

# San Francisco Chronicle

Thursday-Sunday, February 18-21, 2010 | SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | 96 Hours 13

## Visual arts

### 'The Bodies Are Back': Re-examining Margaret Harrison's work around sexuality, gender, power and objectification

British artist Margaret Harrison is no stranger to controversy.

Granted, the voluptuous men and women who populate her saucy watercolor drawings are stalwarts of sexual ambivalence — superhero-like icons who are simultaneously humorous and starkly reflective of social mores — that wouldn't cause most contemporary art lovers to bat an eyelash. However, Harrison's first solo show as an emerging artist in 1971 was considered far too raunchy and subversive in its time, despite the heyday of the second-wave feminist movement.

With pieces such as "He's Only a Bunny Boy" (a witty commentary on the culture of sexual exploitation, which portrays Hugh Hefner as a nude Playboy Bunny centerfold), Harrison's show was summarily shut down by police for obscenity.

Harrison's early pieces are the focal point of a new exhibition, "The Bodies Are Back," which re-examines her incipient work around sexuality, gender, power and objectification. The more recent pieces on display similarly delve into art history and the representation of women in art.

"The early work was made in the context of

Through March 27.  
Noon-5 p.m. Wed.-  
Sat. Intersection for  
the Arts, 446 Valen-  
cia St., S.F. (415)  
626-2787. www.the  
intersection.org.

pop art, which was mainly being done by men," Harrison says. "But it was apparently a shock to people when women sought to examine issues of sexuality and the body through art... there was no real context for the work at that time."

In the 1990s, Harrison's early work was gradually brought to light by curators who found it compelling and timely, considering the proliferation of younger female artists who were engaging with politics, pop culture and feminism.

"It was interesting for me to look at the work and see that it has stood the test of time," Harrison says. "When the work began showing again, both men and women loved it. They related to it easily and it sparked dialogue in ways that it hadn't in the '60s and '70s because of all the barriers that precluded discussing this kind of art."

While the second-wave feminist movement was gaining ground

during the early days of Harrison's career, she notes that most artists in 1960s London were quite isolated.

"Gradually, we began to have dialogues around political action because of the Vietnam War, and issues around the women's labor movement, art and political commentary became more interlocked," she says. "So soon there were safer environments for artists to nurture issues such as women's sexuality and women's work."

Harrison went on to create seminal pieces about women's labor alongside her partner, artist Conrad Atkinson, which eventually evolved into work that is now part of the prestigious Tate Gallery collection.

"Failure can be a kind of success," Harrison laughs. "When you get an extreme response to your art, you figure out new ways to communicate with your audiences. And with the work I did over the years, I discovered that there was a high level of interest and not everything had to be done in alternative spaces. This was work that could also be relevant to the mainstream."

Harrison's newest pieces in the show are very much invested not just in stereotypes of



Margaret Harrison's "Captain America (a)" is among her works in "The Bodies Are Back" exhibition at Intersection for the Arts.

masculinity and femininity but also in art history and common representations of beauty. In making the link between her early work and her more recent

work, Harrison is heartened that she can be a role model to younger artists.

"I'd like to let them know that art needn't be just decorative," she

says. "It may be a hard path to travel for some, but it's possible to create beautiful work that has a serious context."

— Nirmala Nataraj,  
96hours@sfgate.com