

On the Swing Set

Naomi Harris focuses on an American pasttime

writer Stephanie Garuti

FROM POLYAMOROUS NURSES TO BISEXUAL senior citizens, Naomi Harris takes extraordinary portraits of seemingly ordinary Americans in her new book, *America Swings*. *Playgirl* caught up with the New York-based photographer to talk about the project, which documents the underground lifestyle of swingers from coast to coast.

Playgirl: What inspired you to photograph swingers?

Harris: I had been photographing senior citizens in Miami Beach. On days that I wasn't shooting I would go hang out at this beach called Haulover, which was a nude beach. Once I was a regular I began to photograph people there. I knew that many of the beach-goers were also swingers. This one friend of mine, a man in his 60s, asked me to accompany him to a club one Sunday night as he needed a "date" to go (swing clubs rarely allow single men to attend). I figured, why not? My curiosity was killing me. Everyone came dressed up in sexy attire but I couldn't stop thinking of them as ordinary people—teachers, accountants, bank tellers—who all have these regular, everyday lives but were here loading up at the buffet and then 20 minutes later going in to the back room for an orgy. I found it both fascinating and funny at the same time. I knew I had to photograph this phenomenon. No one else had.



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How did you select locations, and approach these people and ask to photograph them?

I joined various online groups and from those found many of the parties. I also would simply Google "swinger" and the location I was interested in. I wanted to make sure that I photographed a wide variety of the U.S., giving the project a good



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representation of all Americans. I would phone or e-mail the organizer to get permission to attend. Sometimes I would be turned down, but more often than not I was welcomed.

How would you describe "swingers" collectively?

There really is no one type. That's what I wanted to show in this project—that the participants come from all sorts of different socio-economic backgrounds, as well as political and religious. I would be at parties where fights would break out between Democrats and Republicans. Or where you'd have a couple come and fuck all Saturday night but have to leave early for church on Sunday morning.

How did you go about taking the pictures? Did you catch the swingers in the act, or were they posed?

I did a combination and I think it's obvious which are which. I wanted to have posed pictures to show how ordinary and average these people were. They don't look like porn stars, rather, they could be your next-door neighbor. In these pictures I controlled the lighting and asked the subjects to look proud and stoic, resembling portrait photography from the turn of the century. The other pictures, where people are in the act, were definitely not posed. I was told by many that they were turned on by being photographed, but these people were having sex for themselves, not for my camera.

Was there any hesitation from any of the models?

Sometimes. If someone didn't seem fully into it I just passed on them. Sometimes that meant losing some really great subjects but this project was meant to be a collaboration and I didn't want to "out" anyone.

Is there a message you want people to come away with after seeing your photographs?

I was interested in the fact that this is such a prevalent yet underground part of our society, but I want people to come to their own conclusions about the lifestyle. I tried to take an unbiased approach and document what goes on behind closed doors. I didn't want to pass judgement on these individuals.

What is your impression of this lifestyle? Did it change at all after your experience with these people?

Seeing all these people having so much sex, with these insatiable appetites, I realized that I am actually quite ordinary and boring when it comes to sex and I much prefer monogamy. That's not to say it isn't okay for others—I'm just old fashioned.

America Swings is available at www.taschen.com.

