

IMAGE COURTESY CAROLINE DY

MOTHERBOARD
TECH BY VICE

'Building the Cockchain:' How NSFW Artists Are Shaping the Future of NFTs

The crypto-art medium has a lot of potential for adult creators—but some advise caution.



By [Samantha Cole](#)

March 18, 2021, 7:00am

A few months ago, Jen Stein entered a room in the voice chat app Clubhouse called "Decentralized Systems," looking for conversations about censorship solutions on social media. She creates sculptural art using colorful dildos as the medium, and had recently been kicked off of Instagram. To her surprise, she found a group of people in the middle of a conversation about cryptocurrency.

"I was like, 'I'm so sorry, I think I came to the wrong room... I did not realize this was about Bitcoin,'" she told me. "I'd heard about Bitcoin like once before, through all these memes about money... I hate money, I hate capitalism, I don't care," she recalled. But the people in that room told her to stay and learn about non-fungible tokens, or NFTs. "It just opened my eyes to what this technology could actually do."

Non-fungible tokens, or NFTs, are visual, cryptographic assets on the



Welcome to Rule 34, a series in which Motherboard's Samantha Cole lovingly explores the highly specific fetishes that can be found on the web.

[SEE MORE →](#)

blockchain that are unique from one another and can represent ownership of an associated digital item. Stein listed images of her sculptures on Rarible, a digital marketplace for NFTs, and calls it "building the cockchain." She's since personally taught more than 100 people the ins and outs of NFTs and cryptocurrency, and written guides on how to get into it. "I've never been more inspired by anything in a really long time—especially after this year, I was feeling very just not hopeful about the world," she said.

NFTs have gained traction in the world of art and collectors' items. Each token points to a digital work in some way, and because they're minted on the blockchain, they're harder to defraud and impossible to duplicate. This means one can track where they're transferred and sold. Unlike cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin or Ethereum, you can't pay for things with them like money; they're more like receipts than dollar bills. It would be like

trying to buy a coffee with a printed picture of Nyan Cat. But they're useful for artists who want to build a community of collectors, and invest in art that could increase in value over time.

NFTs have gotten a lot of attention lately, both for successes such as [art sales in the millions](#), and for criticisms around the environmental cost of cryptocurrency mining and issues such as theft. But the technology isn't new. They've been around for years—at least as far back as [Rare Pepes in 2017](#)—and the basic idea stretches back farther, with "Colored Coins" issued on the Bitcoin blockchain [in 2012](#).

In the last month, several well-known artists—including rapper Azealia Banks, who [sold the rights to an audio sex tape](#) for \$17,000, and Russian rock group Pussy Riot, which released a new video as [series of protest-art tokens](#) to benefit women's shelters—seem to be paving the way for works that push the boundaries way beyond Cryptokitties. There's even an [NFT-based streaming alternative](#) to Spotify. But is the same success attainable for smaller, independent erotic artists?

THE BENEFITS

Multidisciplinary artist [PolyAnnie](#) started minting NFTs in September 2020. She does performance art, erotic physical and digital art, and is a content creator on OnlyFans. "NFTs allow me to set the conditions of my work and provide me the ability to gamify my entire body of work in ways that one day I can take my hands off the 'wheel' and let my brand run itself," she said.

To her, the benefits of getting into the NFT world include a more direct relationship with fans and those fans become investors, as well as the financial: she's made more income from crypto-art in five months than she usually would in an entire year. Now, she runs a weekly conference call

that's open to anyone who wants to learn more about getting into adult NFTs.



"SELF-LOVE," BY CRYPTONATRIX. IMAGE COURTESY CRYPTONATRIX

For erotic artists and sex workers, who are constantly dogged by payment processors' prudish rules and risk having their Venmo, Cashapp, and Paypal accounts closed for selling sexy content, the decentralized nature of NFTs is appealing. Unlike with these services, which are moderated by a central authority, digital receipts published to the blockchain are permanent and there will always be methods of transferring cryptocurrency without the use of middlemen who might take issue with the transaction. For some, this looks like the future of the adult industry.

Cryptoempress, a professional dancer and nude model as well as cryptocurrency enthusiast, mostly creates NFTs from her own nude photos. She saw the combination of crypto and modeling as a natural fit.

"I think the future for NFT's, crypto-art and NSFW artists is bright, because the world is changing to a direction where nudity is not a taboo anymore," she said. "You can create nude art on the blockchain with the actual opportunity to earn money." She also likes that NFTs can bring in royalties— if someone buys her work and then resells it, she can receive the royalties she sets as a term of the sale.

"I think that NFTs are a great 'gateway drug' to bring anyone into crypto," Cryptonatrix, who works as a dominatrix, told me. "However, I imagine it will take time for adult content creators and buyers to become familiar with what's going on in this space, just as it will take time for new adult specific NFT platforms to develop and test themselves."

