

[https://www.sfweekly.com/art/the-brothel-hood-of-man-photos-from-late-19th-century-bordellos/article\\_2d33a5c1-4ebd-54b8-9336-fb2beefb0a15.html](https://www.sfweekly.com/art/the-brothel-hood-of-man-photos-from-late-19th-century-bordellos/article_2d33a5c1-4ebd-54b8-9336-fb2beefb0a15.html)

## **The Brothel-hood of Man: Photos from Late-19th Century Bordellos**

BY JONATHAN CURIEL

Nov 15, 2018



Photo by William Goldman. Courtesy of Serge Sorokko Gallery

The history of American prostitution goes back to the beginning of America itself — back to the days of the Founding Fathers, when Benjamin Franklin and John Adams not only witnessed the world's oldest profession but tolerated it. That tolerance might have been reluctant, but Franklin and Adams' public acknowledgment and acceptance signaled a long period in American life when the selling of women's bodies on open streets and private rooms was a matter of record.

The written evidence — and a sprinkling of visual evidence — is in books like Thaddeus Russell’s *A Renegade History of the United States*, Thomas P. Lowery’s *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn’t Tell*, and Ruth Rosen’s *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*. More written evidence — and a torrent of new visual evidence — is in *Working Girls: An American Brothel, circa 1892*, a new book that coincides with a San Francisco art exhibit of the same name. Both the book and exhibit offer a shocking panorama of prostitution in Reading, Pa. They’re shocking not because of nudity or vulgarity — the images are tame by today’s standards — but in the artfulness of the photos, many of which resemble the posed nude prostitute in Édouard Manet’s masterful 1863 *Olympia*. And the shock is in the liberated nature of the bordello — a house in a wealthy neighborhood run by an older woman, Sarah Shearer, whose charges included African-Americans and who allowed a locally prominent male photographer, **William I. Goldman**, to set up his camera and pose her prostitutes in all manner of full dress and undress.

Goldman, who frequented the bordello as a customer, apparently kept the photos for himself, a private collection that he also let the prostitutes see in albums. These photos might have remained out of the greater public spotlight forever if not for Robert

Flynn Johnson, a curator emeritus with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco’s **Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts**, who stumbled onto part of the collection at a postcard fair in Concord in 2004. The photos were a mystery. The seller, who lived in Grass Valley, didn’t know who the women were, who took their photos, or where. But working with clues in the images — most notably a newspaper that indicated Reading — Johnson tracked down the their provenance. And 14 years later, his project has been realized in a book that includes an essay by Rosen, and an exhibit that opens today at Serge Sorokko Gallery two months after a similar exhibit opened at New York’s **Ricco/Maresca** gallery.

“Working Girls: An American Brothel, circa 1892” highlights what may be the earliest photographic series ever done on American sex workers. That the series happened not in New York, Boston, or another metropolis but in Reading — a locale in southeastern Pennsylvania that had fewer than 80,000 residents — can be traced to its status as a growing industrial base with easy railroad access that connected it to cities around the East Coast. Men with a few dollars to spare could choose from a lineup of available women at Shearer’s bordello and at others in the area, with authorities mostly looking the other way. (Shearer was arrested at least once, according to Johnson’s book, but Reading police were apparently most alarmed by teenage boys’ use of the bordello and not by the prostitutes’ professional doings with grown men.)

It's only Shearer's name that emerges from Johnson's research. None of the other women on display in his book or at Serge Sorokko Gallery have specific identities, despite Johnson's attempts to find their histories. Instead, they're anonymous females who could never have imagined that their private posing for a client would emerge a century later in book form and in the media. The most explicit photos show pubic hair and breasts, although one photo series shows a quasi-lesbian embrace, while one photo has a stockinged woman sitting down and widely exposing her legs, which reveals her genital hair and what seems to be her vulva. The women shared their bodies for Goldman's money at a time in the 19th century when morals were changing but when, as Rosen points out, "Americans viewed prostitution as a safety valve for sexually active men who might attack respectable young women or for wandering husbands who strayed from their uninterested wives."

That "safety valve" was also true in the mid-19th century, including during the Civil War, when soldiers frequented prostitutes everywhere they went, including the nicest neighborhoods of Washington, D.C. *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell* features photos of nude women that widely circulated around the time, and images of syphilitic men with grotesque scabs and ulcerations that consumed them. In 2012, New York's Metropolitan Museum delved into the history of nude photography with its exhibit, "**Naked Before the Camera**," which featured French artist **Julien Vallou de Villeneuve's** 1853 image of a reclining nude woman. Nudity and photography have gone hand in hand almost from the medium's beginning. The discovery of more than 200 private photos from the 1890s isn't big news. What's big from an art-world perspective: The photos are a complete stash. (Serge Sorokko Gallery owns part of the stash, and is exhibiting 25 images, including five from the book.) The photos even show Goldman in a cameo, posing nude like the women he frequented on Reading's North Eighth Street.

