

Porn made for women, by women

Independent female directors are making pornographic films aimed at women. Catalina May finds out what makes them so different



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'Fem porn' director Erika Lust at work

Anna Arrowsmith (aka [Anna Span](#)) has been a porn director for 12 years. This made her recent campaign as the Liberal Democrat candidate for Gravesham rather controversial. "Not my cup of tea", [said Nick Clegg](#) about her occupation. But what she has been doing is not mainstream [pornography](#), but independent porn made for women.

"I have fought long and hard for women's right to sexual expression and consumption, as well as for freedom of speech," [she wrote in the Observer](#). But Gail Dines, author of *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, [challenged her in the Guardian](#): "What are you doing that is different from what every other pornographer is doing?"

The best way to answer that question is probably by watching Arrowsmith's films. And not just hers. Because a number of women, tired of mainstream porn and tired of criticising it without offering an alternative, are making the porn films they want to watch.

These films don't include horny schoolgirls, naughty nurses, nymphomaniac nannies or desperate housewives. Nor do they include Mafiosi, multimillionaires drinking cognac, pimps, drug dealers or super-sized sex machines. Because these women, as filmmakers and consumers, place themselves far away from mainstream porn.

"It is a prejudice to say that women don't like porn," says Erika Lust, another fem porn director. "Sex images make you hot, but pornography has been made by and for men. In mainstream porn everything is about male pleasure and women are objects. Oral sex for men can last forever, but when women's turn comes it lasts 10 seconds. Female orgasms are not an issue in most of the films. And women are shown mostly as prostitutes, which is sad."

Lust has directed three porn films and written three sex books. [Her website explains](#): "We produce adult movies. We publish erotic books and magazines. Our works speak about sex, lust and passion. We enjoy exciting you and exciting your mind. We make love, not porn. And we do all this with a feminine, aesthetic and innovative approach."

After working for 10 years as a TV producer and director, [Petra Joy](#) has moved on to directing "art-core" films. She says: "Women have a lot of catching up to do. We had the sex toy revolution first - no more giant cucumbers but a gold-plated mini vibrator perfect for clit stimulation - and now the second wave is the porn revolution: porn that is made by and for women, that focuses on female pleasure and features male sex objects."

These directors are just three among many. Their films have different styles: Lust's are urban and modern, Joy's are visual and sensory and Arrowsmith's are a bit more hardcore. But there are similarities that show how this new branch of the porn industry works.

First of all, they are educated. Lust read political sciences at Lund University, Joy has a master's degree in film history at the University of Köln and Arrowsmith studied fine art at Central Saint Martins. They do this because they chose it, and not because they don't have other options. They are all independent producers and distribute their films mostly over the internet. They pay particular attention to aesthetics, music, locations, actors and stories. And most importantly, they think about what women need to enjoy porn.

Joy says: "Women enjoy seeing a curve of arousal and like to understand why these people are having sex and how they got turned on. Women want to see credible female performers, women of all sizes and looks who genuinely enjoy themselves rather than porn clones with fake nails, hairs and boobs faking it for the camera."

Lust adds: "To get excited women want to see something that looks like us. We want to see independent women exploring their sexuality, who are not afraid, but are not sex heroines either. We want to see attractive men who share our lifestyles, our ideas."

These directors make sure they only work with people who want to perform in erotic films, and that what you see is real pleasure. Lust says: "I want people with an open sexuality who want to work here. I don't want anybody doing this because they don't have another choice. During the shooting I want them to have good sex and it's my job to find the images. For me it is a tense moment, because things happen only once and it's a moment of hard work. Is not a party behind the camera."

In 2006, Alison Lee created the [Feminist Porn Awards](#), which this year takes place on 13-15 April in Toronto. She says: "We wanted to celebrate people who were making porn in a feminist way and help to expose them to a greater audience. For our sixth anniversary we are expecting lots of stars and a super-fun event. We are also hoping to have a stronger focus on websites and online porn than we have in the past."

Lust, Joy and Span have previously won awards in different categories. This year Lust is [nominated](#) for her last film, *Life, Love, Lust*, and Span for *Sex Experiments: Bisexual Scenes and Sex Interviews*.

These director's films are also featured on [Dusk!](#), the Dutch porn channel that since 2007 has broadcast fem porn 24/7 and is available to 1.2m viewers. Martijn Broersma says he started the channel with the aim of providing a service that nobody else was offering.

"Nowadays women talk more about their own [sexual] likes and dislikes," he said. "With this revolution in mind, it was logical that women needed their own erotic TV channel."

And while independent fem porn keeps growing, mainstream porn is in crisis. Patrick Kwasniewski specialised in gender and queer studies at the University of Klagenfurt and is currently researching his thesis on feminist porn. He says: "The development of this branch of the industry is profiting from the internet: the more direct ways to reach consumers, easier ways of self-distribution, having a more focused target and producing highly profiled films. Whilst the mainstream industry faces loss of profits through not changing their traditional ways of production or distribution and producing very repetitive films that have more and more troubles on the market, especially when there's so much for free on the internet."

Joy adds: "The industry is slowly waking up to the fact that it is not just VOD [Video on Demand] that caused the drop in porn DVD sales, but that even males are bored of films that always show the same performers in the same studios going through the same sexual positions in the same running order and looking bored whilst faking it. People are hungry for more authenticity, variety and joy."

Being part of this industry that refuses to change hasn't always been easy for female porn directors. Male members of the porn industry don't necessarily like their presence. Lust says: "Pornographers are usually middle-aged straight guys, with a similar cultural background. They don't like it when I say that I make porn for women. They say their porn is for everybody and I am the 'tight' one. But I just can't have an intellectual discussion with them, because they don't measure up. What I'm doing is criticising the kind of porn they have been making for years and offering an alternative."

There are no reliable figures on female porn audiences, but there are some academic studies that provide some information. Verena Chiara Kuckenberger is responsible for gender at the University of Graz, and she did a study on women's porn that included audience research.

She says: "Research suggests that women are not as interested in pornography as men are. But this assumption has to be seen in a broader context – there are certain scripts for male and female sexuality and one of these says that women don't find pleasure in looking as men do. But who looks and who gets looked at is a question of power as well. Historically the gaze is male, while women are objects that are being looked at.

"For women to admit to experiencing pleasure in watching pornography means overcoming stereotypes about female sexuality. There are women who do not want to consume pornography, but at the same time there is a potential female audience for porn and I would say it is bigger than it has been assumed so far and it is increasing as our society overcomes gendered stereotypes in general."

Keeping all this in mind, I asked Arrowsmith how she feels about the controversy about her work. She said: "I have received very good responses from the press, the readers and the general public. Now, I want to join together my political work and the work I do in the porn industry. I'm going to start campaigning for sex workers' rights and encouraging women to fight for what they deserve."

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