



Down and dirty

Sexy, subversive, and sensational wrestling

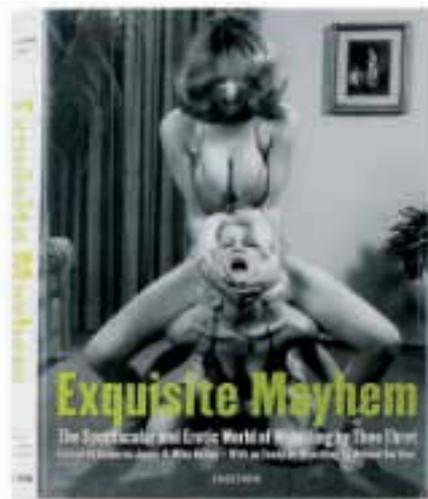
Discover the world of wrestling that was too hot for T.V.! Photographer Theo Ehret's fabulous archives have been dug up by artists Cameron Jamie and Mike Kelley and brought together for the first time in publication. Not only will you see the most famous wrestlers of the 60s and 70s in action, but you'll learn all about a sub-genre of pro wrestling known as "apartment wrestling." Pitting voluptuous bikini-clad women against one another in a staged photography set, apartment wrestling is what many a male fantasy is made of, and there is no better way to appreciate the merits of this unique and rare "sport" than in the classic photographs of Theo Ehret. With almost 500 illustrations, an essay on wrestling by

Roland Barthes, biographical photos, and an interview with Ehret, *Exquisite Mayhem* is not just for wrestling fans—it's a spectacular adventure into a lesser-known side of one of America's most popular forms of entertainment.

The editors:
Cameron Jamie has exhibited his artwork throughout the U.S. and widely in Europe. His artwork addressing the theme of wrestling has appeared in numerous bodies of work. Jamie is also an expert on the subject of North American professional wrestling and apartment wrestling.

Mike Kelley lives in Los Angeles and is an internationally renowned artist. He has exhibited widely, including solo museum exhibitions at the Whitney Museum in New York, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.

Exquisite Mayhem. The Spectacular and Erotic World of Wrestling by Theo Ehret
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Focus on wrestling: the real deal

Theo Ehret interviewed by Cameron Jamie

How old were you when you started to develop an interest in photography?

An uncle of mine had a camera shop; he was a photographer and I helped him. I was around fifteen or sixteen years old. He kept the shop until after the war, and I finally got hold of a camera. You had to be in some kind of photo business to get one.

What did you take pictures of?

People, buildings, anything of interest.



Did you shoot pictures during the war?

I took snapshots of all the guys in the Navy, wherever we went. I shot some combat scenes. I was able to get some film from the Navy even though they were very tight about it. Unfortunately, all those negatives were confiscated in prison camp. The only pictures I had left were the ones I sent home during the war.

So what happened after the war, did you continue to take pictures?

Well, not at first because after the war there were no cameras available. Almost everything was destroyed after the war, so everyone had to start from scratch. Some people had stuff hidden that you could buy. I started working jobs here and there to make a little money. In '48 or '49 I found a Retina and shot a lot of pictures of my kid. Then I really started to get more involved in taking pictures again, and in 1951 my aunt bought me a Contax 380. It's the camera I took all my pictures with coming overseas.

When did you come to the U. S.?

In late 1952, I knew a lot of big wheels in the army since I was stationed with the headquarters in Nuremberg. They all knew me and thought I should move to the United States. One German guy I knew talked me into it; he was already in the U. S. and asked me to put in an application. I thought it would take three to six years to get an answer, but six weeks later I got the answer that they had accepted me. I turned them down because I was not sure. I had just married my wife and we had just got an apartment. We had gone through so much paperwork just to get a place in Germany. But I finally asked my wife, "Do you want to go to America?" and she said, "Sure."

Were there any photographers that you liked?

I liked Stieglitz, Haas, a few others I can't remember. I liked the style of photography that I saw in books, and I subscribed to quite a few photography magazines.

Did you ever photograph female nudes at the time?

I did, but I wasn't too interested in it. I had to do it for school. They wanted to see what you could do with the body as a photo exercise. I wasn't too enthused by it. There was no interest. But I would shoot some portraits. I was never hopped-up about that cheesy stuff.

