



# Shopping for Pleasure

## Julie Sando



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**Meadow Brook Art Gallery**

Oakland University

**Shopping for Pleasure**  
**Julie Sando**

January 15 – February 27, 2005

Curated by Dick Goody

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## Interview

**Dick Goody:** *Is your work “description” or “narrative?”*

**Julie Sando:** Description. I am just trying to create photographs that function as social documents and I ask the viewer to notice the subtlety of that.

*Regarding portraiture, are you cynical about the notion of photographic truth — is the portrait the worst place to look for photographic truth or is it the best place to find “truthful” human interaction?*

I deliberately employ the visual trappings of conventional straight or documentary photography in order to address our culturally perceived notions of ‘truth.’ But our society’s reliance and investment in portraiture makes it a difficult place to discuss other universal concepts and emotions. I prefer room interiors for authentic encounters. With these photographs, the viewer can pan across the various articles on display and like an archeologist; excavate these objects in search of their cultural meaning and significance. This experience is much like gathering empirical research and certainly feels authentic to me.

*How do you apply this when you’re photographing yourself? What sort of truth and lies are you perpetrating when you are the “actor” in your work?*

Truth and lies – you are on to me. I will manipulate ‘photographic truth’ to my advantage when it suits me, but delight in blurring fantasy with fiction when it comes to the self-portraits. If you are thinking of “The Working Girl” 2001, I used myself as the model because I truthfully identified with a fictitious film protagonist. According to Guy Debord, celebrities are spectacular representations of living human beings who come to be perceived as specialists of apparent life. They serve as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the fragmented productive lives that they actually live. In “Self Styled Shopper”, the items in my shopping cart belong to my alter ego who would never fill a shopping cart with frozen pizzas. It is not meant to be an exposé, but rather a psychosocial commentary on boredom. There is a visible otherness there – a psychic fracture in the pattern of everyday life.

*In photographs of yourself you become a kind of celebrity. Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and simulacra suggests that the media redefines things like politicians and pop stars into idealized models that have little connection with the reality of governing or making music. What sort of hyperrealism and disconnect is suggested in your work?*

I’m just thinking about the different hyperreal methods used by the media, artists, or film-makers such as lighting, filtration, and specialty lenses to exaggerate and amplify the ‘real’. I choose to use natural lighting and standard lenses to create disquieting images that, hopefully, leave the viewer with the impression that reality contains more than what can be easily mediated. I suppose that is a disconnect.

*Are your photographs generally images or signs?*

Signs. It’s ironic because I’ve been actually photographing signage lately and I’m constantly cruising the city for signs while driving. With “Best Sensuous Hands,” I initially became fascinated with how the storefront windows for local massage parlors function as semiotic codes – advertising a service that is difficult to advertise. These photographs are very much like that.

*Your portraits are descriptive and so was the “Standing Her Ground” series, however, “Best Sensuous Hands,” the massage parlor series, while presenting a subjective sequence, the individual photographs actually, except for the acuteness of the angle, seem stridently objective. Is this a new shift or have I got it wrong?*

There has been a shift. I have always been interested in monumentalizing the common experience, but I am increasingly interested in playing with images which present objective and credible views to the viewer so that they might question the formal devices, the social institutions, and central metaphors of these representations. No narrative, just the links and collisions of the pure forms put on the couch as symptoms to be diagnosed.

*How removed from romanticism and sentimentality do you consider your work – I ask this because I think the trajectory of your work seems to have a ruthless, dispassionate quality, although at times a certain poignancy bleeds through.*

Photography can either be sentimental or ruthless and sentimentality has never been something I have indulged in. I think of the images as tough and detached. I see it as my responsibility as an image maker to make an unsolicitous visual report from the sidelines (or sidewalks) and allow the viewer the freedom to construct their own meanings.

*In the series you call “This Must Be The Place” – portraits of people and their homes – the people in these images, do you have to know them – I mean be friendly with them – and what’s the relationship of the person to the place?*

They are not really friends; they are friends of friends or acquaintances. These men are all married and I find them ‘photo worthy.’ I am interested to see how these heterosexual couples negotiate the decoration of the most loaded room in the house [bedroom]; after all it is the conventional sexual arena. Not to mention that commercial culture demands that we ask ourselves to select home furnishings which simultaneously define us and embody our tastes and values. What then becomes obvious to the viewer is the couple’s level of investment in these culturally shared expressions of taste, values, and – sexuality.

*The words “ideal” and “fake” are used to define realism in photography. As the invisible (and often visible) author are you using realism as a device to create the illusion of reality or is your work more closely aligned with fiction?*

It’s all real. Even when there are elements of theatre, the recreation of those scenarios has been prompted from actually lived experiences.



