

5 dollars for 3 minutes

Cammie Toloui

Interview by Moffy, Gathorne Hardy



Hanna and I discovered Cammie Toloui's work when we came across her book, "5 Dollars for 3 minutes" at Arles photography festival. Having lamented the slightly slim pickings that year, we were excited by our finding, and sat hunched together reading her essay at the back of the display copy. We both read it again, separately, when we got home. Hanna got in touch and asked if she could publish some of her photographs here, and we decided we would do a kind of interview to go with them, a conversation between me and Cammie.

Cammie is warm, funny, and generous with her time. When we speak, she is at home in Portland, Oregon. Originally from San Francisco, and after years of living all over the place — Brighton, Lewes, Iowa, Russia — she has moved back to the West Coast. She has done this, she tells me, because "it's more friendly to people like me". As our conversation continues, I get a sense of what she is referring to, and perceive what strikes me as the skill of someone who knows how to make do with the objects of identification that are available to them, however disparate or incongruous, and use them to construct and assert self-hood, a kind of patch-working of identity. Having read her account of growing up with a strict, religious Iranian father in what she lovingly describes to me as her "subculture paradise" of San Francisco, I ask her how Iranian she feels, and how American. The answer is that she inhabits a "limbo state, where I grew up in America, but culturally at home it was so different, that it set me apart from my friends and they knew I was different, and yet my Iranian family didn't see me as Iranian". In England she felt American due to "the contrast of living there", regarded by people not as English and therefore as American. Now back in the US she feels more European, and "the through-line through all of it is the Iranian thing, which is always a heartbeat within me".

During lockdown her and her husband started learning Farsi together over Zoom, an endeavour that she designates as an attempt to "shore up that Persian part of me". Cooking Iranian food is another "connection to being Persian". Alluding to the death of Mahsa Amini and the ensuing protests, she says "I am not from Iran, but when I see what's going on there I feel like I am part of those women's struggles, it's a funny thing, cultural identity, where it lives in your life, and in your body". She had been attending some of these protests, and found that in a crowd of thousands of Iranians, she felt she couldn't "meet them" due to her lack of language, a "missing piece", which made her feel lonely. She pauses, and then seems to conclude: "you get it where you can find it, so for me it's in the cooking, and in the learning of the language".

Having been given a little insight into what seemed to me a kind of bricolage practice, what Cammie calls getting it where you can find it, several things occurred to me. The first was the extent to which her identity seems not only fluid, context-dependant, but often defined in negative terms, in relation to an opposite. Again invoking the significance of language for cultural identity, she talks about being "read as foreign" in many of the spaces she occupies, where her status as an outsider — an other — seems to persist despite changing landscapes and subjection to differing perceptions. The second thing that struck me was that this patch-working was a testament to both her creativity and determination in the face of struggle — that the learning of Farsi over an app on her computer in the middle of a pandemic, the ability to cook

Iranian food in her home — these were the tools at her disposal, and she was going to utilise them. The use of food (and I learn later, her camera) as means of communion with self and communication with others, available when a fluency in Farsi and many other things are not, seemed to me to be a salve for internal absence and yearning, a mechanism for bridging gaps in communication, and to reflect both the catalyst for and approach towards much of the creative and artistic output of someone who identifies, she tells me, as a “storyteller”. There is then a two-fold element of opposition inherent to Cammie’s practice, the opposition of being othered, and the opposition involved in the struggle against one’s circumstances, which seem to intersect at their point of origin: not being in possession of certain identifying markers or modes of assimilation engenders the necessity for particular kinds of action. In the essay at the back her book, Cammie writes “I always felt like I was the weird, perverted kid in my family and eventually I proudly took this on as part of my identity”, experiencing outsiderdom within her own family of origin and making something of it that would be all her own. Her sexual and creative awakenings both seem to have been borne out of struggle against parental (and religious) figures. Having been told by her father that God could hear all of her thoughts and saw everything that she did, she writes, “as I was masturbating in bed, I thought about how God knew what I was doing with my fingers and in my mind I said, “Fuck you,” to him (since he was listening) and had an instant orgasm from the excitement of breaking that scary taboo.” She tells me a story about driving to the petrol station with her father and hearing a Black Sabbath song for the first time on the radio. Much to old dad’s dismay, who thought “Satan had taken over” her body, “it filled me, I knew that this was me [...] rock and roll was my rebellion and way out”. Music, she tells me, “spoke to me so clearly, from the radio”, and during her parents’ divorce, which “made me realise that the oppressive religious culture in my house was not for me”, rock and roll gave her something to “grasp on to”. We learn, from reading her, that her photographic impulse was only strengthened by an episode at the grocery store where, having stolen a roll of film, she was discovered by her mother, driven back to the shop, and forced to apologise to the manager. This, she says, did not deter her from future “deviant deeds for the sake of photography”. Au contraire!

