

Voyeurs, Flashers, and Ice-Hockey Players

In a SoHo studio that could pass for a regular Manhattan apartment, David Drebin opens a file on his big-screen Mac. The photograph that appears shows the view from the room's window: on a nearby rooftop, a woman in a bikini is writhing before a man with a camera. "It was such a cheesy scene," recalls Drebin of the photo shoot he witnessed one night.

"I couldn't resist."

The image is not so different from the celebrity portraits and fashion spreads Drebin makes for his commercial and editorial clients, which include record labels, hotels, airlines, and cable-TV outlets. These photos are recognizable for their narrative mixture of grit, humor, and glamour, but the work Drebin makes for himself presents more ambiguous situations. "He takes the pictures, and the viewer completes them," says Steven Hartman of Contessa Gallery in Cleveland, where Drebin shows.

Although Drebin came across his rooftop subject by chance, his work is usually carefully controlled. Set in up- or down-market hotel rooms and gritty or luxe streets, the subjects and situa-



In sexually charged tableaux, photographer David Drebin offers a mixture of glamour, grit, and humor

BY REBECCA ROBERTSON

tions he creates suggest characters and plots. In his cinematic world, beautiful women in very short skirts run up and down stairs, lean dangerously over balconies, or look out windows.

The heart of his drama is often the tension of sexualized, occasionally hostile looking, with the camera peeking at a partially obscured woman. Sometimes Drebin records both the voyeur and his target, as in a 2001 Jeff Wall-like street scene set outside the Apollo Theater in Harlem. In it, a startled-looking woman wearing a midriff-baring shirt and holding her child is coolly appraised by a man walking behind her. *Stalker* (2007) suggests a more explicit threat—it shows a pair of bare female legs in short black boots standing on asphalt, framed by a dark slit as if seen through closed blinds.

For all the mystery in some of Drebin's tableaux, many share a sense of mischievousness. In *Flasher* (2002), one of his most popular images, a woman on an overpass lifts her shirt to oncoming traffic. *Ice Hockey*

Rebecca Robertson is photo editor of ARTnews.



ABOVE David Drebin's *Flasher*, 2002. Drebin says his work appeals to both men and women, although perhaps for different reasons.

BELOW *Central Park*, 2008. "I like to go places people have photographed before and shoot them in a new way," says the artist.



(2002) shows a woman in leopard-print boots in a locker room arguing with a man wearing only black boxer briefs, while his underdressed teammates snicker.

Sometimes Drebin's locations are so evocative that he forgoes models. *Yellow Pool* (2001) is an empty swimming pool deck aglow in a wash of

Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York convinced him he could play only himself. When a roommate began a photography class, Drebin was intrigued and soon began attending Parsons The New School for Design, where he graduated in 1996. Aspiring photographers often break into the business by assisting established artists with lights and



artificial light. *Central Park* (2006) looks north at night from high above the park—a dark trapezoid crisscrossed by strings of lighted paths and surrounded by the orange glow of the city. Drebin took the five-minute exposure from a friend's office on the 57th floor of Carnegie Hall Tower. "I like to go places people have photographed before and shoot them in a new way," he says.

Born in Toronto, Drebin, 40, thought his calling was acting until a brief stint at the American

Apollo, 2001,
revolves around a
kind of sexualized
looking.

equipment, but Drebin found that he hated the work. "I've never been treated so badly," he says of his three experiences as an assistant. Instead he waited tables and went to the lab to print after his shifts.

His transition into the fine-art world began with a group show at Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles in 2007, where Elton John bought prints, and in 2008 he began showing at Contessa. Last year saw solo shows in Cleveland, Montreal, and

Berlin, and a pop-up store in Palm Beach. His book *Love and Other Stories* was published by Daab in 2008, and his work was on the cover of Rizzoli's *New York: A Photographer's City* and *Condé Nast Traveler's Room with a View*, from *As-souline* in 2010. The monograph *The Morning After* was published by teNeues last winter. At

Buffer prepares for a performance in his hotel room, anxiously trying out variations on his phrase as he adjusts his tux. When he enters the ring, he gets it right. The piece is funny and absurd, playing Buffer's celebrity against his impersonation of vulnerability. "It's about fear and confidence," says Drebin, who continues to work in video.



Contessa, unframed works range in price from \$3,500, for 20-inch-high prints, to \$75,000, for ones as large as 15 feet long.

In 2008, Drebin took the first of several photos of professional boxing matches and the grand spaces where they are staged. The images led to an introduction to Michael Buffer, the announcer famous for bellowing his trademarked phrase "Let's get ready to rrrumble!" before fights, and Drebin convinced Buffer to appear in a short video. In it,

In *Champion*, 2009, Drebin records a professional boxing match and the grand space where it is staged.

Drebin's images often revolve around such dichotomies. "I think of my work as the perfect combination of love and sex," he says, explaining that he wants his pictures to appeal on the surface level but to have more substantial meaning as well. He admits, though, that the gender of the viewer may influence which aspect of his photographs he or she finds more alluring.

"Women love the intelligence," he says, "and men love the sexiness." ■