

impressive

instant

John Arsenault's Photography
Balances **Humor, Sex, and the
Beauty of the Mundane**

By Mikel Wadewitz
All images by John Arsenault



"THE LAST RESORT"

A John Arsenault photograph is always more than it appears. On the surface, his colorful, often-humorous work seems casual, carefree. But it's almost as if that sheen is a test. If we look past it, we see much more—commentary on our conception of beauty, what it means to be gay, sex and sexiness, as well as how we remember specific moments in our lives.

Arsenault's work is probably most recognizable to consumers from the cover for Avril Lavigne's "Let Go" CD. He has also shot for a number of magazines. Most recently, the New York City-based photographer created images for a Volkswagen ad campaign aimed at gay consumers (see images at left and on page 50) that visually documented "road trips" to Provincetown, Mass., and Palm Springs. "It's not about a 'hot' couple in their new car," Arsenault explains. "It's about a moment you've spent with your lover—a fleeting instant we all hold on to."

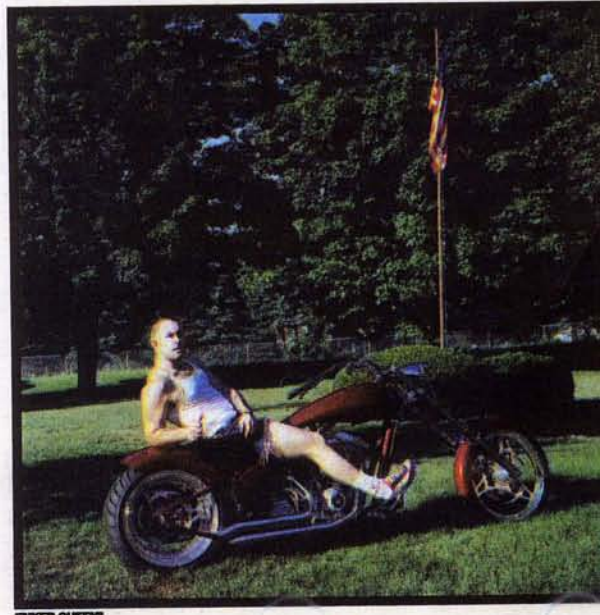
For Arsenault, the fleeting moments are the ones that he strives to capture. The 33-year-old Haverhill, Mass., native had an early love for photography, but didn't really feel inspired to pursue it until he took a class in high school. After graduation, he moved to Boston and enrolled in beauty school, eventually saving enough money to go to the School of Visual Arts in New York, where he received



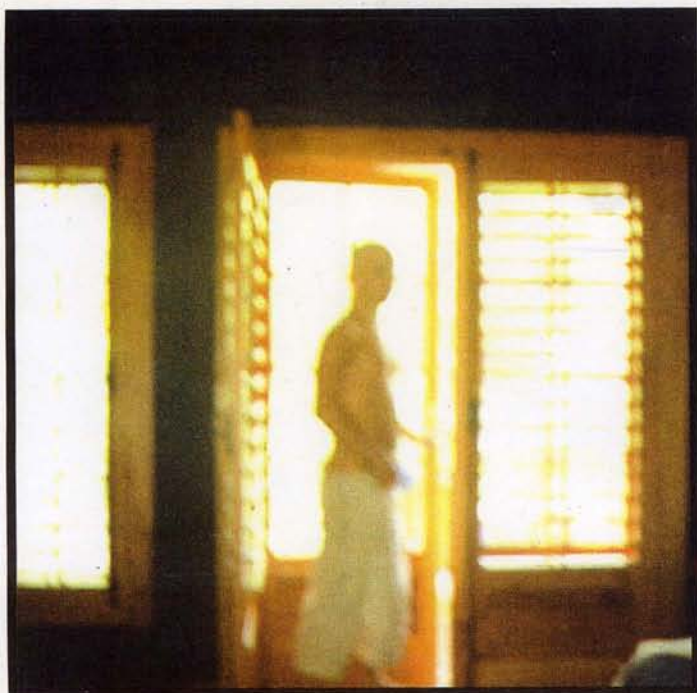
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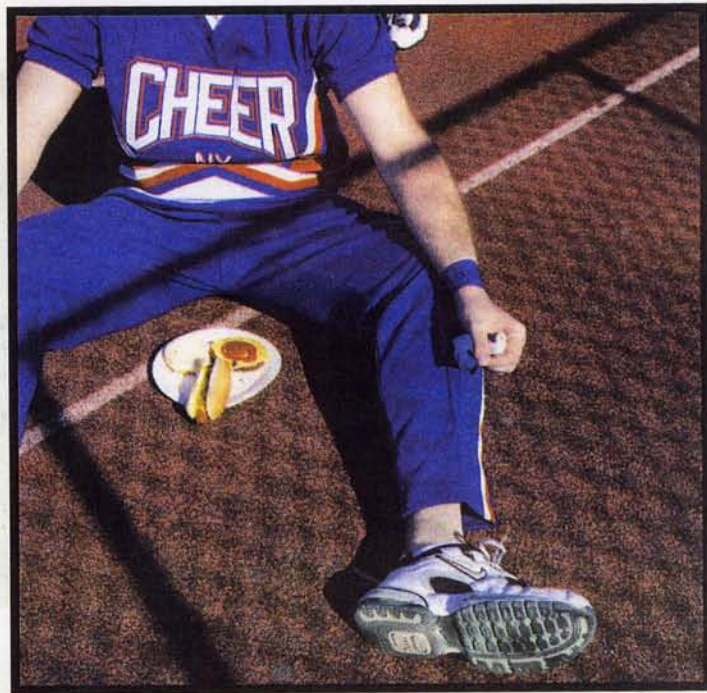
"REMEMBER ME"



