Glen Helfand: Since the title of this issue is Peepshow, I wonder if you could start by talking about how *The Valley* expresses your interest in the notion of looking at something that is perceived to be illicit—even though in the contemporary climate, pornography is everywhere.

Larry Sultan: To begin, I had some misgivings about touching a subject that already seemed to be in the cultural imagination. It's well expressed in magazines like *Dutch*, and *Purple*, and in photos by Jeff Burton, by people who have dealt with that subject in a provocative way. I was never really interested in taking on provocative subject matter. In an odd way, the subject matter found me. I had been doing a lot of work in the suburbs, *Pictures from Home* and a project in a shopping mall with Harrell Fletcher and Jon Rubin, and I was doing a lot of more socially-based and collaborative work with Mike Mandel and Kelly (Sultan). I kept on coming back not to sex, but to home. Home was the target. Pornography as a subject always floats out there in the world of advertising or stars, like Jenna Jameson. But with all that exposure, it loses a lot of its allure—it's not even nasty.

But if you put anything in a suburban house, you put homicide in a suburban house, you put theft in a suburban house, or you put period sex in a suburban house, the site functions like an image processor. It processes it in a way that is strangely dark and more unsettling than it is in itself. You can think 'What's more unsettling than pornography in terms of sexuality?' Well it's not particularly unsettling—sex is really exactly what you're going to get with porn. For me, the house contaminates pornography, it's not pornography that contaminates the house. Of course, it does taint the rooms. If someone rents a house and does something bad in it, it leaves a stain. For me, those houses are stained already, they're so deeply imbedded in my own childhood, as well as our more general cultural fantasies, particularly suburban fantasies. And then there's the real [sexual] event going on. Those things conspire to make it not so much about pornography—even though that's what I knew I was doing—but I read it differently. I never would have looked at pornographic images on the internet and thought they were interesting. The more those images become a part of our culture, the less you can do with

them. They're so over determined, so deeply inscribed that to open them up in any way seems really difficult.

GH: The Valley series began in 1998. Can you talk about how it started?

LS: Literally I had spent ten years going back and forth to the valley photographing my parents. When that project finished, I really felt I had nowhere left to go. I had mined something so personal, nostalgic and complicated. I turned to more politically oriented subjects, collaborative work and site-specific public projects.

I wasn't really doing that kind of personal work any more. And then I started working for magazines and was commissioned to photograph a day in the life of a porn star. What was interesting to me was that I was asked to fly back to Encino, near where I grew up. I knew the name of the street: Vanalden Avenue. There was a girl who lived there that I knew when I was a kid. Hearing about it was a Proustian moment.

The film location was a dentist's house. I went there with my wife and we walked through the garage and then through a hallway hung with family photos, pictures of anniversaries, a kid's graduation, things like that. In that hallway it was quite evident how photography constructs family. In the living room there was a mass of bodies-- five naked women trying to create this fictitious film in which they are photographing themselves for their boyfriends in the army. It was hilarious, and so nasty. But it seemed transgressive as I had passed through this threshold of all those family pictures to get there. It struck me that photography constructs family so beautifully, but it also constructs pornography. Sex is constructed through film and photography. I'm interested in using photography to open up a space around those constructions-- not to dismantle them, but to add something that isn't in the same idiom. I just knew I would do this project. I didn't know it would be in these rented homes—I didn't even know that film set scenario existed. I thought that pornography was mainly made in director's homes or studios. But the idea that they could rent a dentist's house, a day trader's house, or one owned by a German couple was fascinating to me. So I spent seven years on the project.

GH: When you look at them now, what do you see as the differences between the first and last of the series?

LS: The first ones were so innocent. They're from that beginner's mind where everything is meaningful. I'd look at a piece of pie on the floor or a fireplace with books fall off the shelf and they're earthshaking because everything has a connotation. The connotative machine was like a suburban garden hose being turned on but there was no one there and it was going all over the place. Slowly I learned how to grab that hose and control it, and as I did, I lost that sense of openness. The pictures become more calculated near the end, they become less about alienation and more about sexuality. At the beginning, I think the pictures were troubled because I was troubled by the subject matter. In the end, I was used to it and it was hard to make anything that was new for me. The most important ones were made in the first two years. *Tasha's Third Film*, *The Boxer Dogs*, there's something kind of tender about those pictures, and slightly lost. The people are slightly lost. I was slightly lost. It's hard to know when to stop something.

GH: How did you know you were finished?

LS: I knew I had a sequence to work on—I was doing a book and I knew there were kinds of pictures I needed for that. I kept on thinking, and my publisher said this to me, you need to find your innocence. I realized that I was afraid of making pictures of sex, so I tried that near the end. I think to utter failure. For me, the least interesting pictures in that book are those of sex. No one ever looks at those, they're boring, the subject is tired. The first version of the book was mainly about alienation, much less contact. It was almost completely architectural, pictures of just the rooms without people. It changed over the years to become more human.

GH: It's interesting how that shift tracks a personal trajectory, but perhaps also the way pornography has increasingly been seen through the lens of fashion, it's gone from the illicit to the mainstream pretty rapidly.

