

BEHAVIOUR

# SEDUCING ISABELLA

— Birds do it, bees do it, and **ISABELLA ROSSELLINI** does it wearing a papier-mâché cuttlefish costume.

By STEFANIE IRIS WEISS

Left: Director and star Isabella Rossellini as a spider in her series *Green Porno* on Sundance Channel.

Photography BRIAN JACKSON

**C**inematic royalty and a passionate steward of the planet, Isabella Rossellini is at once awe-inspiring and utterly down-to-earth. *Seduce Me*, the spin-off of her critically acclaimed online series *Green Porno*, is currently available on the Sundance Channel's website.

Rossellini has reinvented herself once again through this series of short, playful films about animal attraction, which she writes and produces. The *Blue Velvet* star dresses in whimsical, handmade animal costumes and performs on papier-mâché sets. Some of the videos, to my eye at least, are coyly dirty. (Especially "Duck", my personal favorite. Who knew that female ducks had labyrinthine vaginal structures to fool unwanted suitors?)

Each short, sweet and sexy episode of *Seduce Me* begins with Isabella being courted by male hands – we never see the attached bodies or faces. They tease her by poking, prodding, caressing her cheeks – depending on the reproductive rituals of the animal in question. Isabella, as the animal, says, "Is he seducing me? What am I, a garden snake?" (Or a duck, a cuttlefish, a bed bug, etc.)

Still a stunning iconoclast at 60, Rossellini was for many years the face of Lancôme cosmetics. Her striking

beauty is still part of her platform, but it's having a decidedly different, world-changing effect now.

I found her at her home at Bellport, Long Island, where she lives with three dogs, a cat, and a coop full of chickens. I could feel her strong, grounded energy even over a Skype connection.

**Above: What's the Greenest thing about you?**

**IR:** I bought a hybrid car, I changed my lightbulbs, and I eat organic as much as I can. I have a tendency to become more and more vegetarian. The more you know how the animals are treated, the more it cuts your appetite.

**Above: What is your biggest eco-sin?**

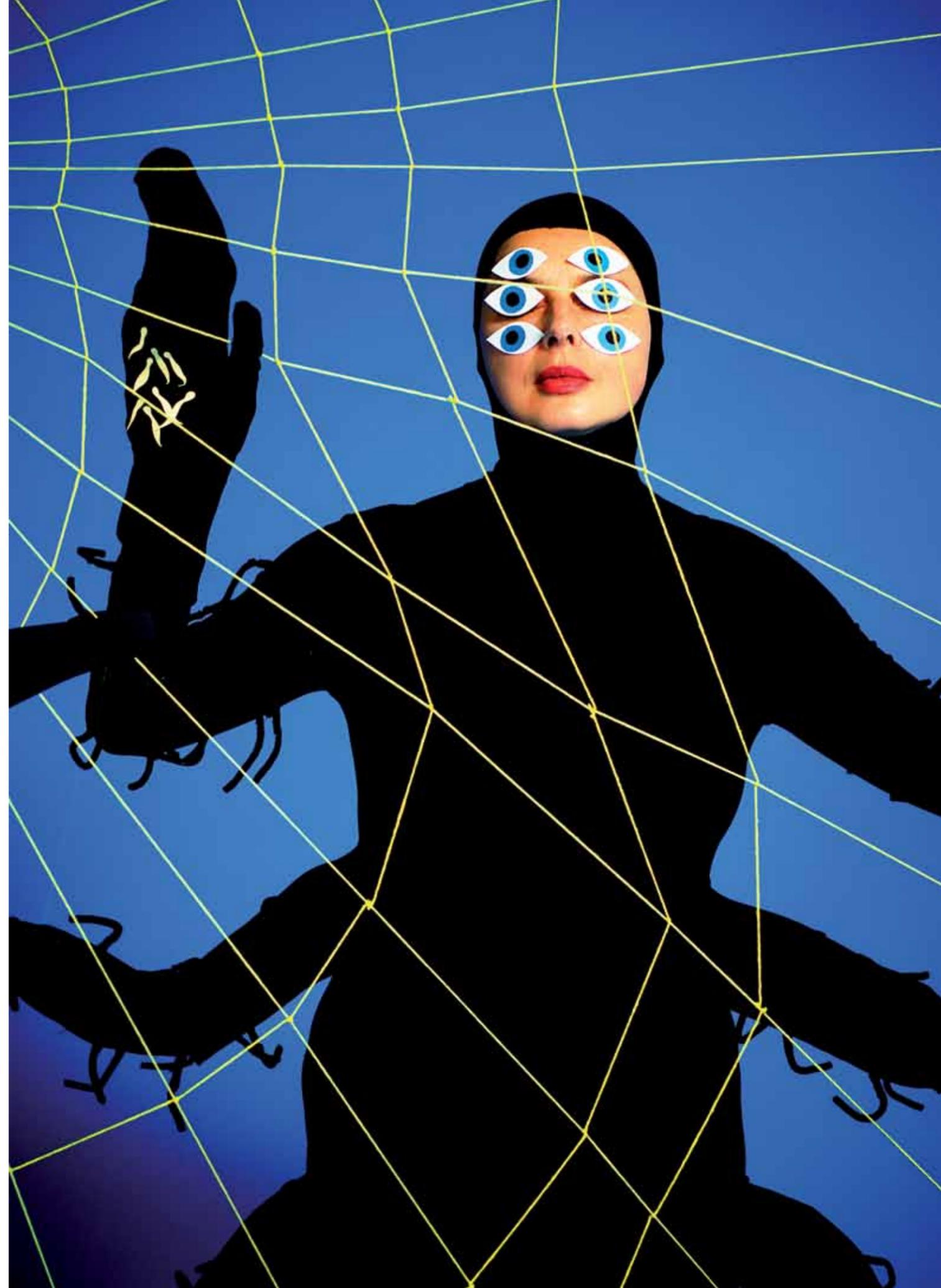
**IR:** It's travelling in aeroplanes. I not only travel for work, but I have many friends in Europe. I have an apartment in Paris where I go very often. Travelling is such a big part of my life, and the one thing that's hard to cut down.

