

Gender bender

Houston photographer Jay Rusovich enjoys toying with sexual identity

By Joey Guerra, Contributing Writer

Jay Rusovich wants people to come out of the closet — sexually, spiritually and socially. The Houston-based photographer hopes to encourage debate and inspire change via *Inside Out*, a one-night-only exhibition on March 5 at the Tremont Tower Penthouse.

Inside Out is a provocative assemblage of works that uses sex and sexuality as springboards to address more specific themes and issues, including religion, gender identity and mortality.

"I have always had a burning passion to explore the masks that people wear," says Rusovich, relaxing amid the sounds of Alanis Morissette and Coldplay in his Montrose-area townhouse and workspace. He's a gregarious, confident man, clearly excited at the prospect of showcasing his ideas.

"The show is not a sex show. The show uses sex as a metaphor because it's such a trigger for so much of this repression," Rusovich says. "If it's cross-dressing, it's not about cross-dressing. It's really more about exploring cross-dressing from the inside out and not feeling badly about it. It's embracing all of the diversity that we all feel inside."

Plastic surgery and body issues are also explored through Rusovich's series of black-and-white photographs, which include titles *Boys Will Be Boys*, *Christ Revisited*, *Afternoon in Paradise* and *Forever Alone*.

He sees each photo as a collaborative process with his models. Some pieces took as long as five hours to shoot, with careful thought being put into what happened before and after the camera shutter clicked.

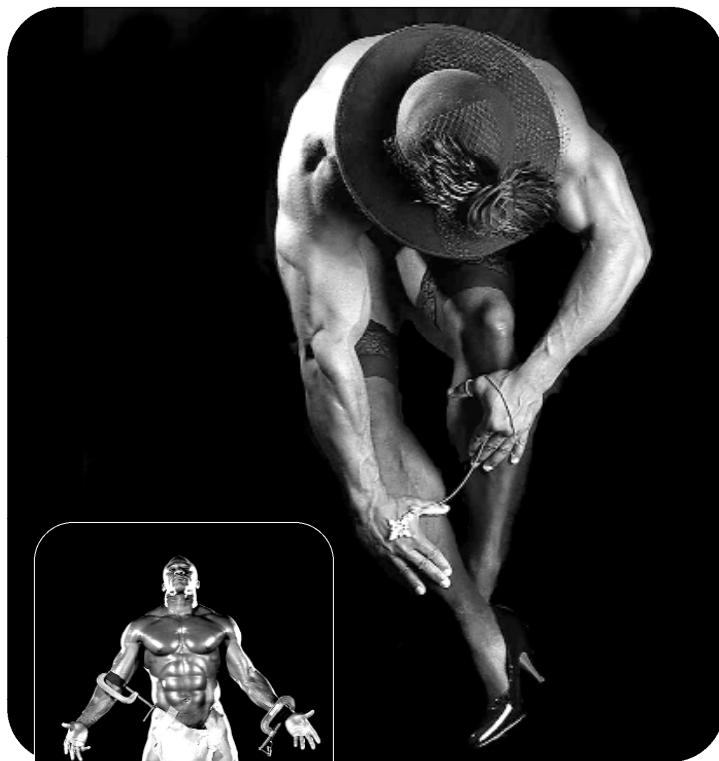
Rusovich describes it as being akin to Martin Scorsese and Robert DeNiro shooting a movie scene — minus the New York accents and monstrous budgets, of course.

"Every model goes through this thematic process with me," he says. "They know they're being photographed, of course, but they're so engaged in the process that it's very voyeuristic."

Rusovich's interest in exploring underlying emotions and issues stems from what he calls a depressing childhood amid a "pathologically narcissistic family fueled with alcoholism."

Originally from New Orleans, he attended schools in Connecticut, Arizona and England. He lived in Los Angeles and New York before settling in Houston a decade ago to be closer to his family.

Before dedicating himself to more person-



creative control.

Creating *Inside Out* has enabled Rusovich to not only address childhood demons, but also more recent issues that have been haunting him. In fact, he's already planning a second series.

"I still had this residual anger and hurt from a relationship that I was in," Rusovich says. "I walked around with it for a long time, and what I wanted to do was sort of 'out' it. I wanted to exorcise it, and this was a way to do it that felt right for me."

"Some people just go to therapy. It was going to come out. It comes out in everyone. What I'm trying to do is open the door to dis-

al work, Rusovich found much success as a commercial photographer. Over the years, his clients have included Shell Oil, McDonald's, Continental Airlines, Miller Brewing Company and Labrada Nutrition. But despite those high-profile commissions, there was still something lacking in his work.

"My problem with shooting anything commercial is that I feel very restrained. I'm dealing with art directors who want something very specific, and I want to bring something else, perhaps, to the fold," Rusovich says. "There's always a conflict. Commercial 'art' is not really art. It's sort of a representation of art."

Today, Rusovich does limited commercial work, but he insists on — and gets — complete

ON EXHIBITION

Bering & James Gallery presents
Inside Out, by Jay Rusovich

Tremont Tower Penthouse, 3311 Yupon St., Unit 618,
 Houston. Mar. 5, 6-9 p.m. Private showings (by
 appointment only) through Mar. 18. 713-529-0351.