On second reading I wonder if a connection may have been fixed in her mind at this moment between immoral or *ungodly* behaviour and photography. The supermarket scene resembles a kind of confession after sin, and the potential for eroticism in the confessional dynamic seems to me to be borne out, later, in the Private Pleasures booth at the strip club where she worked, the Lusty Lady, where customers would pay five dollars for three minutes of her time (hence the book’s title), revealing to her their desires and often telling her stories about their own deviant sexual practices, despite having paid, in theory, to watch *her* do her thing. Her documentation of the sex-working space, that lent such inspiration for her creative pursuits, furnished her with the opportunity for plenty more fuck yous to various gendered authority figures, celestial or otherwise, allowing her to struggle against the Father and God who are in some ways interchangeable. We talk for a while about the relationship between photography, rebellion, and survival. She tells me that “those things merged, the rebellious thing and the photography merged, and the photography is what carried

me through, lots of my friends didn’t make it, a couple of people died, the drugs and all that stuff... and probably also because I’m smart, all those things kept me from diving down”, and here again her father’s presence can be felt: “I continued to be as punk rock, and radical, and in your face as possible, because I was still like, fuck you dad,” she laughs, “and that powered me into finding and seeking out the edges of things and the people I found to be the most interesting in my world”.

So struggle, I learn, is intrinsic to her creative process, has helped to forge it. If she didn’t have film, she stole it. The “weird perverted kid” who could not share in her family’s beliefs found other people who would make her feel known and put her in touch with culture (Diane Arbus was one great love, one North Star, as was the female teacher who introduced her to her work). She used to “escape my suburban hell life, and get on the train and go into San Francisco, and suddenly just be surrounded by my people” all of whom were “letting their freak flag fly”. Her parents’ divorce and father’s controlling ways engendered an appetite for rebellion that would lead to the development of her real skills as a photographer: “the more I found out who I really was, the more my dad tried to clamp down, to try and corral me into being this thing that he wanted me to be, and that just made it even worse for him, great for me, because I was doing drugs and having fun, and being miserable as well as you are when you’re twelve or thirteen...”, she laughs again, “the ripples of the divorce, mixed with my dad’s controlling thing... the ripples of that were me finding my rebellion, and really taking that on as my identity”. She talks for a while about her involvement in heavy metal and stoner culture, which “morphed into punk, and I started being a photographer in high school, because there was a darkroom, and I learned how to use a darkroom”. A darkroom was there, so she learnt to use it.

The same weird perverted kid, in possession of her own outsider status, was able to identify with the customers at the Lusty Lady that were “too strange” for the other girls, and get good photos out of it (sometimes her own reflection in the glass would obscure their faces, a neat little image!). Indeed, being a “freak” helped also to connect her to other people. She tells me that she “wore my camera all the time, which was unusual, so people would really respond, and ask me to take a picture of them, which might have been because I looked so unusual, so the people who were also freaks would be like ‘oh a freak with a camera, come take my picture’”. I was about to ask why, in her essay, she describes having “worn” her camera “around her neck like an item of clothing”, her look being “completed [with] my camera slung across my shoulder”, why in her description of it she had transmuted the camera into something primarily wearable, visible, it fulfilling then the function of a garment. Here I feel, I get my answer, without having to ask: both her clothes and her camera were means of communication, were identifying markers that she had chosen to signal to people like her that she was a person like them.

