

# ARTS

## Sex truths on videotape

Form and Figure  
Dalhousie Art Gallery  
Until December 2  
by Paul Webster

Figure drawings and paintings aren't often compared with video art, which makes the "Form and Figure" show which opened at the Dalhousie Art Gallery last Thursday both intriguing and somewhat disconcerting.

A collection of videotapes created by Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak collectively entitled "4 Hours and 38 minutes" from another half of this show's unusual media partnership within the common theme of the human nude.

The drawings, paintings and engravings include many strong examples of a theme in perhaps the most sympathetic and accessible of traditional media formats. With a preponderance of Canadian works spanning the last century this is a compelling collection that is as reassuring and human as its theme.

"4 Hours and 38 Minutes" lends the viewer considerably more room for a critical and an interpretive view. In a sense these tapes are an assemblage revealing the technical, historical, and political contours of the creative niche that video has carved for itself in the alternative Canadian art scene over the last twenty years.

Lisa Steele's work carries a message as consistently concerned with gender equality in its necessary political and social contexts as does Margaret Atwood's literature. Steele also shares Atwood's

dry, introspective, critical Torontonion wit. Discussing one of her very early videos, "Birthday Suit" (1974), Steele remarks "as a woman it's important for me to say, and to remember to say, that false, idealized versions of women's bodies have got to go. I have to show that the idealized body in art is dishonest to women in general. So I made this video showing all the scars on my body".

### "Room for a critical and interpretive view"

"Birthday Suit" has been described as a "reverse strip tease" in which the artist presents her body to the viewer in all its pallor, with its scars and history so clearly identified as to deny objectification. The strength of the work lies in its simplicity, in its ideological focus and "real time" technical and temporal coherence. It is a piece of art which defies the viewer to misinterpret it while virtually denying that possibility.

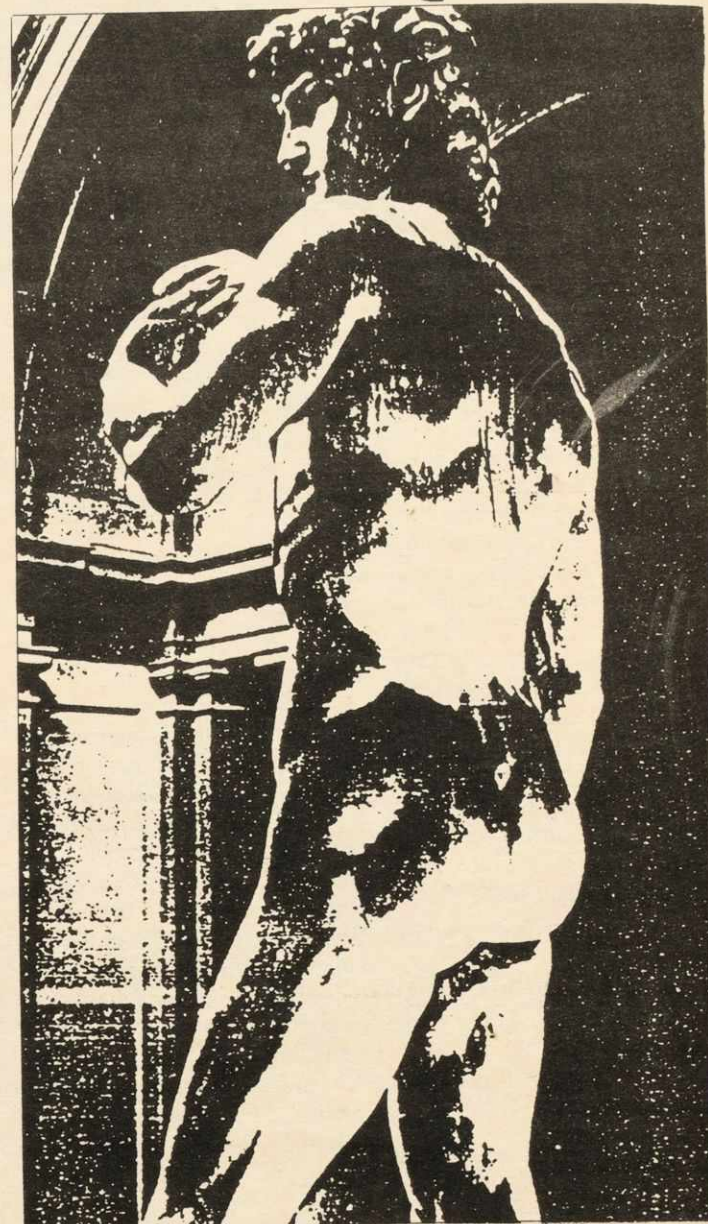
Kim Tomczak's "Paradise Lost" (1980) is an edited, more jagged and aesthetically confused video with a similar theme. Tomczak presents a conversation between the quintessential early 1970s Joe College (who looks uncannily like David Byrne) and his antithesis, Joe

Hippy. The mainstream and alternative male lifestyles are parodied through comparison to great effect until a sudden cut takes the viewer into a scene where a young man confronts his female lover about her involvement in the feminist movement of the early 1970s and how it is in conflict with his version of political priority/police brutality, Vietnam and the military industrial state.

Tomczak suggests that the work reveals the changes a lot of men went through during the emergence of the feminist movement. As an historical artifact and document, "Paradise Lost" reviews the code words and slogans of the emergence of the politicization of gender inequality. As the young woman tells her lover in the video "private politics become public politics. My CR meetings are very important to me. And they should be important to you."

### "The strength of the work lies in its simplicity"

Tomczak and Steele now produce work collaboratively which, at least in the case of 1988's "White Dawn" shows the continuation of their previously independent politicization. "White Dawn" is a comical, acerbic comment on US cultural imperialism from the per-

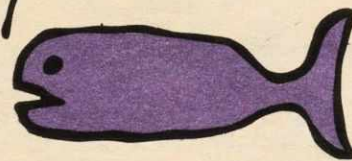


Nude contemplating media contemplating nude.

spective of two frightened Canadian artists on the eve of the Free Trade Agreement. The work simply reverses the current scenario of

US cultural domination in Canada and paradoxically suggests that letting "the market decide" will result in Canadian domination of US cultural markets.

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THE  
HUMANS



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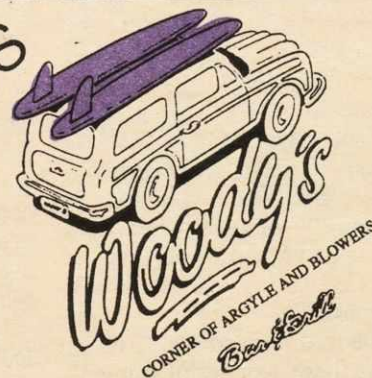
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### "Kids... know what the tricks are about"

This piece's political message is so explicit as to deny interpretation. Technically, however, it reveals, especially when seen in conjunction with their earlier works, an incredible advance in production values for video artists over the last twenty years. Of course, audiences mirror this advance, as Tomczak suggests "people are much more media literate...kids in high school or college know what the tricks are about. They know when they are being sold things."

One of the things which the general public is sold on, it seems, is video. Public libraries in Canada now lend more videos than books. Video artists are perhaps producing the most influential documents of our times. If you want to know who's documenting our culture, go have a look.