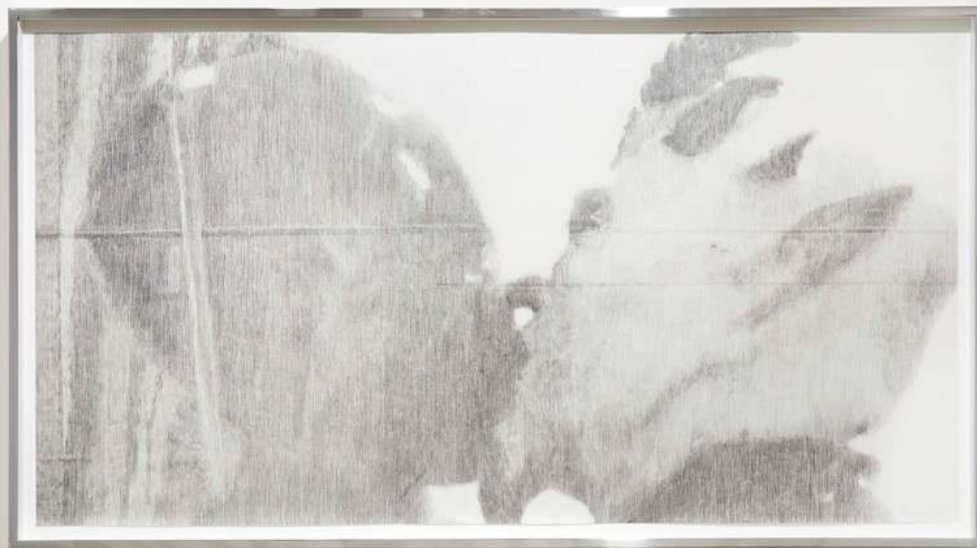


This Exhibition Pays Homage to the Sordid Aesthetics of Desire

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY / FEATURE



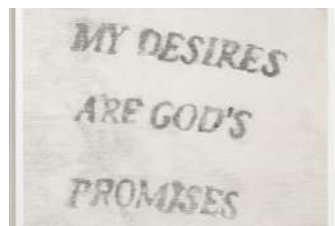
Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby, *Contact (The Kiss)*, 2023
Courtesy the artist/s and Xxijra Hii. Photography by Corey Bartle-Sanderson. © Xxijra Hii Ltd

Laila Majid and Louis Newby's arresting joint exhibition in London explores desire, porn and image consumption – both physical and digital – and how they intersect

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TEXT Violet Conroy

At **Laila Majid** and **Louis Newby**'s new exhibition, ***Beautiful Girls on Top!***, at Sadie Coles HQ's The Shop, there's a drawing of two people kissing. *Contact (The Kiss)* depicts a pair of figures, lips locked, one wearing nightmarish facial prosthetics and the other in a latex gimp mask. The image is cinematic – like a film still – and in some ways it is; the drawing is based on a screenshot of a user-uploaded cosplay video on Pornhub. "I find this drawing so romantic, which I know is weird," says Ema O'Donovan, founder of the Deptford-based gallery Xxijra Hii, which has represented Majid and Newby since 2022 following several joint exhibitions. The drawing is unnerving, like a modern-day *The Lovers II*, that infamous Magritte painting of two figures kissing through white veils – an image striking for its cagey, contradictory sense of intimacy. The process behind Majid and Newby's drawing is romantic in its laboriousness, too – after scanning the Pornhub still through a thermal printer camera (the same way receipts are printed, hence the lines), the pair sat side by side in their studio, painstakingly drawing it together for over 100 hours.



Beautiful Girls on Top! by Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby

Majid and Newby first met at Chelsea College of Arts as undergraduates. Each of them have established practices as solo artists, as well as working together on occasion; Majid has exhibited reupholstered chairs in suggestive materials like silicone and latex at Rose Easton gallery, while Newby has shown collages and cartoonish drawings that deal with queer culture at Sessions Arts Club, a fine dining establishment in Clerkenwell. After graduating from Chelsea in 2018, the pair decided to start making work together. "It was such an organic relationship. We used to send each other a lot of images that we thought the other would like," says Majid. "We always recognised these overlapping interests," Newby adds. "My work is probably a bit more maximal, with the layering and collaging, and Laila's work focuses on the subtlety of a texture. There's real minimalism to it."

