

THE ARTS

Women Gone Wild

the Next Generation of Provocative Female Artists

By Rafael Risemberg

Jul. 31, 2006

“Simone Leigh’s ceramic sculptures portray women’s body parts run amok. Her most dynamic and interesting piece is a grouping of about two dozen breasts suspended from the ceiling, with nipples pointed down, intimating a cluster of bombs hurtling toward Earth. A boot’s treadmarks imprinted on many of their surfaces underscores the masculine/feminine tension between the destructive and the nurturing. It is one woman’s way of dealing with the unchecked violence in our still male-dominated political sphere.”

Though the disparity is narrowing, contemporary museums and galleries continue to exhibit less artwork by women than by men. Attempting to redress this imbalance is Chelsea’s Exit Art, which has mounted an ambitious, cohesive show of emerging female artists, many of whom are feminist, and all of whom are forthright about making their voices heard.

Three of the artists in the exhibit, titled “Wild Girls,” are openly lesbian. Chitra Ganesh, whose parents were born in India and who was one of OUT Magazine’s top 100 people of 2003, is represented by a screenprint that uses Hindu mythological characters to explore her Asian and sexual identity. Done up in Indian costume and jewelry, the central figure in the work is a three-breasted woman, her forearm gashed deeply with a blade, exposing the muscle beneath her skin. Two opposing god-like figures, one of them headless and multi-armed, give her profound, but unintelligible advice. This enigmatic work will appeal to those who have felt torn between two worlds.

Maria Piñeres uses the traditional “women’s work” of needlepoint to re-create police mug shots of two real-life arrested figures: Lizzie Grubman, the Long Island publicist who backed her car into a group of party-goers, and Lil’ Kim, the rap star who was prosecuted for perjury. Piñeres’ portraits capture our society’s insatiable appetite for female celebrity scandal. In rendering the women in old-fashioned needlepoint, she accentuates the chasm between images of demure, homebound women from the often idealized past, and those of more aggressive women from the freer, if jaded, modern day.

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Several non-gay artists in the exhibit explore sexual topics as well. In one of the more graphic works, Boryanna Rossa videotapes herself using surgical needle and thread to literally sew her vagina closed.

Whatever the artist's intent (is she reacting to the savage violation that is rape, or to forced female genital mutilation, or is she minimizing the biological differences between genders?), it is a most unforgettable, viscerally charged piece.

In a lighter vein, Jaishri Abicharidani displays several sculptures combining fetishized objects, including dildos, whips and latex pussies, all covered in crystals and paint so as to appear upscale. But the sleeper of the show is Emily Keown's "Eleven Ladies," consisting of as many pairs of knitted nipples in their full, shapely variety. Tucked away in a corner of the gallery space, this modest work is lovely to behold, and it's a balm for some of the other, more incendiary pieces on view.

Another theme that emerges, unsurprisingly, is food. Japanese artist Saeri Kiritani has created a life-size woman made out of rice, highlighting women's responsibilities for cooking. Pinar Yolacan photographs older women donning raw chicken parts as body wear, to disconcerting effect. In a hypnotizing video, Katia Damianova combines the blood from her cut hands with dough that she is kneading to make bread. And an emaciated Traci Tullius films herself playing with the meat and potatoes that her landlord brought over; unable to get herself to eat, she instead reminisces about her ex-love.

Other issues explored by the exhibit's 30 artists include self-image, cross-dressing and catty female friendship. It's surprising that it is taking longer for the art world to achieve gender parity than other professions, such as medicine or law. "Wild Girls" gives us an eye into the future of women in art, one that is both illuminating and refreshingly disquieting.

Wild Girls, noon–6 p.m. Tues.–Sat. until Aug. 26, at Exit Art: 475 10th Ave. at 36th St., exitart.org, 212-966-7745. Rafael Risemberg, Ph.D., leads gay & lesbian art gallery tours through New York Gallery Tours, nygallerytours.com, 212-946-1548.

The New York Blade | A Window Media Publication