

SEX | JAMES DEEN

The Last Of The Famous International Playboys



James Deen is bending pornography's rule book. As he crosses over to the mainstream with a starring role opposite Lindsay Lohan in the Bret Easton Ellis movie *The Canyons*, he refuses to apologise for – or even give up on – his bawdy day job. Is the X-Tube age ready for the first ever pop star of porn?

PHOTOGRAPHY **Danielle Levitt** STYLING **Luke Day** WORDS **Mark Jacobs**

James Deen's only dinner request is 'no mayonnaise'. So I arrive at his four-bedroom San Fernando Valley manse balancing a jumbo meat lover's pizza and two skinny vanilla lattes. His white Nissan GT-R is parked by the entry gate, but the house windows are dark, save for one flickering blue light, and I wonder if straight porn's reigning boy-next-door is home. Had I been more vigilant about his well-documented Twitter feed, I would have discovered an @JamesDeen post anticipating my arrival: 'I am sitting naked in my office waiting to be interviewed for a fashion magazine. I should put clothes on before they get here... Probably.' When Deen does appear, in an unconsidered white tee, Diesel sneakers and jeans, I find out that the blue light was the episode of *South Park* where they sue the inventor of the toilet, and that Deen likes his pizza cooled to day-old temperature. He is approachable, playful and sharp. Regular.

The commotion over James Deen is that he isn't supposed to be the type that works in porn. He doesn't look like a BDSM (Bondage/Discipline and Submission) savant, or the 2009 Adult Video News (AVN) Awards' 'Male Performer of the Year', or the model for an upcoming anatomically exact (yes, nine inches) Doc Johnson SuperStars sex-toy collection. Regarding the latter, he likes to say, 'I am very excited for this deal because now when I am angry at someone, I can throw my penis at them.' He definitely doesn't look like the sex worker who is fascinating a zillion demographic quadrants, from feminist intellectuals to teen bloggers to art-world brand-names such as Paul McCarthy, who directed Deen in a James Franco-commissioned video for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. And he categorically cannot be the porn star starring as 'the-boy-next-door mixed with Satan' opposite Lindsay Lohan in *The Canyons*, the pedigreed, paparazzi-friendly, Kickstarter-funded contemporary thriller about disaffected twentysomethings in Los Angeles, written by *Less Than Zero* author Bret Easton Ellis and directed by Paul Schrader, writer and director of *American Gigolo*.

Deen is an untanned, curly-haired, 26-year-old Jewish kid who looks and acts like a popular tennis-camp counsellor. And he's skinny. He doesn't have a gym membership, and his Bowflex exerciser (which belonged to his father) and treadmill (left behind by an ex-girlfriend) are lodged behind a truck in his garage. 'The scenes that I do are basically a good amount of cardio,' Deen explains. This means he should have the cardiovascular endurance of a West Hollywood spin instructor, since he says that he has worked almost every day since joining the porn industry (one month after his 18th birthday).

Deen keeps his extensive back catalogue archived on ceiling-high, sliding metal racks in a closet that smells like silicon, just off a large, very empty living area he playfully calls 'the cartwheel room'. He says that the zebra-print headboard in his bedroom – which he swears is the work of an ex-girlfriend – left him trigger-shy about committing to future decor. It at least partially accounts for the general starkness. 'I like the modern museum style. I like open space,' says Deen, who mostly lives in only two of the rooms. 'I mean, it's good for shooting, more than anything. It's basically a million sets in one.' James Deen loves his job so much that he

couldn't help himself from scheduling a shoot for tomorrow, his last day off before production begins on *The Canyons* at the Chateau Marmont. He remembers wanting to be in porn since he was six years old. 'I've been thinking about it lately because I've been doing all of these interviews,' he says. 'I've just always had this weird sexual thing going on. So it makes sense that I'm in porn. Where it comes from? I have no idea.'

