



# Art & Design

Barbara DeGenevieve: “Objectifying the Subject: Exploitation, Political (In)Correctness and Ethical Dilemmas” | February 20, 2005 | By Jason Mojica



Barbara DeGenevieve, *Gordon*, 2005.

As the story goes, Winston Churchill is sitting in a bar with a female member of Parliament. “If a man offered you a million pounds to sleep with him, would you do it?” he asks. The woman thinks about it for a moment and replies, “Yes, I think I would.”

“Would you sleep with me for five pounds?” he counters.

“Certainly not; what kind of woman do you think I am?”

“Well, we’ve already established that; now we’re just haggling over price.”

The subjects of Barbara DeGenevieve’s work are homeless black men. She finds them on the street, then offers them some money, a hotel room and dinner in exchange for allowing her to photograph them in nude, sexualized poses.

Does that make you uncomfortable? Good. Because now you’re armed with just enough moral superiority to be bowled over by DeGenevieve’s work.

Viewed out of context, these portraits are intimate and peculiar. There seems to be a high level of comfort between the model and subject, the lighting is lush, and the only thing that throws us off is that we’re not used to seeing fleshy, naked, scarred dudes in such languorous poses.

Context, however, is everything, and DeGenevieve gives us a glimpse into the making of these photos in a video (adjacent to the exhibit) shot by her assistant. Some of the men are shy, others gregarious. We don’t see indignity; we see guys who are pleased as punch to be in a posh room, hamming it up for the camera. While this extinguishes some ethical concerns, it raises new ones. We live in a world based on transactions, some more palatable than others. Where we draw the line says a lot about us, and it’s not always pleasant.

**Mojica, Jason. “Barbara DeGenevieve: ‘Objectifying the Subject: Exploitation, Political (In)Correctness and Ethical Dilemmas.’” *TimeOut Chicago*, February 20, 2005.**