

## Big Gay Questions

By: FRANK HOLLIDAY

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Filthy Gorgeous:

Self Portraits by John Arsenault

Clampart Gallery

521-531 W. 25th St., ground fl.

Through Jun. 23.

Tue.-Sat. 11 a.m. - 6 p.m.

646-230-0020

John Arsenault, a photographer originally from Massachusetts, now living in New York City, is having his second solo exhibition at Clampart Gallery in Chelsea.

The gallery is hung with 25 glossy color self-portraits, which blur the boundaries between the fiction and nonfiction of his life as a gay man. Often glamorous and funny, the photos indulge in self-gratification and honor the me-me-me consciousness of today. Gay stereotypes are touched, jabbed, and laughed at as he embraces his life.

Many of the photos chronicle his relationship with his partner, whose participation is touching, fantasized, and all dressed up. What I love about this group of photos is how they thumb their nose at "normal" life - which of late seems to be the political goal for gay people - and scream "We don't strive to be normal because we are fabulous." Self-portraits have always been an interesting tradition in

art. In painting, they have always been arrived at by looking in the mirror, begging a critique of the underlying narcissism, but also taking us beyond the artist gaze into the artist's soul. With photography, self-portraits explore the artist's interior life more as a cultural critique, with the image functioning as the reflection of what he or she identifies as the self. Living amongst New York's fantasized interiors, overproduced theme clubs, and film and fashion-forward gay-specific signified realities, it can be difficult to discern the boundaries between the real and non-real. At what point does the constructed become real?

Arsenault has created a narrative of his life and he is the star. We decide whether it's real or, if we can relate to the life portrayed in his photographs, constructed in relationship to our own identities.

This New Realism genre of photography has well known apostles - Nan Goldin and Jack Pierson come to mind. The constructed self/reality photos of Cindy Sherman and Delorca consciously examine identity as a social creation, while the hyper-surrealism of LaChapelle pushes the envelope. Arsenault absorbs and morphs these genres and creates a hybrid of his own. He embraces many ideas of stereotypical gay identities by dressing up like a cowboy, a drag queen, and a pinup boy in a raccoon hat, as well as a tree-hugging lumberjack bear.

My favorites are two extreme close-up portraits of himself in bed having sex or just basking in the afterglow on a striped pillow. These are the most revealing and disarming of the bunch. By including these photographs, he sets up a deeper foundation, which he can push and pull away from. Beneath all the glamour and makeup is just this guy named John asking all the big questions.



John Arsenault's "I Have a Pimple" (1998), left, signed, titled, dated, and numbered, verso; chromogenic print 30 x 30/20 x 20 inches. "Boston Boy" (2000), signed, titled, dated, and numbered, verso; chromogenic print 30 x 30/20 x 20 inches.