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Fetishism makes an exhibition of itself: The Paris gallery portraying upskirting as an art form

Little is known about the photographer, not even his name, but he was believed to be a minor civil servant , writes **Rory Mulholland**



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He was an unsung **genius** toiling in obscurity, dedicated to his art and his beloved mother, upon whose death he took his own life.

Or was he a dirty old man who for years sneaked around **Paris** cafes, shops, and streets, secretly photographing **women's** legs?

Whatever the **truth**, his oeuvre is now on display in a Paris **art gallery** and is making a tidy sum for the gallery owner.

The Fetishist - Anatomy of a Mythology is the rather grand title given to the collection of 75 photos mostly of skirt-wearing women's crossed legs.

Little is known about the photographer, not even his name, but he was believed to be a minor civil servant working in a technology department somewhere in the Paris region. He was certainly prolific, taking around 800 voyeuristic snaps over a decade until 2006 and sending them to photo labs to get the negatives developed.

The dealer then sold them to his friend Christian Berst, who now has a selection on show in the gallery that bears his name in the ultra-trendy Marais district of Paris.

Mr Berst rejects the idea that the exhibition of what he terms "art brut" might be sexist or in some way objectify women.

"He is not at all interested in women uncrossing their legs. There is a certain refinement about his work... His pleasure was even asexual. It is not all a heterosexual cliché," he said.

He bases that argument on the fact that the anonymous artist also photographed his own (hairy) legs, clad in tights, with a plastic bag or a piece of cloth politely covering his private parts.

Mr Berst also points out that there are photos, taken from TV screens, of Thierry la Fronde, the main character of a hugely popular 1960s French adventure series vaguely inspired by Robin Hood. Thierry is generally seen in tights.

But these exceptions aside, the images in the exhibition, and the hundreds of others not on show, are of women surreptitiously snapped. The photos on display are the originals, in the holiday snapshot format that was standard before the spread of digital photography.

The unwitting women are almost always in skirts and stockings or tights. Women sitting, legs crossed, in cafes is the most frequent motif, but the unknown photographer also shot women walking down the street and in various other situations of daily life.

Their faces are not shown, but the pictures he takes of women on TV screens are. Perhaps inevitably, there is a photo of Sharon Stone, taken as he watched the film *Basic Instinct* on TV or on video, in the notorious leg uncrossing scene.

The Peeping Tom artist does not appear to have been a particularly talented photographer, but arguably made up for that with his unrelenting obsession.

That obsession included hoarding women's stockings. Hundreds of boxes of them were found in his apartment when he passed away.

Were he active today, he might fall foul of a law that makes "capturing improper images" of a woman without her knowledge a criminal offence punishable by up to two years in prison and a fine of up to €30,000 (£27,200).

France's "upskirting" legislation, passed in 2018, was inspired by UK activist Gina Martin's campaign to criminalise the practice, which successfully changed the law in England and Wales.

Mr Berst says he is aware that if his show were to be held in London or New York, it might well enrage feminists, or might not be able to go on display at all.

"Perhaps we [French] do not have the same way of seeing things as the Anglo-Saxons," he said. "But the most dangerous thing would be to censor in the name of political correctness."

One man visiting the gallery on Friday along with his wife said he did not think the show was at all seedy.

Is it art? *The Independent* asked him.

“Yes. I don’t see the point in putting boundaries on art,” he replied.

But a 25-year-old self-declared feminist activist, who inspected the show online, had mixed feelings. It is interesting to give a voice to this type of fetishism that is little known among the wider public, said Isaure Schlumberger, a Paris student of gender studies.

“But there is certainly an objectification of women aspect. They don’t have faces, they are just legs,” she said.

Mr Berst argues that the pictures are in the tradition of artist fetishists like the Czech photographer Miroslav Tichy.

Tichy spent 20 years wandering around his hometown, Kyjov, dressed like a homeless man and secretly taking tens of thousands of pictures, many of them of unsuspecting young women. His images ended up on display in a major retrospective of his work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2008.

Mr Berst thinks his unknown photographer’s pictures could one day end up in the Pompidou or some other prestigious art institution.

He has so far sold about 40 of them from the exhibition, at an average of €800 each. He has hundreds more in stock.

Even if his collection never makes it to the world’s top museums, Mr Berst stands to make a small fortune from the lonely civil servant who probably thought no one but himself would ever see his collection.

He said his relationship with the photographer was perhaps like that of Max Brod with his friend the writer Franz Kafka. Kafka named Brod as his literary executor and instructed him to burn his unpublished manuscripts when he died. Brod disobeyed and several great works of literature were saved.

“Maybe I am betraying him,” said Mr Berst.

