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Vanilla Sex:
Explicit Fine Art Photographs

Michael A. Rosen

with an introduction by A. D. Coleman

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for Lucile

Vanilla Is as Vanilla Does: The Sexual Art of Michael Rosen

by A. D. Coleman

Picture this:

Adults of all ages, sizes, shapes, ethnicities, genders, and gender persuasions come voluntarily and indeed eagerly to a photographer's studio, singly, in couples, or in small groups, in order to present themselves to his lens either naked or in apparel of their own choosing. He offers these fellow citizens—"real people, not professional models," in his words—the most elementary proscenium, a bare and featureless stage with the option of a few generic pieces of furniture, on which to perform their sexuality. No props or costumes or adornments save those they provide for themselves. He commits himself to describing them and their behavior in as empathetic, value-free, and nonjudgmental a way as his personality and the technology he employs and their shared sociopolitical context will allow.

No camera, no photograph functions as a neutral artifact, of course. Photography as a technology has embedded within it a host of cultural assumptions, ranging from renaissance perspective to the importance of physical records and

the preserving of the past. And the photographer's presence as an observer, along with the presence of his camera, inevitably "perturb" the event, to use a term from physics. Inevitably, these affect the participants in the situations in numerous ways, most of them subliminal; yet certainly we must consider them as part of the image's context. ("[S]ometimes," as Anthony Hyde wrote, "the most important person in a photograph is the one you can't see."¹)

But this photographer employs no peculiar social affectations or directorial instructions to conform the performances of his actors to his own preferences. And he imposes no distinctive visual mannerisms on his imagery to spice up his responses to his subjects or demonstrate a "signature" style: no special lenses or filters or films, no unusual lighting, no idiosyncratic developing and printing strategies.² He resolves his images in black & white because it removes the distraction that color as information can generate, and because the results abstract the people and actions he portrays, putting his

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1. Hyde, Anthony, *Formosa Straits* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 159.
 2. In some of his prints Rosen vignettes the central event, darkening the edges of the print (especially the corners) to create a keyhole effect

that concentrates the viewer's attention on the middle of the frame. And he does at times adopt an aerial perspective to give himself, and the viewers of his images, a bird's-eye view of the events before his lens.

descriptions of them at one more remove from the original moment, making them that much easier to contemplate and absorb.³ A considered strategic decision, made because all of what he and his protagonists have to show us will be shocking to some people, while some of what he shows us may startle even those more experienced in these matters.

And what does the photographer—whose name is Michael Rosen—choose to call the results? *Vanilla Sex*.

According to a July 2005 poll taken by *CNN/Money*, vanilla stands as the favorite ice cream flavor of almost exactly one-third of Americans.⁴ Historically, it has polled consistently in first place, preferred by almost three times as many people as the nearest contender, chocolate.⁵ Vanilla ice cream is what they serve on airplanes, in hospitals, in prisons, and at other locales for captive consumers without the privilege of

choice, on the theory that nobody—or at least hardly anyone—actively doesn't like vanilla, even if it's not their personal favorite.

Colloquially, like its baking equivalent, “white bread,” the term *vanilla* has therefore come to connote the predictable, the blandly conventional, and thus (implicitly) the boring, with vanilla in this usage applied most commonly to standard western sexual behavior.⁶ Notably, neither term has a flavor-based opposite in Anglo-American slang—no “whole-grain” or “rocky road” to indicate the preference of those with more sophisticated tastes. As with both foodstuffs, once you move past the limits implicit in either white bread⁷ or vanilla then connoisseurship kicks in, and the range of options becomes both exhilarating and bewildering.