**Rudimentary**

2004 (serial c-prints) each 21.5" x 27" mounted on gator board

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## Self Styled Shopper

2003 (c-print) 32" x 40" mounted on gator board

## Locating Julie Sando

Julie Sando has been staking out massage parlors in a recent body of work. The level of disengagement from the subject in these new photographs, *Best Sensuous Hands* and its accompanying series *Rudimentary* (both 2004), is startling. Her most detached work to date, these site photographs convey an acute clinical distance emphasizing the deadpan banal pathos of these low facades and their entranceways. Mixing the metonymic and symbolic, "Tropical Relaxing Massage," "Oriental Rose," "Head Shoulder Waist Leg Foot," and "Cleopatra Massage and Spa" are some of the photographed texts that lure in prospective shoppers. Shot in prosaic daylight, all glamour is leached from these sampled images. Are they base facades or is there something brave in their fatigued doggedness to stay in business; are they documentary photographs, metaphors of alienation or is a social critique being perpetrated?

To some extent Sando has always kept her distance, but the detachment of the massage parlor images makes her self-portraits in comparison seem positively lush and allegorical. Locating Sando's work in the spectrum of contemporary photography might be more easily achieved if she concentrated on one area. However, the compartmentalization of her various interests provides her with greater opportunities to explore different discourses and it will become clear that her work yields parallel and common threads.

*Shopping for Pleasure* features photographs from the last four years which range from self-portraiture, to site photographs, to narratives exploring identity. All Sando's images are committed at domestic/urban ground zero. Their vernacular currency is the stark social anthropology of urban sprawl reflecting the existential tragedy of the commonplace. Her site-specific massage parlor color prints epitomize this bland hopelessness, which in every sense is the antithesis of Utopia. Historically the roots of these works are the same as those of Walker Evans: the routine and incidental as a repository of theme, content and social commentary.

Her familiarity with these locations, i.e., her home environment, reveals a particular sense of place, a specific geographical/social imprint. Certain photographers exploit their locale in this way. In the early 1970s for example William Egglestone made the photographs that were to make his name, primarily in Memphis, his hometown.

The subject of an important international exhibition of photography recently was "engagement and estrangement," that is to say "an engagement with the subject matter yet at the same time a distance or estrangement in its presentation;" *Cruel and Tender*, an encyclopedic exhibition of realist photography, traveled from London to Cologne in 2003-2004. When it opened in London at the Tate Modern, paradoxically, across town Cindy Sherman was having her lush/louche mini-retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery. *Cruel and Tender*, if not a backlash against narrative excess, was a re-examination of realist priorities. It drew a clear distinction between realism and what Walter Benjamin disparagingly called "arty journalism." Sando's site photographs would certainly not have looked out of place as part of *Cruel and Tender's* stark realism; not quite so her self-portraits.

In *Separate Spheres*, Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, 2001 (exhibition and catalogue), amongst other things Sando delved into the myth and demystification of professional





### The Working Girl

2001 (c-print) 84" x 48" mounted on gator board

women who "have it all." Culturally, television commercials tell us that the modern working woman lives an enviable existence. Sure, she's busy, but she's perfect looking and brushes by her faultless children in complete control of the flawless regime that has been created for her; a regime which balances work, domesticity and the admiring gaze of her spouse. *The Working Girl*, 2001, was featured in this exhibition and makes its reappearance here. Recalling a double-page spread from an architectural magazine, the photograph's

setting oozes nouveau-riche privilege – a cliché of upwardly mobile conformist materialism (actually an extant high-end suburban Ontario home). The paradox of the title, *The Working Girl*, resonates instantly. A woman vacuums the room in her underwear. Thematically, and art historically, Chardin and Boucher collide in a postmodern allegory of class, sex and the male gaze. In a Boucher painting the woman would function as an erotic device, reclining in passive compliance; in a Chardin, she would be a clothed maid asexually-a-sweeping.



But here (at last) the woman is empowered and takes control. A busy temporary presence, caught in pro-action, she's all a-blur and this photograph captures her in complete control of her destiny. The working girl, Sandó actually, will soon be off to her next assignment for this is a self-portrait. The strand here combines locale with narrative: a sense of North American entitlement with emancipation. At the same time, curiously, it is also a projection of Sandó's autobiography. She is a professor of art at the University of Windsor with an interest in image making, cultural studies, and feminist/post-feminist theory. The autobiographical aspect is tenuous until one realizes that Sandó's self-portraits are not that far removed from her own presence/personality. Certainly they are not as disconnected from reality as the pantomiming clown/cloning photographs of Cindy Sherman. *The Working Girl* and *Self Styled Shopper* (2003) are both images from Sandó's milieu, a milieu where she is able to function adroitly as a social chameleon. While Sandó herself is not a "normal" person, that is to say normal in the sense of normalcy personified in *Self Styled Shopper*, she is an artist – and they are different – but she is, however, a mother, a shopper: someone who functions socially within a shared context.

Conceptually, over the last twenty years photography has changed dramatically because the common currency of digital manipulation brings into question the camera's proverbial veracity. Of course such veracity has always been tenuous. Oscar Rejlander's assemblage techniques of the 1850s make the debate old-hat (Rejlander painstakingly constructed large composite photographs from multiple negatives). Issues about the "ideal" and the "fake" in photography are as old as the "artificiality" of the very first photographic image (whatever that may have been). Questions about authenticity aside, from the outset photography also explored invented narratives. Hippolyte Bayard's early self-portrait, *The Drowned Man* (1840) for example is brazenly fictitious. In making this photograph Bayard was apparently expressing dissent at the official support won by his archrival Louis-Jacque Daguerre – the French government sided with Daguerre's invention of the Daguerreotype (glass) over Bayard's rejected direct positive (paper) process.