THE RISKS

As excited as she was about cryptocurrency's potential for art, it took Stein a few weeks after learning about cryptocurrency to start her own wallet. "It was the PTSD of being on other platforms where [sex is] the first thing that gets regulated," she said. "Something's gonna happen with sex, sexuality and kids, or with kids money."

Even if cryptocurrency infrastructure is fairly agnostic, markets represent a possible bottleneck for content creators. Rarible's terms of use prohibit users to "publish, post, distribute or disseminate any profane, obscene, pornographic indecent or unlawful content, pictures, topic, name, material or information," for example, but at the same time, has a dedicated NSFW category. OpenSea, another listing marketplace, is more lenient. Its terms of use state that it allows the sale of NSFW content, but that content is "subject to being marked NSFW and handled differently than non-NSFW content in navigation menus and search results," and the site bans "asset names, listings and their descriptions, smart contract names, and collections

including profanity, sexually explicit, or overtly sexual content." SuperRare, another marketplace, does not allow minting pornographic or obscene content—but a quick search on the platform shows that this rule is pretty loose. Foundation similarly forbids vulgar, obscene or pornographic content.



IMAGE COURTESY CRYPTOEMPRESS

All of this surfaces age-old questions about what constitutes art, porn, and erotica—and what makes each of these distinct from the others. What might be considered acceptably NSFW without crossing the line into “obscene” on these platforms?

"The very notion of erotica as 'good,' clean, non-explicit representations of sexual pleasure in opposition to dirty, explicit pornographic ones is false," porn scholar Linda Williams wrote in *Hard Core*. "The one emphasizes desire, the other satisfaction. Depending on who is looking, both can appear dirty, perverse, or too explicit." And as pornographic legend Gloria Leonard,

once put it bluntly: "The difference between porn and erotica is the lighting."

"Just as what is considered 'art' is infinitely debated and in the eyes of the beholder, what is considered inappropriate, varies greatly amongst individuals," Cryptoempress said. In these cases, the beholder is the platforms themselves.

"Obscenity" at least has a legal definition, but it's subject to jurisdiction. "What jurisdiction is the metaverse?" Stein said.

Cryptonatrix said she had one of her first NFTs removed by Rarible, without explanation. "Terms of Service are never written so clearly, which allows platforms to censor selectively," she said. "As with any social platform, there are definitely double standards in the way their ToS are applied, and in who they choose to promote. For example, a GIF of me wearing a strap-on silicone toy was removed while others sell uncensored nudes, men have minted dick pics, and there is other art involving dildos not actually being worn." There's also a double standard on platforms about erotic content when it's made by a someone who is openly a sex worker, versus someone without that stigma attached to them and their art, she said. But there's still less risk of deplatforming in crypto-art so far than there is on Facebook or Instagram.

There's also the usual security risks that anyone connecting their credit care to a relatively new platform take on: earlier this week, several users on token marketplace Nifty Gateway had thousands of dollars stolen from their accounts, because the site doesn't require two-factor authentication. And there's always the risk of copyright infringement and stolen art ending up on a marketplace—a problem pornographers have dealt with since the earliest days of putting images of sex on the internet, and one that's only

expounded with the rise of independent sex work such as camming and clip sites.

