

You haven't come a long way baby

by Moreen Murray

Remember those cigarette ads in magazines, the ones with the slogan "You've come a long way, baby?" Well, according to video artist, Lisa Steele, we really haven't come that far.

Steele, now a resident of Toronto, came to Canada from the United States in 1968, a product of dissatisfaction with American foreign policy. She considers herself an "arts activist", one who is trying to change the way we perceive the arts, particularly in the medium of video/television. One of her prime concerns is how the media sees women.

Steele described the first program as a rough selection of footage, done over a short period of time. She recorded six hours and then edited down from there. Examples were chosen from the 1950's to present day, encompassing drama, comedy, and even the most banal: TV commercials. The message remains however, that despite some progress, women really haven't come that far in the eyes of the media.

Steele started off the program dealing

"...women really haven't come that far in the eyes of the media."

with TV commercials. These fixtures of programming have often become a sore point with feminists for their portrayal of women as ignorant, obedient creatures.

A Wisk commercial was first to be shown. Steele commented that there was an exaggerated sense of anxiety, particularly over a trivial matter such as laundry, and conflict between women, here to sisters. The older sister is the authority figure; however, the major voice of authority still comes from inside a washer — a male voice.

Next, an Oil of Olay commercial — although still concerned with aging and wrinkles, the woman in this ad is seen as pleasing herself — a successful businesswoman.

Then, a long distance commercial portraying a nervous mother returning to work and the support she receives from her daughter, long distance. This gives a positive image of bonding between women.

Finally, a Crest commercial with a woman as an authority figure. Steele commented that the women's movement did put pressure on advertising to change their portrayal of women, however, some of this is in fact a veneer. Pre-teen commercials, for example still pitch for physical appearance above all.

The next segment of the presentation

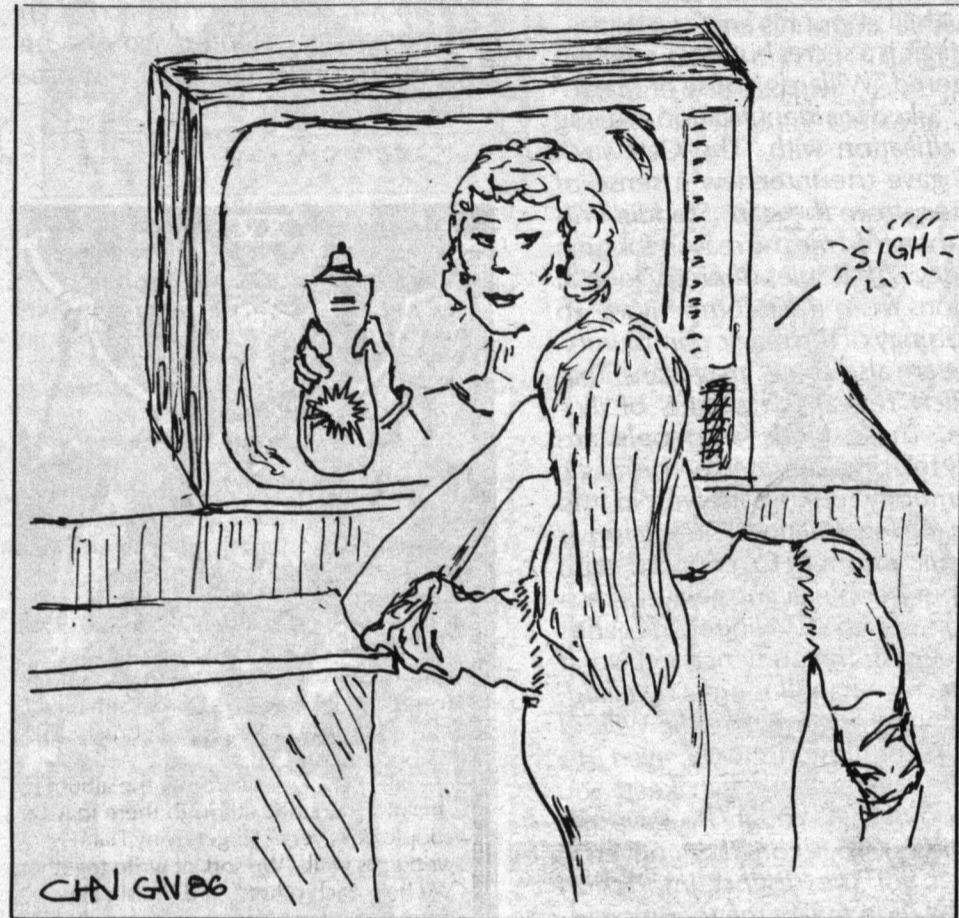
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dealt with a more positive image of women, their relationships with each other. From the 1950's the example of *The Honeymooners* was used — the women, both housewives, are together all the time, however, they are not as physical in their relationship as such present examples as *The Facts of Live* or *Kate and Allie* or such dramatic series as the new *L.A. Law*, where a discussion between an older and younger woman takes place. Here, there is support on both a personal and professional level. Ms. Steele believes this may signal a creation of more rounded female characters. Also, the women in these current programs are allowed to display affection for each other.

The second section deals with the changes which have been effected on the image given: a comparison of past with present image. Steele used the example of *I Dream of Jeannie*. The character of Jeannie is the ultimate male fantasy: the beautiful woman who grants every wish and calls her husband master. He in turn is patronizing her. She is ever domestic and does things to reinforce her perfect woman

image. Steele commented that this image of a woman is so feminine as to be a caricature, and underneath there is a basic distrust of the power of women, in this case a magical power.

