

**ONLY IN VEGAS?
INSIDE ALBERT WATSON'S STRIP SEARCH**

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It's no secret that Sin City is America's most bizarre place, a glittering monument to id carved by greed, lust and gluttony straight out of the Mojave. While those qualities might not make it the most spiritually edifying destination -- and judging by the Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Bureau's ads, the city agrees -- they do encourage a first-rate sort of voyeurism. And that's what's so wonderful about Strip Search (PQ Blackwell), photographer Albert Watson's two-volume compendium of images from the town, shot over the past five years.

Alternating between gorgeous full-bleed landscapes and grimmer portraits, the clothbound book offers a series of images so vivid you can smell the carpet cleaner in photos of off-strip adult motel rooms, not to mention feel the shaving rash of the people who frequent them. (Among the subjects Watson returns to repeatedly is Breaunna, a dominatrix in thigh-high boots with Bettie Page bangs and a glamorous sort of sex appeal, but, uhm, she looks like she waxes. Some of the others -- strippers, rockers, punks -- don't seem to pay as much attention to personal deportment.) The photos are titillating, whether featuring impossibly limber showgirls and gift-ribbon-esque lingerie, or vibrant, almost lurid, desert landscapes. Watson steers clear of the usual material, so if you're expecting pictures of the Bellagio Fountains or Steve Wynn chilling on top of his logo, 614 feet up, it's best to keep looking. Instead the photographer backs up his reputation with photos that manage to be simultaneously gritty and glossy -- portraits that capture all their subjects' surface glaze and hint that the manic sheen is created by white-lightning desperation within. (The essay by Tom Wolfe helps contextualize matters, too.)

At 10-plus pounds, it's certainly heavier than, say, a set of plane tickets to McCarran International, but we suspect that as a stocking stuffer, Strip Search will be just as rewarding.