What was your first commercial work?

I worked for a PR agency who hired me to shoot whatever came

about. He was an agent whom people would approach and say, "We need pictures of these people, we need pictures of these buildings, or the operating room in a hospital, or the interior of this room." You had to be a jack of all trades to shoot. By then I could shoot anything, in any situation. During that time, I photographed newly built modern buildings and homes in Los Angeles.

Then you set up your own photo studio?

1963 was when I opened my studio on Sunset Boulevard. The first work that came around was at the Olympic Auditorium. They needed a photographer to shoot publicity stills. I was desperate and went down to try it out. They thought my photos were very good, so I was hired to shoot boxers.

By "publicity" do you mean portraits of the boxers?

Yes, "mugshots." *(laughs)* That's what we called them because they were done so quickly. I would arrive at the gym and they would say, "Take a mug of this mug, with that mug." *(laughs)* Half the time I had no idea who these boxers were.

Did you instruct the boxers to pose?

We did set them up a little bit. Some guys came in and did all sorts of crazy things, but I set them up to get a decent shot. I went through a lot of trouble because I used two strobes to get better lighting. Most of the photographers at the time just used one. I think that's why my shots came out better than most. I started the mirror stuff, the double portrait of a boxer standing next to a mirror. The mirror at the gym was so filthy that you could not see in it! I had to clean it!

The photographic style of the boxer looking into or reflecting in a mirror became a very popular motif in boxing portraiture as a result of your work.

Normally you see only the boxer's face and gloves and I thought why not have a dual portrait, showing both sides. The idea clicked, and I went with it. The next thing I knew, every boxer wanted a picture like that.

At the same time you were also shooting boxing matches.

I was immediately hired to shoot the action in the boxing ring at the same time I was shooting the portraits. The lighting conditions in those arenas were poor.

Did you shoot the ring action with existing light or with a flash?

Anytime I could use available light, I would use it. Sometimes it was impossible, so I had to use flash. The television broadcasts had lighting all over the whole arena and that was nice because then I could get some nice shots. You had to watch constantly when you shot with strobes, because the strobe light would bounce off the ropes of the ring.

I am interested in how you shot outside of the ring because in some of the photos you have the ropes in the frame, and in others you don't. Was this intentional?

With available light, I don't mind the ropes, but with flash I really don't want to see the ropes because they distract with the reflection. I would always shoot blind to avoid the ropes when I used flash. I would take the camera, pre-focused, and shove it underneath the ropes and follow the action without looking through the view-finder.

Were you a fan of boxing?

No. To me, it was just a job.

These boxing photos were used in programs, and what else?

The Olympic used them in their programs, and newspapers wanted prints. And I had made contact with a boxing magazine back East that always wanted prints.

Tell me about the interior photographs of the Olympic, when you shot the arena, completely empty, before the show; those are beautiful shots.

I turned my photo studio into the set of an apartment. I got hold of a couple of girls, and asked them if they could make faces and act like they could wrestle. They all said, "Oh sure, no problem." And I have to say that all the girls I worked with were excellent.

I did that because nobody else did it. I figured I'd do it just in case I needed it for something. The lighting was good in those situations. I never really had a moment to think when I shot boxing and wrestling. You didn't have a moment to set up.

What is it that you don't like about commercial photography?

Well, all the gadgets and gizmos that photographers use today. It's not photography anymore; it's a completely different medium. With photography, I think you have a camera, a lens, some film – and your head. I never considered myself an artist. I just thought, "This looks good," and that was it. In general, I can't stand the magazines today. It's trash.

When did the pro wrestling work come along?

Around late 1963, early 1964.

From looking at your whole body of work, it seems that you documented everything and everyone, from the superstar, to the obscure jobber.

The magazines back East would say, "Shoot everything you can on Mascaras, Blassie, or whoever." I had carte blanche to shoot anything and anyone because I was on the payroll at the Olympic. Once I did my job for them, I could do whatever I wanted with the pictures. I had to pay for all of the materials, processing, etc., so really, I made just enough money to pay bills.

Were you familiar with pro wrestling at the time you started your job?

