

National Art Gallery's meat dress controversy largely overdone

Gallery

by Andrew Brouse

Controversy has been boiling recently over a sculpture made from raw meat exhibited in a retrospective of Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's work at Ottawa's National Gallery. "Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic" consists of 50 pounds of salted raw flank steak sewn over a dress form and hung from the ceiling. Without refrigeration the meat decays for the duration of the show.

This is the first solo show by a woman at the National Gallery since Joyce Wieland, 20 years ago—a significant fact in light of the controversy.

Felix Holtmann, the Manitoba hog farmer who also happens to be chair of the House Committee on Culture, says that "using public funds to exhibit beef is ridiculous."

Tory MP Larry Schneider, who also sits on the Culture Committee, says the work is "as close to pure obscenity as one could define obscene."

Ironically these comments about "wasting" \$300 worth of meat come from representatives of the same government that just spent well over a billion dollars killing people in the Persian Gulf, then proceeded to cut almost the same amount from social and

education spending in their recent budget.

According to Sterbak, the problem in Canada is not a shortage of food "but a political and social desire to distribute the necessary economic means for everybody to purchase it."

Obscene, indeed.

The current attacks on Flesh Dress are merely part of the ongoing assault on cultural spending that has manifested itself across North America. Recent examples include controversies over the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and the National Gallery's purchase last year of Barnett Newman's painting "Voice of Fire."

Missed in all the Flesh Dress hoopla is not only the rest of the show (which is an excellent selection of this important artist's work) but the layers of meaning implicit in the work.

An important function of art is to shock and unsettle us—to shake up our stale and static perceptions in order to open our eyes to "the art of seeing with ones' own eyes" and to expose us to the chaos of that "convulsive reality" that Andre Breton and the Surrealists so dearly loved.

Beyond shock value—and what many of the critics have missed—is that the Flesh Dress and the rest of Sterbak's work is laden with autocritical cultural references. Sterbak has explored the cultural form of the woman's dress explicitly in three separate works: "I

Want You to Feel the Way I Do," "Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic," and "Remote Control."

In "I Want You to Feel the Way I Do," the dress motif finds its expression in the form of chicken wire formed into the shape of a woman's torso with outstretched arms. Wrapped around the midriff are coils of nickel-chrome wire which, triggered by an electric eye, glow red-hot when approached. Projected on the wall behind the dress is an incendiary text derived from a reading of Euripides' Medea.

The text speaks about spurned love and an unrealizable desire to be one with an "other" which turns into a desire for revenge. Like the other dresses, this one deals with power relationships and the female body. You are attracted to the dress, but if you get too close you could be seriously harmed by the uninsulated heater wire.

"Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic" is subject to many readings. The title refers directly to the narcissistic vanity of our society and its outcome, anorexia. The vanitas was a medieval practice of painting various foodstuffs in varying stages of decay as a reminder of the fleeting nature of temporal pleasures in favour of more eternal spiritual values.

The work is an indictment of a society that views women as 'meat' and a misogynist fashion industry



Jana Sterbak's "Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic." What is the controversy really about?

States of being
Jana Sterbak
National Gallery of Canada

that puts greatest import on young, thin women. By inverting these constructs, Flesh Dress makes them explicit: it is not a representation of flesh; it *is* flesh, as evidenced by the impact of the smell and look of rotten meat.

The Flesh Dress addresses the contradictions of a vain society which constantly strives for physical perfection while its members' bodies are perpetually decaying and rotting. Another aspect of the work has been pointed out by vegetarians who have visited the show: the sight of the decayed,

desiccated meat was the best argument against eating it.

"Remote Control" is a motorized crinoline dress form made of aluminum which can be radio controlled by another person. A woman is suspended inside the dress. She is protected, but trapped by the crinoline while another controls her path. It is a strong statement on the condition of women in traditional society.

The attempts by some reactionary philistines and political opportunists to discredit and trivialize contemporary art by taking it out of context will undoubtedly continue. To maintain a free society it is important not to accept the judgements of others—we must make our own opinions based on our own experience.

100 Monkey alternatives

Theatre

by Ira Nayman

On an island in the Pacific, a group of monkeys fed off potatoes which had fallen to the ground. One day, sick of having to eat the dirt the potatoes settled in, one young monkey decided to wash its food before eating it.

