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CEWEBRITY STATUS

BALTIMORE NATIVE ANN HIRSCH MAKES HER NAME(S) AS A DIGITAL PERFORMANCE ARTIST. *By Hannah Monicken*

Maybe Ann Hirsch's art should come with an NSFW (not safe for work) warning. I speak from experience—watching her video performance piece "Semiotics of the Camwhore" in my office cubicle made me feel a bit self-conscious.

But to Hirsch's credit, I couldn't look away from the video's comedic/brainy bedroom scene, in which the slim 31-year-old performer, spanks herself and says "Ass" in a sexy, somewhat babyish voice, squeezes her chest and announces "cleavage," purses her lips and goes "duckface."

Now based in L.A., the performance artist was born and raised in Baltimore, attending the Krieger Schecter Day School and Park School. Her father, Alan Hirsch, co-owns Donna's Restaurant and helps run Cosima; her mom, Dina Sokal, is a child psychologist in Owings Mills. The middle child of three, Hirsch attended beloved after-school art classes with Calvert instructor Victor Janishefski—"Mr. J"—in Lutherville.

Hirsch, whose work has been written about in *The Guardian*, *New York Magazine*, *ArtForum* and many other national publications, uses the digital sphere to expose cultural taboos and biases, especially around women and sexuality. Some of her media include online video, reality television and the internet.

"I think I'm someone who my favorite space to be in is just the fantasy in my head," she says in her authentic Kristen Schaal-esque kid voice. "And there's no better place to really do that than the internet because you're interacting with other people, but projecting onto them a lot of things, and you can make yourself more who you want to be."

Though the life of an artist is often accompanied by the moniker "starving," Hirsch's dad, Alan, was never too concerned about his child's odds for success.

"Most of those kids [in her art graduate school] will go out there and just wait for things to happen," he says. "But I wasn't worried about Ann. She knows how to make things happen."

And happen they have. If you were an avid YouTuber in the early days, or have a penchant for late-2000s reality television, there's a good chance you've seen Hirsch in smart action.

In 2008, while attending graduate school for video art in Syracuse—"a middle-of-nowhere, nothing-there, miserable place"—Hirsch became "Caroline," aka "Scandalishious," racking up 2 million views and thousands of subscribers. The channel featured Caroline confessing vlog-style and dancing sensually. The idea was to show viewers, especially young women, someone they might not have seen yet—namely, a woman both flaunting her sexuality and possessing a weird, funny human life. A fresh, new character appearing on a platform that, for all its

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Some media stories have mentioned that embryo donation is an option for women who are well into their 50s—and, therefore, past standard childbearing years—to still get pregnant and give birth. Although this seems less common, particularly because programs have cutoff ages—women have to be 50 or younger to get an embryo transfer through the NEDC and 51 or younger for any of the infertility services at SGF—there are alternate routes. Donna K., 54, who lives with her sister in Bowie, got pregnant with her daughter, Evangeline, when she was 52. (Donna prefers not to share her last name.) When she was 41, Donna and her husband began going through two cycles of intrauterine insemination (IUI), which was required by their insurance, and two cycles of IVF. With IVF, embryos were transferred to her uterus both times, but Donna never got pregnant. She says she knew all along she was infertile.

Donna got divorced and, at 52, figured she had to have kids "now or never." She chose a woman in her 30s to produce donor eggs, which were fertilized in a lab with donor sperm to create her embryos. After she had an embryo transfer, got pregnant and gave birth to her daughter, Donna had seven embryos left. "Because of my age, I was like, 'Well, of course, I can't have any more,'" she says. Donna donated her embryos to the NEDC.

Laura Covington, a clinical social worker with SGF—which requires that people interested in donating embryos attend a mandatory counseling session—says people may decide to donate their embryos for religious or ethical reasons. Or, after going through the physical and emotional toll of infertility treatments and finally having children, they may want to give another person or couple the opportunity to have kids, too. In Donna's case, it might seem like it would be easier for her to donate her embryos because her eggs weren't used to create them. Covington says this isn't always the case. "A potential child from an embryo would [still] be fully genetically related to their child. It brings up a lot of issues," Covington says.

