daubed on the white borders in blue ink, describe their subjects - who include Debbie Harry, Raquel Welch and Brooke Shields - in starkly objectifying terms: “nipples of girl on right barely visible”, “girl in low cut jumpsuit”.

The shots convey a fascination with women’s bodies, and in particular a fetish for nightgowns, bras and breasts. Although they are images of images, the way the photographer appears to view women in the notes is reductive and degrading. It makes viewing them an uncomfortable experience, as if looking through the eyes of an obsessive, misogynistic stalker.



📷 'People love it' ... the My TV Girls photographs on show at Paris Photo. Photograph: Jerome Clermont/Atelier Obermant

And then Girard found one image that he believes changes how we should interpret the Polaroids. It was a self-portrait of the photographer, dated 27 March 1981. In the dimly-lit picture, the camera obscures the taker's face, concealing his identity. The caption reads: "Me wearing 38B Playtex beautiful ones lace bra. Photograph was taken using a dressing mirror and an SX70 camera." It is signed Tom Wilkins.

Girard believes this single self-portrait changes how we should view the My TV Girls collection. "This is the absolute key to deciphering the mystery enveloping the work," says Girard. "Tom Wilkins was not a pervert. This archive was a documentation of what he wanted to become." By taking the pictures, Girard believes, Wilkins appropriated a female body. "That's the mystery and genius of it. This shows how, in photography, you dive into your subject - you become the subject."



📷 'He also collected Barbies' ...
Tom Wilkins in his Polaroid self-
portrait Photograph: Courtesy
Christian Berst Art Brut gallery

Wilkins stopped taking Polaroids of women on his television after January 1982. Little is known about him, other than that he died in 2007, age 56, at home in Jamaica Plain, Boston. The cause of his death is unknown. Girard says he had no friends or family. "He was very alone. He was a trainspotter, who took photographs of trains and collected electric trains. He also collected Barbies and would stage scenes with them and photograph them."

It was an expert specialising in Barbie dolls, asked to appraise the collection after Wilkins' house was repossessed, who came across the Polaroid albums in a bedroom. They were never, it seems, intended to be seen in public. Wilkins appears to have used the Polaroid format to avoid having someone else develop the films. His sexuality and his gender remain shrouded in mystery. But Girard believes the secrecy shows "how difficult things were in conservative Boston in the 1980s. It was difficult to change gender."

At Paris Photo, around 100 Polaroids were organised into grids of nine running chronologically - a dizzying documentation that remains ambiguous, despite Girard's efforts to explain it. A 1970s style sofa was set up in front of a vintage TV to "create a context for the work and a feeling of intimacy". Girard has also produced a pocket-size book reproducing the complete archive. When asked, he doesn't disclose how much he paid for the shots - perhaps fearing a lawsuit similar to the [Vivian Maier case](#).

Was Wilkins a peeping tom? Or was he ultimately not much different from anyone else who sat on a sofa and watched these shows? What was the root of his obsession with these women? And would he want this hidden, private obsession to be displayed and sold in public? Girard's project poses disquieting questions, and it is unlikely the truth will ever be known. The only answers - for now - are in the pictures.

At Paris Photo, throngs of visitors craned their necks to get a glimpse of the archive. "People love it," says Girard. "It provides something we are lacking in photography today - the element of surprise."

● My TV Girls is published by [Christian Berst](#), price €10

The Guardian - 27 Novembre 2023
par Charlotte Jansen

christian berst art brut
christianberst.com