Portrait of the Artist as a Sex Bomb

Valerie Caris has used her body for money and art. Now it's a source of healing, too. A tale of debauchery and revival.

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In a mortuary parking lot across from Santa Monica Boulevard's Hollywood Forever cemetery, with its willow-lined paths and glitzy, black marble tombstones, visual artist and performer Valerie Caris, 42, is shooting her latest project, a calendar entitled "Valerie Resolves the Transportation Problem in Los Angeles." Each month features a photo of Caris with a different vehicle—a car, a bicycle, even a toy horse. On this hot and sunny afternoon, Caris stands at the rear of a vintage black hearse. Her lips are painted a deep red, her eyes lined in black. With one black-velvet-gloved hand she leans on a silver-tipped ebony cane. In the other is draped a thin chain, at the end of which a black pug dawdles. Through the black gauze of her gown you can just make out an elaborate tattoo that spans the small of her back, framing her buttocks: a phoenix rising from the ashes. A group of gardeners across the street stop their work to watch.

Now the "money shot": A crew gets into position as Caris leans over her deceased husband, played by male erotic photographer Rick Castro, to "shrimp" his foot sticking out of the back of the hearse. "I call this 'The Horny Widow,'" she says afterward. "I'm planning to distribute the calendar to auto mechanics, restaurant kitchens and art collectors. I want to take my art out of the gallery and performance space into the real world."

Caris has straddled high, low and gutter culture throughout her career. Just to list her recent exploits gives a sense of her range. She has posed for (and befriended) Nan Goldin, whose photographs of Caris are part of "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency," a slide show now on display in the Whitney Museum's blockbuster The American Century. Caris devours the scenery with her cameo in gay filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim's most recent short, Can I Be Your Bratwurst, Please?, featuring porn star Jeff Stryker. Last October she toured the South with the shock-rock band The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, dancing onstage like a debauched glitter rocker in full body paint. Her schedule for 2000 opens with a burlesque performance in the city where low and no culture collide, Las Vegas.

In all of her art-world travels, Caris says, "My body has been the main frontier." Images of her body populate her collage work, and reflections on her body occupy her performances. Since being diagnosed with HIV 10 years ago, she says that she has come to view her body "as both fragile and deadly. I'm trying to deal with having a sexually transmittable illness—and a lethal one at

that—and somehow reconcile all of the lab tests and viral loads with the part of me that's an erotic being—that's juicy, passionate, completely different from the clinical." This struggle has produced some vibrant work.

One of Caris' most striking pieces is her 1993 sculpture "Vestment"—a hospital gown made entirely of paper printouts of Caris' blood-work charts sewn together, lined with satin and torn slightly to reveal a photograph of her own tattooed skin. Artist and curator Frank Moore aptly describes the effect: "The lab reports are very official and dry, black and white, but she rips them just enough to let you know there's someone quite different underneath. It's a classic theme: a slit or a vagina, aggressive in a female way." "Vestment" makes you want to look even as it makes you feel like an invader.

According to Barbara Hunt, executive director of Visual AIDS, Caris is a rarity—one of only a dozen women in the group's registry of more than 200 HIV positive artists, and the only one coming out of a women's art tradition. Says performance artist Penny Arcade, who has collaborated with Caris, "Valerie has elements of Judy Chicago's approach to feminist art, using techniques and materials associated with women to talk about AIDS. There are a number of women with AIDS who become artists because AIDS pushes them into expression. But Valerie was an artist before she got AIDS, and having AIDS then became her subject matter."

Caris painted, performed and hustled her way across Germany and New York City for years before her diagnosis; then she retreated to recover in Boston. In recent years, she's reemerged, as sex-positive as ever, but with her feet on the ground. She's the one you'll see bicycling around LA in her silver lamé capri pants, Frederick's of Hollywood pumps and unruly Medusa hair. LA may be the exhibitionist capital of the world, but compared to Caris, most of its denizens appear to be introverts. Her local crew are the stars of anti-Hollywood: Rick Castro, drag performer Vaginal Davis, gay filmmaker Carl Michael George and pierced performance artist Ron Athey. "This city is obsessed with glamour," Athey says, "and Valerie strongly reinterprets that old movie-star glamour. But she totally disregards all the rules. She has an impressive commitment to being half-naked in public." Caris calls her look "trailer-trash punk-rock" crossed with "Hollywood Boulevard stripper."

Caris grew up in Walpole, Massachusetts, a leafy suburb of hissing summer lawns where she was part of an ethnic Greek family in a field of Anglos. She was the first in her school to wear Earth Shoes, the first to discover transcendental meditation. An honor-roll student, Caris won statewide art competitions throughout high school, but, says her sister, Dimi, she "hung out with the bad kids." Soon, like so many other misfits, Caris made the migration to New York City. There, in the late '70s, she studied painting at Barnard, interned at the Guggenheim and exhibited some early collages. She was also exposed to abstract expressionism and '60s body art—the art movements that would become her aesthetic touchstones. Her first husband, Christopher Ruhnke, remembers the period: "I believe we met in the Chock Full O'Nuts on the corner of 116th and Broadway," he says. "We got into a long, excited conversation about radical politics and psychoanalysis and their relation to the cause of human liberation." Soon they were living together in a nearby artists' commune, where he built a loft bed out of police barricades and made wooden stretchers for

Valerie's canvasses out of old window frames.

