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Margaret Harrison's "The Bodies Are Back" hits where it hurts

Comments (0) By **Traci Vogel** Wednesday, Mar 17 2010

If you've always wondered how an influential feminist art show from the 1970s would read if it were suddenly transposed to a contemporary gallery, here's your chance to find out. Intersection for the Arts is hosting **Margaret Harrison's** "The Bodies Are Back," a collection of ribald watercolors and drawings that, as the curatorial statement says, explores "notions of the human body as an object of sexuality, consumption, and gaze."



Margaret Harrison's *Ejaculator*: Lady heroes first.

Details

Through March 27. Free; 626-2787 or www.theintersection.org.

The pieces here date back to, or are riffs on, work that appeared in her 1971 London solo exhibit, which proved so shocking that the police shut down the show. In the nearly 40 years since, of course, much has changed. Men have taken to wearing push-up bras, women earn equal pay, and the first female president of the United States was — no, wait. Wrong reality, sorry.

The truth is, even in the context of 2010 San Francisco, Harrison's work remains bitingly pertinent. It's not just because our city appears to be enduring yet another pin-up revival — this week alone, you can see Jessica "Tink" Whitesides' pop paintings of retro burlesques at Gallery Three and [Aaron Nagel's](#) buff beauties posing as Catholic martyrs at the Shooting Gallery — but because Harrison provides something so often missing in these entertainments. She has a point.

There's no vogue in "The Bodies Are Back," no coyness, just authentic, undiluted anger. One of the first pieces, *Women of the world unite you have nothing to lose but cheesecake, 1969-'70/2010*, shows a lurid pink woman, naked but for high heels, with the head of [Minnie Mouse](#). She is posed, splayed like a showgirl, underneath a dripping faucet. Nearby, in the drawing *I Found Him in Park Lane, Woman on [Hugh Hefner](#) Skin Rug, 1971*, the flayed skin of the soft-porn impresario serves as a resting place for a one-booted nude.

According to the lore surrounding the original show, the police didn't seriously object to the naked women. What really riled them were the watercolors of Captain America in drag. Harrison's version of the banal superhero sports garters and high heels and is endowed with breasts as big as his head. There are other superhero types here, including *Son of Rob Roy*, with a cocked, er, piece, but Captain America is the perfect target for Harrison's sharp pencil. Her tender line and accomplished watercoloring render a reborn icon — one so resonant that the rest of the show has to work hard to keep up.

There are, for example, the paintings that appear to be pure cheesecake. How to read a series of women-as-sandwich-meat images, or the pin-up squeezing a monstrous lemon to her breast, all from 1971? They're dishy, but underspiced with irony. Harrison admits as much in a 2009 interview with [Kinsey Robb](#), saying, "I thought I was quietly subverting it but it was too close to the imagery of the time, which sort of could be interpreted as just the same."

If These Lips Could Only Speak, a 2010 drawing on paper of a woman with a pouty mouth between her legs, is likewise too clever for its own good. Nevertheless, Harrison keeps mapping the line between kitsch and knockout. It's something other artists are routinely too restrained to do, and her instincts are

killer. The artwork here may skewer consumerism, but it's ready to be useful in its own way. I carried home one particular image in my head — *The Fantasy Footballer, 1998* — which serviceably channeled my personal cynicism toward professional sports. In it, a muscular man poses sylphlike, one high heel flung back, willing and ready to play ball.