



# Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

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## Sex Drive



**Sex Drive**, one of our new exhibitions that opened Oct 14, brings together photographs, drawings, paintings, videos, sculptures, and installations to shape a multi-voiced story about desire, power, and difference. The exhibition title suggests that sex has a momentum, a propulsive and attractive force. “Sex drive” is here understood as the compulsion to sex *and* the need to come to terms with one’s own identity, orientations, and affiliations through sex.

Recent socio-political events provide context for this exhibition, including President Barack Obama signing legislation that repeals “don’t ask, don’t tell,” the seventeen-year-old law barring gays and lesbians from openly serving in the U.S. military, New York state changing its laws to legalize gay marriage, and outrageous sexual scandals featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Anthony Weiner, Bishop Eddie Long, and others.

Even seemingly straightforward images and texts encountered in childhood cultivate and constrain our drives, and so it is not surprising to find artists mining the storybooks and comics of their youth. **Larry Jens Anderson**’s drawings acknowledge the moment when one realizes that words have multiple meanings. Anderson has often addressed issues of sexual orientation and identity politics in his work, using gender-coded colors, slang language, and seemingly benign imagery. **Steve Gianakos**’s painting *Schlong* is typical of the canvases and collages that make up his playfully vulgar oeuvre. For decades, the artist has wreaked havoc with ideas of innocence and propriety, showing prepubescent boys

and girls in ribald situations that seem perfectly natural to them but embarrassing or disturbing to viewers.

Drawing is often the medium of choice for artists who examine the erotic. **Lisa Alembik's** drawings from her *Meaterbation* series show men and women in the act of pleasuring themselves with various kinds of food. They speak to issues of obsession, loneliness, and potential violence. **Patricia Cronin's** candid watercolors offer cropped views of lesbian love-making seen from intimate angles. They bring to mind illustrations in classic guides to health and human sexuality including *The Joy of Sex* and *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*. Ion Birch's pencil drawings show alfresco orgies with clean cut teenagers wielding engorged phalluses and eager orifices. His work captures adolescent fantasies of sex without consequences, and situations where more might be merrier. **Leon Golub's** drawings in oil stick and ink are populated by lascivious women and satyrs on the prowl. They reveal a sardonic artist in his 80s, playfully examining power and mixing references to mythology and modernity. **Tracey Emin's** *Is This A Joke* is a large blanket that has an embroidered drawing of awkward figures having a violent sexual encounter. Like much of the artist's work, it speaks to issues of potency, vulnerability, and mortality.

Erotic art arouses us at various speeds and by utilizing distinct strategies of seduction. **Melanie Manchot's** video *Kiss* presents a teenage couple consumed in a ten-minute lip-lock, their intense focus making them oblivious to other passengers on a moving bus. **Lynn Cazabon** weaves together film stock from various pornographic sources (bought, found, and made) to create large photograms that pulse with saturated colors and crisscrossing elements. From a distance, they seem to be benign tartan fabrics, but upon closer inspection they reveal lustful acts and aroused body parts. **Leigh Ledare** has explored intimacy and Oedipal issues in photographs featuring his mother, Tina Peterson, shown pulling her panties down or reclining with boyfriends in various states of undress. His contribution to *Sex Drive* is his re-edit of a soft-core spanking film she attempted to make with family friends. The artist received the footage as a gift with instructions to "make something out of it." Ledare exploits expectations about family values and taboo, and his work has some of the shock value of surprising confessions made by public figures caught in sexual scandals. In her *Lucky Tiger* series, **Laurel Nakadate** is seen in erotic poses at various indoor and outdoor locations. Using Craigslist, she contacted anonymous middle-aged men and invited them to handle her photos with their inked fingers. Photographs by **Susan Silas** show the artist and her husband having sex for the camera. The works are a meditation on the realities of intimacy and aging, a topic not often addressed in mainstream culture. The artist is committed to prompting candid dialogue about the expectations and capacities of older women and men.

"Sex is the biggest nothing of all time," said Andy Warhol. Transforming oneself through make-up, dress, body sculpting, and role-playing are ways that we can test sexual identities and live out fantasies. **Christopher Makos** was a friend and collaborator of Andy Warhol, photographing him extensively for many years. His *Altered Image* shows the enigmatic Pop artist in drag, inspired by Man Ray's portrait of Marcel Duchamp dressed as his alter-ego Rose Sélavy. The men and women in **Forest McMullin's** *Day/Night* diptychs would most likely disagree with Warhol about sex. They are presented decidedly different poses, one image shows them dressed for work or public interactions, and the other has them sporting the outfits and brandishing the whips, chains, ball gags, and masks necessary to realize their private predilections. The photographs challenge notions of normalcy, power relationships, and what consenting adults are able to do in the privacy of their homes. **Wayne Koestenbaum's** paintings show male nudes reclining on couches or standing near glory holes. Their bodies express feelings of longing, loss, and satisfaction. These works are a new development for Koestenbaum, who is a distinguished poet and cultural critic whose writings address issues of masculinity, identity, and celebrity.

Governmental rules and religious orthodoxies regarding sex and love are cause for artistic engagement. **Mira Schor's** multi-paneled painting *War Frieze* incorporates images of breasts, penises, and veils, as well as language appropriated from political discourse. The phrase "area of denial," rendered in a hairy cursive script, references a particular land mine developed by the United States and sold to Iraq before the first Gulf War. "Area of denial," applied here to male and female forms, aptly describes the body as a battlefield. **Patricia Cronin**, inspired by 19th-century war memorials and mortuary sculpture and incensed by the prohibition of gay marriage in the United States, produced *Memorial To A Marriage*, a three-ton Carrera marble monument depicting Cronin and her partner (artist Deborah Kass), in a loving horizontal embrace. Installed at the

couple's plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, the piece remains on view through eternity, addressing the officialdom of love and loss. This summer, after New York state changed its laws, the couple were married. **Michael Patterson Carver's** drawings are filled with colorful figures protesting various injustices or celebrating shared values. They are shown holding home-made signs and smiling, gathered together in solidarity.

Public figures including politicians, athletes, movie stars, religious leaders, and teachers have consistently been embroiled in fascinating sexual narratives. With this in mind, artists **Vertna Bradley** and **Nancy VanDevender** created works for an earlier version of *Sex Drive* at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. Working in consort with Haverford's Humanities Center and members of a student-run seminar called Digital Fame, Bradley created a video compilation and VanDevender, a wallpaper design. Both feature accumulations of open-source images and information from the now familiar order of scandals in process: accusation, denial, evidence, apology, forgiveness, redemption.

*Sex Drive* asks us to consider the conventions that govern sexuality, as well as its unruly power. Though but one possible collection of artworks dealing with sex, this exhibition gets some satisfaction by examining a subject that is inextricably bound up with everyday life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Image: Patricia Cronin, *Memorial To A Marriage* (detail), 2004

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