

**sex
machines**

photographs and interviews

This new sexual underground doesn't look anything like I thought it would.

While researching a story about independent inventors in the spring of 2002, I came across a small web community for inventors of sex machines. The group seemed tiny. It was made up of a handful of guys with names like “Inventor Bob” and “The Toymaker.” They were sharing ideas and solving problems in the classic garage-inventor manner. Amidst tips on reworking domestic hardware into complex sex machines, their posts would occasionally reveal glimpses into their surprisingly conventional-sounding, family-oriented personal lives.

And then there were the photographs—amateur snapshots of the machines inventors shared amongst themselves. These photographs of their creations, posed in cluttered garages and homey kitchens, were startling to me in their simple beauty. They were honest documents of otherworldly creations. I had to meet the people who made these things.

My first attempts to connect with the members of this group went nowhere. The group's moderator sent me a polite note thanking me for my interest. He explained that the group was really just for the members themselves. They just used the machines in their own relationships, and valued the anonymity of the Internet. Discouraged, I tried to let it go.

A year later I was still haunted by the images I had seen of the machines. I resurrected the file I had created on the sex machine inventors. After doing more research, I found that a local company had begun producing erotic videos specializing in men and women having sex with machines. Located in San Francisco, Peter Rodgers and Tony Pirelli were operating a successful Internet pornography site called Fuckingmachines.com. They knew a number of the working inventors and pointed me in the direction of some folks they thought would be interesting to talk with.

A chance conversation with an inventor got me into the depths of the Mature Audience section of eBay, where I discovered a regular offering of 15 to 20 different sex machines daily. Through this I stumbled upon a number of grassroots sex machine web communities.

People in tiny towns and suburbs across America were building, selling, and collecting these machines, and sharing their ideas with each other. What once seemed so elusive was now everywhere I looked.

The first inventor I visited called his business “Sartan’s Workshop.” Over the phone, Sartan spoke with a deep baritone, sounding very serious and a bit intimidating. And then there was the name of his business—it sounded like a misspelling of “Satan” or “Santa’s Workshop,” and either way it was frightening. What kind of social misfit would make such a thing as a sex machine?

Sartan ended up being a guy named Paul, who wore a t-shirt of his favorite football team and smiled a lot. He met me in the driveway of his family’s upper-middle-class suburban home. We drank beer in the backyard when the kids came home from school and his wife cooked dinner. This was no dark and steamy fetish underground...these were like the people you’d meet at a PTA meeting. This immediately relaxed me. I knew I could understand these people and felt they would understand me.

Whom I chose to visit depended on who seemed the most passionate—inventors who proudly felt they were on a mission. It didn’t matter to me who was popular or who was making money. Sincerity and passion is what piqued my interest.

While driving from an interview in Champlin, Minnesota, to another in Kansas City, Missouri, I was struck with the big questions: What does this all mean? Are sex machines some embodiment of men’s misguided attempts at understanding women? Are they a form of contemporary folk art? Or am I simply witnessing a pop culture trend that will fade away in a few years?

I soon discovered that the U.S. patent office is filled with early designs for mechanical sexual devices. A peek into erotic world history reveals that people have been creating forms of sex machines since the invention of Cleopatra’s bumblebee-powered vibrator.

I began to see this preoccupation of creating a mechanical sexual creation as part of human instinct. The technology we now have is allowing the inventors to share their ideas, but the act of creating these machines has been going on for centuries. The people I met and documented are not simply following a trend. They are current practitioners of a timeless craft, one that will undoubtedly continue long into the future.

—Timothy Archibald