Being a woman was still difficult in the 1980s (not now though), and aspects specifically of biological femininity were still very much subjects of taboo then. The band Cammie was in, the Yeastie Girlz, somehow managing a kind of righteous feminist rage that retained its sense of humour, wrote songs about menstruating, yeast infections, and cunnilingus, with names like “Ovary Action” and “You Suck”, playing tampon applicators like recorders at their live shows. To flashers and public masturbators and men who

grabbed women, they dedicated the aptly titled “Sperm Brain”. It is clear to me that Cammie isn’t, perhaps despite appearances, a showy person: she is open to the idea that, times having changed, these songs might not be relevant anymore, and that if the Yeaste Girlz were to get back together, she is not sure what they would sing about; it is the message she centres and not herself. The Yeaste Girlz were brought back into each other’s lives, incidentally, by the permission-less sampling of one of their songs by TV Girl (who earned lots of money from the resulting track’s TikTok success) and the Girlz’ ensuing struggle for justice. Not only had they shamelessly misappropriated the female voice (there are no women in TV Girl), but they had misused it, turning a song about women getting off into one about male sexual jealousy. Men stealing from women singing about women’s rights — what to say? The jokes indeed write themselves, but in this instance I couldn’t resist making one too. In her essay Cammie describes the flying cockroaches at the strip club where she worked, who from a “steady diet of spunk” had become “super-charged, testosterone-fuelled hell beasts, snacking on the dried crust of pussy juice on unwashed sequin thongs”. I ask her if this is not a rather apt metaphor for a kind of parasitic man we all know, and that perhaps TV Girl (I’m not sure if there are one, or several TV “girls” in the band) is not himself a cockroach eating the crust off her thong? We both cackle like witches — I mean women — and she asks that I make it clear these are my words, and not hers.

Having lived in Iowa City for years for the sake of her son, she did portraits and wedding photography to make a living, dealing with norms and bridezillas and the occasional racist (one woman refused to sign a contract upon learning that Cammie’s surname was Iranian). While she “hated the fakey fakey thing that I had to do” while shooting weddings, she tells me, she “shot it like a journalist”. She was able to use the plentiful moments of human interaction and emotion, the element of unpredictability present even on such occasions, to get what she needed from the exercise: “the part of me that hungered for those moments, I got it, I got it through my weddings”, she laughs heartily. This is my very favourite of everything she tells me during our conversation. What a lovely, amusing, perfect idea: Cammie on norm safari, interloper among the canapés, locating the intrigue.

In other words, she is gifted at taking unfortunate circumstances, transforming them into something that she can work to her advantage, in acts of the kind of industrious, female creativity that is demonstrated by every woman who takes sparse ingredients and transforms them into a meal. In her essay she describes her early attempts at persuading customers to allow her to photograph them: “I figured I had to offer an incentive, so I asked the next guy if he would allow me to take his picture in exchange for a free dildo show. This was a ten dollar value! Amazingly, he didn’t seem at all hesitant or shy. In fact, he returned the following week, asking if I would take his picture again. He seemed to think I was hot for him. This was an important lesson in the workings of the male ego and served me well for the rest of my time as a stripper”. It seemed to me then, that much of Cammie’s joint sex work/photography practice was an exercise in getting these men to expose themselves to her, using their perception of her as the one who was truly exposed. Of all the Trojan horses, this really is very Trojan!