Beautiful Girls on Top! is the pair's fifth show together, and takes its name from a spread in *Madame in a World of Fantasy*, a now-defunct erotic magazine celebrating female domination. The title is apt; the show features six interdisciplinary works exploring desire, porn, printed matter, the internet, and how they intersect. Tucked away to the left-hand side of Sadie Coles HQ in Soho – whose current exhibition, *Hardcore*, explores similarly explicit themes – The Shop is a modest, one-room gallery space that has been hosting young London gallerists and their artists since 2021. "There is an exciting energy coming out of the emerging art scene in London at the moment," says Sam Will, sales associate at Sadie Coles HQ and programmer of The Shop, "and we hope to encourage it by offering our project space The Shop for free to young galleries who might otherwise not have access to a central London space." The location of the show is also fitting; Soho has a centuries-long history of sex work and has been home to many niche, underground subcultures, with Newby explaining that he used to go to there to buy old porn magazines as a university student.



Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby, *Spread (The Politics of Undressing)*, 2023

Courtesy the artist/s and Xxijra Hii. Photography by Corey Bartle-Sanderson. © Xxijra Hii Ltd

This idea of print is central to the pair's latest exhibition. An ongoing series called *Spreads* takes centrefolds from existing publications – the sources are as diverse as fetish and porn magazines, wildlife encyclopaedias, cinema journals, anime drawing manuals – and replaces the images with Majid and Newby's own drawings and found images mined from their shared digital archive. "We like this idea that the images had a prior life, that they had a public that consumed them," Newby explains. With images as diverse as pierced genitalia, hairless dogs, gangbangs, and a film still of Maggie Gyllenhaal in *Secretary*, the *Spreads* series collides print culture with internet culture, speaking to desire, fandom, and the randomness of internet holes. "The printed textures of different images is also important," adds Majid. "In *Spreads*, we'll use these composites that combine a really high resolution scan from a pornography magazine with a really crunchy digital image taken from Reddit."

The *Spreads* are topped off with a translucent layer of a resin cast relief of leather, which looks sticky. "You can touch it, it picks up the texture of skin," says Newby, pressing against the wrinkled surface with his hands. "In this conversation around porn

and non-normative publications, this idea of reading through the site of the body felt quite important," he continues. "It affects you in a chemical way much more than cognitive way, so we wanted to try and visualise a magazine spread that's almost existing under the skin." Majid adds, "Plus, your first contact with the work is through the skin. It just felt more visceral, and it spoke to such a bodily experience. And obviously, leather speaks to fetish and desire too." An accompanying exhibition text by Donna Marcus extols the bodily pleasures of leafing through pornographic material. "Reading, you notice the similarities between page and skin – gloss runs smooth under finger like freshly shaved arse, a gleaming film of sweat. Maybe that's why reading feels like a massage, maybe that's why reading holds you." Elsewhere in the show, two closeup images lifted from the internet of slogan tattoos on bodies – "my desires are God's promises" and "the sky is the limit" – show the humour and intimacy of ink's relationship to our skin.



Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby, *Deeper Position (Ochre)*, 2023
Courtesy the artist/s and Xxijra Hii. Photography by Corey Bartle-Sanderson. © Xxijra Hii Ltd

In the corner of the room, a dusty pink Jesmonite cast of an inflatable pillow – or what the pair giggle and refer to as an "ergonomic sex pillow" – sits in front of a white

curtain, evoking the atmosphere of a bedroom. "Having it as an empty seat in the space, it evokes this idea of a body sitting there," says Newby. "So it gestures to this imagined action, and it's linked to desire and sex." Like the rest of the work in the show, *Deeper Position (Ochre)* manages to evoke the idea of sex, bodily desire, and touch, but without any physical bodies actually present. With their laborious, intricate artistic processes, Majid and Newby have painstakingly paid homage to the sordid aesthetics of desire, and the myriad ways in which people – past and present – get off.

Beautiful Girls on Top! by *Laila Majid and Louis Newby* is presented by *Xxijra Hii* and is on show at *The Shop at Sadie Coles HQ* in London until 1 July 2023.

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