

TAMMY RUGGLES

Angels in the Night, 2015
Silver gelatin print, 24 x 36 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

ERIC BERKOWITZ

What Is a Prostitute?

Historical Attitudes Toward Sexual Freedom

The word “prostitute” comes from the Latin *pro-stare*, to “stand out,” and from the very beginning until the present day prostitutes have been marked apart. Historically, the definition was based on a woman’s moral shortcomings rather than her means of earning money. If she was considered freely available for the pleasure of men, she was a whore. The question was: How many men? Some authorities said five within a certain timeframe sufficed, others as few as two or as many as twenty thousand. Whatever the variations, there was no distinction between a woman whose virtue was for sale and one who was merely promiscuous. Both had the same rock-bottom legal and social positions. Money is now part of the definition of prostitution (at least in the West), but prostitutes are still viewed as unworthy of the same basic rights as others—and also as objects of intense sexual interest, whether admittedly or not. Whether they are seen as victims or vulturine whores, they remain the embodiment of everything the respectable classes are not.

* * *

As attitudes toward sex have evolved, so has the place of prostitutes (both female and male) in the popular imagination. They have been perceived as the embodiment of disease, the face of foreign immorality, the casualties of a licentious age, or even feminist heroes. However, these perceptions are neither static nor uniform, and when sex and morality are involved, the law almost always moves more slowly than popular attitudes. In some settings—such as the hazy intersection of prostitution and marriage—the courts have had to step in to legitimize relationships that laws on the books still condemned.

This happened in Malibu, California, where tough-guy actor Lee Marvin lived with the actress Michelle Triola from 1964 until 1970. The couple moved in together soon after meeting on the set of the aptly named film *Ship of Fools*. While they never married, the wealthier Marvin supported Triola, and she changed her last name to “Marvin.” However, after he abruptly married a former sweetheart in Las Vegas, he had her evicted from his Malibu house. As a settlement, he agreed to give her \$833 per month for five years—but he stopped making payments after a year and a half. Triola ran to court for more money,