**Above: Do you feel guilty?**

**IR:** Yes I do.

**Above: Do you do anything with carbon-offsetting?**

**IR:** No, I haven't gotten that far. That's more of an idea



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than a solution. We all have to do this collectively. You cannot do this individually. It has to be done at the very highest level; it cannot be done on a voluntary basis. Even me having a hybrid car and changing my lightbulbs is just to make myself feel better – it's not an overall solution.

**Above: So what do you feel about all the commercial, "go Green" stuff out there?**

**IR:** I think it's important. I used to work in cosmetics. The cosmetics industry did animal testing. I wasn't aware of it, but once I went to a public appearance in a big department store and PETA was protesting, so I went up to the activists and asked for information. They gave me the materials and I looked into it and saw that the company was doing animal testing, really making these animals suffer for mascara and other makeup. There are very few women on earth who put on their makeup before they go out at night knowing that animals have to be tortured for it. We used makeup innocently, thinking that it was the most superficial, playful act; we didn't know that there was this dark scenario underneath it. Then women started to ask for products that weren't tested on animals. That demand pushed the big industry leaders such as Lancôme and Estée Lauder to adopt it because it was a demand of the client. So I am completely in agreement with the Green movement because all of that builds up to a very strong demand, and ultimately the industry has to create products that we'll buy.

**Above: There is lot of teasing in *Seduce Me*.**

**IR:** My intent is to make films that are funny and entertaining. I want my films to elicit two responses. The first is to laugh. The next is to say, "I didn't know that about that worm, or that spider." I have always been fascinated with the animal world, and I hope that the audience will become fascinated. With fascination there is more respect. But my principal goal is to entertain and make people laugh. There is this one group of videos in *Green Porno* called "Bon Appetit". I consulted with a marine biologist named Claudio Campagna; he believes that the message coming out of foundations about the



environment is so gloomy that people shut off. He encouraged me to do a few episodes with a more explicit propaganda ending just to see if humour was another way to attract people's attention. We did it and it worked. But the principal goal is to entertain.

**Above: It almost feels like you're playing with gender roles in the videos.**

**IR:** There are no gender roles in the animal world. We designed the world in male and female, but it's not a universal decision.

**Above: Do you have a favourite video from *Seduce Me*?**

**How do you choose the animals?**

**IR:** I don't have a favourite. In choosing the animals, first of all, I have to understand the science of it completely. I don't want the animal to be so exotic you don't know what it is. When you're walking in your garden or in Central Park, you think about a duck or a squirrel. So I select animals that are common in our culture. Then I need to make sure there is diversity. Then the next problem is to invent a costume and make it comical; those are all the constraints I have when I write. And then when I write, sometimes there is a costume that turns out to be funnier, or a line that is delivered in a funnier way.

