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A porn star kicks up her heels for the camera at the Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas on Jan. 9, 2008. Fans and media alike flocked to Sin City to catch a glimpse of all the new toys, videos and, of course, the stars.

Deep Inside the World of Porn

A down and dirty look at the 2008 Adult Entertainment Expo

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Porn has been threatening to go mainstream for quite some time now. Time magazine warned of it all the way back in 1998. But this year, they have finally achieved their much heralded objective. The Adult Video News (AVN) Awards, considered by most to be the Oscars of porn, were covered this year by the CBS program, Sunday Morning. Sunday Morning! If you aren't familiar with the show that's probably because it's a news magazine program watched exclusively by people over 60. Not to knock Sunday Morning or Bill Geist's humorous report; I just use this to highlight that if my grandmother knows who Tera Patrick is, porn has most definitely arrived.

Preceding the yearly AVN Awards is the yearly AVN Adult Entertainment Exposition, known to most as the Porn Convention, but to insiders as the AEE. Originally a small subsection of their annual neighboring convention, the Consumer Electronics Show, the AEE grew large enough that AVN had to step in and start an independent expo. According to the show guide, this changeover happened in 1998, but don't expect most people to remember that date. The porn industry is historically very fuzzy with numbers. AVN reported that in the year 2000, revenue from sales and rentals of adult videos topped four billion dollars, but that number has never been independently confirmed. An article in Forbes from 2001 quotes Adams Media Research as giving \$1.8 billion a year as a "most generous" estimate. For comparison, Adams estimated the yearly mainstream video market at \$20 billion in 2001.

A slideshow of the expo. All photos by Zach Telthorst & Russell Barnes.

But in the seven years since that report, porn has exploded. With the combination of high-speed internet, bit torrent technology and a pop-culturizing of the adult film industry, porn is more accepted than ever. Jenna Jameson graces best-selling book

covers, Ryan Gosling dates sex dolls in adorable romantic comedies and the famed million-dollar porn movie, "Pirates," has become a bona fide cultural touchstone for millions of college students. But the world of porn is still a mystery to most, and offensive to many. The AEE is a perfect place to explore the inherent dichotomies of this industry. Men in suits offer contracts to women in platform heels and skimpy outfits. Note that no nudity is allowed at the AEE. Well, no "real" nudity. Fans waiting in line to meet their favorite stars can watch the women perform all manner of sex acts on the hundreds of flat screens populating the convention floor, but if her nipple slips out of that low-cut top while she's leaning in to sign an autograph, she could be hit with a big fine.

The AEE isn't all boobs in booths, though. There's plenty of business going on at the convention, too. Sex shop managers wander the AEE perusing all the new video titles ("Pirates 2" coming soon!), the newest video camera technology and exercise balls with attachable sex toys. What the AEE offers to people who work in porn is an invaluable business resource and a sense of legitimacy in an oft-derided industry. What it offers to everyone else is total sensory overload: thousands of people milling around the booths with telephoto-lensed cameras hoping to close-ups of their favorite stars, performers eating lunch while wearing naught but panties and pasties and booths offering everything from tooth whitening to 3-D televisions. Words, even photos, cannot do justice to the overwhelming nature of the porn convention.

Abbywinters.com

Guilt free porn? Maybe not, but there is something different about Abbywinters.com. Their booth was certainly the surprise hit of the 2008 AEE. In stark contrast to the heavily made-up, tarty porn stars at most booths, Abbywinters.com took a simple, stripped-down approach. A dozen or so girls wandered around a sloping, Astroturfed area smack in the middle of the convention, wearing jeans with white T-shirts and/or bras. They eagerly and enthusiastically engaged fans in conversation or games of speed chess. At the same time the girls weren't afraid to start snogging halfway through a yoga session. The entire experience felt somewhat like an after-hours party on the set of "Teletubbies," with all the cute girls from your Writing 1 class-if all the girls in your class were Australian. It wasn't just the booth, but the product they were promoting that was in stark contrast to what ruled the rest of the convention. Marigold, a long time model and speed chess fiend, describes it best. "Abby Winters.com is an Australian adult Web site with young natural amateur Aussies having fun in our own environment, usually in our own homes in our own rooms in our own clothes no makeup, full bush, everything natural and real." And then of course there's the fact that there are no boys. While this site certainly isn't a clean alternative to porn, there's something refreshing about seeing girls actually enjoy themselves in a natural environment while they explore their voyeuristic side.

High Tech Sex Toys

From the OhMiBod, the vibrator that pulses along with your Ipod to the Fleshlight, a flashlight-shaped, dishwasher-safe device men can pleasure themselves with, sex toys are becoming high tech and a big business. The inflatable woman has evolved into the silicone sex doll with realistic flesh and customizable features. The simple vibrator now comes with the option of remote

controls and various attachments to enhance pleasure. Many blend form with function, attaining a modern artistic sensibility or successfully disguising themselves as normal household items. My personal favorite was presented to me by a Taiwanese man who spoke little English. The business end of the device seemed like any motorized dildo, one with a substantial base that can thrust itself. But then he showed me the electronic brain behind this ersatz phallus: a silver briefcase filled with dozens of lights and knobs. It seemed to be the sex toy of choice for James Bond. Despite its retro appeal, the toy seemed to feature too many functions. But Pussy Galore would have loved it.

XXXChurch.com

Billing themselves as the number one Christian porn Web site, xxxchurch.com actually features no porn whatsoever. "People ask if we have naked nuns; sorry no porn," founder Craig Gross jokes. "We want to help people that are struggling with porn. We don't want to shut it down, we don't want to picket it, we don't want to get in a fight. If you look at too much porn and want help, we're here. If you look at just a little porn and you want help, we're here." For just over six years (the church celebrated its birthday during the convention) xxxchurch.com has been offering services to people who want out of the industry. Their agenda is not political, and not even aggressively religious. They hand out Bibles emblazoned with their motto, "Jesus Loves Porn Stars," at porn shows around the world. "Right wing Christians are saying, 'Lets make everyone do things our way. Lets take (porn) out of hotels. Lets ban it. Just stop buying it.'" Gross isn't exactly porn friendly, ("God's plan for sex is a beautiful thing, but we've twisted it,") but he is porn star friendly ("Jesus loves porn stars just as much as he loves pastors"). He tries to focus on letting women know that they don't need to accept pornography if they don't feel comfortable with it. "So many girls on college campuses, now, are into porn. I don't think they're as visually turned on as the guys but they think they need that to get the guy."