Suppose, however, that we redefine “vanilla,” using it to stand not for that

3. A technical note: Though grounded in traditional analog photography—which some refer to as “wet” or “chemical” photography—Rosen, who lives and works in the Bay Area, has donated all of his darkroom equipment to the San Francisco Art Institute. He now works entirely digitally, because “There’s so much power and possible control over the result.” The digital images begin in his digital camera as full-color files that he then converts to grayscale. He even prints digitally nowadays, although, paradoxically, he chooses as his digital output archival carbon pigment ink on high-quality coated cotton rag paper—a 21st-century descendant of the 19th-century carbon-printing process. He names the results “carbon pigment prints” and advises, “They will last longer than traditional gelatin-silver photographic prints.”

4. See Gordon T. Anderson, “America’s favorite ice cream,” *CNN/Money*, July 29, 2005, http://money.cnn.com/2005/07/25/pf/goodlife/summer_ice_cream/. This figure combines the responses

to both “vanilla” and “French vanilla.”

5. This figure, from the same source, combines both “chocolate” and “chocolate chip.”

6. For anyone seeking a truly romantic, affectional association with vanilla, I recommend Joan Micklin Silver’s film *Crossing Delancy* (1988), in which a Lower East Side pickle salesman (Peter Riegert) woos an uptown bookstore clerk (Amy Irving). Riegert’s practice of washing his hands in vanilla after work to get rid of the smell of brine plays a small but crucial role in the courtship.

7. The term’s pejorative usage derives from the packaged, pre-sliced, mass-produced, almost flavorless Wonder Bread-type supermarket product that began to replace home-baked or locally made breads in the U.S. and U.K. circa 1930. On a personal note, the very best bread I’ve eaten in my life came in round loaves of white bread baked in wood-fired ovens somewhere in the countryside outside the town of Vevey, Switzerland and sold in the local greenmarket between 2002 and 2004.

specific flavor but for a given individual's favorite variety of ice cream, his or her usual selection, whatever that might be, making it metaphorical in a different way. Thus pistachio might be *your* vanilla, and coffee would be *my* vanilla, and every conceivable flavor would be someone's vanilla. Under such circumstances the vanillin derived from seeds from the ripened pod of *Vanilla planifolia*, a plant originating in the Latin American tropics, would become just another of many vanillas, perhaps the *Ur-vanilla*, but the term would lose its onus. At the same time, the normalcy—and thus the acceptability—of all those other “vanillas” would assert itself.

That idea would seem to underlie Michael Rosen's decision to title this collection of images *Vanilla Sex*. Some of the sexual behaviors enacted by his subjects do fall within the parameters of “vanilla sex”; people here fondle, cuddle, hug, kiss, and adopt the missionary position, among other things. But the very act of doing those in front of a camera, to generate images that thousands of strangers around the world will view, remains inherently non-“vanilla” in terms of societal standards. And, on top of that, most of these activities unmistakably go beyond “vanilla,” into some comparatively rare and exotic range of tastes that often get lumped under the headings of “radical” or “alternative” sexuality: BDSM, urolagnia/“water sports,” group sex, GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual,

transgender) sexual play.

Yet we live in an era when more sexual minorities have uncloseted themselves than ever before, tattooing and piercing have become pervasive, BDSM accoutrements have turned into commonplace fashion accessories, and urine therapy has practically gone mainstream. So positioning such practices as rare and exotic may lead us to overlook the fact that these behaviors have steadily moved from underground to cultural front and center. We can trace this shift in part to an ever-larger cohort of picture-makers producing what David Steinberg calls “sexual photography,”⁸ of which Rosen is a charter member. (The full list would have to include Gilles Berquet, Barbara Nitke, Tony Ward, Annie Sprinkle, Mark I. Chester, Timothy Archibald, and many, many more.)⁹

Rosen, then, intends several things with his title. It comes loaded with wit and irony, but has as its goal the inclusion within the definition of the acceptable of the full range of “consensual, safe and sane” adult human sexual behavior. His purpose, then (and that of his collaborative subjects) is normative. That energy has underpinned all of Rosen's work over the years, but he has never made it more explicit than he does here. Rosen confirms this in a statement he first issued in the wall label for a 2005 exhibition of these images and repeats in this book: “For me, ‘vanilla’ means the spectrum of our community's sexuality; what we normally do. . . . The

8. See Steinberg, David, ed., *Photo Sex: Fine Art Sexual Photography Comes of Age* (San Francisco: Down There Press, 2003).