The most fascinating thing about James Deen is that, by virtue of simply being James Deen, he is a nexus for so many deeply felt social and cultural conversations. His ascendancy can be aligned with the vindication of the sex-tape-for-fame transaction (see Kim Kardashian's appearance at this year's couture shows); the new, retro-cheap sexualisation of male celebrity (see *Magic Mike*); and the male full-frontal gold rush (see Michael Fassbender in *Shame*, Shia LaBeouf in Sigur Rós' *Fjögur Píanó* video, and, presumably, James Franco's 'homo-sex-art-film' collaboration with filmmaker Travis Mathews). When *Fifty Shades of Grey* made news with its airport-bookstand pop-sadism and talk of 'mummy porn', Deen's fans nominated him to play the novel's leading man, Christian Grey. In fact, when Dr Faye Skelton from the University of Central Lancashire used police-grade photo-composite software in order to generate a mug shot of Grey from celebrity features suggested by readers, the result looked like Deen (with a sneeze of Chace Crawford).

Deen has inspired pages and pages of feminist and feminist-adjacent critiques of sex, power and gender. He is singled out for his 'female-friendly' responsiveness to on-screen partners (the oft-mentioned eye contact and hand-holding); his enthusiasm for cunnilingus, which is underrepresented in mainstream porn; and his respect for the charged intricacies of BDSM. The Female Gazing blog referred to him as 'the physical embodiment of consent culture'. *Broad Recognition*, a Yale University feminist journal, elaborated on the possibility that he might be 'the answer to a sex-positive feminist's prayers'. Deen, however, steps back from the discussion. 'The last thing I should ever do is speak for feminists,' he says. 'I respect people. I'm a big believer in equality. I like making eye contact. When I talk to people, I look at them.' He adds, 'Not to be arrogant, but I've reached a point in my career where if I don't want to work for somebody, I don't need to. Thank God. It might not last, but at the moment I don't need to work for people who are assholes or disrespectful fucks or misogynists. I just don't need to do it. Which is really great.'

Young people's behaviour around sex and technology is also subject to a Deen-centric analysis. *Good* magazine profiled Deen in its winter 2011 issue and drew attention to the sizeable group of teenagers who obsess over his every move – from biting his co-star's fishnets while fucking to wolfing down frosted cookies adorably – and then reproduce his moves as a flurry of GIFs and other digital testimonials. The story's potential for parental terror was infinitely enchanting to US television-news magazine *Nightline*, which broadcast a sensationalised interview with Deen in February 2012. The segment ultimately failed by neglecting to rebrand him, hauntingly, as 'the Justin Bieber of porn'.

Deen is obviously included in the ongoing conversation about porn and the mainstream. However, unlike 'crossover' adult ►

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► superstars such as Jenna Jameson and Sasha Grey, Deen is male (a more unusual sell) and he is flatly uninterested in leaving porn behind – which could be a game-changer. The crossover narrative ensures that when sex workers choose the mainstream (a perfectly fair choice) they enjoy a social pardon that tacitly reinforces porn's second-class standing. But Deen's unapologetic commitment to producing porn, no matter how high his star rises, is a real challenge to this contract. If his popularity continues to grow, he could break through the adult industry's latex ceiling and become porn's first true pop star. 'I'm happy with what I do and what I am and my life. I haven't wanted anything other than what I've achieved,' he says. When people ask me about leaving porn to try to have a mainstream career, I say the same thing every time. I got into porn because I want to be in porn. This is what I want to do.'

'I don't see myself having a message,' Deen says. But just being James Deen is inherently provocative, so he finds himself cast in discussion after discussion. It's like being constantly notified that you've been added to a new Facebook group. But he handles it. Because the satisfying truth about Deen is that he's a thinker. He may be critical of intellectualism, and sometimes fall back on self-deprecating asides about his 'over-analytical Jewish brain', but ultimately, he is an engaging conversationalist in search of the same. It's easy to imagine his excitement when Bret Easton Ellis courted him, first on Twitter and then at Soho House in West Hollywood. 'My whole mentality was, "This movie is never going to happen. They don't want me in it. I don't really care. I want to go have dinner with the guy who wrote *American Psycho*, *Less Than Zero*, *Glamorama*: Bret-motherfucking-Easton Ellis",' he says. 'It was almost a fanboy thing for me.' But *The Canyons* did happen, and there has been plenty to say about the movie ever since.

