



PERFORMANCE

Michael Portnoy Wants to Know: Can You Fuck to An Irregular Beat?

In his new film series, "Progressive Touch," he tries to answer a most elusive question.

By [HALEY MELLIN](#) | Jan 12 2020, 5:30am

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TWEET



Michael Portnoy, *Progressive Touch*, 2019, video still

Michael Portnoy, a performance legend in European and New York circles, has released a new film series called *Progressive Touch*; four films which look at the future of sex through an absurdist lens. Portnoy dreams up a bizarre "improved" vision of sex, synced to an irregular metal and trap music score, requiring the physical skill of a trained dancer and the musical ingenuity of a composer. Filmed in Berlin and premiered at the festival Steirischer Herbst in Austria as a multiscreen installation, the dance-based films are intensely funny, and well, sexy. A new single screen version is headed for the International Film Festival in Rotterdam. Portnoy began his career in the world of stand-up comedy, moved

verbal abstraction.

Portnoy's well-received engagement with comedic performance stretches back to his intervention at the 1998 Grammy's. Hired as a background dancer for Bob Dylan's live performance at the Grammy Awards, he broke out of his role and leapt onto the stage, beside Dylan, contorting with SOY BOMB written across his shirtless chest, becoming an iconic pre-meme meme of late-'90s pop culture. SOY BOMB showed how his imaginative work is both captivating and perplexing. In the past years he's presented work at major museums and exhibitions internationally, including [documenta](#) (Kassel, Germany), [Stedelijk Museum](#) (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), the [Centre Pompidou](#) (Paris, France), and the [Liverpool](#) and [Taipei Biennials](#), among others. "Progressive Touch" will be exhibited at [Vleeshal](#), Netherlands from January 18th, 2020 to March 29th, 2020. Currently in New York, Portnoy's sculpting an outlandish line of dad shoes in clay that give Balenciaga's Triple S a run for its money, Portnoy speaks with GARAGE.

Why did you make this film series, Progressive Touch?

As a comedian, I am always looking for humor-free zones to pervert. Why is there so little truly absurdist porn out there? This should be a whole niche industry! I'm not talking about parody or kink, which is still recognizable and codified in its non-conventionality. I'm talking something joyously imaginative and terrifyingly other, like the sex scene in the Swedish film *Border*, for instance. I want sex and sensuality to co-exist with manic nonsense and laughter. The hope is if you can reprogram human behavior at the root level of sex, by introducing formal invention and abstraction, then you can affect change similarly at higher levels of interpersonal exchange.

How did you come to this series?

It started with imagining people fucking to a highly irregular beat. The idea only became funnier and more inspiring to me over the years, and it was brewing for a long time. The human body is pretty uninventive musically. A healthy heart has a regular beat, we walk at a steady pace, and our genitals are wired to need a steady rhythm to orgasm. Foreplay can be all free jazz but to get off we need a good ole 4/4. As a progressive rock fiend, and someone who works with choreography, music, and comedy, the question is naturally going to arise: what is progressive sex? By that I mean, bodies connecting in all sorts of strange meters, tempo shifts, stops and starts, changes in dynamics, unpredictable flourishes and permutations.



MICHAEL PORTNOY, "PROGRESSIVE TOUCH," 2019, VIDEO STILL

Now that's just musicality. But what if we also "improve," or complicate our movements - complicate our touch and the approach of two bodies moving towards each other. Why should a tongue go directly to a clitoris? Can't it travel through the room in complicated, swooping baroque patterns until it gets there? I have been interested for a while in microchoreography to rhythmically unpredictable music. For example, *77 Blinks*, one of the pieces in my exhibition Relational Stalinism (2016, Witte de With Contemporary Art Center), was a dance just for the eyelids of five dancers blinking sporadically to a taiko drum score. *Progressive Touch* was trying to do this for sex.

"I want sex and sensuality to co-exist with manic nonsense and laughter."

How did you find the talent?

I put out casting calls in Berlin and New York. As I suspected the talent pool in Berlin was much better suited for this project, so we rehearsed and shot it there. I was looking for clever and technically skilled dancers with a great sense of rhythm. Most contemporary dance, as opposed to popular dance, has very little relation to the score, since synchronization is seen as passé, and so this requirement was hard to fill. The dancers needed to be comfortable with performing sexual acts on camera. And most importantly, I wanted to work with existing couples, as diverse as possible. As you can imagine, it wasn't easy to find people who checked off all the boxes. But in the end, I assembled an amazing cast with two couples and two women who were not romantically involved but who were good friends.

second chunks and then went through them one by one. It was a collaborative process with the assistant choreographer [Moss Beynon-Juckes](#) and I proposing some movements, the dancers improvising, then refining and selecting. We had very little rehearsal time, so it was demanding, but we had a lot of fun. As long as we are [laughing in the studio](#), I know we are on the right track.



