

Nothing pretty here

Searing exhibitions confront our notions of prostitution



PETER SIMPSON
BIG BEAT

The searing question in two photography exhibitions in Ottawa is not what will we, as individuals, do for sex, but what will we do to others for sex?

The answer is incriminating and distressing. At La Petite Mort Gallery are two views into the horrendous reality of the so-called oldest profession, one view gritty and sympathetic, the other seedy and voyeuristic, and both are indictments of a society that makes prostitution exist in a violent netherworld, as it always has.

The first exhibition to open at LPM packs the greater punch, as it offers no cheap titillation — no scantily clad hookers, no sex at all. The only thing hardcore about the photographs is the truth. They were taken backstage, so to speak, and include helpless women who are



MIMI CHAKAROVA

A young girl worries about the fate of her sister, who was taken by sex traffickers to Istanbul, writes photographer Mimi Chakarova.

forced to have sex for money.

Their stories are familiar, as young women are plucked from their impoverished villages in Eastern Europe, lured away with promises of riches and adventure and that priceless commodity, hope. They are delivered to distant cities and then stripped of their passports

and other documents needed to escape. They are sex slaves.

Last year an American photographer and filmmaker, Mimi Chakarova, released *The Price of Sex*, a documentary about sex trafficking and the corruption and misogyny that allows it to flourish. Chakarova has since won inter-

national awards for investigative reporting and for "courage in filmmaking." Much of the footage in *The Price of Sex*, and the still photographs in her exhibition of the same title at La Petite Mort, were taken with hidden cameras she smuggled into the grimmest corners of the international sex trade.

Some of Chakarova's photographs are passing moments of gruesomeness — in one a man leans over to grab an inattentive prostitute by the rear end and pull her to his lap, indifferent to what she wants.

Others are more artful, which heightens the sadness they capture. One shows a meal of gruel and dry bread set out on a cheap tablecloth, a typical breakfast for a family of six in Moldova, from where many of the girls are taken.

Another photo looks down upon a baby boy who plays on a cheap carpet, while his mother's relaxed feet jut in from the side of the frame. It's a moment of peace eked from an unforgiving life. Chakarova writes, "She attempted escape several times but local police officers always brought her back to the pimp."

The other portraits of women forced into this life of wholesale sex — reportedly men line up for a go — show faces of despair and desperation, even when the women are not at the moment "working." They sit together and smoke, with a defeated air.

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Simpson: Pretty Woman, it ain't

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The photograph that will stay with me shows a young girl, perhaps 14 or 15 years old, who waits terrified to hear news of her sister, who had been taken by sex traffickers. The expression on the younger girl's face is real and heart-wrenching. How awful that a child so young should know such horror, and be so at risk of being sucked into it herself.

The Price of Sex continues at La Petite Mort Gallery, 306 Cumberland St., to Sept. 30. It's sponsored by the U.S. State Department, through the U.S. embassy in Ottawa.

The other view of prostitution coming to La Petite Mort is less activist and more ambiguous. The images were taken by American photographer Scott Sothorn in the late 1980s in or near Southern California, and they form a panoply of diseased and degraded whores.

The photographs were published by Sothorn in a 2010 book titled *Lowlife*, and LPM director Guy Berubé says this is the first time any have been displayed in Canada. Berubé says he chose photos from the book that show a degree of empowerment in the women and men (as women) who posed for Sothorn. Those degrees were too slight to be seen by my eyes, but Berubé did avoid Sothorn's more stomach-turning images, the ones of a naked woman with her legs absently spread, or of a woman bent over a cheap table with her face hidden.

We don't know if the women and men were forced into prostitution by circumstance or other people, but it's impossible to believe any rational person would choose such a life. Layered over that misery is the moral ambiguity of Sothorn's project, completed during a five-year dive into "the murky depths of sexual obsession," as Berubé writes in his director's statement.

In the book, Sothorn writes of one encounter with a "whore (who) was young and cute and kind of shapeless." The photograph shows a young woman who looks healthy next to the others shown in the book. She's still apple-cheeked and not yet emaciated. She's dressed in ludicrous tights that are furled around the waist and belong in a small-town Fourth of July parade, not in a greasy shell of a motel room.

Sothorn writes of their clinical encounter, and his conclusion is a



Maia was trafficked to Moscow at age 18: 'They brought me to a group of 12 men, kept me there for four days, taking turns.'

weird marriage of Raymond Chandler and the Marquis de Sade: "I couldn't get off so I used my hand and her visuals to finish up. I said adios and took my leave."

Pretty Woman, it ain't.

Lowlife shows at La Petite Mort from Sept. 21 to Oct. 4.

There'll be a very different view of southern California at LPM before *Lowlife* opens. Tony Foughse's new series *Angelos* opens Sept. 7, and it will include 10 portraits of "Russian émigrés, gang bangers, runaways ... The face of Los Angeles you don't

see on Entertainment Tonight," as Berubé writes.

I have only seen a few of the photographs on a computer screen, but they are taken on the street, as per Foughse's preferred style. Find a subject, approach and request permission; it's amazing how often he gets co-operation from people who are instinctively wary. This gives the portraits a veritas, and a distinctive atmosphere that is recognizably Foughse.

Angelos opens at 7 p.m. on Sept. 7 and continues to Sept. 20.

STEVE PATTERSON

"If I had known he was going to be THAT good, I would have cancelled him" ~ Steve Martin

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