I had no idea whatsoever. None. When I first saw it, I thought it was comical. It was so obvious that it was phony, I could never understand people believing it could be real. It's right in front of you. I would look at it and say, "What the heck is that?" People hollering, screaming, and throwing things, my goodness!

Did you ever have problems with any of the pro wrestlers?

In general, I had no problem with anyone. I did have problems with the wrestling fans. Once there was a fight with The Sheik, where during the match he grabbed a pen from out of my pocket and started to stab his opponent in the head and face. The fans blamed me for giving him the pen! I needed to have a police escort for three weeks to get into the arena! *(laughs)* I did not like things like that too much.

Who were the first pro wrestlers you photographed?

Fred Blassie, John Tolos, Gordman and Goliath – those guys were among the first. I remember once Andre the Giant came over to the studio to have his passport picture taken and he could not even fit through the door!

You were never fond of the wrestlers, even as showmen?

I never even asked any wrestler for his autograph. Not one. I knew them all, but I couldn't care less. I liked Blassie as a human, but not as a wrestler because I had no interest in this stuff. Blassie would call me constantly, and he would always use me to photograph him at charities, or wherever.

that was not lost on Cameron Jamie and Mike Kelley."

Wrestling is often considered to be fake, yet the amount of punishment that these wrestlers take is unbelievable. I remember when you could walk into the locker room of the Olympic and watch the wrestlers getting their foreheads stitched up by the paramedics.

No question about it, it looks easy, but it hurts. To me, it's crazy. You would see these guys flying out of the ring into the seats. You could cut your head up on those things because the seats at the Olympic were made of hard plastic with sharp edges.

Was it difficult to shoot the battle royal matches with so many wrestlers fighting at once in the ring?

In a battle royal match, you see nothing when you are close to the ring. All you saw were a bunch of body masses flying around. In order to see anything, you had to be up above. So I went to the TV booth up above the Olympic and shot from there. From the top, you could get the whole ring and all the action at once.

I never liked boxing for that reason. It always felt too controlled for me. The chaotic sensibility and absurdity is what I liked about pro wrestling.

Oh yes. In boxing, things are toned-down. I mean, it can get wild, but any sports event can get wild: basketball, baseball, anything. It depends on the mood of the people and how much beer they've had.

Fred Blassie was the wrestler who popularized the theatrics of blood with his famous biting-into-the-forehead routine. The blood was never fake. I remember some of the magazine covers would have photos of wrestlers with their heads busted open, covered in blood, and it looked like a still from a horror movie.

That's right. Fred Blassie, John Tolos, The Sheik, Rivera, Abdullah the Butcher, Goliath, ... those guys were bleeders! Whenever The Sheik came into the ring, there was always blood.

I loved the dramatic interaction between the wrestler and the spectator. I remember seeing The Sheik screaming at old ladies in the front row.

A wrestler walking out into the ring hollering and screaming at the audience always looked good. Because you would see the ring, the crowd, and the wrestler; those were interesting shots.

Tell me how apartment wrestling came about. Who approached you with this concept?

It was started by Stan Weston, who was the owner of those *Detective* magazines. One day he called and said, "What do think about getting a couple of gals in bikinis, and have them pretend to wrestle in an apartment?" He wanted to start having this "apartment wrestling" thing in pro wrestling magazines.

He was proposing to bring soft-core erotica to the masses.

That's right. I mean they had done stuff like this in the 30s ... but I had never seen it before. They wanted it to be sexy. He instructed me to shoot it in an interior, a living room, or an apartment. And after that, it was called "apartment wrestling." At that time, pro wrestling had slackened off, and it was made to spice up the magazines. That's when it started.

