

Interview between art critic Jean Wainright and Jo Broughton
Talking about the series Empty Porn sets and Virgins Wanted.

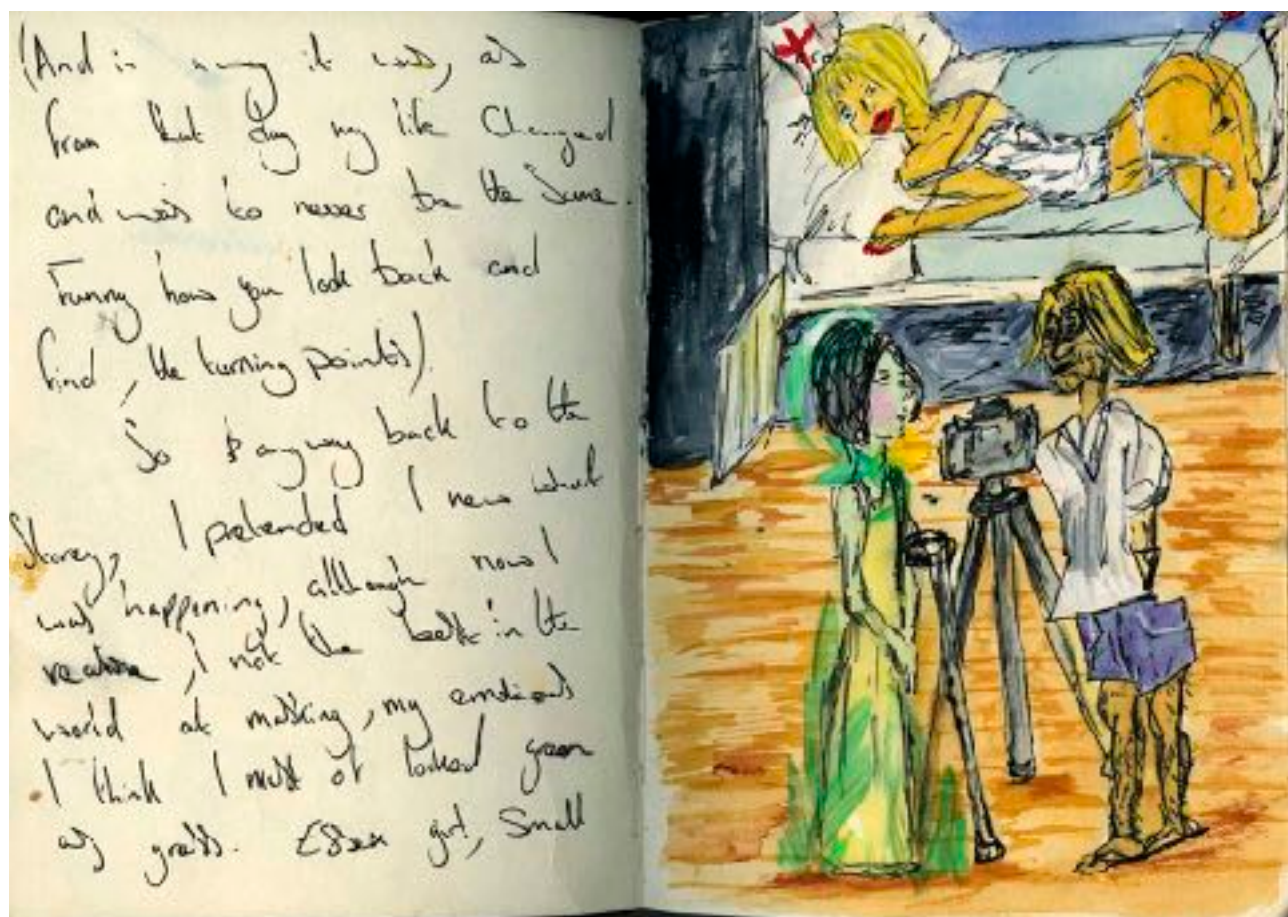
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JW talks to Jo Broughton