We need not delude ourselves into believing that things have changed all that much. Steele pointed out *Jack and Mike*, a series about a Yuppie couple. She is a journalist, he is a restaurateur and father figure husband. When she is on her own she is weak. The character often doubts herself and her ability to make decisions: her husband is the support figure. The contradictory image given here is that of a



career woman who should be able to stand on her own, but needs the support of a man.

The next section of the presentation dealt with women as figures of power. The first example is that of an animated children's cartoon "She-Ra". Here is a woman character who is powerful, however, she is not allowed to go into the excess of violence and weapons. This superhero has power but within limits — on the other hand, lack of violence and weapons provides a better example of conduct in the world.

Two drama series, *L.A. Law* and *Dynasty* deal with power in the real world. In *L.A. Law*, women are allowed to be feminine; however they must deal in their field on men's terms, that is by being aggressive and relentless. In *Dynasty* the popular nighttime soap, power is acquired by traditional methods. Danger is inherent to women seeking power — and power is perceived as having a cost for women — sacrificing love and family in order to succeed.

Steele concluded her lecture, by offering some alternatives to this situation. She stated, "It is one thing to critique or criticize, it is another to provide an alternative." The suggestions she offered are for the media to stop stereotyping all groups, and to support women's art as there is support for women's writing and women's music. She said that women need to put pressure on local stations, to set aside a time for women's programming, by and for women and their concerns. Also, there needs to be more concern for independent production. This need for independent production has been realized

by Lisa Steele and her co-artists, and was the focus of the presentation on Thursday evening.

Steele opened her own video presentation by stating that her work critiques the standard popular medium. It is an alternative to broadcast television. Her early work came out of a school of conceptual art, one of whose forms is performance art. She and other video artists were seeking a way to slow down television, to make it more intimate.

One of the reactions to regular television fodder, was a 1980 production, *Gloria*. Steele explained that this film was made as

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Video artist Lisa Steele was in Edmonton recently to present *Images of Women*, a visual discussion of the media's image of women and also some of her own creative work in video. Since 1981, Steele has been teaching at the Ontario College of Art, specializing in experimental video. Among her accomplishments are being founding editor of *Fuse* magazine.

Gateway: What first interested you in this area?

Lisa Steele: I originally started out as a photographer, and was a member of a photography co-op in Toronto. An opportunity came up to teach video to students and I took a workshop for background to teach others.

Gateway: And an interest in the study of women and images...

Steele: That started back in high school, doing film reviews for the school paper, around 1967, and I have written before about women and images from a journalistic angle. It's just been my interest for a long time, the shallowness of modern culture.

Gateway: Which program or programs, in the past, do you feel were most damaging to women and why?

Steele: Well, not necessarily damaging, more a cause and effect relationship. Generally, in the past there was an absence of the presence of working women — this was quite dramatic. Women could work, but in more traditional occupations such as teachers, secretaries, nurses.

Gateway: What were the positive images of women to come from the past?

Steele: *The Honeymooners* for example, Alice is a strong character and the old Lucille Ball *I Love Lucy*, but the majority of series and films from the 1950's onwards went back on the era of strong women of the 1940's. It was sort of a reaction to women's strength in the workforce during the war years — to one of dependence. There became a drying up of roles for women — or women in anxiety/alienation films or fluff.

Gateway: Do you see progressive images for women today?

Steele: Yes, for example *Golden Girls*, given that there are identifiable scenarios — romance, dependence on men and a comfortable living situation for older women. These older women are perceived as human beings — have sexual lives and a camaraderie. I think that it's important to point out that there are women writers on the show. Also *Kate and Allie* which deals with two divorced single mothers, *Airwaves* on CBC, a mother/daughter relationship all demonstrate bonding between women. A little further back, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* — it had an interesting narrative structure and some substance — a rebellion against the soap opera image of women.

Gateway: Do you feel that today's young women will receive a more positive image of women, visa vi such negative images as rock videos?

Steele: Well, I don't want to say what is wrong. I don't believe in censorship. It's hard to say things haven't changed all that much.

Gateway: How can women change their image in the media?

Steele: Well, first of all we need to understand that this should be a reform, not a revolution. We should be fighting against what is happening instead of acquiescing. We also need to know where to go in order to change things. Less reports on the status of women and more action.

Gateway: How do you propose we instrument these changes?

Steele: First, we need to move women into positions of control. But, on a more grassroots level, we need to develop women's skills into taking part in the broadcast media, such as women training themselves to handle equipment, etc. The present level of instruction is that of high technology a hierarchy presently controlled by men, where what the machine can do is more important than the production. Some independent filmmakers use women crews — in television they do not. Women need to be trained in the technical aspect and to be political voices in the media.

a reaction to *An Unmarried Woman*.

For this production, Ms. Steele drew upon her experience in dealing with battered women at a shelter for women in Toronto.

The format of this film is like a real-life soap opera. The title character is someone to whom things happen, not someone who is in charge of her life. She is meek, with very little education; however, she talks a great deal. She is a single mother, on welfare, who is sometimes neglectful of her duties. It is a very realistic portrait of how some women actually live, and the problems they have dealing with their situation and how to get out of it. There is a positive ending to this, with *Gloria* learning to stand on her own and deal with the traumas she is faced with. The production is an admirable alternative to regular programming.

The second video was *Working the Double Shift* or *changing politics on the domestic front*. This production dealt with a series of images, collected from television advertising where women are seen as controlling the household economics. Women are also seen as cleaning and dealing with the lower jobs in life, a true representation is lacking and women's values are absent. The video proclaims that media is still patriarchal, racist and heterosexist. It further proposes that we live in a restricted society controlled by a few, who

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decide who we are and how we should be portrayed.

Steele's presentation and opinions may be hard for some people to accept, but then again, for women, so is the media's portrayal of who we are, what we think and what we experience.