LS: Because the signifiers are so deeply seated, it's hard to push them off of a narrative momentum. Whether they're used in fashion or used in art, there's a certain point where they reach fatigue. I can't imagine doing that project now – I was almost a bit too late in 1998. To do it again in 2008, the fatigue is really evident. It shows how cultures takes images that are threadbare and endlessly tries to reuse them before diminishing return sets in. The more you use it, the less interesting it is. I faced that problem when I was photographing, because the desire or will of the subject was to try to stay put, to stay within the context of being glamorous pornography, but I was trying to push it as far from that as I could.

GH: Since the series is so much to do with the character of the houses, and they're photographed so hauntingly, do you think the homes take on a kind of glamour? To me the sites seem ripe with fictional narrative possibility.

LS: I think the houses become uncanny-- they become what they are. Those houses that I grew up in were deeply unsettled houses-- unsettled from my experience from the family battles that occurred in them, unsettled by my own masturbatory fantasies and the terribly nasty things my brother did at home. That kind of uncanny is projected, by me, on to all suburban interiors. The things that look like safe decorations are suspect, and pornography makes them look more suspect. Everything could be used as a prop for some unintended new function. But I don't think the rooms themselves become glamorous, I think they get scary. Not in a horror film way, but a film where someone went mad kind of way.

GH: But a film nonetheless, something fictional . . .

LS: They're infused with fiction. I've always been interested in the theater of the home. That's kind of what my work is-- taking the construction of the domestic and looking at it as a theatrical subject. It's not natural. I choose to photograph a constructed interior, one meant to look cozy, but functions in every way but coziness. At the same time, the

pictures are also infused with a deep sense of my own longing, desire and a nostalgia that manifests itself in sliding glass doors or flagstone fireplaces.

GH: The idea of these being constructed interiors relates back to the notion of set dressing and even interior decoration as means of creating or even controlling a space. How do you approach constructing a picture of it?

LS: I start by making the act of looking quite overt. You have to see through things or around things, you have to play hide and seek. It's my own ambivalence. I want to see and I don't want to see. Certainly I'm trying to control that fatigued narrative by choosing moments when almost nothing is happening. Pornography used to be transgressive but it is no longer. What is transgressive is sitting with a naked behind on a kitchen counter, or fucking on a child's bed. Those are things that interest me because they are very specific. No one talks about sex in family language except as instruction. My parents never said, 'We want to tell you that we have sex, we enjoy it and we expect you to masturbate.' No one ever considers that, but you're forced to with my work, and when pornography comes to town and goes into those homes. I'm sure the filmmakers have to talk about it with to the owners of the homes and perhaps their kids. I like that you're forced to talk about that which you're not supposed to talk about, but really talk about all the time-- but never to the right people. The issue is not how to control it but to push it off of its pornographic center into something that's poetic.

GH: It's interesting to consider how the internet creates a strong sense of specificity. Fetishes are controlled visions, and the use of websites like amateur porn sites, hook up sites, and Facebook allows people to completely cater to their interests and constructed identities.

LS: It's completely decontextualized. When I was on the sets, and even when I was looking at amateur porn, what I found interesting is getting to see people's homes. You get to see the books they read. I remember when years ago I would look at porn magazines to take out my loupe to look at the bookshelf to see what they're reading, what

records they're listening to. It was an intense voyeurism. Who wants to see penetration? I don't want to see sex, I want to see what surrounds it.

GH: You photographed the San Francisco studio of Kink.com for the *New York Times*. Does a site like that, a building where they make fetish videos, provide anything similar to the rented houses?

LS: It's actually sort of boring. When you have full access and actors are performing for you it's not interesting. Somehow that performance spoils it. When something is forbidden, taboo, and you have to struggle to see it, you're implicated in such a deep way. Your view breaches distance, and you get off by closing that distance. But you're always distant, they're not performing for you. It's probably why voyeurism is such an important topic when you think about pornography. They used to go hand in hand, now they don't. You can actually go to a chat room and direct a woman or man with a webcam to perform for you. It's still somewhat voyeuristic, but it's very different than the idea of peeking.

GH: I keep finding myself coming back to the idea of how much the cultural profile of pornography has changed since you showed *The Valley* at SFMOMA.

LS: I have to say, and I don't mean to suggest that I'm ahead of the curve, but when I did *Evidence*, the idea of taking found images was not a common phenomenon, which was what made it interesting. The same with *Pictures from Home*. I couldn't get a show for years. Peter Galassi put my work in *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* in 1991 but I started those in 1983, so there was not a lot of receptivity at that time. But the reason you do it is because there's a lot of room to make discoveries, the field is not so determined. Now, I can't look at *The Valley* work too much, I can look at individual pictures, taken together as a body about pornography, it feels like a club or strategy. As if that subject matter itself could create enough of a spectacle to make anything interesting.

GH: Which goes back to what you said earlier about your subject really being something other than pornography.

LS: Pornography was a decoy to get someone into the sense of listlessness of being in those homes. I want viewers to feel sense of being lost in those houses, but also how it feels being naked in them, being sexualized as a teenager. The pictures are deeply nostalgic for me, as is the home itself. That's the subject for me. Pornography gets to the mundane and uncanny pretty quickly. It can do that work. I've been on sets where you see a porn actress standing in a room naked and you start looking around and you see details-- a mezuzah and a Book of Knowledge on the bookshelf. She does something to that room and that room does something to her. There's a reciprocity of strangeness going on in there.