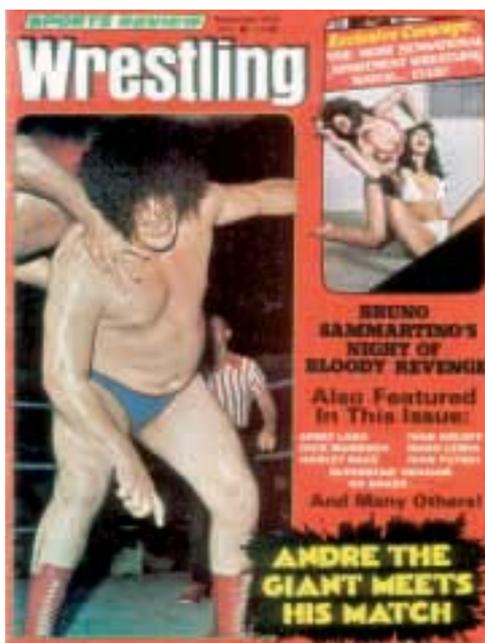
That's right. Fred Blassie, John Tolos, The Sheik, Rivera, Abdullah the Butcher, Goliath, ... those guys were bleeders! Whenever The Sheik came into the ring, there was always blood.

Tell me about where you shot these interiors.

I turned my photo studio into the set of an apartment. I got hold of a couple of girls, and asked them if they could make faces and act like they could wrestle. They all said, "Oh sure, no problem." And I have to say that all the girls I worked with were excellent.

And did they know how to wrestle?

I made a pin-up board with my pro wrestling photos and had them imitate the moves. They didn't know what to do, and I'm not an expert either. I picked out some wrestling photos and things started to devel-



op from there. I would tell them to just move around and get into the hold and fall over each other, or do whatever. We would try it once, and if it looked good, I would say, "Okay, repeat the same pose," and I would shoot it. We went from one hold to the next.

Where did you find the apartment wrestling models?

The first ones I got through an agency. I used the agency about three times, and I asked those girls if they had any girlfriends who wanted work. The word spread around. From then on, I had an endless supply of girls. They were hippie girls, and they kept calling me wanting to do it.

Did you have any say about the style of these girls? Did you supply them with the bikinis?

Yeah, I went to Frederick's of Hollywood. Jeff Walton's wife worked there at the time, and I would have her pick out some. I think I still have some of those things lying around somewhere.

When apartment wrestling came out in the early 70s, it became a big deal with the pro wrestling fans?

Yes. We put a little sex in it. Instead of the blood shots, and the gory faces, we brightened things up a little bit. I hope no one took it too seriously.

The photos are obviously over-dramatized, and to me part of the attraction is that the gestures are overdone. Was this your intention?

One of my biggest problems in shooting that stuff was capturing the right expressions. I had a hell of a time trying to get them not to laugh, and to make it look natural.

There were definitely some star apartment wrestlers.

Oh definitely, there were some great models who could really act, but the magazine always wanted new girls all the time.

I always loved reading the letters column in the wrestling magazines written by the fans, or editors posing as fans. Did you read them, and did you find it funny that some people believed that this was real?

If somebody likes to believe it, it's fine. I sometimes look at my work and think, "How can I do this? This is ridiculous."



What about the more sexually explicit apartment wrestling photos?

The wrestling magazines could never publish those.

I'm curious, how did you get Seka and Candy Samples to model for you? They were well-known first-generation hard-core porno superstars.

They were hired by the magazines back East. I could never afford to use them myself.

Do you find your apartment wrestling work sexy, erotic?

No. I don't think it's sexy at all. It's posed and make-believe, that's what it is.

Don't you think that "make-believe" can be sexy? Wasn't the point to make a sexual fantasy?

I was completely impartial to it. I guess there was an interest, or people wouldn't have bought it. Something about it made people want to see it. I was shooting it for years and years. It was a job, that was it.

This was before the age of the hard-core sex video, it was pre-porno industry ...

Back then, I thought that this stuff, in Europe, could not go over well because they are more used to nudity. It's no big deal there. You see a butt, you see a breast, they show it on TV and in magazines. They have nudity in better magazines, not only cheap ones. You see good nude photography and nobody has a second thought about it. But here, it's all hush-hush.

Where do you think this repression in America comes from?

I think religion has a lot to do with it. The more you deprive people of something, the more they want it. You put a nude magazine on the table in Europe, they glance at it and walk out of the house. Here, they grab it and go into the closet to read it. I could never see what all the fuss was about.

Were aware that apartment wrestling, or cat fighting, was a fetish?

That's what it is. Those are all strange worlds to me, but if you want to see a couple of girls wrestling, what's the big deal? Let them wrestle.