9. For more on this phenomenon, see my introduction to David Steinberg's anthology *Photo Sex* (op. cit.).

53 photographs are soft and romantic images of explicit sex that challenge the banality of pornography.”¹⁰

Sex comes in many flavors. Some of those we might consider psychological and emotional, and speak of metaphorically, as in announcing that one has a taste for bondage or an appetite for pain. Others are the literal, sensory experiences that one body offers to another, both natural and enhanced.

Consider, for example, the image that Rosen has selected to lead off this suite. It depicts a crouched woman, naked save for shoes and a gas mask, pouring (quite neatly, I might add) from her depilated vagina a wineglass full of urine. Clearly ritualized (like much of what happens in Rosen’s images), this performance suggests a slave under the direction of her Master or Mistress. That dynamic has its own metaphorical flavors, as you might imagine and as anyone who’s tried it would attest. But in this specific case it has literal flavors also, gustatory and olfactory consequences, implicit here but foregrounded. Will someone drink what this submissive has distilled and served up? If so, who—she herself, upon command, her Dominant, both of them? Will she be allowed to dry and clean herself, or will she be required to perfume the air with the fragrance of what she has expelled, and to carry its scent on her body? Will her owner taste

the distillery as well?¹¹

Small wonder, then that so many of the participants in Rosen’s images seem preoccupied with smelling and tasting each other and themselves. Pleasures like these, viewed collectively, comprise an elaborate epicureanism in relation to sex that increasingly reaches across religious background, educational status, race, and even class in global secular society. The pursuit of what vanguard artist Robert Delford Brown has termed “the wanton ravishment of one’s sensorium” has an ever-widening circle of devotees. And sex functions as a logical locus for this sensory exploration.

In the middle 1990s Rosen hypothesized that such specialized and sophisticated variations on basic sexuality should not get classified simply or primarily as “transgressive,” defiant, or merely outré. Instead, he proposed, they could represent early evidence of something much deeper and more Darwinian, a genuinely evolutionary tendency in human beings, the forward motion of the species past sex-as-reproduction to sex-as-play.¹² An intriguing thought experiment, whose implications boggle the mind—hinting as they do that, when looking at these photographs, those who find them appalling or incomprehensible might stand in the same relation to their protagonists and author as a Cro-Magnon

10. For those bean-counters who may read this, five of what Rosen refers to as “photographs” are actually clusters of 4 images, each a variant study of the same subjects or subjects. So, technically speaking, this suite contains 68 images.

11. David Glenn Rinehart used the evocative term “aromatic” to describe an earlier set of images

in his introduction to Rosen’s book *Lust & Romance: Rated X Fine Art Photographs* (San Francisco: Last Gasp of SF, 1998).

12. Introduction, *Sexual Art: Photographs That Test the Limits* (San Francisco: Shaynew Press, 1994).

tribe watching the first Homo sapiens go about their business.

Rosen once expressed his admiration for Irving Penn's quasi-anthropological project *Worlds in a Small Room*,¹³ and wrote, in describing his own portraiture project, "Think of this as a travel book. I've visited a place to which few have access, where the culture is very different from mainstream America. I've made photographs there and brought them back to you."¹⁴ There you have the core of the gift that photographers of all periods and nations have given to the world: permission to look. Permission even to stare. "Stare," Walker Evans recommended. "It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long." All of us can benefit from that wisdom, and Rosen's images invite us to take Evans's advice in relation to a subject from which far too many people still instinctively shield their eyes.

