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Aorta

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The Nature of Environment / No.4

MARGARET HARRISON/ ORIGINAL PERVERT



INTERVIEW BY CHRYSTAL POWELL AND PAULINA MACFARLAND

Margaret Harrison paved the way for feminist artists with her perverse and bawdy works, reminiscent of 20th century comic books. She fashioned Captain America with bulging breasts, stockings and pumps long before 'gender bending' was a widely used term, before ideas of 'fixed identities' were deeply examined, and apparently before the world could handle it. It wasn't the lewd and perceivably objectifying imagery of nude women that caused the controversy—it was the images of altered men that caused the London police to shut down Margaret Harrison's first solo exhibition the day after it opened in 1971. At San Francisco's Intersection for the Arts, Harrison unveiled this body of work for the first time since the 70's, in conjunction with new works exploring the same embedded themes: the body as an object of sexuality, consumption and gaze. It was the honor of a few Aorta members to sit down with Margaret at Intersection and talk with her about being a feminist, confronting censorship and engaging in politics in and out of the art world.



How did these controversial bodies make their way back? Why now?

I did an earlier show with Intersection for the Arts called *Beautiful, Ugly, Violence* that came about partly because of my older daughter who had said, "Mom you should do something on women and violence again; it's needed." I said, "I don't want it to be about victims this time, and I want to have a male voice in it and I want to show that something can be done."

I was introduced to two people who were a part of this program called Man Alive. It's a program for men who are in prison but who want to end the cycle of violence. Melissa Joe Kelly, who works on harassment in the workplace, volunteered to have a group conversation with these men. She excels at drawing out issues people are dealing with. She recorded and transcribed the conversations for me and I made selections from the text I thought were the most pertinent. I drew and painted related domestic items in watercolor so they looked kind of pretty. I called it *Beautiful, Ugly, Violence* because of this notion that a lot of things are hidden by beauty. I also did paintings of objects like hammers, kettles and telephones painted beautifully, but placed on silk or exotic cloths as metaphors for hidden notions of violence.

At some point, Kevin B. Chen [Curator at Intersection for the Arts] and I discussed what I would do next. I showed him the drawings from the WACK! show, and he convinced me that the right time had come.

When you look at the past, present and future of your own body of work what do you see as being success, failure, or accomplishment?

I don't really think about my work in those terms. Failure can be success. That's what I think about some of the work in the show upstairs in the Intersection gallery. Initially, in terms of a show, my London exhibition that was shut down was a failure. For many years, the work from that show never saw the light of day. The experience did cause me to consider the notion, if people can't understand this right now, what do I need to do? What do I need to look at? I did not want to be an artist for a few years. I wanted to find out what I was looking at.

When did your art-making become political?

Not while I was in college. I think it happened as I became aware of my position as a woman artist. I didn't encounter sexism until I got a job in an educational institution. I was the only woman out of my year to get a job in an art school. It was called Manchester School of Art at the time and I was the first and only woman to be brought into the art department as a professor.

One night there was a party and one lecturer had a bit too much to drink and opened up a bit. I said, "What's going on here? I'm about to leave, I hate it here."

He said, "Didn't you realize that you were the only woman in the department and we all opposed it?"

I stayed on for two years, just to make sure they knew they didn't freeze me out. It's difficult to be a pioneer. Sometimes you don't reap the benefits. You plow the furrow and not everyone is in on it. Sometimes you are cut out of the picture and you kind of go, "Uhhh..." But I think that artists can change things with their art practice. They need to be a part of the debate, because if you don't deal with it, it will deal with you.

CAPTAIN AMERICA 2. 1997

"I THINK THAT ARTISTS CAN CHANGE THINGS WITH THEIR ART PRACTICE. THEY NEED TO BE A PART OF THE DEBATE, BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T DEAL WITH IT, IT WILL DEAL WITH YOU."



LEFT TO RIGHT TOP:

2 PRINCESSES 2 HANDS, DIEGO VELAZQUES PAINTING, DAVID WALLIAMS AND BATMAN, 2009

CAPTAIN AMERICA, 1971-1997

EJACULAR, 2007

THE LITTLE WOMAN AT HOME, 1971-2010

LEFT BOTTOM:
MARGARET HARRISON AT
MOCA, LOS ANGELES, 2007



You and Lucy Lippard have had a longstanding public dialogue over the years. How did this relationship initially develop?

