

As much about painting as eroticism: Shift, by Selina Liss.

COURTESY OF GALERIE LA CENTRALE

More than porn on offer

Woman artists' works are explicit, but often witty, too

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Gazette Visual Arts Critic

On the face of it, the definition for pornography fits this show as snugly as Buffalo jeans on a giant billboard. According to Webster's New World Dictionary, pornography is material that depicts erotic behaviour and is intended to cause sexual excitement. And certainly the works on view at Galerie La Centrale, titled *Positions*, are more than just a tad explicit.

It would be hard to be more up-front than Montreal artist Doreen Wittenbols, one of the three young woman artists in the show. A kewpie doll blonde stares wide-eyed at us from Wittenbols's gouache with the sassy, tongue-in-cheek title *Pretty Cockey*. Her face is almost smothered by her golden hair, a pastry confection of creamy brush work. All the while, she nonchalantly holds the tip of a disembodied penis, as erect as a classical column, as if it were a lollipop.

In another work titled *Green With Envy*, we are confronted head on by a woman's spread legs. When we look more closely, we see that the figure, sporting a chic little jacket, is oddly blurred. The dramatically exposed vagina, welcoming viewers like a second mouth, consists of but a few deft brush strokes.

Wittenbols teases, putting us in the embarrassed position of reading into the paint. Arguably, the true beauty in the works is in the actual flow of paint and the way we weave in and out of a state of suspended disbelief.

Meanwhile, Montrealer Selena Liss's oils seem laden with meaning. In a work titled *Interior*, we encounter a full-length nude woman lying on her back atop a wooden hobby horse. This exercise takes place in a room with windows on to the street just beyond. The woman's skin is skilfully painted in layers of brown and beige. And, if it weren't for the blank look on the subject's face, we might even think that she were undergoing torture. The hobby horse isn't all that form-fitting, but this image might appeal to people with their own special definition of horsepower as it is an archetype of male sexuality. The unfortunate woman, with slightly unconvincing anatomic details, herself seems stiff as wood.

There's also a residue of sadism in Chantal Rousseau's series of gouache drawings titled *Spank*. They recall some of the works in the recent *Picasso Erotique* show at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Toronto-based Rousseau includes in her series a few good girls, such as the smiling beauty queen, tiara in place. But if this form of North American royalty is untouchable, there are female stereotypes in the drawings, apparently crying out for punishment. One image of an especially angry-looking woman wearing spike heels, contains the words "spank spank."

Rousseau's obsessive, sensuous drawings bring to mind the good girl/bad girl dichotomy into which women have been slotted through the ages.

The shock value of the work's pales beside any number of older images in

the history of art. What could be more erotic than Titian's *Venus With Organ Player*, and this even without close-ups of sexual orifices or an impending slap on the buttocks? In fact, the relationship of this art with pornography might be just skin deep. Putting a damper on the fires is the text accompanying the current show in which we read that the three woman artists were researching pornography, not actually making it. The didacticism puts a damper on the potential eroticism.

Ultimately the show is not so much about about pornography as with the sensual process of painting and the art of representation. Links with the real world of men and women and stereotypes are of secondary value.

* *Positions, with works by Doreen Wittenbols, Selena Liss and Chantal Rousseau, remains at Galerie La Centrale, 460 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 506, until May 11. For information, call (514) 871-0268.*

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