



## BUNNY YEAGER *funny bunny*

by Nora Landes

Look out, Jack Frost! The North Pole has gotten hot hot hot. This year, even Santa has been a little naughty. What's *Cf* Saint Nick got in his sleigh this year? Here's a hint: it's already unwrapped. A pair of full, perky breasts, seemingly defying gravity; a carefully controlled, concave waist—an ideal nook for one's, or another's, hands; hips thrust back loading down, down, down to a set of magical legs, polished off with perfectly pointed toes. And those eyes! Those eyes shatter the illusion of personal space as she gives you a look that turns your heart uptempo. Top it off with a cherry red cap and woo-ee!, you've got enough heat to keep you warm 'til spring.

OK, we got that out of our systems. Bunny Yeager's photographs of pin-up girls and mid-century sex symbols are exactly that: images of busty bombshells in all their bikini-clad and topless glory. Go ahead and peruse the curves of Bettie Page's body as you contemplate the impracticality of being totally bare-assed between two live leopards. Who cares? Self-preservation be damned. These women somehow manage to look perfect; their hair set and cheeks rouged amid crashing waves, holding the leash of some exotic animal, a lei strategically draped over an errant ripple. With every image comes the same thought: *humina humina*. Before long, we lose interest in the models themselves; their womanly frames fade to nothing more than plasticine caricatures of ladytron perfection.

The more we gaze at each photo, the more we become aware that each angle of the hips is perfectly drafted to maximize hourglass figures and that, somehow, throw physics into the wind, as the tumultuous sea air blows her coil into a radiant, sun-drenched halo. Yeager's subjects are beautiful in their own right; this much is obvious, but it cannot be enough. Natural beauty does not make a captivating photograph on

its own. Now, it is the photographer we are attracted to. What is behind, more than in front of, the camera makes us swoon. Who better to capture these sumptuous models on film than one of their own?

Yeager herself had a successful career as a model and was a regular on the Florida beauty pageant circuit. It was through this channel that she entered the world of photography. Looking to inflate her modeling portfolio, she took matters into her own hands and began shooting self-portraits, the final product always in direct correlation to her own self-definition. The same woman in front and behind the camera. Her self-portraits present an introspective vision of female identity untouched by the taint of society's patriarchal standards. Even in her photographs of other women, Yeager still occupies both positions. After first photographing her in 1954, Yeager transformed Bettie Page's public image from performative and fetishistic to the empowered pin-up that came to subvert the genre itself. It is the photographer's vision, her understanding of womanhood and female sexuality, that is translated on film, regardless of whether her likeness is. Yeager's photographs pose a striking femininity that transcend all the contradictory post-war images of women as either infantilized or hyper-sexualized. There is an unspoken understanding between the photographer and model, which allows for a completely different type of intimacy than that which occurs between a male photographer and his female subject.

Although often featured in men's magazines like *Playboy*, Yeager's photographs hold little regard for men's approval. They seem to exist outside of masculinity and its power to shape and control femininity. They are more 'girls just wanna have fun' than 'girls gone wild.' Neither pornographic nor making some sort of second-wave feminist statement about

Bunny Yeager. All images courtesy of Gallery Schuster, Berlin.



liberating our bodies from misogynistic oppression, these pictures remind us that a sexualized woman is no less in control of her own agency than a bra-burner. The view that pin-ups cannot be feminist is oppressive in itself. In Yeager's interpretation, the pin-up genre of photography can be used as a platform to exhibit a pluralistic view of female sexuality. At once, performing is both a form of entertainment and self-expression. The question is, how can women define sexuality in the public eye? How can they define it for themselves? Do these two definitions have common ground? An entire generation of female photogra-

phers followed in Yeager's footsteps, looking through the lens for answers to these questions. Diane Arbus, Cindy Sherman, and Nan Goldin, to name just a few, were each influenced by Yeager's dynamic affirmation of female multi-dimensionality and autonomy. Her legacy, as an artist, goes hand in hand with her legacy as a paradigm-shifting figure in the history of the feminist movement. Her body of work does not present the image of a liberated woman, but of a woman who needs no liberation. In one photo after another, Yeager presents a subject who exists on her own terms, entirely independent of the fetters of a male-dominated society.

Bunny Yeager. Above: caption to come. Opposite: caption to come.



Bunny Yeager



Bunny Yeager: Betty Page.



Bunny Yeager: caption to come.