

A Branch of the Poisoned Tree

Queer pornography through the lens
of a radical feminist

by Megan Rolfe

After hearing a tip about degrading posters being sold in Student Stores, my friend Allison and I went to purchase one for a panel on pornography. We found the posters upstairs, next to the construction paper, and what we saw was far more disheartening than anything we had ever expected: pictures of rock bands and beer pong references intermingled with empty-eyed, distorted, semi-nude women.

"Let's buy this one," Allison said softly, and I knew she was right — if there could be a scale of degradation for the posters, this one reigned supreme. Against a black background, a blond woman was removing her underwear; in the corner rested a "Bierbitzch" beer; to her side were the letters, "Nothing goes down better than a Bierbitzch." The use of alcohol — the number one date rape drug — and "bitch," a word still used to check women stepping outside gender norms, was mixed with blatant sexual exploitation. It was the perfect sexist cocktail for a college dorm wall.

Feeling a dull heartache for what we were doing, Allison and I asked the sales clerk to ring up the poster face down, but he turned it over anyway.

"It's for a panel," we explained. He glanced at the image, smiling as he said, "Ohhh."

Hmm. In my head I wondered, what did that "Oh" mean? Did he think that Allison and I were partners? Did he think that we were turned on by the poster? That we were going to go home and proudly put it on our own apartment wall? Or did he just think we, as female-oriented individuals, were embarrassed to be buying sexually explicit material geared for heterosexual males?

"What do you think of poster?" I asked him. We watched him stare at the woman, the portrayal of her body suffocating any possibility of the woman herself being present in the image.

"I like it," he said.

We could have used that poster to smack him upside the head. Or we could have cried. Or we could have just taken the poster, receipt in hand, turned around and gone quietly back

down the elevator, which is exactly what we did.

In less than ninety seconds, I had spent my radical feminist cash on a poster that perpetuates the dehumanization of women in my own university's textbook shop, and further witnessed a male willingly tell me — to my radical feminist face — that he found this debasing image appealing. It is by far one of the most powerless moments I've experienced in recent memory.

The Playboy Panel

The blond woman on the poster met over one hundred other gazes that day, but of a very different nature: Hollie Mann, a Political Science graduate student who spoke on the recent panel discussing the presence of Playboy in the Bull's Head Bookshop, used the poster as a visual for her opening speech.

The incredible turnout and heavy media attention the panel garnered indicates the demand for this kind of dialogue, but just as panelist and Journalism professor Jane Brown explained, "Playboy is more symbolic than the heart of the problem; it is just the tip of the iceberg."

Pornography is an iceberg of mammoth proportions, a powerful agent of harm perpetuating and enabling a rape culture through the degradation and objectification of women. To speak to a specific chunk of that iceberg, the issue of queer pornography does not get much talk time in panels such as the one on Playboy. The pornography industry is so effectively dominated by men who debase and dehumanize women, it makes talking about anything else seem like we aren't seeing the forest for the trees.

But the issue of queer pornography is a damn big tree. During the panel, Hollie highlighted how Bull's Head caters specifically to heterosexual-identifying men in that it doesn't sell Playgirl or LBGTIQ-targeted pornography, and it's true — Bull's Head sticks to only the most en vogue kind of degradation.

The same goes for Student Stores itself. When Allison and I were flipping through the posters, we came across one that depicted two female-oriented fairies kissing.

My first thought was that it could not possibly have been