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ARTS AND LEISURE DESK

Art/Architecture; So at Ease With Lives on the Edge

By VICKI GOLDBERG (NYT) 1380 words

PROSTITUTES fascinated artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time when prostitution not only thrived but also was accepted in many countries where divorce was too costly and decent jobs for women too scarce. Perfect fodder for voyeurs, prostitutes, who lived a nonconformist, anti-bourgeois existence on the edge of society, had some correlations to artists. Certainly they represented an extreme life, a conjunction of primal need, pleasure and intense fears of illness and death.

Manet shocked society by casting a recognizable French courtesan as a Titian Venus. Degas's bathers are thought to be prostitutes complying with inspection laws. Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon" contains an invitation to sex in an atmosphere of anxiety, though Picasso could not know that social historians would suggest that male artists were interested in prostitution because it is an institution for containing and controlling female sexuality.

Prostitutes were essential to the growing business of photographic pornography in Europe. In the United States, however, artists and photographers generally assumed that brothel pictures would not greatly aid their careers. One American photographer, E. J. Bellocq (1873-1949), nonetheless made uncommonly relaxed, respectful, complicit and engaging portraits of female sex workers in 1912. Eighty-nine plates are known to exist. Thirty-five prints that have never been exhibited, including four images that have not been published, are on view in "E. J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits" at the Julie Saul Gallery in Chelsea through Feb. 2.

These prints, though posthumous -- no fully authenticated prints made by Bellocq himself exist -- predate those first seen in the 1970 Bellocq exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and some are more complete, as they were made before the glass-plate negatives suffered severe damage. Bellocq kept the photographs, taken in New Orleans, almost entirely to himself. The negatives were rediscovered long after his death, then printed by the photographer Lee Friedlander in the late 1960's.

Some of the women are slim and shapely, some dumpy with distinctly overripe curves. There must have been something for every taste in Storyville, the red-light district of New Orleans, and all of Bellocq's sitters appear equally at home with their bodies. Of course prostitution is a theatrical business, and prostitutes are accustomed to being on display.

A few of the photographs are remarkable as portraits or just as pictures: a woman in a chemise and striped stockings appreciatively eyeing a glass of rye she holds up; a long-haired woman with her eyes cast down upon a bunch of flowers in her arms; a glowing nude beauty, a mere adolescent, reclining on a wicker chaise. This last supposedly inspired Louis Malle to make the 1978 film "Pretty Baby," in which Keith Carradine played a fictional Bellocq and the 13-year-old Brooke Shields played a novice prostitute whom Bellocq later weds -- the voyeur photographer united to the object of his eyes' desire -- and then loses to her prostitute mother's bourgeois ambitions.

All of Bellocq's portraits are remarkable at least for what they portray if not for their aesthetic

sophistication. He was a perfectly competent commercial photographer -- architecture, class portraits, shipbuilding -- whose other extant pictures are reportedly undistinguished or even dull. His photographs of prostitutes are unoriginal except perhaps in not conforming to the prevailing artifices of studio portraiture. Yet it's not just the conjunction of contemporary prurience and feminist studies that makes these pictures so compelling, but the almost unprecedented intimacy and openness of the sitters.

Possibly Bellocq made these portraits for the women, possibly primarily for himself, possibly for blue books, the advertisements of their wares that New Orleans bordellos published much as call-girl agencies in Las Vegas do today. Whatever the pictures' purpose, and whoever determined the poses, the result is portraiture rather than pornography.

The sitters manifest an ease, a relaxed frankness with the camera and an occasional smiling happiness that defy the usual intense and tangled seductions of sexual advertising. Posing naked or in dishabille has an obviously erotic intent, but Bellocq's pictures are less highly charged than, and never as explicit as, popular French postcards of the time. Several of his subjects, though clearly meaning to entice, pose calmly and effortlessly, as composed as any sitter before a lens, in attitudes well-dressed women might adopt. One, concealed by voluminous underclothes, lies on her stomach and plays with a little dog.

They might also be women at home sitting for the family album in their undies or their altogether, sometimes masked or sporting black stockings, comfortably ensconced amid medallion wallpapers and floral rugs, with crocheted lace on their dresser tops. Today these pictures look like what studio portraits aspire to: images of the sitters as they want to be seen.

As they want to be seen by customers? The argument for this is a couple of pictures in which the background has been eliminated or covered by a white screen and the figures stand out like cut-outs. The undeleted backgrounds are engineered images of bourgeois domesticity, full of patterned fabrics and embroideries, pictures of women, college pennants, and then in one room signs like "Oh! Dearie I Give U Much Pleasure."

Or are these pictures the way the women want to be seen by themselves -- or in some instances by the folks back home, or prospective suitors? The argument here is that a number of pictures are of women dressed up, with jeweled bodices and fur stoles, like any virtuous and well-off burgher's wife. Theatrics again? The body as the costume of the assigned role, the dress as the costume of the wished-for role that the right man could bestow? Freud never asked, "What do prostitutes want?" Maybe Bellocq did.

The man and his intentions are a mystery, even a kind of myth. The book that accompanied the Modern's 1970 show included excerpts from tapes of people who had known him very late in life and described him as dwarfish, hydrocephalic, possibly hunchbacked, distrustful, wearing a rope to hold up his trousers, insane. Perfect: an American Toulouse-Lautrec, an outsider among female social outcasts.

Recent research, much of it by Rex Rose of New Orleans, has scuttled this notion. Bellocq was certainly short, 5 feet or 5-foot-2 in his 70's, no doubt a couple of inches taller when young, at a time when people were shorter anyway. His forehead was high but no cranial abnormalities were mentioned on his death report. He was stooped. The Storyville prostitutes clearly trusted him to an unusual degree. He was senile late in life but quite sane enough earlier to earn a living at various jobs and then as a photographer. He never married but as a young man was attractive, and a dandy besides. As a candidate for an art myth, Bellocq was appallingly normal.

The pictures harbor mysteries, too. Some have violently scratched-out faces, as if the photographs -- and symbolically, the subjects -- had been attacked. Bellocq's brother, who discovered the negatives after the photographer's death, was a priest, and it has been suggested that he was the defacer, though

there's not much logic in a moralizing priest's hiding a prostitute's face and leaving her body uncovered. Another suggestion is that Bellocq made the marks himself to protect the identity of his subjects, but there are instances of one woman nude in two photographs, her face blacked out in one and untouched in the other. The pictures remain disturbing, the explanations elusive.

Storyville was named for Sidney Story, the alderman who in 1897 proposed that the city council confine prostitution to a single district, then regulate and legalize the business. Prostitution was legal in New Orleans from 1897 to 1917. Nude pictures were not. The sexual revolution and other developments totally reversed this, making nude pictures widely available (and pictures of prostitutes prize exhibits in museums and galleries) while prostitution is illegal.

Progress, you just can't beat it.

CAPTIONS: Photo: A photograph of a New Orleans prostitute, circa 1912, from the exhibition "E. J. Bellocq: Storyville Portraits." (Julie Saul Gallery)

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