



Interview with Marissa Soroudi

By [Daniel Rothbart](#)

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Julia, 2008 Duratrans print in lightbox,
30 x 20 x 6 inches

Marissa Soroudi is an artist who immerses herself in foreign environments and, much like an anthropologist, studies them. Artworks have taken her from the canopies of tropical trees in Vanuatu to life among cannibal Pacific islanders and recently to performing with burlesque showgirls. Through a personal methodology of contemporary art, Soroudi turns male projections and fantasies on their ear.

Daniel Rothbart: How did your idea for the Showgirls series first come about?

Marissa Soroudi: My life was divided between a Persian culture's societal beliefs and the fables of New York City's modern pop culture. In both societies I see the domineering role of male opinion over women, where admiration of the female essence is overshadowed by appreciation of the female form. A strip club is the extreme manifestation of these things.

There, women are viewed only for their physical beauty and as objects of desire, while the female individual is abandoned. The complexities I struggled with throughout different stages of my life are heightened in the strip club. I needed to understand more about this association between men and woman and why this was the case, and a strip club/brothel seemed like a good place to start. I didn't go in knowing I was going to do the Showgirls project. I didn't know before I started that I would be photographing men. I really just went in asking a lot of questions.

DR: Were the men reluctant to pose for you? What kind of reactions did you encounter when you approached them?

MS: There were two steps to my method. The first was how I gathered the information and the second how I physically got them into my studio. Step one comes down to three factors:

- 1) They're in a dark room
- 2) They've been drinking all night
- 3) Its very late at night.

As a result, men were much more candid and revealed a lot more to me than they would have done in any normal environment. I gained their trust because these were all regular customers who visited the club frequently."

It was these intimate conversations that had me thinking about male projections and the male anima – the Jungian term for the female counterpart in men. It has to do with how men relate to women, how they idealize women and all of their relationships with women. In a strip club, the anima is embodied and male projections are overtly exercised. The women act like whatever the men project they want us to act like. The way we look is dictated by what the men want us to look like. We are their fantasy. Showgirls is a series of photographs I took of my customers. They didn't realize when talking to me that they were being observed and studied, they thought they were speaking intimately with a stripper.



Vivian, 2008, Duratrans print in lightbox, 30 x 20 x 6 inches



Claudia, 2008, Duratrans print in lightbox, 30 x 20 x 6 inches

How did I physically get them there? I think that comes down to desire. Most everyone could relate to this – people being at the mercy of their desire and how much they're were willing to suffer for it and what they're were willing to do for it. For the same reason they were spending money in the club, they were looking for some sort of connection. They were willing to come to a stranger's home studio, take off all their clothes and wear the sequined and feathered lingerie of a woman they had

been obsessed with. They became a parody of their obsession and I think it had to do with being at the mercy of desire.

DR: How did you instruct the men as they posed?

MS: I tried to make them comfortable because the position of power changed really quickly. When they're in a strip club they have the money and the power, but then all

of a sudden when they're in the studio, they've forgotten about that situation and are standing in front of a lighting assistant and a makeup artist. Suddenly, they are in a very sterile environment and forced to undress into women's lingerie. It's an awkward situation, so the first thing was to make them comfortable in order to get a more natural shot. I would put on some music and give them another drink. I found that talking about the club or one of the girls there helped ease tension.



Dallas, 2008, Duratrans print in lightbox, 30 x 20 x 6 inches,

DR: What kinds of questions did your models ask you?

MS: They asked very personal questions. I think a lot of men in clubs like this really want a connection and not just a sexual connection – they really want a connection with a woman. I'd tailor my answers in order to get them to speak more and feel more open with me. It was less about me talking about myself but rather them telling me about themselves. They asked me questions about what I desire, what I look for in men and other predictable erotic questions.

DR: How did it feel to turn the tables and be the voyeur of their projected femininity?

MS: I hate to say that I might have enjoyed it too much! I was holding up a mirror to this female fantasy that they carried inside. It was a picture that they painted for me, most elaborately and in great detail. I didn't know what would happen when I dressed them up in female clothing or why they would find it so disturbing to be dressed as a girl they were in love with. It's weird that a sixty-five-year-old sex tourist gets angry when he sees himself dressed as a young Asian girl. There was another guy that I found crying in the bathroom of my studio looking in the mirror when he saw himself dressed up. Realistically all I was doing was holding up a mirror to their erotic psyche. I don't generally photograph men – I focus my work on women, but what I



Jules, 2008, Duratrans print in lightbox,
30 x 20 x 6 inches

quickly understood in the club is that women really shut themselves down. They use tools like makeup and hair extensions, plastic clothing and alcohol to shut down the female soul so they can be sort of like dollies answering to male desire. As I said, men in that club dictated the way we looked and to some extent I think that carries on outside of a strip club. It was a very male environment so I became more interested in photographing these men. I used to record them as well. That's how it began. I had a little microphone in my bra and in private shows I would secretly record them talking to me. I never revealed what they told me during these shows. I kept the dialogues from my recordings to myself. The only thing I've ever shown to the public are the photographs that they dressed up and posed for. Somehow putting men in the shoes of the women they were in love with – just putting them in their clothes and having people look at them- was extremely disturbing and unsettling for them. For

someone like me who has always struggled with inequalities in gender,

there was a self-fulfilling element to this series. It was interesting to see them stripped of their machismo attitude... and a bit humiliated.

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