If *Sex and the City* starred New York City as its 'fifth character', *The Canyons*' extra dimension comes from Bret Easton Ellis' 'post-Empire' pop thesis. Ellis's theory, first popularised in a *Newsweek* article in March 2011, suggests that the 'fake rigours' and ineffective decorum of the famous (which are referred to as 'Empire') have been supplanted by 'an exhibitionistic display culture' ('post-Empire') in which 'being publicly mocked is part of the game', and celebs are fools for 'enacting the role of the humble, grateful celebrity instead of embracing [their] fucked-up-ness'. Post-Empire declares that a profound correction in the cultural balance of power has already occurred: public wreckage is the norm and those who judge it are deviant. Discreditable stars will be given due credit – such as Lindsay Lohan, who evolved from a talent of interest to a delivery system for infamy: a post-Empire Elizabeth Taylor.

James Deen is perfect casting, for his own reasons. First, there is his absolutely correct stage name, a re-appropriated junior-high-school nickname that has become less about prototypical cool and more about the pop of Andy Warhol. And although Deen may have been raised Bryan Sevilla in Pasadena, California (by two sensible, supportive, now-divorced rocket-scientist parents), it does not feel more intimate to call him Bryan. Second, after succeeding at becoming a porn star, then a porn-star phenomenon, he is now the ultimate in post-Empire – a phenomenon for being a phenomenon. (In fact, I was offered the chance to profile Deen for another glossy mag while writing this piece.)

Deen freely shares stories about dropping acid during his bar mitzvah ceremony and then spending hours on a couch in a women's bathroom at Temple Sinai in Glendale, California. He will disclose the reason and exact moment he began manscaping. He has dished out so much that he now quotes himself from other interviews. 'Every time anyone asks, "So tell me, why am I talking to you?" I'm like, "I don't know? Because I said I'd do it, maybe?"' He assures me that he is not doing more interviews than porn scenes.

The new culture of exhibitionism and narcissism fostered by social media is very post-Empire. Deen's blog and Twitter accounts alternate between the graphic ('James Deen Fucks Tight Pussy') and the goofy ('James Deen is a Baby Panda'). 'I don't necessarily think it's narcissism as much as it is the craving for human contact in a safe environment,' says Deen, who suffers from bouts of social anxiety. 'I'm also an exhibitionist,' he admits. 'I like the idea of entertaining. It really is the right thing for me. I like the idea of people watching me. I feel more comfortable naked. The old saying, "Picture the audience naked"? I'm the exact opposite. I want to be naked. If the audience is there and I'm naked, I'm good.'

'That is one of the most beautiful things about my situation right now that I love so much. I feel like I'm almost untouchable because I've made myself as vulnerable as you can make me,' he says. 'I think about it when I'm driving around playing *Phantom of the Opera* at full blast, singing along to every word. What if TMZ pulled up and started filming?' I ask Deen if he was media-trained in advance of *The Canyons*. 'We talked for about 30 seconds and they were like, "You're not an idiot, do your thing." It comes down to respect. I respect the project and everyone on it. I have no desire to violate that respect,' he says firmly. 'But if they did prep me and I violated every single thing they said, what could they do to me? "You have to go back to porn!" Yeah... and? That's my plan. "We're not going to give you a Hollywood career!" I don't really want a Hollywood career. It's such a cool feeling. But I also feel like a dick because there are so many people with so much to lose who deserve it so much more than I do. This is their dream – to star in a Bret Easton Ellis and Paul Schrader movie, next to Lindsay Lohan. And I'm just like, "This is awesome!"'

Late in the conversation, while Deen pees off one of his balconies into the dark, I ask him what will happen if he shoots *The Canyons* and discovers that he loves Hollywood. 'It would surprise me,' he says. 'If I was going to have that switch click and be like, "I want to do mainstream stuff! I want to be an actor!" it would have already happened. I've been involved enough in enough of it for the last few months that it would have clicked. And I do enjoy it. Don't get me wrong. I'm having a great time.' He continues, 'I realistically think what will come of this project is that I'm going to have a great time, hopefully do a great job, and then go back to doing porn and be really happy doing it. I'll probably do an occasional mainstream thing here and there. I always say I'll end up playing myself on a Charlie Sheen sitcom, or *Family Guy* will do an episode and I'll play my own voice.'

'There's not that much about me,' he insists. 'I'm a normal guy who does porn... who's not particularly creepy, I guess?' But while he may be a prop in the service of his co-stars on-camera, it's hard to remain a prop when you're designed to be a star. ■

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