

The following excerpt is from a short biographical sketch of pornographic actress and performance artist, Madison Young, foremost voice of feminism in San Francisco's queer community. Sources are listed; endnotes are not included.

The BDSM Alternative

“Sexual diversity exists, not everyone likes to do the same things, and people who have different sexual preferences are no sick, stupid, warped, brainwashed, under duress, dupes of the patriarchy, products of bourgeois decadence, or refugees from bad child-rearing practices. The habit of explaining away sexual variation by putting it down needs to be broken.”

Gayle Rubin

Feminist Writer

In the world of BDSM, there are sadists and masochists, dominants and submissives, tops and bottoms. These roles are often played out in clubs or parties within a highly scripted environment. But regardless of labels worn or roles played, BDSM is a lifestyle. Madison summarizes the scene this way: “There are different ways to engage in BDSM,” and it is “more focused around communities and relationships” than more conventional sexualities. She continues: “Regardless of how often one participates in the lifestyle, . . . it is part of their sexuality and their (sexual) orientation . . . And although some people may engage in role playing either at clubs or on designated nights, it is still an innate part of who they are.” She further asserts that communication is the key, learning the preferences of your partner and others involved in the community of players, “talking with them about their boundaries, what they’re interested in exploring and going on a journey with them, taking them on a journey through different psychological and physical aspects, exploring different sensations.” Madison explains that this disclosure is vital, “having a dialogue between two people and negotiating what their boundaries are, what they’re interested in, what their limits are, what their soft limits are as for as what is an

absolute no, of where they don't want to go or what might be a trigger for them and then things that might be a fear for them." In the world of hetero-normative sexuality, often referred to as "vanilla" by those in alternative sexual environments, sharing erotic thoughts, feelings, and desires is not often discussed or negotiated between partners. An individual may expect his/her partner to intuitively understand what desires he/she feels and when it doesn't happen, disappointment and a lack of fulfillment results. Those who are quick to judge the queer culture or fetish community ought to take note of the BDSM credo. As Madison notes the end product can be invigorating, "just the fact alone that it's so based on communication and asserting your sexuality and consensuality (sic) can be empowering for someone, for people who haven't in the past felt like they had a strong sense of their sexuality or strong control over their sexual self." Feminism can be the basis of this empowerment. Madison asserts, "(w)hen a woman is taking control of her sexuality and owning it and exploring it and not ashamed of her body. When a woman is embracing her orgasms and pushing her sexual self to new dimensions. That is a feminist act."

For those outside the BDSM community, the scene can be confusing and frightening. First impressions can yield a violent world where some suffer pain, degradation, and humiliation for the sexual pleasure of others. But this is far from reality. According to psychotherapist Dr. Charles Moser, the scene "is probably the least understood and the most feared sexual behavior." He adds, "SM is a safe sexual game, it is role-playing in the sexual arena, and what is thought of as weird, kinky, and a rare phenomenon actually is not." The BDSM arena is not about violence, forced sex, rape, torture, and coercion; in fact, it is a "passionate, erotic, . . . sometimes fearful (but also a) trust building" experience. Madison agrees. She says, "the bottom is not always submissive in the situation, but is often . . . being guided" through sexual delights by a watchful top. She reminds everyone, "bottoms can be great guides as well." (36) The use of safe words (*green* for "I'm ok, keep going," *yellow* for "back off a little," to *red* "we have to stop," being among the most common) puts the submissive in charge because the safe words keep the scene under constant scrutiny. The sub may be screaming "stop!, don't!, too much!" yet play continues because the energy is flowing with the cries enhancing the

eroticism of the moment. Experienced tops, highly valued in the BDSM community, are attuned to the submissive's needs and constantly monitor the emotions and sensations experienced by both players. But all play ceases immediately if the safe word is used. The sub's welfare is of chief importance and it is never the desire of the top to do physical harm. Madison is adamant about this aspect of BDSM play, she says, "the submissive (is) in control of what's happening." Describing the rules of play, she adds of the submissive, "You're the one laying down the law of what you want to do, what journey you're wanting to go on, and you're engulfing all this energy and just raised to this amazing higher state." The role of the dominant is to facilitate the submissive's experience and take satisfaction from administering pleasure to the bottom. In the final analysis, the irony of the BDSM game is that the dominant cedes control and transfers the energy to the submissive. Candida Royalle quietly observes, "It is really the dominant who serves the submissive" and may account for why many BDSM participants will switch roles in different play sessions.

BDSM devotees, whether gay or straight, share community with other gays, lesbians, and transgendered. All are sexual minorities and seek pleasure within their own circles, especially in the pornography business. In fact, the whole of pornography --- its performers (gay and straight), producers, directors, film crews --- often express a sense of the familial. Incorporate a sexual minority and its practices within the porn business and the feeling intensifies. The safety of the group buffers criticism from the outside, but it also fosters elitism. Feminist writer Wendy McElroy explains, "(t)he attitudes toward sex in porn circles was . . . Sex should be flaunted . . . shocking people should be part of the fun; and, we are the sexual sophisticates, we are the sexual elite." She quickly adds, however, that in talking with those in porn, "I had encountered a strange blend of suspicious hostility and total openness. . . . They were used to being rejected, even despised, by the people around them." Yet as they "hungered for decent treatment and acceptance," they also "had acquired the survival skill of automatically treating others with the contempt they fully expected to receive back." Such attitudes are not surprising. The public has traditionally condemned sexual minorities and pornography, but

McElroy's words emphasize Madison's courage and resolve in confronting society with a combination of both to introduce new ideas and break down barriers.

With the 21st century and the technology it brings, home based and mobile, cultural views are expanding and acceptance of alternative lifestyles has followed suit. The world is suddenly more cosmopolitan and pornography has become commonplace. Madison is the face of the new age of talent and directors, she is indeed a sexual sophisticate. But where she differs from the timeworn business of porn is her commitment to teaching, guiding, and welcoming others into her world where sexual fluidity is the norm and everyone can participate, the only requirement is tearing through prejudice and exposing one's sexual shame and guilt to the light of day. Madison believes "(w)e all have erotic tissue regardless of our gender or sexual identity and we all enjoy sexual pleasure and stimulation of the erotic tissue. We are all fully developed complex beings that are not meant to exist in binary constructs in neat little packages." To inform everyone that sexuality complex, highly erotic, and often confined to categories and preferences, is Madison's self-proclaimed mission and it is a part of her political activism.

Madison's art and performance --- political statements in their own right --- speak to McElroy's findings. Feelings of rejection and contempt among sexual minorities still exist but are withering as legitimacy grows in a society that is becoming more exposed to the pornography universe. Madison's feminism, her workshops, performance art, and gallery are steps in that direction. As she and others travel to film and lecture, the "community" of those who explore and display various sexualities will expand and acceptance will grow, and whatever elitism survives will diminish.

Sources

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