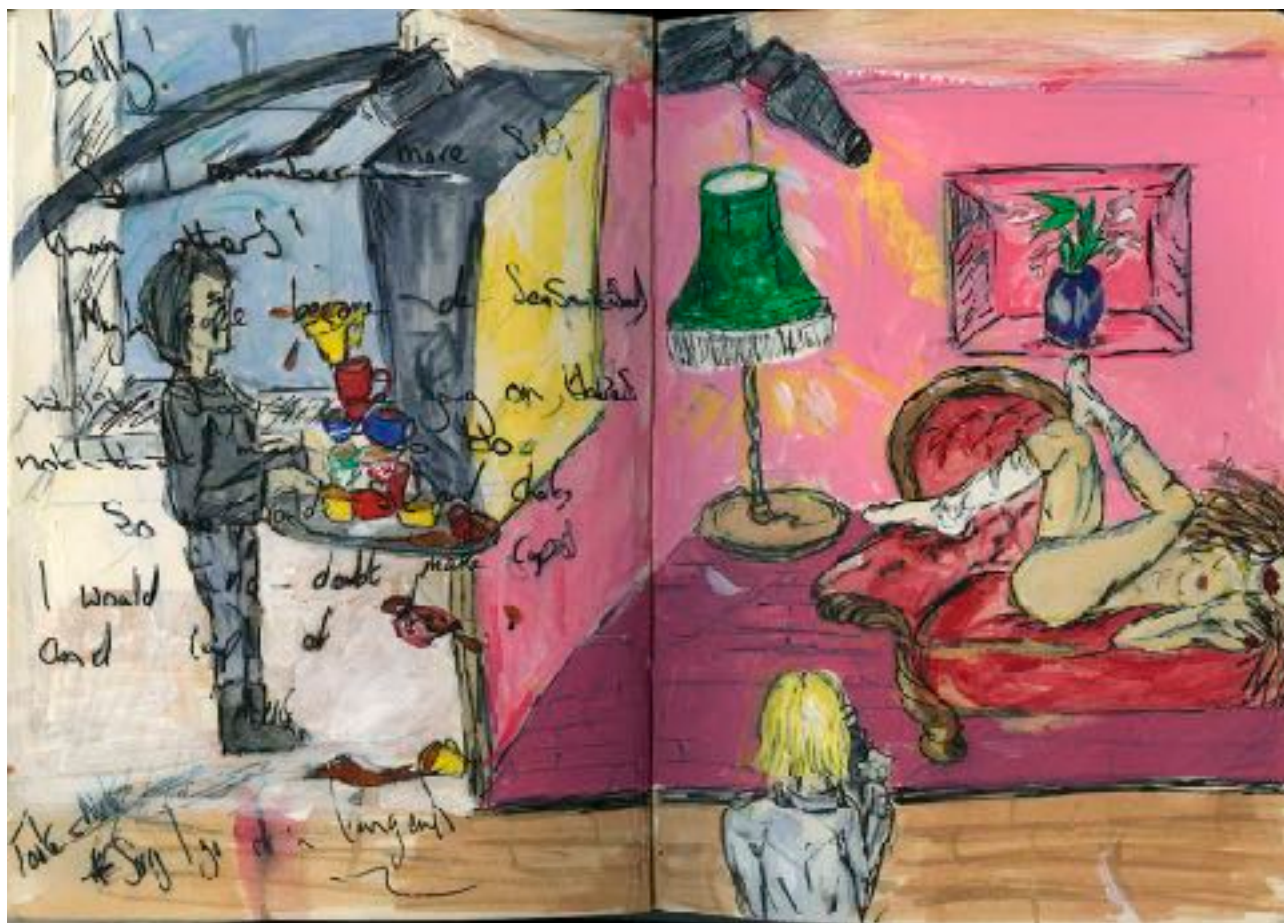
JW: I'd like to start by asking why porn sets?

JB: Well the subject kind of found me many years ago. I was doing a foundation art course in Thurrock, Essex and I was sent on work experience in London. I thought what I was being sent to was a glamorous fashion shoot when in actual fact I walked into a studio in Hoxton to a nurses set being set up and a girl walking out of a changing room wearing suspenders and stockings, the full monty kit. Quite an abrupt Yorkshireman approached me and asked if I'd ever seen a "fanny up front" and I squeaked "No" and he replied "Well today's your lucky day". I didn't just work for him as work experience for two weeks, I actually went on to drop out of college and work for him for two years, as his photographic assistant. I was known as "Jo student" which I'm still very much known there today by that name.

For a long time I had quite a problem with what was going on there, I was quite conflicted. I was green as grass; I'd never ever walked into something like that before. He actually wrote my reference for Kent Institute of Art and Design where I studied for my BA and I lied and said he was a portrait photographer so I got into my degree on a big fib, when I'd actually spent two years as a pornographic photographer. I suppose it always stayed with



