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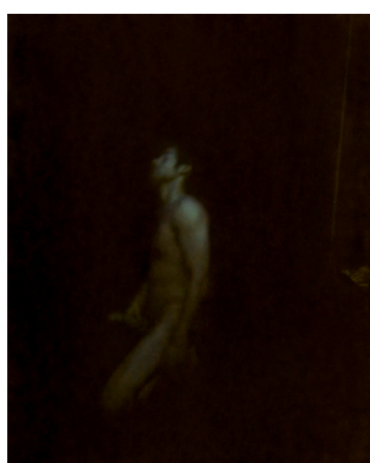
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GALLERIES

Male Sexuality, Recast in Retro Surroundings #NSFW

by Patrick Neal on February 6, 2013

Next to Baruch College on East 25th street is the intriguing red-lit entrance of [The Carlton Arms Hotel](#). The check-in desk sits in a foyer that is a feat of spectacular kitsch excess — think the [Scharf Shack](#) and [Pewee's Playhouse](#) rolled into one. The hotel, which has the zany energy and personality of a youth hostel, has opened two of its rooms for a small photography exhibit of Aneta Bartos's work.



Aneta Bartos, *Brian*, 2012, Inkjet print, 8 x 10 inches, Edition 1/5 +2AP, (Courtesy Jon Feinstein).

The show, entitled [Boys](#), includes 12 small-scale photos depicting men in the act of masturbating. Actual rooms in the Carlton Arms serve as the settings where the photos were taken, and then, after being printed as inkjet editions, the prints were wittily rehung on the premises. Bartos has shot the men with an open aperture, simultaneously absorbing the outdoor light while capturing the act as it occurred. The results are rich and haunting; the boys are sexually-charged specters glimpsed through a thick, murky atmosphere.

In his statement for the show, curator [Jon Feinstein](#) mentions Bartos's interest in "paying homage to the pictorial movements of artists such as [Julia Margaret Cameron](#) and [Edward Steichen](#)," and there is a definite aura of late 19th and early 20th century stylings to the work. The photos all appear monochromatic or with a sepia

tone tinge, sometimes featuring a hot orange or pale green emerging from the gloom. In the darkened environment, forms blend, obscuring definition, giving the figures an expressive, painterly quality with an [Ashcan School](#)-style grittiness.



Aneta Bartos, "Scott," 2010 (Courtesy Jon Feinstein)

Each photo is titled after the name of the man pictured. The models are made distinct by body hair, tattoos, and their varying degrees of muscularity. Because floors merge with walls and figures get enveloped in darkness, the compositions take on dreamy, ambiguous readings. Igor could be reclining on a lounge or stranded on the beach, framed by palm trees against a sultry sky or maybe stuck to wallpaper. Brian looks like a repentant prisoner locked in a dungeon and Nick resembles John the Baptist lost in the desert. Frank could be a blacksmith stoking coals. Many of the men, in the contortions of cathouse denizens, arch their backs and legs, throwing their heads back as they pleasure themselves.



Rooms 1A and 4A at the Carlton Arms Hotel

The fin de siècle vibe is echoed in the installation space, as the photos hang in two rooms done up to look and feel like old down-and-out flop houses straight out of [The House of Mirth](#). Walls are painted in dour olive green, red velvet curtains hang in the windows, and there are old-fashioned telephones, sinks, radios, fireplaces, bordello lamps, grandfather clocks, desks, and hardwood floors. A bed with metal posts sits in a corner, covered in vintage-patterned fabrics. The photos are displayed in incised black metal and gold leaf wood frames.



Aneta Bartos, "Igor" (Courtesy Jon Feinstein)

It's a refreshing conceit to have the female gaze cast upon the sexualized men, an act that could be politicized in all sorts of ways. Yet nothing here suggests the project was anything but good fun, the men fully enjoying themselves. If anything, I was transported back to the 1970s and '80s with the abundant depictions of male sexuality at the hands of many gay male artists. Bartos's frank depictions of male vulnerability, desolation, and sexual hedonism bring to mind the work of [Peter Hujar](#), the paintings of [Hugh Steers](#) and even [David Wojnarowicz's "Rimbaud Series"](#), all work produced in the shadow of the AIDS crisis.

The mood here is entirely different from that dark time. Knowing that these photos were staged and installed within a playful shifting of time periods and props makes for an exuberant, layered premise. It's a visually rewarding show, one you want to revisit just for the sensual fun of it.

Aneta Bartos: Boys runs through February 21 at [The Carlton Arms Hotel](#) (160 East 25th Street).

Tagged as: [Aneta Bartos](#), [Boys](#), [Carlton Arms Hotel](#), [Jon Feinstein](#), [photography](#)

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