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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Nothing coy about these 'Working Girls' photographs

By [Leah Garchik](#)

Updated Nov 20, 2018 2:11 p.m.



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Image from 'Working Girls, An American Brothel, Circa 1892'

William Goldman

Art lover **Robert Flynn Johnson** calls himself a curator, a distinguished label that means someone likes stuff and likes to differentiate this stuff from that stuff. He's a guy who gets to the flea market early in the morning, and he's particularly fascinated by old photographs. In addition to scholarly works about individual artists, he has published several books about the photographic treasures he's unearthed.

At a postcard show in Concord a few years ago, he bought two photos — professionally taken, crisply focused — of prostitutes. They were part of a collection, and eventually, Johnson contacted the seller and, after much back and forth, bought a whole set of the photos.

They were taken in 1892 at a brothel in Reading, Penn., by photographer **William Goldman**. As soon as he realized the size of the collection, said Johnson at the opening of a show of the photos at the Serge Sorokko Gallery (through Dec. 9), "I knew somewhere somehow there would be a book." "Working Girls: An American Brothel, circa 1892" is newly published by Glitterati Editions. In addition to Johnson describing his acquisition of the photos, and the urban milieu in which they were taken, the book has a foreword by neo-burlesque star **Dita Von Teese**; a preface by feminist historian **Ruth Rosen**; and an essay that focuses on Gilded Age lingerie, by Phoenix Art Museum fashion design curator **Dennita Sewell**.

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But for all that scholarly power, the pleasure is looking at the pictures, the women seemingly relaxed in front of the camera. With a few exceptions, Goldman's subjects aren't playing peekaboo, they're not flirting behind fans, and no one has ever heard of any body part that's artfully waxed. They're just there, comfortable in every size and shape; no one's had a boob job, no one's sucking her stomach in.

At the opening of the exhibition, I watched the crowd peering at the photos, complete with imperfections, and it seemed to me that this peep show pleased the sisters even more than the men.

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•HBO has announced plans for an as-yet-untitled documentary on **Roy Cohn**, the local angle being that conversations between Cohn and journalist **Peter Manso**, who has lived in these parts, will be featured in the doc. Cohn, Manso and **Norman Mailer** were at one point roomies in Provincetown, Mass. The director of the documentary is **Ivy Meeropol**, granddaughter of **Julius** and **Ethel Rosenberg**, who were prosecuted successfully by Cohn, convicted and executed.

•**Susan Johnson** got an email flyer from San Francisco State about an event Friday, Nov. 15, “Corpses of the Holocaust,” in which “**Jean-Marc Dreyfus**, reader in Holocaust studies at University of Manchester, discusses his research on human remains of the Holocaust. Reception to follow.” Johnson says she’ll pass on the reception. “Not sure I’d be up for drinks and canapes.”

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•The cost of living in San Francisco is so high, says **Patrick McAteer**, that even a big spender can’t make it “without a little side income.” On Market Street, he saw a Maserati Uber.

•Just across the road from Muir Woods, Druid Heights, site of a former commune where **Alan Watts** wrote “The Way of Zen,” has just been recognized as a historic site by the Cultural Landscape Foundation in Washington, D.C. The land it sits on is part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and the recognition is good news to a group called Save Druid Heights, lovers of history and literature who have been worried about the fate of the place as cuts to national park budgets are mandated from Washington.

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The theme, she said, was “appropriation,” and artist, performer and MacArthur fellow **Carrie Mae Weems** wowed the audience by singing a bit (along with a video of **Aretha Franklin**), dancing and showing other videos in her Bransten Lecture at the de Young Museum on Nov. 9.

Setting out afterward from the de Young to the Prospect restaurant for dinner hosted by the museum, she realized, upon approaching the machine to pay for her

parking ticket, that she'd left her wallet at the Laurel Inn, where she'd been staying. There was a line of people waiting to pay behind her, and a man who'd been at the museum for its Friday Nights at the de Young party — not for the lecture — stepped up and paid for her.

## **PUBLIC EAVESDROPPING**

“I have the talent. I just have to monetize it.”

*Woman to friend, overheard over breakfast at Alexis Baking Co. in Napa by Joe Pramuk*

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By **Leah Garchik**



Leah Garchik washed up on the shores of Fifth and Mission in 1972, began her duties as a part-time temporary steno clerk, and has done everything around The Chronicle including washing the dishes (her coffee cup). Over the years, she has served as writer, reviewer, editor and columnist. She is the author of two books, “San Francisco: Its Sights and Secrets” and “Real Life Romance.”

She is an avid knitter, a terrible accordion player, a sporadic tweeter and a pretty good speller.

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