"We fear what we do not know," Rosen reminds us in his introduction to a previous collection of his work.¹⁵ It would surprise me if, once you've familiarized yourself with the images in this book, you haven't learned something you didn't

know before. Which might enable you to release a bit of fear, and replace it with some of the diverse joys on display here, in this generous visual menu of erotic options.

Indeed, if you follow Rosen's lead you might just look at *vanilla* itself with new eyes, tasting it anew, relishing it, recovering the sensory delight it provides and the startling new sensations it offered first to those who cultivated it in its native lands and then to the foreigners who encountered it there millennia later. As one poet wrote on that subject:

Knowing Beans

He made her wear them
all day tucked inside
 white silk, smooth velvet—
 thin, hard, fragrant, brown;
slightly rasping, they
slid down to gather
 dampness, flavoring
 slick heat, nestled there
till after dinner:
ready at last, brandy
 by the fire, savor
 of vanilla sex.¹⁶

13. See Penn, Irving, *Worlds in a Small Room* (New York: Grossman, 1974). Penn traveled around the world setting up a small tent and posing therein costumed members of many of the last remaining "primitive" and aboriginal peoples.

14. Introduction, *Sexual Portraits: Photographs of Radical Sexuality* (San Francisco: Shaynew Press, 1990). In the 17 years between Rosen's writing those words and the present we have witnessed dramatically increased visibility and social acceptance of what then constituted "radical

sexuality," and a considerable expansion of the population that pursues such practices.

15. Introduction, *Sexual Art*, loc. cit.

16. The poet in this case is myself, writing under my full name, Allan Douglass Coleman. This poem was published in *Porcupine Literary Arts Journal*, 2006.

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Foreword

by Michael A. Rosen

This PDF is a reprise of a 2005 show at the Center for Sex & Culture in San Francisco. It's my latest and best work. For me, "vanilla" means the spectrum of our community's sexuality; what we normally do. So, some photographs are of acts generally considered normal and standard (missionary position sex, for example), while others are of acts considered normal and standard only within the radical sex community.

The 53 photographs are soft and romantic images of explicit sex that challenge the banality of pornography.

What's Free, and Why, and What's For Sale

First, what is it that I'm giving away? The pictures all have a visible copyright notice. The license agreement allows printing the pictures, but forbids the removal of the copyright notice. So think of this as an advertisement for myself and my work. For me, publication has always been about putting my point of view out in the world in the most effective manner. Last century, I chose printed books for sale; so far this century I choose a free PDF.

All *Vanilla Sex* images are for sale as modern carbon pigment prints—archival carbon pigment ink on 100 percent cotton rag paper. These inkjet prints will last longer than traditional gelatin silver

photographic prints. \$150 for an 8x10; \$325 for an 11x14.

Support this work. Buy my art prints. Buy my books—*Sexual Art*, *Sexual Magic*, *Sexual Portraits and Lust & Romance*—from Amazon and other online vendors, or from me at my website, www.michaelrosen.com.

Technical Notes/Printing The Pictures

Some of these pictures began life as analog film negatives, some as digital raw files. All have been blessed by Adobe Photoshop and printed as art prints in 2005 for the Center for Sex & Culture show using an Epson 1160 printer with PiezoTone Warm Neutral monochrome ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper. Now I print them on my Epson 2200 with Piezography Sepia K7 monochrome ink and QuadToneRIP software, again on HPR paper.

It's best to use a black-and-white mode, if your ink jet printer has one, rather than printing in color—although it is certainly possible to achieve good results printing grayscale files as a color image. The Epson 2400 and 3800 use two gray inks, a black ink and some color ink in what they call ABW, Advanced Black-and-White mode. Canon and HP offer competitive systems.

