

Opposite: Brian Smith's shot of Inga Ingénue (also known as the Little Blond Bomb), part of a fresh firmament of stars bringing the fine art of burlesque to a whole new generation.

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THE NEW BURLESQUE

MODERN REFLECTIONS ON A VENERABLE SHOWBIZ TRADITION

BY FRANKLIN MELENDEZ

You can't blame a photographer for being drawn into a good game of tease-and-reveal — and the flourishing world of neo-burlesque provides ample fodder, with its nubile starlets, unabashed glamour and outrageous personalities. Although the photographers featured here share a common interest in this colorful realm, each approaches the genre with his or her own distinct vision, providing a unique spin on the American form of this art, one that's rooted in the 19th-century showbiz tradition of vaudeville and variety. And they all offer intriguing insights into the modern renaissance of burlesque, which has risen from underground clubs and bars to produce mainstream stars like Dita Von Teese. "If you look at the recent economy," photographer Brian Smith notes, "there are a lot of parallels to the classic days of burlesque, amidst the Depression in the '30s." It might be that this latest incarnation offers a much-needed escape through decadence and fantasy — or is it that we simply can't stay away from a good show?

OPPOSITE: © BRIAN SMITH





Smith's portraits of Tempest Storm (opposite), Dixie Evans (right) and two members of the Amazing Knicker Kittens Burlesque Revue (bottom right). "I approached it as if I were shooting a starlet for *Vanity Fair* — I wanted to treat them like performers from Hollywood," he says. "I'm a big fan of '40s glamour, but I didn't want to take from that era directly. I wanted to create an homage, yet something that's also current."

BRIAN SMITH

Portraits of yesteryear's glamour girls reveal audacious wit, undimmed bravura and unabashed exhibitionism

Miami Beach-based photographer Brian Smith is known for his high-octane portraits of larger-than-life personalities, including celebrities and star athletes. The flamboyant world of burlesque and its over-the-top icons was a natural draw, he says, though he happened upon it by chance: "I was watching CNN one day and Dixie Evans popped up, and I just thought, 'Wow, that is the type of assignment I wish someone would give me!'" Once touted as the "Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque," Evans is also the curator of the Burlesque Hall of Fame, a museum celebrating the erotic art of tease-and-reveal in Las Vegas, which runs an annual reunion for the headliners of the 1940s, '50s and '60s. For Smith, what began as a self-assigned project in 1993 developed into a decade-plus journey to capture the stars of classic burlesque — women like Dee Milo, Satan's Angel and Tempest Storm, who acted for film director Russ Meyer — in all their current glory. Far from a chorus line of ingénues, Smith's images attest to the power of these women, now in their 60s, 70s and 80s, who have lost none of their spark or penchant for provocation. "This may be one of the few times in recorded history when a photographer talked a girl into her clothes," recalls Smith. Since American burlesque, like vaudeville, is part of the fabric of the country, the project also served as a journey into American history. "When we began, this was a dying art, and what has been most rewarding is that we've been able to witness the resurgence of this craft with a new generation of young women honoring burlesque."

BEHIND THE LENS

Smith took to shooting in the desert in the '90s, and in the beginning used a medium-format camera and short telephoto lenses. "The desert was a beautiful but difficult environment. We always worked with big lights, and at one point we had a medium roller stand held down by ten 35-pound sandbags. The wind was so strong that day, it bent a steel stand."