In the history of early American photography, Goldman's photos are important because they reveal the times they were taken inasmuch as the flesh of the man and women who cavorted together. Behind closed doors, anything could go in the 1890s. Money could buy you a sexual romp, and the time of a woman who'd gradually take off her clothes and pose in nylons or whatever else was required to make the client happy. Goldman, who died in 1922, was in a privileged position. He was already a successful commercial photographer.

How much he exploited the women in Reading is open to debate. And how much the new circulation of these photos re-exploits these anonymous women is also open to debate. The burlesque dancer **Dita Von Teese**, who wrote the book's foreword — and who is one of three women who penned essays — says the Reading bordello's prostitutes were likely thrilled and "empowered" by the chance

to pose for Goldman. Johnson agrees, saying he wanted to avoid having his book be an extension of “the male gaze,” and that Goldman’s photos were in stark contrast to the salacious pornographic images that European photographers were taking (and selling) around the same time in the 1890s.

“The photos were basically a secret cache — he wasn’t trying to monetize them, he wasn’t exploiting them, and he wasn’t just taking photos of them without their knickers,” Johnson tells *SF Weekly* in a phone interview from Paris. “If you want to be feminist to the extreme, you can say he was an exploiter. But the women were servicing him by being his muses. And I can’t prove it, but he undoubtedly paid them to pose — in which case, they kind of had a day off or so to pose artistically instead of having to sleep with guys. Looking at all the photos, the women are at ease. They’re like *Vogue* models. And they also felt safe, because the knowledge of his activities and these photos would have been his financial ruin in that town in 1892. He was the local photographer who took photos of businessmen and weddings.”



Into the Headlands. By Susan Burnstine. Courtesy of Corden Potts Gallery.

**Susan Burnstine** takes panoramic photos — of skylines, highways, street corridors, downtowns, lakes, and other things — but they always become dreamscapes. Blurry dreamscapes that seem half-formed or in the midst of forming, as if she could somehow conjure up scenes that were both modern and primordial.

Burnstine takes her unique photos with homemade cameras and lenses that she tinkers with over and over. She also visits places in the early morning or other off times to ensure that few people are in her scenes. And she says her finished work is never about the places themselves. Instead, Burnstine says, it's her dreams that emerge from the camera — that the highways and downtowns and other forms are merely substitutes for the dynamic that's in her head.

Burnstine has worked this mystical way for more than a decade, and her new exhibit at Corden|Potts Gallery, "**Susan Burnstine: Where Shadows Cease**," continues her search for dreams in the byways she encounters in urban and rural areas — but that search is now in color. For the first time in her life, she has produced a volume of work that's not in black-and-white. The reason: For the first time, Burnstine — who's in her early 50s — is dreaming in color. She never expected the switch, either in her dream state or in her photographic life. The sudden change coincided with Donald Trump's election.

"I've been in dream-study programs for years and years, and suddenly I had color coming in in 2016," Burnstine, a Chicago native who now lives in Los Angeles, told *SF Weekly* at the opening of her new exhibit. "I studied immensely about why this would happen, and it's really about the shift of the world, and me taking an escape route in my dreams. Black-and-white is *so* real. It's always how I've seen the world and shot the world. Because my dreams have shifted, I have to photograph what my dreams are telling me. But this is not enjoyable to me, because black-and-white is such an easy release."

In fact, even the colors in Burnstine's new images are a little abnormal. (They're "very muted," she says, "because it's the only kind of color that I can take, because color is so overwhelming for me.") For example, the orange from the Golden Gate Bridge is, in her photo, more of a rusty red, and even black in places. Titled ***Into the Headlands***, the image isn't about the bridge at all, and her new images are more about "class consciousness than my solo journey," says Burnstine, whom *SF Weekly* profiled in 2012. Look closely, and *Into the Headlands* features two people walking on a pathway near the landmark span. The pathway is filled with whiteness — the kind of whiteness that's in some of the clouds overhead. But the cloud coverage is also partly in darkness. It's these overlapping themes bathed in blurs — where colors and shapes bleed into each other, and where strict demarcations get challenged — that actualize the dream state that was once stuck in Burnstine's head but is now out in the open for anyone to see.

**"Working Girls: An American Brothel, circa 1892,"** through Dec. 9 at Serge Sorokko Gallery, 345 Sutter St. Free; 415-421-7770 or [sorokko.com](http://sorokko.com)

**“Susan Burnstine: Where Shadows Cease,”** *Through Dec. 1 at Corden | Potts Gallery, 49 Geary St.*  
*Free; 415-781-0110 or [cordenpottsgallery.com](http://cordenpottsgallery.com)*

---

*Jonathan Curiel is a contributing writer. Twitter @WriterJCuriel*

---

Jonathan Curiel