Once you shoot and edit them, they are always a little different than what you originally imagine. The biggest jump is the incredible collaboration I have with Rick Gilbert and Andy Byers who make things so much better – they take my original drawings and take them to the stratosphere. They make these incredibly beautiful paper animals. That is always, to me, the most exciting moment.

**Above: When do you feel closest to your animal self?**

**IR:** In America there is a very strong division between people who feel that God has created men separate from animals and people who believe in Darwinian

Above: Isabella Rossellini in the "Salmon" episode of the Sundance Channel original series *Seduce Me*.



*'If I were God? I would definitely replant our urban spaces.'*

evolution; that we're all a continuum. I believe we are all a continuum. So obviously there is a lot of me that is animal – if you did a genetic test you'd see I share a lot of genes with bees or dogs. I not only believe it, but I feel that the affinity one feels with the animals is a response to that. I do feel that my dogs have feelings, and I don't see why they have to have feelings that are different from mine. I don't have any doubt that they are happy to see me, or affectionate, that they feel love or feel fear. They may not be able to build a bridge or an aeroplane but there is some basic emotion that is the same as ours.

**Above: How many pets do you have?**

IR: I have a cat, three dogs, and I raise dogs for the blind. I'm working as a volunteer for a guide dog foundation in Long Island. One of my dogs is a guide dog that didn't pass the final exam. Two are mutts I found in the street. There is always a puppy or a litter of guide dogs. I live in the country so I also have chickens. I eat my eggs; that's how I get my protein. It's very easy to raise chickens.

**Above: Have you ever heard of the term ecosexual?**

IR: I thought that sexual *was* eco.

**Above: It's also about how we prevent STDs, what kind of birth control we use, condoms, lubes, etc. For instance, hormonal birth control is a big, messy issue.**

IR: I am almost 60 years old, I haven't used contraception in a long time. When I was younger I was nervous about changing my hormonal balance. I had friends that had a lot of hormonal help to get pregnant. Because in my generation, we were under the illusion that we could get pregnant in our 40s, that it was easy, and then a lot of my friends got cancer. My mother died of breast cancer, so I've always been very, very careful of anything with hormones because they attribute a lot of breast cancer to hormonal dysfunction. You create hormonal dysfunction.

**Above: Have you started eating less fish because of over-fishing and marine devastation?**

IR: I don't eat any fish anymore. They give you these lists

of what is safe and sustainable – but it's complicated. I got this list from the Monterey Aquarium. Little by little, fish have come out of my diet. Meat came out of my diet a long time ago.

**Above: What are your thoughts about the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico?**

IR: We were all terribly concerned about the offshore drilling, but apparently we have to do it as an in-between while we're working more toward alternative energy, and look at this – it really gives you pause. The regulation for the offshore drilling in the US is not as good as it is in other countries. It's extraordinary that as the richest nation, we'd damage our wildlife. We have everything to be at the vanguard here. In the future, how do we contain a disaster like that? I wonder what the "Drill baby, drill" people are saying now.

**Above: If you ran the world, what's the first thing you'd do to make it a happier place for animals?**

IR: If I were God? I would definitely replant our urban spaces. I think that the biggest destruction today is in our habitats. Even on Long Island where I live, we have so many empty malls – big sites that were built and later abandoned. Ten acres to build a mall that's closed down two years later, and has been fenced in for years. It's taken away land from deer, squirrels. It's hard for me to think of running the world, but sometimes when I go around Long Island, and I see not only the amount of development, but the amount of development that hasn't been used, it is very upsetting. Entire villages with houses that are decaying – they can be of use for somebody. It's of no use for anybody now, but it can be of use for somebody. Habitats can be saved.

**Above: Would we all be happier if we had more sex?**

IR: It's hard to say. Some people might have a lot of sex, some might have little sex, some might not have sex at all. I think there is an enormous emphasis on sex and how it will solve all of your problems, but I don't recognise myself in it. I don't think there's one thing that solves the problems of your life.

Left: Isabella Rossellini as a Fly in her series *Green Porno* on the Sundance Channel