In spring 1981, Caris followed Rhunke to Munich, Germany, where he'd gotten a job producing art posters, and her art career began in earnest. She quickly dove into the creative scene, tutoring Fassbinder actor Bunkhardt Driest and entering the orbit of the eccentric art dealer Emanuela Schwankl, who organized Caris' first solo exhibition. Most importantly, Caris met artist and hustler David Steeves—"a character who walked out of a Jean Genet novel," recalls Ruhnke—who would change her life.

Steeves remembers Munich as a conservative, snobbish city, with houses like iced wedding cakes, where the annual highlight was Oktoberfest's liederhosen-clad musicians. "A character like Valerie was very provocative," he says. "She would run around in a miniskirt with her ass hanging out and a leather brassiere with studs. We got into a lot of trouble that way, but we had great fun." The two made what Caris calls a "very campy" video called Rococogogovoodoo, in which they populated a local church with pagan figurines and performed invented voodoo rituals—what one critic lovingly called "a persiflage against the very Baroque."

Caris began to star in offbeat porn films, including her own 1983 The Story of Foie Gras, a food-smeared romp that begins as a formal dinner, and the memorably titled The Munich Double-Fuck. By then, Caris says, "I was reading a lot of Marxism and made the decision to live outside the 9-to-5 life." Still, she needed money. "I couldn't take a normal job because I didn't have a visa," she says. "I was already pretty promiscuous, so it seemed like a good idea to just blow somebody. Of course, by the time I started hooking, alcohol was already a factor."

In 1984 Caris "eloped" with Steeves to the edgier West Berlin, whose pre-gentrification Kreutzberg district was literally exploding in the heat of squatter's riots. "We were living in the Turkish ghetto," Steeves recalls. "One vegetable shop after another interspersed between little galleries and trendy bars. It looked like a city in the Orient." Caris and Steves were soon making the rounds of Berlin's alternative art institutions, hustling for a living and cooking up bawdy performances such as "Turkish Honey," a card game–turned–ravenous striptease. "Usually you have dumb porno stars or intellectuals who write about it," says filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim, who first met Caris in Berlin. "Steeves and Caris were very intelligent and very sexual, and combined that in their work."

By 1985 Caris had thrown herself into another thriving counterculture, hitting Manhattan at the peak of the fervent East Village art scene, where AIDS was on the upswing and HIV positive artists Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz were starting to take a stance against the epidemic. Caris produced some lovely, formalist pieces during the years that followed.

One, 1988's "Untitled" features a highly worked background in maroon acrylic; at the center spring winglike crests of silken fabric that frame a reclining male nude, an image taken from a porn magazine.

In New York City's raunchy downtown club scene, Caris' performative approach to life and work hit

its stride. She played a sex bomb in a faux noir feature film, starred in a campy vampire comedy and performed with drag queens at The Pyramid, the birthplace of Wigstock. Filmmaker George remembers an early sighting on the Lower East Side: “Valerie was wearing a barely legal miniskirt and a black leather bustier with her tits popping out. Nothing else. When a fire truck passed, she went, ‘Hello, firemen, hello.’ They stopped the truck and started honking the horn—they were all leaning out of the truck, whistling and clapping. Valerie just stood there basking in the attention.”

Modeling for artist Kiki Smith, Caris became in some sense her muse—as she had for Goldin and others before. “To me it was amazing to see someone so comfortable bringing an enormous amount of sexual attention to herself,” Smith recalls. “She’s always been a hero to me. She has an enormous amount of vitality and energy.”

During these years, Caris recalls, people she knew—mostly gay men—were beginning to get sick from AIDS. But she was barely taking it in: “I was a tornado,” she says simply. “I was wreaking havoc.” Already a full-blown alcoholic, she was now sniffing heroin. And she’d begun a hot and heavy relationship with “a street kid” named Jeff Raia, an ex-boyfriend of Warholite Holly Woodlawn and an IV-drug user himself. “He was such a great lover,” Caris recalls, “like heroin was a great lover. I couldn’t see that the relationship was killing me—as well as the drugs.”

George went home to Boston with her for Thanksgiving in 1988. “It was really an awful scene,” he says, “her being there, being an addict, looking like hell. I think it was a few months later when I discovered her walking down Avenue B with no blouse on trying to cop dope.”

“I felt I could not live without being loaded,” Caris says now, “that I couldn’t be creative and spontaneous without a substance in me. Drugs gave me the courage to be who I wanted to be.”

Finally, friends dragged her back to Boston and the supportive, unstimulating suburban world she’d fought so hard to escape. It was the right thing to do. Caris entered a detox program and, in a clear state of mind, tested positive in 1989. Soon Raia showed up, still using. He said he was HIV positive too and begged her to take him back—which Caris did, marrying him, with characteristic exhibitionism, on a TV talk show. “When you first get clean, there’s a sudden void,” she says. “You clutch onto anything.” Newly sober, fighting for her life and separated from the creative ferment that had nourished her artistic output, Caris, the Madonna of the underground, made herself over again.