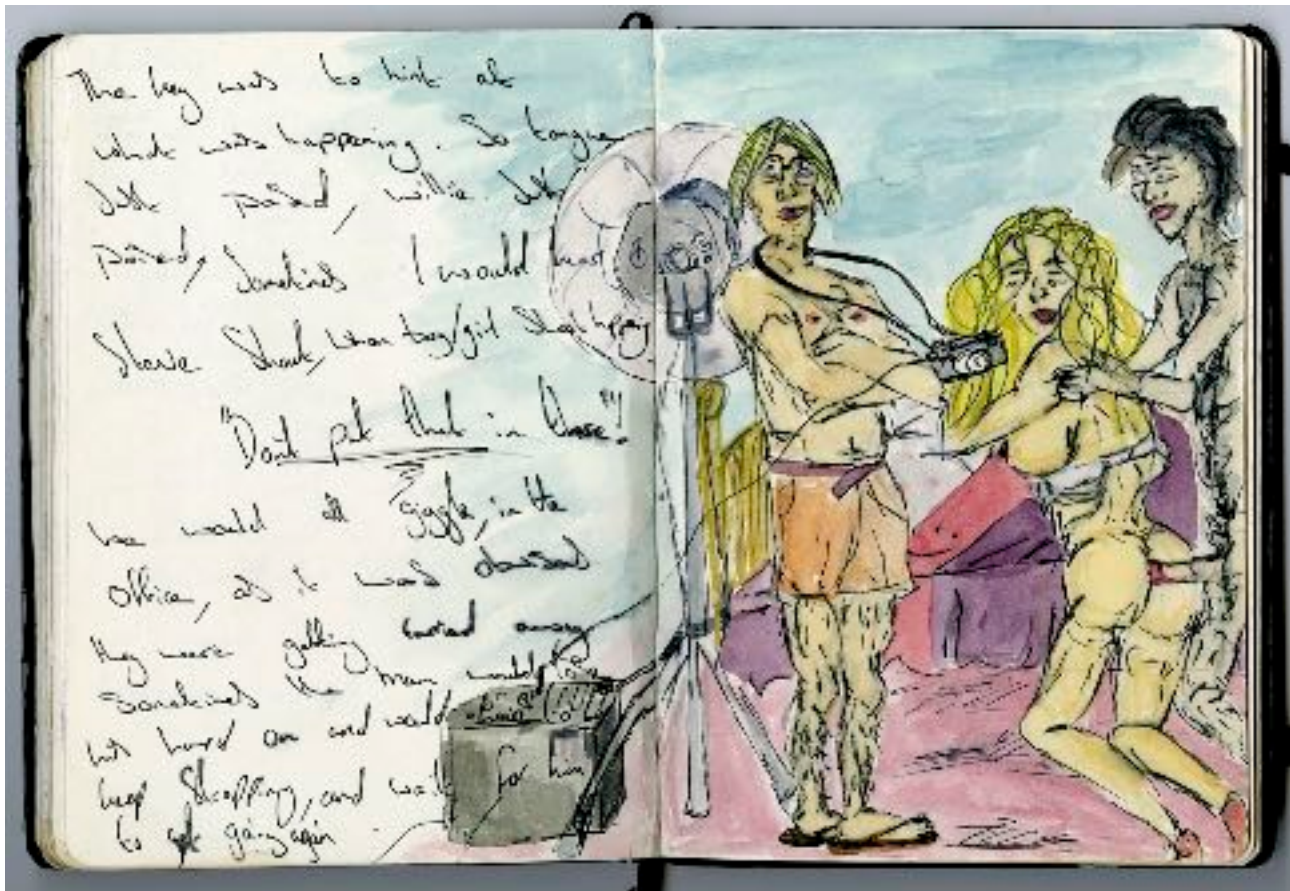
me and I always stayed in contact with him because I had this connection with someone who, at the time, had taken me in and taught me photography and shown me a side of life I'd never seen before. I suppose because I come from an odd-bod of a family, in a strange way it became my family. It was very contradictory in some respects to have this space where I was safe and had a connection to people that were "family" and yet it's perceived as very unsafe to other people: it's a safe industry because they work very safely but it isn't your desired environment, I wouldn't desire it for my child to work as a pornographic model. My conflicting emotions stayed with me and I hid it very well, where I'd been and what I'd been doing, for a long time.



JW: I'd like to ask – what was the job you were supposed to be doing in the first place? Was it photographer's assistant? What were these shoots?

JB: Well actually they were probably very much like the fashion shoots out there today, from David LaChapelle and many other fashion photographers, because you're talking about twenty years ago. I was seventeen; I'm in my thirties now. The rules of engagement, shall we say, on set were as follows. It had to be a flaccid penis and it couldn't enter the hole and if there were tongues the tongues couldn't touch. So I suppose my job was to paint the set, make lots and lots of tea and to sweep up. I was just the dogsbody, to put up the lights; always give Steve a "pop", meaning I'd have to dump the power on the light packs for him to do the light test. I had to put up the poly boards and all the normal stuff you do in a studio with the content of a sexual nature, which actually was very tame and quite tongue in cheek now. And it is very different now actually, going back to take pictures

and waiting whilst the shoots are going on, Its actually quite hard to see because there is penetration now, there's anal penetration with dildos and whatever. It's quite hard actually.



