

Pushing back against the pricks 'The Bodies Are Back' reconsiders the figure at Intersection for the Arts

by Sura Wood

Is satiric cheesecake still cheesecake? Is titillating imagery of voluptuous flesh bursting forth from peek-a-boo bras and garter belts pornographic even when it's delivered with a generous dose of irony and savage humor? This thorny dilemma, replete with alleged assaults on the gender of superheroes (more on that later), caught a 30ish, classically trained, feminist artist named Margaret Harrison in its clutches and threatened to derail her promising career. In 1971, the police shut down her first solo exhibition the day after it opened in London; a show that, in Harrison's words, "tread the fine line between irony, sexuality, transgender, transvestism, power, masculinity, objectification and exploitation."



"Available in Other Colours" (2007) by Margaret Harrison. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Though the subject matter seems tame by today's standards, the ensuing antagonism and harassment haunted the artist and forced a provocative, fiendishly brilliant body of work into the deep freeze. Harrison shelved it for nearly 25 years; but now, *The Bodies Are Back*, literally and figuratively, in a small show at Intersection for the Arts that packs a big wallop for its size.

The predominantly female forms, trussed up and spilling out of scanty, sexualized outfits, and the bending of gender to diabolical effect have been resurrected from the notorious 1971 exhibit, and are shown alongside new works that carry forward the mischievous, transgressive spirit of her drawings, watercolors and mixed media from the late 60s and early 70s.

There are 33 images in all (not nearly enough in my view), and based on the evidence, I've concluded that the 70-year-old Harrison, a native Brit trained at the high-brow Royal Academy, is no less of a shit-starter than she was 40 years ago. While once ahead of her time, she's now having her moment of glorious push-back.

From Picasso's stew of body parts to the Underground Commix artists with their penchant for exaggerated female anatomy, women haven't fared well at the hands of male artists, who have exorcised their ambivalence and given free rein to their lust, fear and loathing. And since, historically, men have wielded pen and brush to manufacture female fantasies, promulgate an unattainable ideal of beauty or indulge their contempt for womankind, turnabout is fair play.

Take a re-imagined Hugh Hefner, inordinately buxom and stuffed into one of his skimpy playboy bunny suits, topped off with rabbit ears and a pipe hanging from his mouth. So there! The work, recreated for this exhibit and entitled "He's Only a Bunny Boy But He's Quite Nice Really" (Harrison's sting extends to her wry titles), was stolen from that London show. Rumor had it that members of Hefner's organization, not taking kindly to such an undignified representation of their boss, were the culprits. It's not so entertaining, is it, when the bustier is on the other torso? By reversing gender and deconstructing these images, Harrison reveals how ludicrous they truly are.

She riffs on the forniphilia studies of British pop artist Allen Jones, who made a career and a fetish of mannequin/sculptures of women as human furniture. In "Allen Jones & the P.T.A.," Dolly Parton gestures toward an unlucky, barely clad woman on all fours who serves as a table. The suntanned beauty wrapped around a giant roll of Lifesavers is a nod to Mel Ramos pinups.



"Captain America (2)" (1997) by Margaret Harrison. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Elsewhere, half-clothed women are depicted as edibles to be consumed or offered up for delectation. Early on, Harrison was condemned for her objectification of women, accused of promoting the very thing she was critiquing. "Good Enough to Eat," the 1971 watercolors in which women are ingredients in jumbo-sized sandwiches, were taken literally and landed with a thud. Sultry – and who wouldn't be under the circumstances? – the women here are locked in the firm embrace of lettuce and tomato, some with a knee strategically anchored by a sliced, deviled egg. And then there's "Banana Woman," an Amazonian creature slung in the crescent of a half-peeled banana, munching, in a state of rapture, on its exposed tip.

In an impressive display of Olympic strength, a woman gamely squeezes the bejeezus from oversized citrus in "Take One Lemon," as her huge pink nipples and wrestler's thighs escape their flimsy lingerie restraints. "Mrs. Softie No. 2" features yet another nubile creature sitting cross-legged in black hose – the pantyhose revolution hasn't occurred on the planet these women inhabit – and beckons seductively from her perch atop a luscious ice cream cone, smiling idiotically as these fantasy females often do.

In the most subversive move of all, Harrison subverts the myth of the all-powerful superhero. "Captain America" sports oversized breasts and thunder thighs; "The Fantasy Footballer," a figure of indeterminate gender, dances on air in gladiator gear; and you can let your imagination roam free in the case of "Heroes(1): What's That Long Red Limp Wrinkly Thing You're Pulling On." But what's the story behind the deflated Superman? Kryptonite? Arch-nemesis Lex Luthor? No, it's that oversized tote on his arm that did him in. And who is that masked man, the Lone Ranger? Wait, he has a gun for a penis, and he's aiming it right at us.

The only downside of the show is that there isn't more of it!

The Bodies Are Back is on view at Intersection for the Arts through March 27. For more info: www.theintersection.org