I begin to think then about the received ideas about the objectification of the sex worker, the customer as the voyeur to their viewee, and how the actual dynamic does not entirely reflect this binary. Cammie was able to conceal her personal identity through performance, through wigs and makeup and costume, through the use of a fake name that would develop into a fleshed-out alter ego all her own. She was able to keep her internal landscape obscured from view. The private identity of the customer, on the most immediate, animal level, however, is revealed, their desire laid bare. Cammie’s customers were revealing, making visible to her, something that in the outside world they kept hidden, that they did not attach to their public persona. Before having read the bit of her essay where she confesses to anthropological hobbies (spying and the like), I had thought to myself, “she’s gathering information about Man, that’s what she’s doing”, and this tale of photo/dildo show bartering seemed a perfect illustration of how she reached these ends. I ask her to what extent this is true, how much the sex work situation allowed for anthropological study, and how much it was informed by her desire to conduct such a study. She responds: “it’s uncovering the mystery of the other, and being curious about the other, the men didn’t know anything about me, so they would fill in some blanks about what they assumed I was, who I was, and I was doing that to them, but we were both hiding things from each other, so I was baring the very intimate depths of my body, but the important bits of me, they had no idea about, and they were baring to me the very depths of their desire, their very personal kinks and fetishes and all these things, and bits of their body as well, but I could only guess who these people were in real life”.

Indeed, Cammie ended up at the Lusty Lady in the first place because a friend of hers had worked there and she had been “enthralled by her stories about her job, her customers and the bizarre events she observed during her shifts”. Once there, she enjoyed meeting all the “curious characters”, telling the others to send any customers they couldn’t deal with to her: “the stranger the better”. This anthropological inquiry now strikes me as the vein that runs through the marble of all her work. She compassionately took note of the habits of these men, the “lunch time crowd” who came and went (excuse me), and then those deserving of nicknames. In her taxonomy of the strip club’s ecosystem was Target Practice Man, The Shitter (“straight out of a David Lynch movie”), Self-Suck Man, The Slug, The Rulerman and a naughty policeman. After a particularly gruelling interaction with The Shitter, Cammie thinks to herself: “better than a creative writing class”. You can read all about their unorthodox merrymaking if you buy her book.

The discussion of this anthropological impulse leads me to another question I had had for her: is photography inherently punk? By which I had meant, rather pleased with my idea, does the act of looking, of actively observing and recording — thereby asserting point of view — necessarily engender a critique of one’s environment? Does this *bothering to look* constitute a refusal to become inured to the workaday banality or even cruelty of the conditions in which we live? Initially, her response is that this may be the case because of “where we are now”, but that she’s not sure it was true when she was young and shooting the photographs displayed here. Then she thinks for a while, and says very casually “yeah, actually, I guess, even when I was a teenager, shooting out in Berkely and San Francisco, I did know that I was making a comment on how I felt about what I was seeing”. “I’m always in the frame”, she acknowledges, repeating it: “I’m always

in the frame.” Reflecting on Cammie’s photographs, with their embedded, embodied, female narratorial presence, and what she has told me about the route she took to art — having a hard time, having something to say about it, saying it through photography, and using that to survive — I feel she has already expressed the very idea I am putting to her, but in totally unpretentious terms. This lack of grandiosity, her resisting the temptation of self-mythologisation, strikes me as exceedingly punk indeed, especially considering that she was doing what she was doing before the de-stigmatisation of sex work had even really begun.

This discussion led me to my next question: is sex work inherently punk? To this, she responds, “it was for me [...] for me, becoming a stripper was an extension of my punk, fuck you, trying to find the edges, see how far I could push myself to the edge without actually dropping out of school, because I was also getting a degree”, she laughs, “so being a stripper was like, oh, let’s see how far I can take this, also as a story teller, because I think I’ve always had this need to tell stories through photography, I was really drawn to it because I knew that they were... not just photographic stories, but I knew that there were going to be some great stories that were going to come out of the experience of being in a place like that, and that was really part of my identity, was that person who threw things in people’s faces to see how they could handle it”. She tells me about the pleasure she took, when some poor sod would make the mistake of asking how she was, in regaling them with stories about what she’d been up to recently with The Shit Eater (the artist formerly known as The Shitter), and watching them squirm. So sex work was experimentation, it was survival, and it was identity formation: she talks about the lessons in tenderness she learnt from her alter-ego Tasha, from performing femininity, and the education she got about her own sexual preferences from her interactions with her customers. It was the development of more than one skill, “first trying to entice the men wandering the hallways to come in and part with their money. Second, finding the best way to get them off while also trying to get them to stay longer and therefore pay more money”, and I guess, long enough for her to take their picture.