Abandoning art for recovery—“all those things about acceptance and first things first”—she focused her energies on coping not only with HIV but with her increasingly abusive relationship. She began to attend support groups for newly diagnosed women, and soon she was running them, as well as counseling women on alternative approaches to treatment. Shortly before cofounding the Women of Color AIDS Council in 1992, Karen McManus met Caris in one of these groups: “When I first found out I was infected, Valerie was a great source of support and information for me,” she says. “She carried me through that first year. She always connects to people, so her not being a woman of color was never an issue. She accepts people where they’re at—no pretensions.”

When Raia died in 1992, Caris says she felt more liberated than grief-stricken. As a woman with AIDS, Caris realized, she needed more than ever “to feel adored, to act out sexually in a safe way and be glamorous.” She returned to art, using her lab reports to create intensely personal collages and touring in Penny Arcade’s “Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!” an in-your-face tirade against puritanical views of sex and AIDS hypocrisy. She revived an early collaboration with Annie Sprinkle, playing a prostitute in one performance and modeling for the art-porn priestess’s 1995 “Post-Modern Pin-Ups,” provocative playing cards that celebrate safer sex and alternative gender identities. Sprinkle recalls, “Valerie was the first openly HIV positive sex worker I’d ever met—she was so honest. In my subculture that was very brave and bold. There’s just a tiny handful even now who are open about it.”

Inspired by Sprinkle, Caris created her 1996 solo piece, “Hey Mister, Looking for Any Company?” reflecting on her years of sex for pay. In the piece, Caris slowly puts on makeup to a voiceover of what Caris calls “the stripper’s self-loathing, her need to be desired, her duplicity, the virus concealed within, her hostility toward the patrons, her collusion with and superiority over them in playing on their desire.” The piece was dubbed “the striptease that stripped the striptease” by feminist art critic Marjorie Mikasen. As Caris recalls, “People walked out.”

Her most accomplished visual pieces, including “Vestment,” appeared in 1996 at New York City’s Artists Space in A Living Testament of the Blood Fairies, an exhibition of works by a dozen artists with HIV, only two of whom were women. “Blood Fairies was about magic and alchemy—using art as a medium for transformation—and that’s very much the spirit of Valerie’s work,” co-curator Frank Moore says, adding that there were other HIV positive women artists working at the time, but AIDS hadn’t entered their art in a direct way. Caris’ work was unique—not only direct, but “incredibly feisty and incredibly strong-willed.”

Caris now lives in a modest studio flat in Hollywood, where orange and lemon trees grow in reach of her balcony. Her life is calmer and healthier than it has ever been—she even cans her own preserves. “At times you have to retreat artistically and develop your talent,” she says. “And also develop your life in such a way that you infuse your art with meaning.”

When friends arrive to accompany her on her first visit to the new Getty Museum, she is not yet fully dressed. But, then again, she never is. So Caris ends up on a tram full of tourists, with her hair in curlers, in a trademark leather halter top and skin-tight miniskirt, oblivious to stares as she loudly recounts the technical details of her kitchen-sink approach to HIV therapy, which now includes antiretrovirals and prophylaxes as well as her alternative treatments.

For her Vegas debut this month, Caris is creating a rock-and-roll burlesque piece to be performed in a fur bikini at Exotic World, a museum established by an ex-stripper to celebrate the history and culture of showgirls. It was her attempt “to perfect some shimmies” for this show, she says, that launched her current obsession, belly dancing. Caris remembers watching belly dancers in Middle Eastern restaurants as a child. She says the dance form feels natural, as “a return to my Greek roots” and as a more “healing, transformative” way to approach sexual performance than the hustling and porn of her past. “I love the idea of eroticism, seduction and beauty,” she says, “but I

don’t want to prostitute myself anymore. Now I love being in my body and of my body. I feel more like a goddess.”
With “four solid years” of recovery behind her, Caris can say that this work has been her longest in the making. “Once I stopped using, I had to come to terms with who I was,” she says. “If I want to stay clean, I can’t be full of doubt and self-loathing, I can’t be afraid of HIV or the side effects of my drugs. I have to draw on strength, acceptance and faith.” She reports that she’s learned how to “genuinely care for other people”—a new boyfriend as well as a warm community of artists who sketch together at the home of costume designer Theodora Van Runkle. “Everybody in my drawing club adores her,” Van Runkle says. “She bakes beautiful cakes and breads and makes marmalades to bring to the club. She’s my favorite person in the world.”

Caris takes the praise in stride, as always, saying, “I just feel more alive now, more able to deal with what’s on my plate.” She’s currently painting a self-portrait about, she says, “my conquest of this illness.” In the background, her suburban family stands on their front porch; in the foreground sits a stack of books—Women, AIDS and Activism, de Sade and Marx—and other defining icons—a high heel, a lipstick, a rhinestone necklace. A theatrical curtain flanks both sides of the canvas. Caris, in the center, sports a crown and a sword: a warrior, but always a performer, too.

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