JW: This is really interesting because you couldn't leave the subject alone. You went back to shoot the porn sets with a medium format camera, with studio lights, these really interesting sets but emptied of people. You've given a graphic description of the acts that happened, but there are no acts in these shots. What was that decision about?

JB: That was another thing, another career in the porn industry. I left my degree and I went to live in the studio because I was in between homes, I'd graduated, I had no where to live, I couldn't go back to my parents' because of the family situation there so I actually went to live at the studio. So whilst I was working for the Observer Newspaper as the picture editors assistant, I went home to sleep on a porn set. So I was getting up in the mornings and sleeping on whatever set was left and then going to work. After a while I found somewhere to live but I started to take pictures of the studio, snap shots, I suppose that's where the whole thing started. I think also David La' Chappelle's work was coming out, artistic visual imagery was emerging so it wasn't seen as so evil, this subject. When I was working as an assistant we would get phone calls all day, somehow people had got hold of the studios number and they would scream obscenities down the phone and make threats. People were repelled and absolutely disgusted by the subject of porn; you just didn't mention that you worked in the porn industry. So in order not to be tainted by that brush, I didn't dare mention it when I was at The Observer because you just didn't know how people would take it, take what you did. I think by the time I got to the Royal College of Art

because I left the Observer and went to the RCA to do my MA, that's when attitudes really started to become more open to pornography, it almost became fashionable. It's funny because I remember Steve going "Oh my God, I'm fashionable" and Rankin phoned him up and asked to be in a Benny Hill fashion shoot with him chasing girls around because he knew Rankin, he used to play football with him in the park. Also, my friendship with Steve. I think the sets came about because I was discussing it with Steve. I always make work about experiences and what I've known but I'd never gone there with this pornographic experience because I was quite embarrassed for a time and just cautious the reaction of the outside world. Also, I was scared it would ruin my career if I did mention it because I wanted to be a photographic artist. So by the time I'd got to the Royal College of Art and made work I was still always visiting Steve once a week for an evening, and I became his cleaner. So I'd had these conflicting issues about these models seen as meat and I was doing all this feminist work and then I became Steve's cleaner every two weeks. I became this... I don't know how to describe it, this Igor character, cleaning up after someone. But also, I felt more humanistic towards the models, the industry and suddenly I started becoming more comfortable with it myself. I started to see this more human aspect because I'm seeing bodily fluids and I'm washing things and I'm in contact with almost what the untouchable is. You know, washing dildos and whatever, you're there, at that point. And suddenly I started to laugh and see the funny side of it and going in and putting the radio on and seeing the set week after week after week, it would change. It made me laugh because you see the set, there's so much work that goes into those sets and yet it's still the same subject; tits and arse.

JW: What do you mean so much work? In the construction, the painting?

JB: Yeah.



JW: We're looking now at the G.I. Jane set so what you can see are trees, sand bags...

JB: Camouflage nets, boxes and water bottles and the helmet, the bullets she had around her waist.

JW: So G.I. Jane would appear in this scenario, leave and then you would photograph the set?

JB: Yes.

JW: Can we also talk structure? Because you let the audience see the set, and then see that it is not real, which is an important point about the work.



JB: Yeah it's almost like I'm letting the audience in to see what I saw and also to take the power out of it almost. It is to say this is false, which I suppose pornography is, it's false. I like the fact that there's a brick holding up the poly-board that reflects the light, the

ambiance coming in, the floor boards coming in. For me it's really important to have those elements, also it shows humanistic elements of imperfections. Because in the magazines that its published in that would all be cut off and straightened and it would all be very glossy, so that was important. Also, I wanted to show the space I had this relationship with, that was important to me as well. This space doesn't really know what's going on, a table doesn't know it's a table, a porn set doesn't know it's a porn set and that's almost what I was trying to do.

JW: I wanted to talk about this idea of seductiveness in the work. We're looking now at various images that have luscious pinks, silk sheets, a pink tablecloth, a decorative Christmas tree, the shadows on the wall; it's all very seductive and lovely and belies what has happened in this space. Can we talk about the way you've photographed that, the way you've shown the light flooding the spaces and picking out all these different sensual fabrics?