Sex work was also rebellion — and I wonder — maybe even revenge? In her essay, she explains how she came to choose her stripper name: “My best friend in sixth grade was called Tasha. At her house we would watch, fascinated, as her mother prepared to go to work in the evening. She pulled on shiny spandex disco leggings, a tube top, a giant blonde afro wig, stuck on false eyelashes and wore stiletto heels. “Tonight, my name is Tasha!” she would announce. I was always perplexed about why she would call herself by her daughter’s name. To be honest, I’m still a bit confused, but by the time I was in my 20s I had at least figured out that she was probably a sex worker. I decided I would name myself Tasha, too.” This whole exchange of roles and names seems to serve as a long and winding road to getting back at her dad, in the execution of its inversion. The appropriation of a name that is attached to the domestic and familial space and is used to perform sex work — the adoption of the daughter’s name — prefigures Cammie’s rejection of the parent-given name for the same ends. In other words, maybe use of the name Tasha appealed to Cammie because of its proximity, at its origin, to the family home, and how far away from this home it took itself, not to mention the subversion of parental and patriarchal power enacted by calling yourself by a name other

than the one you’re given. Or maybe I’m getting carried away.

Regardless, some kind of subversion or another is enacted by the photographs here, in their portrayal of “hard cocks”, symbols that here challenge the status quo by gesturing at male need, and what’s more, this need as an idea in the mind of a woman. Cammie is making visible the obverse of the sex worker coin: men, and their need of women. When asking the artist Michael Petry why he thinks people are so reticent to exhibit her work showing hard cocks, he tells her: “Because we live in a patriarchy. Your photos make men look too vulnerable”. But what about the hard cock as a symbol of power, of domination? What about the weakness also associated with erectile dysfunction, and the male fantasy of female penis envy? Both poles, for me at least, are visible in Cammie’s photographs. It seems worth noting that the club she worked at was called the Lusty Lady, despite taking the satisfaction of men’s lust as its objective. So in order to entice men in, they had to be made to feel wanted. Women were to be portrayed as the ones in need of them, and this need was to be two-fold: women need men sexually, and they need their money, they need to be paid by them. In more Trojan horsery aimed at placating and soothing the male ego, women are offered up to them in a comforting state of double need. I wonder how many men would have run for the hills if it had been called the Lusty Bloke, how many would have felt shamed, disempowered, feminised even, and would have stayed at home for their festivities various.

When I ask Cammie about the need to perform gender at the club, she responds “there were so many different ways to be there, but for me I had to pretend to be a feminine woman, which isn’t that unusual, lots of women have to do that in their lives don’t they?”, pulling out not the extremity of difference between sex work and domestic life, but instead its parallels, the ways in which women have to use their femininity, lest it be used against them. It seems to me then, that what Cammie’s work manages is not only an accurate portrayal of the sex work situation, the inner workings of the strip club and its eco-system of girls and customers, but the ways in which the strip club acts as an analogue for the actual communicative situation between not only men and women, but between people: the things we want and need from each other, the way we pretend to need things we don’t need to get other things we do need, our fear of being explicit about our need (in her essay she describes a rather heart-breaking habit that men at the club had of accidentally on purpose leaving the door to the video booth unlocked, allowing others to accidentally on purpose walk in on them), and the whole rich, delicate, touching and obscene complex of human interaction that outside of the strip club is camouflaged by convention, by propriety. The club is a microcosm of life outside of itself.

So finally, as she puts it in her essay, “We are so used to seeing women as the object of the male gaze. When I turned my camera on the men in the Private Pleasures booth, I violated an unspoken rule of the patriarchy - that the male is the owner of the gaze, never the object of it”. Cammie has reclaimed this gaze on all of our behalves, and given us something truly interesting to look at with it, striking as she does the right balance: meaning is conveyed, but not a meaning too easily closable, inciting us to linger on the photographs, to keep looking at them, like the men she had to get off, but not so quickly that she’d miss the opportunity to take their picture.















