

**REAL
ART WAYS**

56 ARBOR STREET
HARTFORD CT 06106
860 232 1006
REALARTWAYS.ORG

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Don't Trust Anyone Over 30" competition in 2003, which requested proposals from emerging artists age thirty and younger, living in New York or New England. Under 30 was juried by Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Barbara Hunt, Executive Director, Artists Space, New York, and Barbara Krakow, President, Barbara Krakow Gallery.

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REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Fan, from the series Tennessee Virgins: Our Eighth Annual Photo Shoot, 2002, 20x24 in., C-Print (detail)

Sarah Martin



After New Year's from the series Tennessee Virgins: Our Eighth Annual Photo Shoot, 2002, 20x24 in., C-Print.

Sarah Martin

By Jessica Hough

In Sarah Martin's photograph *After New Year's*, a woman reclines on a purple satin comforter posing provocatively for the camera. She holds a guitar, which provides the only obstacle between the camera and her bare skin. New Year's party tiaras and bottles of booze hint at the photograph's occasion. In the foreground, a woman in a silk robe and bath towel turban holds up a flash aimed at the sitter, giving the sense that we may be witnessing a low-budget porn film shoot. But the title of Sarah Martin's series of photographs, *The Virgin Club*, leads us to a different conclusion and becomes essential to the way in which we finally begin to understand the images.

According to Martin, the women in the photographs all grew up in the same small southern town and have made a pact to remain virgins until they marry. They get together several times each year to conduct photo shoots during which they capture each other in provocative and erotic poses. Martin's photographs reveal a group of women in an intimate relationship. Her success in capturing her subject stems, in large part, from her being their peer. They went to

Sarah Martin

Assistant Professor,
Photography

M.F.A., Photography,
Yale University

B.A., Media Arts,
University of Tennessee

Sarah is an artist who works in photography, video and film. Upon completion of graduate school, she spent three years working in commercial photography and television.

Sarah shows her photographs nationally and is beginning to show her videos in competitive festivals. Her personal work challenges both her peers and her own interpretation of history and religion. Sarah has taught photography at Yale University and film making at the University of Tennessee, she is currently teaching photography at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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school and to church together and she too was, at one time, part of this “club”.

Although we are not privy to the precise images the women of the Virgin Club have taken of themselves (only Martin’s documentary view), we can imagine the images in our mind’s eye. They are images that are ubiquitous in our culture. The viewpoint that Martin provides is more telling. She opens up the frame wider so that we can see the women grooming, styling, lighting, and photographing each other. She gives us a behind-the-scenes, insider’s perspective. What Martin’s view reveals is a world composed of women only, an aspect that the more tightly framed images taken by the amateur photographers are less likely to have revealed. Here we see that every aspect of the images is initiated and accomplished by women.

Martin’s perspective is both from the inside and from the outside of this group of friends—an ideal position to hold in her desire to examine the micro-culture and pastime of this particular group of women. Since moving away from her hometown, she has gained a distance and unique perspective with each passing year. She is able to bring both intimacy and objectivity to this body of work. She writes in a statement about the work, “I have begun to realize how these photographs (which end up filed and cataloged chronologically or given

Fan, from the series *Tennessee Virgins: Our Eighth Annual Photo Shoot*, 2002, 20x24 in., C-Print



Jodie as Lolita, from the series *Tennessee Virgins: Our Eighth Annual Photo Shoot*, 2002, 20x24 in., C-Print

to boyfriends) function as tools of control in perpetuating a certain myth of a perfect southern woman (religiously devout and sexually pure daughter/forbidden temptress).”

Martin’s sense of the Virgin Club as perpetuating a mythology seems true, and not surprising given the images and stereotypes that girls work against at every turn as they come into their own as women. But it is also interesting to consider an even more complex possibility—that these women also experience sensual pleasure in the making of the images. This pleasure may be a reason to continue to generate more photographs, even if they just end up “filed.”

The woman in *Fan* has an expression of total relaxation and trust. She sits topless outdoors—a small paper fan rests against her chest to shield her breasts. She appears to be indulging in having her hair brushed by another woman, and perhaps is also enjoying having the camera directed at

her. She doesn’t have the awkward expression of some of the girls in the other shots, her eyes communicate a submission to the moment. The experience of being photographed has an eroticism all its own, that comes in part from being examined. Especially here, the women of the Virgin Club are helping each other to accomplish an idealized seductive pose. The environment in which they work is certainly not a sexually neutral one.

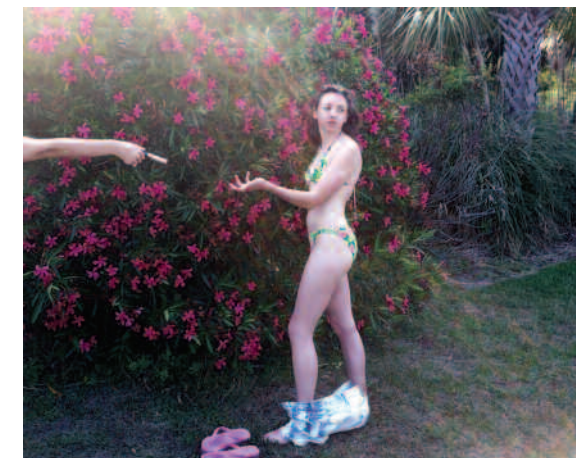
Sexuality is complicated, as is female identity. Women like to look at other beautiful and sexy women (simply consider women’s fashion magazines). And women like to appear desirable in the eyes of other women, not

just men. It would seem from what Martin is able to reveal to us that her subjects are, whether consciously or unconsciously, exploring aspects of their sexual and female identity. Perhaps the stereotype of the ideal southern women originally brought them together but the activity of the “club” has taken them on a journey they may not have originally anticipated.

In examining the photographs in the series, we get the sense that some of the women are comfortable in front of the camera, while others are much more awkward. In the image *Lip Gloss*, we feel empathy for the young woman who, pale-skinned and bikini-clad, stands with shorts around her ankles and looks over her shoulder not seductively but exceedingly mundanely. In *Jodie as Lolita*, another young woman sits awkwardly hunched with tightened shoulders. She doesn’t seem to know how to turn the lollipop at her lips into a phallus for the camera, clearly the end-goal of the

photographer who we see leaning over to get a close-up of her face. And perhaps the model doesn’t really want to. Awkwardness is also captured by Martin through her portrayal of the women not posing, but styling and shooting. The rumpled belly skin of the photographer in *Jodie as Lolita*, and the woman about to sneeze in the *After New Year’s* show us a much more realistic, unedited side of the women of the Virgin Club.

Perhaps for Martin, an examination of her peers provided her an opportunity to build an identity for herself, attempting to make sense of the environment from which she emerged. Standing before Martin’s images part of us might wonder, “Who are these people?” a question likely in the photographers mind, and by extension “Who am I?” This question may be ultimately what directs her camera and guides the way she frames her images.



Lip Gloss, from the series *Tennessee Virgins: Our Eighth Annual Photo Shoot*, 2002, 20x24 in., C-Print

Jessica Hough is curatorial director at *The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum*. Her recent exhibitions include: *Into My World: Recent British Sculpture*; *Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis*; and *Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration*. She earned her undergraduate degree from *Occidental College*, and her MA from the *Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College*.