JB: The sensual fabrics and the props are put there by the photographer but I kind of wait... For them they shoot it with the blinds down so you have no ambient input whereas for me it's really important that the ambient light comes in. Otherwise I'm using Steve's lighting and it's just me recording something. But I always wait for the ambient to hit. I think that's part of my recapturing the love of the studio, coming home to the studio after a days work in the summer after I graduated and living at the studio, I would always see the



ambient light hit certain points of the studio and bring it alive in a different way. I have kind

of always kept that feel, that vibe, that tension in and wanting light and the shadows to be in is also my personal interaction with the space. Also, not what many people get to see the sets properly because even the models are in and out, it's a job for them, they're not looking at the set particularly they just do the job then they get out. So I kind of get this still, chaotic space, I walk into that.



JW: What's also interesting is the signs of activity left in the space, it's very subtle. Can we talk a little bit about that? What would you have not photographed? Would you have removed anything? Changed anything apart from the lighting? Or are these a real representation of when the people walk off set and leave it?

JB: Yeah they just fling their clothes off and leave them in heaps and the lubrication is always in the corner, not far away. I have to get to it before the staff that work at the studio because they normally try and clean it up and I just run to try and get there before they get their hands on it. Yeah, there's a kind of fight between us because they're still worried about what people will see and I suppose I'm worried about what people won't see. But no, there's nothing I'd edit out.

JW: You talk about a twenty year period and that's a long time. You say the acts have changed, have the sets changed? Obviously there are stereotypes that will re-occur but have you noticed new ones creeping in? New genres of sets?

JB: Yes, definitely. You can tell the difference between an eighties and a nineties set. The eighties was very glamorous, as were the fashions. The colours were pastels, so you'd



have a lot of pastel sets. The nineties was deeper colours, and now in the noughties or twenty first century its deeper, darker, vibrant colours, a lot of pinks and colours like that.

JW: Has there been a shift to make them consciously more arty?

JB: No. With digital actually there's been less of a shift and it's quite a fight to keep the quality control on there. Steve turned to digital which kind of changed the lighting set up, only last year. The Christmas one is shot digitally – it's used with gels so it's quite uneven lighting whereas the satin shoots picture is very vibrant, bold colours. It's painted and everything has to be boldly done.

JW: So what kind of act would happen in this room we're looking in? Does it have a name?

JB: I called it Pink Satin Shoot. Probably more glamorous than Down and Dirty. Probably one girl basically pulling her clothes off and do it yourself masturbation.

JW: And these would be filmed?

JB: Filmed and photographed. Normally Steve does still photographs for magazines and then at the end he will do a ten minute film.



JW: What were the most unusual sets you saw?

JB: Definitely the G.I. Jane. I just thought it was quite funny and also quite classic because it's commenting on what's going on now in Iraq, not that it means to but this sex and war and the society we're in. I think they're able to have quite a lot of fun, these people and are able to take the Mickey. The nurses set I think is great, its sort of a Carry On genre. Britain has the history of the Carry On films and it has elements of that in the set and in the shoots I would imagine.

Lots of putting the thermometer in different places that I'd never seen before that was quite imaginative. Some of them I just named myself; Messy Bed is messy bed, it's just a set with a messy bed but it's pink and quite beautiful and I think this was the template of the rest of the series. Before that I did shoot on 120 for quite along time and I spent ages trying to construct this work and it wasn't until I started using 5x4 and did this series that it started to work.

JW: Why was that?

JB: Just the feel of the camera. I think it made the work mine more; it put my own personality on to these places whereas before when I was using 120 it's very much just recording what's there. So once I started having rules like I have to have ambient and my own lighting involved with the photographers lighting – it had to be my own stamp in a way so that's why. And they become a lot slower and must more stilled and the feel just became me, instead of what they were. They look a lot different actually from when they're shot by Steve to when they're shot by me because he's using it for a different purpose.. At times we've both shot the same thing to see what it'll look like, it's quite funny. I think that's what happened to us really, it just became more about my own journey with the space, with Steve the photographer, how he's been such a huge part of my life for so long.

JW: You made a decision to use sound for some of your exhibitions of this work. Originally they weren't with sound and they weren't installations and now they are or they can be. Can we talk about the shift from the two dimensional to the three dimensional which far more represents the space?

JB: Yeah. For me that was important as well because Steve is such a big part of this work and it felt like something was missing or lacking to not have Steve in the work so I asked him if I could do some work with him and he said "You can only use my voice". His voice is very Yorkshire, very dark, very... him. Everyone knows Steve, how he bellows. People that know Steve have a story... Steve is renowned for having the worst telephone manner in



this world. I wanted to be able to discuss what goes on there when I'm not there, that was important to have that commented or put in and I didn't want to make it up so I recorded the sound and it's surround sound so you can feel the impact of being on set. One of the recordings is actually me on set and Steve telling me to move in a certain way. We did it to work out the timeline but we ended up putting it in. I felt like I had to go through the same



process, you shouldn't show what you're not willing to show yourself. I've always had that belief. It's hilarious because I'm dyslexic and dyspraxic and by the end he's shouting at me "No! Left!" and he gets really agitated because I don't know my left and right so it drives him nuts. So that was also an important part of the work of why I had it there.