"BICKER QUEEN"



"PLANTACION, COSTA RICA"



"NEW YORK CHEER"

his bachelor of fine arts degree. Yet it's still Mrs. Hess, his high school photography teacher, who continues to inspire him. "She encouraged me to photograph what was around me," he says. "I view my work as a visual diary, capturing portraits, landscapes, or just the mundane in life that we pass by. I try to bring the beauty of the mundane to light."

The beauty he finds is often unexpected, and elicits a chuckle from the viewer. Take "Biker Queen" (opposite), in which Arsenault positions himself on a motorcycle, assuming a butch posture, complete with an American flag in the background. One expects to see a motorcycle parked next to a symbol of Americana, but it's offset by the photographer's camp sensibility; Arsenault is toying with how we fetishize masculinity, if not simply hot guys on bikes. Then there's "Hoochie With a Gucci" (right), in which Arsenault shoots himself in a beauty shop seated next to an older woman, under a hair dryer, both subjects prettifying themselves for the day ahead.

The combination of humor and sexiness is intentional, Arsenault says: "Within my self-portraits I'm always making fun of myself—making comments about my being gay and simply laughing at myself. I think I would consider myself a pretty sexual person, and humor makes me have fun with it."

The self-portraits are indeed among the most sexualized pieces of Arsenault's work, but they are less about selling the image than exploring what it means to be gay and comfortable with oneself. "I think what we as





"I LIKE BOYS, NYC"



"MY WATCHFUL EYE"



"FAMILY PORTRAIT"

the gay community deem important at times can be a bit over the top. I like to poke fun without pointing fingers," he says. "I also like to put things out there and say, 'This is who I am, and I'm not going to hide it or step down. Accept me or don't.'"

Clearly, acceptance is something he's found. In addition to his busy slate of commercial projects, Arsenault has begun assembling a book, and he also hopes to set up a gallery show on the West Coast soon. He is also putting together a project titled "Kathy's Beauty Nook," a series of portraits of the women who have been getting their hair done by his Aunt Kathy and who clearly have had an influence on him. "Some of these ladies have been going to see Kathy for 40 years," he says. "Many of these ladies have seen me grow up."

And then there are more domestic concerns: He and his boyfriend recently bought a house in upstate New York, and he's excited to plant trees now that the weather is turning warm. One can almost see the image now: A man kneels next to a mound of dirt, tipping a sapling into a hole in the ground. Perhaps he's wearing only gloves and a smock, or perhaps a straw hat is perched atop his sweaty brow at a jaunty angle. He's surrounded by tools of his trade, looking at you with an expression of invitation and surprise on his face—daring you to make a joke about the slipping of the tree into the hole, or the nearby hoe.