Scientists studying the monkeys noticed that the young, who adopted this behaviour, had to teach it to their elders. But around the time one hundred monkeys learned how to wash their food, it became an ingrained habit; monkeys born after this time washed their food without being taught. Moreover, monkeys on the other islands, who had no contact with this tribe, inexplicably picked up their behavior.

It was with this vision of "ideas spreading and making contact" that the Hundredth Monkey Network was created by Stacey Engel, a third-year York Creative Writing student.

"The reality most of us choose to live in is only one" of many possible alternatives, Engel explains; once a specific number of minds have been reached, new ideas can take hold.

A benefit performance for the Hundredth Monkey Network was held on Monday, May 13 at the Euclid Theatre. The centrepiece was an excerpt from Engel's *Shah Maat*, a work-in-progress which will be produced at the Montreal Fringe theatre festival later this summer and remounted in Toronto in November.

Also on the programme were live films, including Ryerson graduate Phillip Connolly's *Flying*, second-year York film student Azed Majeed's *K* and Karen Yarosky's *Hard to Swallow*. The evening ended with a performance by local comedy troupe Illustrated Men.

According to the programme, the main goals of the Hundredth Monkey Network are "to promote the discussion and presentation of ideas in a creative, cooperative climate; to enable women and men from varying artistic backgrounds to produce original works, individually and collectively; and to encourage dialogue between artistic communities in Toronto and Montreal."

The collective plans to mount shows in both cities, with artists moving freely from one to the other. This was more a personal than a political decision, she explains: although many of the benefit's performers live in Toronto, the personal ties to Montreal "are very strong." In

terms of anglo/franco politics, Engel says she was "waiting to see where it goes."

As a collective, Engel pointed out, the Hundredth Monkey Network follows the interests of its member artists. The women artists, she said, were currently "exploring womanhood to a greater extent." As the membership of the network changes, its themes will change.

As it happened, a couple of artists approached Engel after the benefit to find out more about the collective. "One evening like that," Engel said, "will fuel another."

To Cry is Not So is so unconventional and bizarre

by Stephen Belsky

It's not easy to assess all the merits and shortcomings of Theatre Smith-Gilmour's latest production, *To Cry Is Not So*; it is a whirlwind of emotion which ranges from brilliant slapstick to brooding, dark imagery and incoherent nonsense.

One of the nine tragicomic sketches in the anthology describes the romance between a burly, neolithic brute and his sultry mistress; the sort of thing one reads in trashy novels.

The sketch's physical comedy is priceless: multi-talented Dean Gilmour plays both the Schwartzenegger-like cretin Bernardo and his hip, sexy counterpart.

Gilmour delightfully exaggerates the stance, speech and movements of the two characters, switching maniacally back and forth between lines like a tennis match. The play's funniest moment comes when they finally make love.

To Cry Is Not So also contains a sequence subtitled "The Prisoners." It is a dreary tale of a headless jailer guarding a French woman in a cage just big enough to contain her body.

She cries out for food. He ignores her. Although not explicitly stated, one gets the impression that he will appease her wishes for sexual favours.

To Cry Is Not So
written by Jason Sherman
The Poor Alex Theatre

On its own, "The Prisoners" is well-acted, with Gilmour as the guard and Michelle Smith as the distraught prisoner. Her facial expressions are well-defined, shifting from comic to tragic. The problem with "The Prisoners" is that it seems to belong in another play.

In *To Cry Is Not So*, every sequence is unconventional and some are so bizarre, so utterly incoherent, that one is not sure whether to cry, laugh or feel any emotion at all.

One such sketch, "The Man With The Artificial Hand," goes into detail about the discovery of sexual arousal using two hand puppets. It is pointless and silly, merely a time-filler.

Different? Yes. Odd? Yes. Interesting? No!

To Cry Is Not So was first developed in 1990, bringing the creative team of director Alec Stockwell, playwright Jason Sherman and co-artistic directors Smith and Gilmour together.

Over the past months, the anthology was expanded and altered slightly to prepare for touring.

To Cry Is Not So runs until June 16 at the Poor Alex Theatre. For more information, call 927-8998.

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