JW: In your work you often work in long gestation periods of series. I'm thinking particularly of your series of Virgins and Porn sets, which you were sometimes shooting concurrently, interestingly enough, because of the subject matter. Can we talk a bit about this time and duration, these long projects? Is it just because you just can't let go of the subject matter? Is it because it's so engaging you want to carry on with it?

JB: Umm, sort of. I think it's also because I take on quite hard projects when I'm not in control I'm actually at the mercy of the subject. For example, I was making this along the same time as Virgins, the same time as the Pete Doherty work. It's like when I couldn't do one, instead of sitting waiting until I could do it I had them all coinciding together. It was interesting because some of them would come together and it would drive me nuts because I'd have to run to the studio and do the shoot and then run to the Doherty house in Whitechapel and shoot stuff that was going on there and then I might get a virgin turn up the week later. Some I was really harassed during them and others it slotted in quite well. I would only work on one for a while and then I'd work on the other. That's because Steve goes to work in a studio in Prague for two weeks a month and also it's always important for me - I suppose it's because of my training at Kent (UCA) – that there's an element of documentary involved in my work. It has to be real Virgins, it has to be real ex-boyfriends/ girlfriends, it has to be real empty porn sets, it has to be real people in real situations.....So for me that's why I have these long projects. Also this took so long because I was so

conflicted by the project and how would you put into words where you've come from, what you've hidden. I almost ran away to this place so how do you discuss this subject out loud now. My mother was quite traumatized when she realised that since the age of seventeen I was working for a porn photographer. But I'd left home by that point so... I suppose that's why the projects went on so long. This one (The Empty Porn Sets) especially. I planned to show this as my final show at the Royal College and I was struggling with the work so much and it just wasn't ready. I left it there and went on to the 'Virgins' because I didn't want to show the porn work at that time.

JW: What is also interesting is this dialogue between portraiture, sets and absence because in all your work there's always this enigma. In The Virgins, we see virgins, we don't know if they are or not, we look at them and make assumptions. In Empty Porn Sets we're making assumptions from the traces. You often like to leave your audience space to negotiate through your images.

JB: Yes, because then the audience gets a chance to put themselves in the picture, or put themselves in the character of being a virgin. It makes them think about what it was like for them being a virgin. The porn sets are shot so that the viewer can put themselves on set, they can put themselves in the picture, they can imagine themselves doing these things. I think that's why I make it inviting because at the end of the day these women, these men, these people are just showing flesh and it's quite silly after a while, first of all you're shocked like (gasps) "they've got no clothes on", then you're like "Oh my God, they're showing their genitalia" and then it's just quite daft after a while. You see it week in and



week out and you think “and people buy this, they want this?” and I suppose Virgins and pornography one screams absence and one screams no intimacy, it’s a kind of similar feel, it’s cold. Absence I think is warmer than this aggressive showing of sexuality.

JW: The images are very large now. Can we talk about scale? You made increasingly larger works.

JB: That’s because I wanted the beds to be life-size so that people could put themselves on the bed, they could step in. They could hear the sound on the surround sound that goes round them and could feel people almost walking around them, so that they’re the oddity with their clothes on standing looking at the work. So you’ve got people talking in the corners, all over the place and they’re standing in the room with their clothes on and it’s as if the action is just going on around them.

JW: What do you think has shifted with cable and having access to more sexual programmes on a daily basis, which very different from 20 years ago? That’s changed how we regard pornography as we are exposed to it more than we would have been. Has that made you push your work into pareing it down and at the same time bringing the stresses and strains, bringing the voice back into it?

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JB: Yes, in a way because I’ve watched them. They were from a very strong position. I mean pornography photographers were the only ones not to go out of business in the 80s when everyone else was struggling they were making lots of money. Maybe people needed more of a release them, I don’t know. So you’ve got this... The still is almost being buried under the internet underneath cable telly, because there’s almost more interaction for people to have than just flicking through a magazine. I think magazines have a certain amount of intimacy, they can take it to the bed almost, they can hide it under their bed. You know there is that myth of the boy growing up hiding magazines under his bed, the mum finds it... Now they’re watching it on the internet, they’re downloading it on their phones; they’re running around the playground. So I suppose by distilling them and making them vibrant making big pieces it’s almost trying to put this stop – not a stop on what’s happening because you can’t – but a stop to take stock. This is what it was and it’s changed. This is where it is, it was. Actually the studio closed last week, very sad. But it felt good it closed because although I had this 20 year relationship with a place it felt good to kind of move on, to resolve this work. I think apart from doing lots of different sets with different themes, there’s not a lot of room to go with this work anymore. Also, it says lot, video, internet, that’s the fast forward of pornography, and that’s something I don’t have experience in, and I don’t particularly want experience in. So I think I’m fine to leave it where it’s at and leave it as ‘this was my experience growing up’ and leave it at that.

