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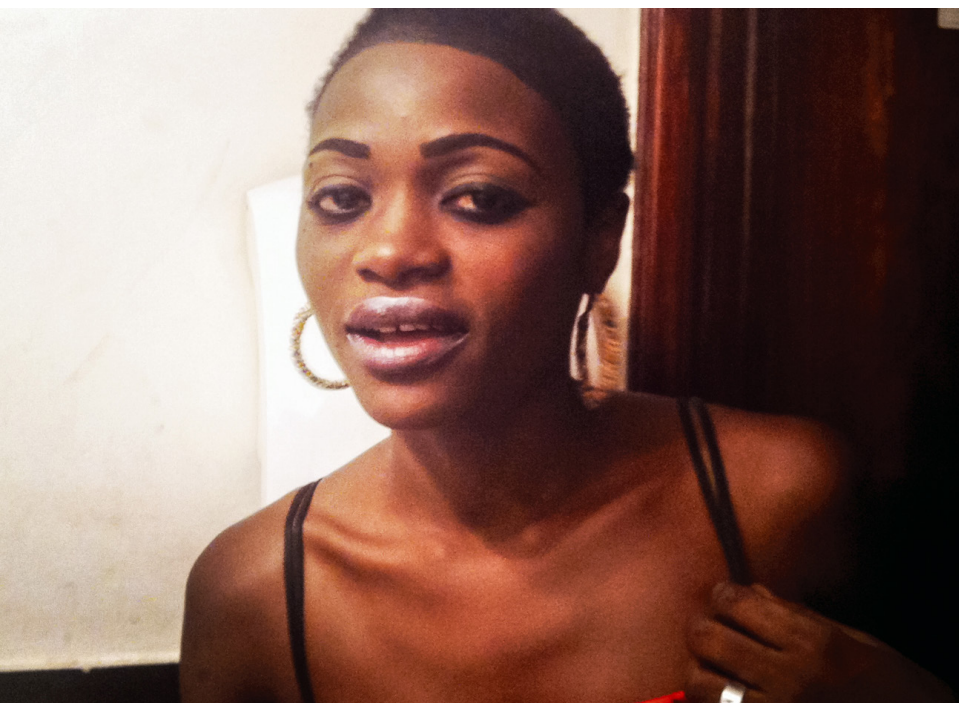
Photographer Yapci Ramos Focuses on Sex Workers and Stray

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When you title your exhibition “Perras y Putas” — roughly, “female dogs and whores” — you’ve got to expect some level of controversy, or at least consternation. Spanish photographer Yacpi Ramos, whose show of that name opens September 12 at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery on New York’s Lower East Side, seems ready for it. The gallery will present works from an ongoing, multi-part series that depicts prostitutes, and a handful of quasi-feral canines, in various locations around

cigarettes while staring down the camera; knickknacks line a shelf behind them; Rosi wears a pair of grey Crocs. The significantly older woman in “Mari,” 2010, wears a defiant expression, one arm shielding her mop-headed dog. Ramos recorded Mari singing a song, a capella — you can listen to it here — whose lyrics translate as “Don’t abuse this woman / because she’s a working girl / it’s bad enough / that she has to go to bed / with a man who she doesn’t love.”



the globe, from the Canary Islands to Aruba and Brazzaville, Republic of Congo. “It’s not a social project,” Ramos stressed, when I asked if her documentation of working women had an activist angle. “It’s an artist’s point of view; I’m not saying if prostitution is good or bad.”

Ramos is the co-founder and former director of the Tenerife Design Festival, which is inadvertently how she found herself working alongside prostitutes in the Canary Islands. The festival was willfully eclectic — “different projects, all mixed together,” she said — and one year’s edition, which featured heavyweights like the Campana Brothers and El Ultimo Grito, enlisted sex workers for an extended design collaboration. Ramos got to know some of the women, and eventually asked if she might photograph them against the intimate backdrop of their own apartments. The resulting pictures are frankly casual, and the opposite of erotic: the dual subjects of “Rosi y Mari,” for instance, are sitting on a cheap loveseat, puffing

Ramos’s project evolved when she traveled to Aruba to participate in the island’s biennial in 2011. At first she thought she would continue photographing prostitutes, but the scenario didn’t quite feel right. The artist found herself paying for the women’s time. She took some portraits and made audio recordings, but she doesn’t think she’ll ever show those. Instead, her prostitution-focused series moved toward an unexpected subject: The legions of wild dogs prowling Aruba. Some Arubans, Ramos explained, have a habit of adopting puppies and then abandoning them to the streets. It wasn’t much of a stretch for the artist to equate their plight with that of sex workers — “society takes these people as dogs,” she said bluntly — and her own process of scouting for and digitally photographing the canines at night with that of a cruising john.

The third portion of the series at Catinca Tabacaru was shot in a very different locale: The women’s room of a prostitution-focused nightclub, No Stress Bar, in the Republic of Congo. Ramos was in Africa on behalf of a commission from a Congolese hotel that wanted her help facilitating a project with local artists. She stumbled upon No Stress — whose odd name, she said, made it pretty clear what might be happening inside. When she visited, the working women weren’t there yet; they’d been held up en route from Kinshasha, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. (The girls — mostly very young, and commuting from the larger city for “more opportunity” in Brazzaville — seemed to be searching for male patrons to support them in the longer term, Ramos said.) While the artist had weeks to develop relationships with the Canary Island women in the first portion of her series, the portraits at No Stress Bar were much more spontaneous: When the girls finally arrived, they headed to the bathroom to put their make-up on. Ramos followed, and asked if she could take quick snaps with her smartphone camera. The resulting portraits find the subjects consciously mugging for the lens, striving to impress.