But for Donna, she is excited about the possibility that her daughter could have full siblings. "Maybe the [kids] could know each other," she says. "I don't want [Evangeline] to be isolated and have no type of genetic connection … A big part of it is because I'm older and my family is not really that big. I'm trying to do everything I can do ... so she has options."

At SGF, a person or couple who is interested in receiving embryos goes through the same mandatory psychoeducational session. Covington talks with them about what it will mean to them not to have biological children. She also encourages them to tell any children they might have about their origin story from an early age.

Rebecca McGrath, 33, and her husband, Titus, 39, have been telling their 6-year-old twins, Jacksen and Ella, how they were born for the last four years. The McGraths got married a decade ago, and began trying to have children right afterward. After a medical appointment, when they learned they wouldn't be able to have children of their own, Rebecca walked into an empty waiting room and cried. "That was the only time I grieved not having biological children," she says. "I know it's harder for some people. I was able to move on."

But Rebecca still wanted to be pregnant. The McGraths, who are born again Christians, felt adopting embryos would "be an opportunity to give those embryos a chance at life," Rebecca says. They chose the NEDC in Knoxville, Tenn., because the facility is a clinic, meaning the McGraths, who lived in Owings Mills at the time, could go there for the embryo transfer instead of having the embryos shipped to a fertility clinic in Maryland. They adopted six embryos, and three survived the thawing process. Rebecca and Titus learned they were having twins in 2010.

When the twins were 3, the McGrath family, who now live in Lancaster County, Pa., traveled to Yosemite National Park to meet their donating family, who live out West with their three young children.

The McGraths will now show the children photos from that trip, explaining that this family gave them the embryos. "They'll [sometimes] tell people they were adopted as a embryo," Rebecca says. "People are like, 'What?' But [the kids] are comfortable." □

The Bishops and several agencies use the term "embryo adoption" to describe the act of receiving an embryo from another couple, while the medical community uses the term "embryo donation." STYLE alternated between terminology accordingly.

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experimentation, tends to favor the typical.

"We're kind of still recycling some of the same tropes and stereotypes that we were using with old forms of media," Hirsch says.

It's those tropes and stereotypes Hirsch takes on. Post-Caroline, she became "Annie," a contestant on VH1's "Frank the Entertainer in a Basement Affair," a 2010 reality show in which several women lived in Frank's house with his parents and competed—literally, in weekly challenges—for his heart.

She began to realize how manipulated all the women were by production—fitting them into certain categories (Annie was "the realest, nicest girl in the house") and then humiliating them to justify kicking them off. So, before she could become the next victim, Hirsch sealed her fate her way. During the "crooning" challenge, she broke out in an expletive-laden dirty rap.

"Of course, then they kicked me off that night because they realized they couldn't control me," she says. "But my hope was that viewers at home would see this complete shift in character and question my realness as 'the realest girl in the house' or whatever and then also thereby question the reality of how the other women were depicted as well."

In 2013, she debuted a coming-of-age play, "Playground," which details the relationship between a preteen girl and a predatory older man through an online chat room.

The work is based on personal experience. When Hirsch was 12, she engaged in an online relationship with an older man she met in an AOL chat room. And as she workshopped the play, more and more women told her their own stories of similar experiences.

As she matures as an artist—and a person—Hirsch addresses ever edgier themes. She recently exhibited a conceptually exciting installation at The New Museum in Manhattan called "horny lil feminist" that I'll leave you to Google at will. Incidentally, Alan Hirsch freely admits he hasn't seen some of his daughter's more recent work. He trusts her when she says it may not be fit for a father's eyes. But, hey, we recommend it. □