JW: I’d like to talk about the themes, which we touched on – for example Christmas is usually your stereotypical tree, reindeer that sort of thing, or children and families. You don’t usually associate porn with Christmas.



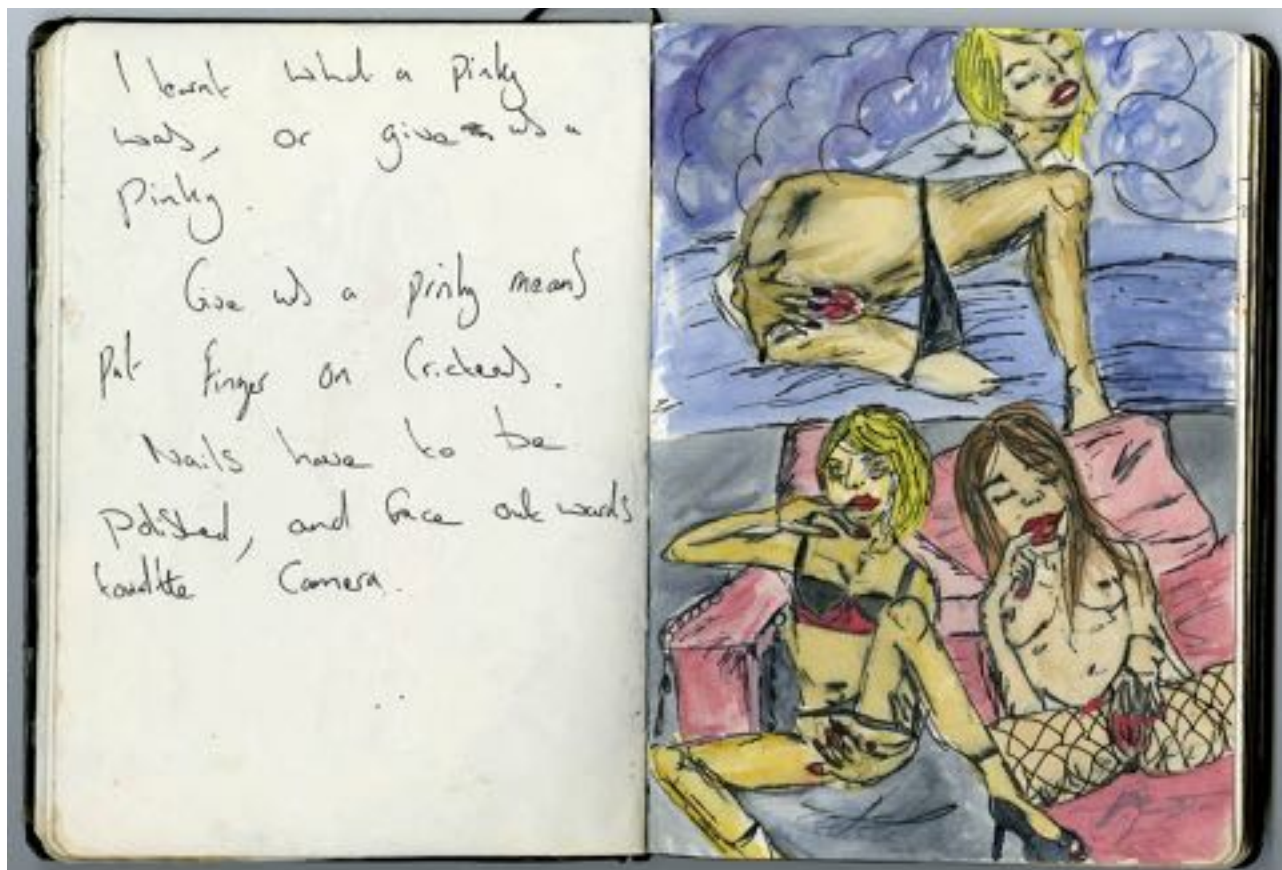
JB: No, they always have to do a special Christmas set which is usually shot in July so it's always fun to do Christmas, I always go "Oh my God is it Christmas already!" when I turn up to see the Christmas set. Normally the brief is that the girl opens the presents, gets over excited and masturbates with them slowly under the Christmas tree and flings her clothes off everywhere. Or it might be a girl/boy set which is girl and boy or it might be a foot fetish, she gets some shoes and rolls the stocking up and down and up and down and does things there. So it's Christmas with extras is the theme they do each year.