Today digital techniques make photographic manipulation almost effortless. Another 19th century parallel can be drawn with the work of French painters from the 1850s and 60s. Freed from objective realism (because of the invention of photography) they began to explore more subjective, subversive agendas. Similarly, digital technology has liberated photography from its rickety allegiance with reality.

Amid these changes, Sandó's work, which incidentally has remained true to chemical rather than digital processes, has responded in two ways. Taking advantage of the freedom of choice engendered by liberation from realism she has on the one hand elected to knuckle down and make unflinchingly realist works. However, concurrently, in antithesis, it has also given her free reign to delve into irony, vis a vis her self-portraits. The separation between her two working methods is less a disconnect than a dialogue. It is rationalized by a prolific production and the fertile discourse it engenders. At once she seems to be presenting herself as social realist and at the same time as an allegorical post-feminist ironist. The extremity of each approach gives her greater freedom to experiment by provisionally adopting different guises.

Sandó's guises are formed from the fabric of her own sense of the contemporary vernacular drawn from the world around her. Even her photographs of massage parlors are a sort of

### Best Sensuous Hands

2004 (5 serial c-prints) each 32" x 48" mounted on gator board



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cultural memoir, albeit a disengaged socio-anthropological account of urban sexual alienation: the massage parlor as a metaphor for dissatisfaction, estrangement and loneliness.

Her choices are nothing if not idiosyncratic, but they are always rooted in her community. The people in *This Must Be The Place*, 2002-2004, are a case in point. Culled from the net of her circle of acquaintances, they are men she invites to be photographed in the intimate domain of their married quarters. Having gotten access (sanction by the entitlement that the lens invariably affords) she photographs these married men and their conjugal bedrooms. The bedroom is a metaphor for the distillation of the shared interests, choices and compromises within the hegemony of marriage. It's a private realm. There's something emasculating about seeing a grown man's bedroom, something simultaneously poignant and awkward. It's the same embedded pathos that runs through the seam of all Sando's work. Her gaze shifts from estrangement, engagement, to irony and back as she delves with varying degrees of fascination, empathy and scorn into the facades and interior of her separate spheres of interest.

Dick Goody, 2005





## Julie Sando

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2005 *Shopping for Pleasure*, Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan
- 2003 *Standing Her Ground*, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, Michigan
- 2001 *Separate Spheres*, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario
- 1996 *New Mother Demographic*, Laura Mesaros Gallery, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV (MFA Thesis Exhibition)
- 1995 *Uniform*, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario
- 1994 *Vanity, disguise, and the slipperiness of it all*, Accent Gallery, Morgantown, WV
- 1992 *Extremely Fragile*, Common Ground, Windsor, Ontario

### Group Exhibitions

- 2004 *Point of View*, School of Visual Arts Faculty Exhibition, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario
- 2003 *Faculty Show*, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
*Doin' the Louvre*, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario
- 2002 *20 External v.20*, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario  
*The Labouring Body*, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario  
*20/20*, Commemorative Plate Exhibition and Auction, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario
- 2001 *University of Windsor Faculty Show*, Thames Art Gallery, Chatham, Ontario  
*Artseen 9*, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario  
*It's All Academic*, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, Michigan  
*Examining Our Breasts*, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
*Labour Arts*, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario
- 2000 *Faculty Show*, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
*Ketchup to Art*, Leamington Arts Centre, Leamington, Ontario  
*Artseen 8*, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario  
*taking back the image: representations of women*, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Ontario

- 2000 *Living on the Fringe*, Capitol Theater, Windsor Feminist Theater Exhibition, Windsor, Ontario
- 1999 *Duty Free*, Detroit Contemporary, Detroit, Michigan  
*Faculty Show*, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario
- 1997 *Public Order*, 1997 Southwest Triennial, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario
- 1994 *Confrontations (and other sweet medicine)*, Third Floor South Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland
- 1993 *Southwest Biennial*, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
*Look '93*, Lambton Gallery, Sarnia, Ontario
- 1992 *Image/Text*, Detroit Artist's Market, Detroit, Michigan  
*BFA Exhibition*, LeBel Gallery, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario
- 1991 *Love and Romance*, Kenneith Gallery, Sarnia, Ontario  
*The Big Picture*, Odette Building, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario

### Catalogs

- Separate Spheres*. Windsor, Ontario: Art Gallery of Windsor, 2001
- The Windsor Salt*. Windsor, Ontario: Common Ground Editions, 1998.
- Public Order - 1997 Southwest Triennial*. Windsor, Ontario: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1997.
- Look '93*. Sarnia, Ontario: Lambton Gallery, 1993.
- Image/Text*. Detroit, Michigan: Detroit Artist's Market, 1992.

### Education

- 1997 MFA — West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
- 1992 BFA — University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario

### Best Sensuous Hands

2004 (5 serial c-prints) each 32" x 48" mounted on gator board

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**January 15 – February 27, 2005**

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