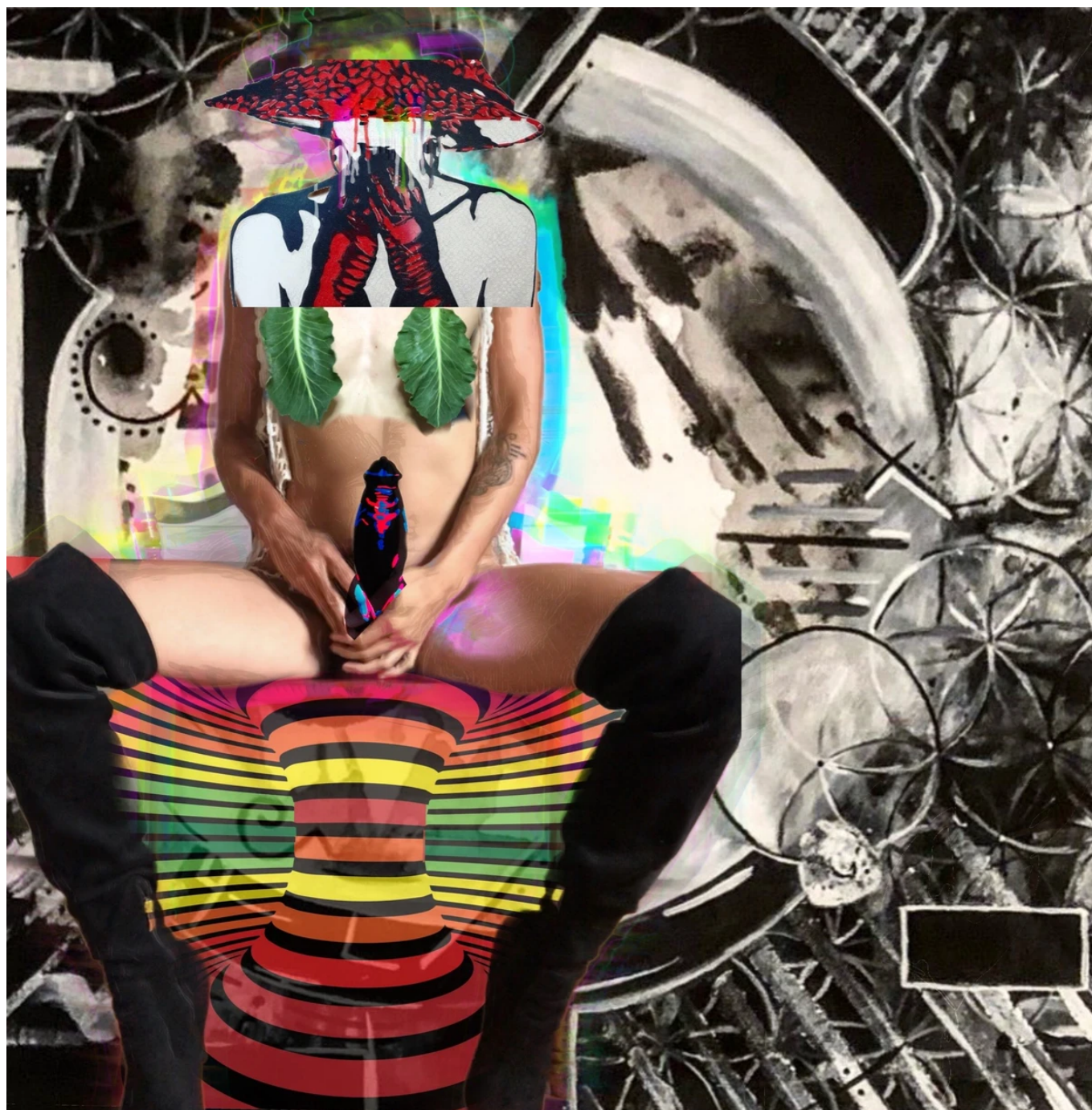


IMAGE COURTESY POLYANNIE

Some sex workers are trying to stay a step ahead by minting their own works on the blockchain before someone else can: Allie Eve Knox told Motherboard that she's been minting her works before others can, and watermarking them with a "bid now" banner that stays on the image until

it's purchased, to keep people from stealing the jpeg or screenshotting it.

A complication of NFTs (and a risk for sellers) is that most tokens give the purchaser the right to do what they want with it, including reselling it.

"When I shoot for a company or whatever, I sign those rights away in a contract, but here, there is no contract. There is no law. There is no regulation, aside from moderation of the site—which is hella subjective," Knox said.





RE(BOOTY) BY CAROLINE DY. IMAGE COURTESY CAROLINE DY

Stein and Cryptonatrix both brought up the fact that most marketplace platforms don't have age verification or consent agreements, for either the seller or the buyer. "I think it's just like any new technology, in that with the endless amount of positive potential it may bring, there are also dangers that we cannot yet foresee," Cryptonatrix said. "I am moving cautiously, including with the projects that I am aligning myself with."

Some of these issues are the growing pains of a newly-popular medium, but mostly they're predictable questions within the adult content industry.

"Any fringe content will remain vulnerable to censorship as long as payment and computation hosting are in the hands of large tech companies," PolyAnnie said. "Blockchains are not evolved enough to host the content itself, only the proof of purchase and ownership. Therefore, blockchains can solve payment vulnerabilities, yet blockchains cannot address censorship in who gets hosted on the tech giant's servers." Although there are ways to host images on the blockchain, they're very limited, and more like storing pixel art.

The NFT boom could also help illustrators who make more erotic-themed

art in private expand that work into the public. Caroline Dy, who got into NFTs to supplement her income as a technical artist and game developer, creates digitally-painted portraits and pin-ups. "I'm exploring the idea of publishing more work that leans towards erotica as I believe we need to destigmatize and normalize talking about sex," Dy said.

"It's extremely important to not get too drugged up on that 'hopium,'" Cryptonatrix said. "Neither sex work nor cryptoart is easy money, though that misconception is certainly prevalent in regards to both."

Even with the uncertainty of where this technology and art form will go, Stein said she'd still encourage anyone who's been shut out of other platforms to try making their own NFTs.

"There are so many people that have already lost their voices, and they're the ones that need this," she said. "I see this technology as a way to get voices to the people that have not been able to use them."

TAGGED: [SEX](#), [PORN](#), [SEX WORK](#), [BLOCKCHAIN](#), [RULE 34](#), [CRYPTO](#), [NFT](#)