JW: I think the other thing that works very well with these images – and I stress again these lovely tonal variety you have, the saturated colour – is the fact that the viewer can make up what's happening in the space if they wish. Or they can leave the space empty if they wish because it is an empty space, or they can fill it with their imagination. So you're playing a dual game here Jo, you're saying well, I'm being a woman artist dealing with the subject area. But then on the other hand you're saying let's stop there, I'm not actually showing anything. Did you ever have any anxieties about this subject matter?

JB: Oh, loads. Horrendous amounts. I felt appalled for the women when I first started working for Steve. And you hear a lot of stories actually. Funnily enough, it's quite political because you do get a lot of students who work as porn models, especially at the point when I first started working there as I said it was seen as a very bad in society, pornography. Like, you were almost a prostitute if you were a porn model. One student had gone to a ball, she was one of the models, and someone had seen her picture in one

of the magazines and spread them all over the hall of the ball. You can just imagine this 'Carrie' scene of this girl walking into her ball at graduation and there's pictures slapped up of her carrying out sexually explicit acts everywhere. I think we all winced at that.

JW: So she'd decided to take that on and embrace the porn industry.



JB: No, I think she carried on for a little while longer. People like Jo Guest who Steve kind of created because she met him when she first started her career and was in the video for Parklife for Blur and was in magazines such as Loaded and was a little celebrity, she definitely embraced the whole thing. But then there's stories of her being quite lonely and not having boyfriends and stuff like that, you do hear of causalities within the industry. It was hard to watch sometimes and you felt for them. And then you'd see the models screaming with laughter at how silly one could be to buy these magazines or to want to buy these magazines... One minute they're asking for their bacon sandwich and a fag and the next they're doing a pink, which is putting their fingers on their clitoris and spreading their legs. The contradictions were all over the show. Also, yes I do come from this feminist background, for some reason, and did a lot of work on the body and I think that's what I did actually, because I didn't start doing that work until I worked with the porn photographer. I think it also affected me physically; these models are size 10, they're beautiful, they're perfect bodies and I actually felt quite inadequate. When you're around them days after day you start to judge yourself and feel quite inadequate as a woman because these bodies are stunning. I think a lot of us felt that way, the set designer, who was a woman... You don't mean it to but it just gets to after day after day seeing it. So I think that's where the work real women came from. Actually porn was good in some ways because it made me realise there's someone out there for everyone and the most beautiful person will not be a turn on for that person because actually they've got a foot fetish, or they like hair, you

just don't quite know. You just think there's got to be somebody out there for me because all these quirks can't go missing.



JW: Which brings us very neatly to 'Ex-boyfriends/girlfriends'. Also shot in the same space.



JB: Yeah because I've produced a lot of the work in the same studio since graduating and living there and going to the Royal College. I had studios at the Royal College that I could have used but for some reason I felt more comfortable working from the studio, so yes, I did go to the subjects home, my ex-boyfriend's girlfriends and researched and traced all my ex-boyfriend's girlfriends and then rung all the ex-boyfriends up and asked if I could photograph my successors. I got quite weird looks from people and comments but actually some of them agreed.

JW: Were you surprised sometimes?

JB: I suppose from working with this industry I became much more comfortable working in this way, this subject, actually getting down to the nitty-gritty of things. I actually wanted the boyfriends to present them only as the boyfriend would see them and I almost said to them "look in the lens as though you're asking your boyfriend to fuck you". I suppose it did break down the barriers for me, I asked the girlfriends to wear their underwear and night clothes to seduce their boyfriend and to look in the camera as only the boyfriends would see them. So they're all on these satin sheets bed, which was off a porn set, so I used some of the bedding from the porn sets to make up these beds of silk satin sheets. Again, I wanted it to be very inviting and seductive and beautiful and sexy. It had to be sexy. I made it very simple lighting. You can't tell them they're coming to a porn studio until they quite got there because... I had to reassure them and hide all the dildos and stuff. But they were like "why are there all these beds here?" So I had to reassure them that I wasn't going to make them do a porn shoot. So that was quite hard, but I think it did add to the shoot themselves



because it was like a little oasis of a place where you shut the doors and you could get very intimate in the space. This space was created for intimacy. So I suppose it did affect the models, did affect me, did affect the work, without me meaning to.

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