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'Trouble': Nicholas Sistler Channels Kinsey Porn

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Some things can't be told. The consequences would be unbearable, or so it seems to the one who would have to do the telling.

So they stay hidden. Over and dead if you're lucky; festering if you're not. And sometimes, even when you've kept your silence (Penn State comes to mind), they have a way of breaking through.

These unspeakable, seamy pockets of life are the driving force in "Trouble," an exhibit of small-scale, big-impact prints and paintings by Nicholas Sistler

that opens Friday at Tony Fitzpatrick's Firecat Projects. The 30 pieces in the show are built around images from the pornography collection of the Kinsey Institute.

The photographs, rendered by Sistler in the paintings and incorporated digitally in the prints, are mostly stiletto-and-garter-belt fantasies from the first half of the 20th century. He drops them into cartoonish but sinister interiors, viewed from a perspective so close to the ground it could belong to a fallen adult, but is more likely that of a child. There's a range of content, including the dreamy eroticism of Reverie, which juxtaposes images of two aroused but isolated adults, but the most common theme is bondage: the occasional man, but mostly women, trussed and subjugated.

Sistler says his work wasn't always like this. The School of the Art Institute graduate and former performance artist, who now works out of his home and studio in Bucktown, was happily engrossed in something completely different a decade ago, when his art suddenly took a "drastic turn." He'd just completed an abecedarium—an alphabet series of three-inch-square gouache paintings illustrating aspects of art, from aperture to Zoetrope. Witty and whimsical, the series was so child-friendly the Illinois Art Education Association made a poster of it. But in the last stages of this sunny and safe work, Sistler says, he'd begun to get a different set of marching orders. While he was painting bunnies and dinosaurs, he recalls his muses whispering, ever more urgently, "You must work with pornography."

He began researching porn in 2002, looking for something beyond the "boring stuff" rampant on the Internet. In 2004 a friend put him in touch with Catherine Johnson-Roehr, curator at Indiana University's Kinsey Institute, which has a collection of nearly 48,000 vintage photographs. Sistler says the collection, organized in 46 categories from "anus" to "zoophilia," was mostly donated by the public.

It starts with daguerreotypes and includes images that had clearly been in police custody. In two pilgrimages to Bloomington, he perused about 8,000 of them and brought home copies of 250 that he thought he could work with.

Sistler hasn't done large-scale art since his student days. He says he cured himself of painter's block when he picked up a two-inch-by-three-inch piece of paperboard and completed a tiny painting on it in two hours. That was in the early 1990s; now, after a series of eye surgeries, he's working under a magnifying glass, in even more meticulous detail: his Kinsey-collection BDSM fantasies are elements in four-inch-square environments. And he says that's the optimal size when working with images made to be used as sexual stimuli. They're not large enough to make people uncomfortable, but—in a nifty paradox—they force the viewer to move in so close, there's a better chance he or she will actually enter the world of the painting. And when they do, Sistler's strategic, trapped-child vantage point makes everything in that world look ominously monumental. The power balance between viewer and image "flips," and that's the moment that captures what the Kinsey photos are really about.

Sistler is a master of the ironic use of color: the claustrophobic but seductive interiors in his paintings (influenced by a Hyde Park childhood with frequent visits to Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle) are saturated in Popsicle hues: an aqua door swings back on a wall of dense blueberry, revealing a glimpse of blazing lemony stairwell. But his finely detailed black-and-white prints hold their own. Their stark palette, like the noir films that are his most obvious influence, invests them with a relentless menacing air, while the photo-polymer process used to produce them also allows for stunningly nuanced gradations. They glow. Both the Art Institute and the Block Museum have purchased boxed sets.

Which brings us to a sorry footnote: those stunning prints were a collaborative process with Sistler's printer, Anchor Graphics, which is now facing extinction. Established 20 years ago by husband-and-wife team David Jones and Marilyn Propp, Anchor gave up its independent nonprofit status in 2006 to become a part of Columbia College, and since then has brought both members of the public and artists like Sistler to the school. But Columbia's going through a "prioritization" process, and it's looking increasingly like Anchor is no longer a priority. Jones says the dean, the provost, and a faculty committee have all recommended that the print shop be phased out or eliminated. When Columbia president Warrick Carter weighs in next month, Anchor's fate could be sealed. "Right now it's just a recommendation. We're hanging on to that," Jones says. "Even though my heart tells me otherwise."