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San Francisco's City Guide

The Bodies Are Back *A Challenge to Cheesecake* By Ann Taylor – February 19, 2010



Photo Credit: Courtesy of Intersection for the Arts.



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We sometimes have difficulty distinguishing between art and pornography, but throw in some bizarre gender-bending imagery and various plays on the depiction of women in art, pornography, and the media and the problem is infinitely compounded. This is perhaps why Margaret Harrison's original 1971 exhibition of many of the works in *The Bodies Are Back* was shut down after one day. These works are — as the name indicates — back, along with newer works on similar themes at Intersection for the Arts.

Harrison's "Good Enough to Eat" series along with such works as "Banana Woman" and "Mrs. Softie No. 2" are the most tame and straightforward, although one could hardly call them either of those things. In these works, the artist takes up the topic of "cheesecake" — the mainstream depiction of women as pin-ups and objects that are, as the titles suggest, good enough to eat, lick, lap up, and guzzle down.

These depictions of semi-nude women literally sandwiched between lettuce, tomato, and a bun interestingly convey both an idea and its opposite at the same time. On the one hand they seem to challenge the objectification of women by pointing out the absurdity of considering them as tasty comestibles. Lingerie-clad women juxtaposed with burgers and ice cream just presents a ridiculous image.

Yet on the other hand, these paintings may make the viewer hunger as much after a beautiful woman as he or she might salivate in anticipation of a long-awaited meal. Oddly, according to some of Harrison's statements about the 1971 exhibition, this is exactly how the works were taken by many — not as challenges but as more of the same semi-pornographic eye candy common in men's magazines at the time. It was the other pieces in the exhibition that were objectionable.

As multivalent as the above-mentioned works may be, these others in the show seem to defy any meaning at all merely by exhibiting images that are so unexpected as to be utterly baffling. It is in these that the topics of masculinity and femininity, sexuality, gender, and sexual identity come into question in a very compelling way. Whether you are fascinated or revolted by these images, you can't help but wonder about them.

Among these works, "The Fantasy Footballer" is one of the most intriguing. The painting plays off of the interests of the stereotypical man — sports and sex — but puts the two together in a terribly disconcerting yet absolutely intriguing image. An athletically built man appears to have just headed a soccer ball, his head thrown back so as to obscure his face but reveal a beautifully muscular neck to rival that of any ancient Greek sculpture. However, as one's eyes travel downward, they encounter voluptuous breasts, elbow length black gloves, garters, stockings, and stiletto heels. The pose itself is both athletic and graceful — feminine, reminiscent both of a woman kicking up her heel during a passionate kiss and the powerful leaps of an accomplished athlete. And to bring the confusion and discomfiture of the viewer to a climax, the footballer's penis hangs exposed, naked and limp, whether in shameful embarrassment or in unabashed display is up to the audience.

That is what makes this work, along with Harrison's various controversial superhero paintings, which caused her 1971 exhibition to be shut down by the police. These hermaphroditic, highly sexualized cross-dressing icons are bound to evoke reactions ranging from enraged horror to coquettish embarrassment to outright applause.

For others, it may be difficult to know how to react. The aim seems to be to force us to question our accepted ideas of gender, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, and objectification of the body, though the conclusion arrived at must rely heavily on the one who is doing the looking.

One last main area represented in the show is that of the depiction of the female body in art. In these works, Harrison takes on the works of such artists as Eduoard Manet, Pablo Picasso, and Allen Jones, putting their well-known works into unfamiliar contexts, thus forcing audiences to rethink how the subject of women's bodies is being treated by each.

Shocking, challenging, confusing, compelling; *The Bodies Are Back* is all of these things and more. Though the faint of heart and easily offended may want to steer clear, even those who think they've seen everything will be in for some surprises.

Intersection for the Arts
Now through March 27, 2010