MICHAEL PORTNOY, "PROGRESSIVE TOUCH," 2019, VIDEO STILL

The films seem to be set in some kind of alien world - the man and the woman in a deep orange-red outdoor landscape like a sunset on Mars, the two women on a floating padded couch-spaceship disc in a purple void, etc. And all the actors are naked but with iridescent makeup which gives their bodies an inhuman glow. What were you trying to evoke with the look of the films?

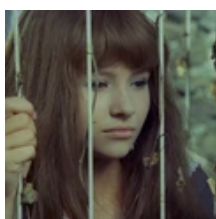
I see these films as a vision of a ridiculous possible future of sex, one all about rhythmic and choreographic complexity. I wanted the sets to be sparse, sublime, unplaceable environments and shot with luscious cinematography to stretch the humor. The budget was bare bones so we really concentrated on atmospherics—light, color and haze, and a few sculptural set pieces. Visually, I wanted to lean just lightly into the futuristic thing, and to keep the aesthetic quite classy and mysterious, so it wouldn't feel like most of the porn we're used to seeing. The team was exceptional, [Darja Pilz](#) was the cinematographer, [Ran Chai Bar-zvi](#) did set design, and hair and make-up was by [Servulo Mendez](#).

Music is such a huge part of this piece and mixes elements of metal, trap, prog rock, and sound design. What was the collaboration between you and composer and sound artist [Stefan Maier](#) like?

It was a real joy to work with Stefan. He is a pro composer and sound artist who

that hit you in the gut. Stefan started by creating and assembling a whole palette of percussion sounds. There was a real back and forth. I'd send him recordings of me singing in my bathroom at 3am in a bathing suit (not sure why I was in a bathing suit!) and he'd transcribe them, and this was later used as a partial rhythmic template for the two men's math-metal track. Or, I'd send him a melody scratch track like the Exotica-ish one for the two women, and he'd send it back fully orchestrated. I love when little movements of the dancers are coupled with massive sonic swells and impacts. I wanted the music to be onomatopoeic at times—to feel like the different moves—but to still be massive and catchy and not cartoony. Stefan really nailed it.

Often this is slapstick. Are these vignettes both wholly satirical and earnestly serious to you?



Sex Scenes: 'Valerie and Her Week of Wonders' Delves Into The Politics of Becoming

RACHEL RABBIT WHITE

I love physical comedy, and you could almost see these as cartoons, like if Mr. Bean was ripped and hot, had a dick in his mouth and studied dance in Brussels. The comedy that I'm after teeters between something beautiful, sexy, uncanny, abstract, WTF hilarious, masterful and stupid as hell.

"I see these films as a vision of a ridiculous possible future of sex, one all about rhythmic and choreographic complexity."

Any thoughts on presenting this work in the different contexts?

The films were initially presented at Steirischer Herbst in Graz, Austria in a huge empty, dark hall on four big screens. It was a formation in which viewers had to walk around to see each film playing. There was a nightclub style sound system which allowed the sub sounds to really take over your body. The films will also be presented as a multiscreen installation at Vleeshal, a museum in the Netherlands. I made these films to be seen by a large audience—as physical comedy they're much more accessible than some of the convoluted language performance I do. So Film festivals like IFFR and streaming services are ideal for this work.

I'm being tongue in cheek here, but this type of "improvement", which runs through a lot of my work, is less about making something better than making it more intricate and confusing. If it's pleasure alone that you're looking for, Progressive Touch is probably the wrong technique for you! My crazy dream is that young lovers out there would use these films as instructionals. I mean, for better or worse, we all have some sexual scores which we enact repeatedly—dances, you could say, that are especially pleasurable for us or our partners. Why not for a change try to sex each other up in 17/4 time?



THE ACTUALLY ICONIC "SOY BOMB" PERFORMANCE AT THE 1998 GRAMMY AWARDS. PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE

Any comment on your 1998 Grammy's appearance of SOY BOMB, today?

What are you making next?

Since the NDA just expired, I can finally reveal that the whole thing was an elaborate negative propaganda campaign orchestrated by the U.S. Oat Growers League to damage the reputation of the soy industry by associating it with terror. It failed, however, because it would take another 20 years until Americans were finally ready to adopt oat milk on a large scale. Next up, I want to make a second series of these. I have a bunch of ideas for the further mixing of sex, dance and experimental comedy. I am also developing a large scale performance piece for a museum in Moscow. And I just designed a new line of hideous and ridiculously expensive ceramic sneakers.