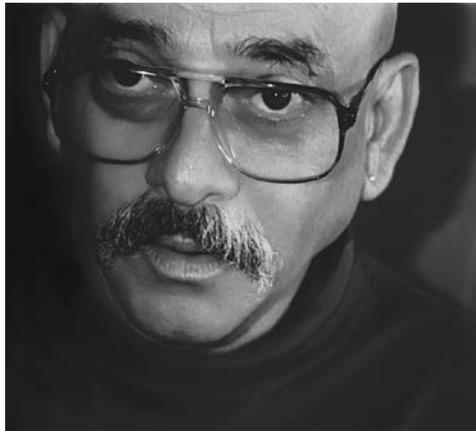
For this project I made test prints the size of the ones in this PDF with my

Epson 3800 printer and Epson K3 color ink in their ABW mode on inexpensive Epson glossy paper from both Photoshop and, as you will, from Adobe Reader. My experience was that the Reader prints were somewhat lighter and had less contrast than the prints from my Photoshop files before the images were placed in the PDF, but both sets are acceptable. You have the ability to adjust brightness and contrast in your printer driver to your taste.

My monitor is profiled and, hopefully, yours is too. But I have no control over what my pictures look like on your monitor. And I really have no control

over what my pictures look like coming out of your printer. Please don't complain if you don't like your results; I offer no help.

These pictures are set up with a maximum dimension of five and one half inches at 360 dots per inch. My tests show that Adobe Reader wants to shrink this according to what it thinks is the maximum size that can be printed on letter-size paper on a particular model of printer. I've seen 93%, 94% and 97% depending on which of my printers I tried. Since this PDF has no data anywhere near the edges of letter paper, you can choose to tell Reader in the Print dialog to print at 100% if you like. Or use its default percentage.



Thanks

Thanks to my wife Lucile for being who you are all these years.

Thanks to Carol Queen and Robert Lawrence of the Center for Sex & Culture in San Francisco for showing this body of work.

Thanks to Pet Silvia and Tammy Stubbs of Art@Large for representing my work in New York City, and promoting my work at events at many venues in the U.S. and on the web.

Thanks to Laura Henkel for representing my work on the West Coast.

Thanks to those who have bought my prints and the many

who have bought my books. May you and yours enjoy health and happiness!

Thanks to Charles Gatewood and David Steinberg, good friends for many years.

Thanks to David Glenn Rinehart, a comrade for many years and the one responsible for the design and implementation of this PDF book.

Thanks to my collaborators, the people I photographed for this project: Alex, Amber, Angie, Beth, Bill, Brett, Bridgett, Casey, Catherine, Charles, Chelsea, Clarity, Clista, Crystal, D. J., David, Debbie Ann, Desiree, Desiree, Douglas, Duncan, Elise, Emily, Erik, Heather, Jack, Jack, Jeanette, Jeff, Jeff, Jennifer, Jim, Jim, Joelly, Jordan, Jordy, Julep, Juliet, Karen, Karima, Karina, Kathy, Kathy, Kristina, Larry, Lia,

Linda, Lisa, Mark, Master Bob, Melisa, Michael, Mindy, Molly, Natascha, Nikka, Paladin, Revi, Rex, Roman, saba, Sarah, Sarah, Seana, Seeley, Simone, Steve, Suzanna, Tallulah, Tania, Terry, Tina, Veronica, Wandering Crow, Wildchylid/ Heather, Willy, Zach, and Zoë. We did it!

Last, thanks very much to A. D. Coleman for his virtuoso Introduction, scholarly and witty and right on target. If I believed in accountability, reward and redemption, then I'd present his words to the gatekeeper, along with my pictures, as my admission credentials.

I continue to actively photograph sexual behavior and publish books of my photographs. I am always looking for individuals, couples or groups—of all genders, races, ages and persuasions—who want to share their sexual energy, from the vanilla-ish to the outrageous, with my camera. Email michael@michaelrosen.com. See more of my work at www.michaelrosen.com.

If you enjoy *Vanilla Sex*, watch for my forthcoming *Crimes Against Nature*.



PLATE 1





PLATE 3



PLATE 4







PLATE 7



























































PLATE 36



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