I met Lucy at an installation show in the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin. They put a huge amount of money into the women's show and I made a piece especially for the show called 'Anonymous Was the Woman.' In it was a line of portraits of talented women, from Rosa Luxemburg to Janis Joplin. When I was researching their lives I noticed that even though a lot of them succeeded, they all had been crushed in some way.

Janice died through drug overdose and then there was Marilyn and so many others whose mysteries we haven't ever gotten to the bottom of. There was Eleanor Marx who drank prussic acid and killed herself, and Bessie Smith who died outside of a whites only hospital because they wouldn't treat her. No one would treat her.

Lucy was speaking at the show and someone from the audience asked the organizers why there were no artists in the show who

had any political leanings. She picked out mine, which was actually the only one. What the curators tried to do was not upset the apple cart, not be too fierce. They wanted to show that women were just as good painters as men and that they actually had the same skills.

Lucy picked my work out when she was asked that question, and sort of praised it. We met afterwards and became friends. We had a dialogue going about East Coast women and ourselves in London which continued well into the 90's.

Did you find the U.S. and U.K. feminists to be in coalition?

I think within the U.S. there were splits because there had been a crash in the art market at the end of the 60's, which just happened to be when the Women's Movement came into being.

We felt a lot of similarity with the New York women, but when we started to get to know other groups we realized we didn't see things the same way. It was what Lucy called a "pie to be had." They wanted to be more recognized in museums and make



LEFT:
THE HEALTHIER CHOICE.
2007

RIGHT:
HEROES 1. WHAT'S THAT
LONG RED LIMP WRINKLY
THING YOU'RE PULLING
ON. 2009

money at private galleries. Our private galleries didn't do anything, so we said we might just as well do what we want. Some West Coast artists dealt with rape and other issues, but then there was the feeling that they wanted to be more like men. We were stupid and we said that if we can't change the pie, then we don't want a part of it. We were very starry-eyed, thought we could change the world. We thought, we don't want to be on the end of things, decorating things. We want to be amongst everything as a part of everything.

In the art world, do you recognize any huge changes that have taken place in relationship to the radicalism of the 70's? Do you consider present times to be radical enough?

It's difficult to untangle and to see who the enemies are. I think there definitely needs to be more activity, not just keeping yourselves in the fringe areas. To have something that enters the mainstream is very important. Alternative spaces where people can go are very important. There is also a need for artists to be a part of the structure.

What was interesting for us, was that the official trade unions took us seriously. At one point we thought we can't survive on our own. Every union courted us. They all came up to us and told us why we should be a part of their union.

Some people have this idea that in the post feminist era, there aren't inequities anymore. Do you see this relate to your art practice?

I did that investigation in the 90s. I looked at how attitudes operated in universities among students. For example, although all of them said "We're all for equal pay," they wouldn't call themselves feminists, because of the negative associations. They did not want to be called other names, so it's a kind of underlining invisible thing. You don't want to step out of the line on your own, there needs to be the kind of energy that was present when Obama was elected. All those small groups and collective action. You are told a lot that you are an individual, but you can only be one if you operate together; only then do you have a chance of survival.

Is it important to create and maintain separatist groups?

I think they are needed at certain times because you have to discuss things without feeling threatened. That's what the women's workshop at the artists union did for us. We discussed things freely. That kind of space gives you confidence to articulate. There is a notion that artists shouldn't speak, but I think you need to have that voice. Whether it is art and culture, political change, or art and social change, if you have a group of like minded people you can try ideas out. You can find a way to articulate what you are actually about and articulate it in a center of power. I think it is actually important; the survival of the artists is totally key to the whole society.

"YOU ARE TOLD A LOT THAT YOU ARE AN INDIVIDUAL, BUT YOU CAN ONLY BE ONE IF YOU OPERATE TOGETHER; ONLY THEN DO YOU HAVE A CHANCE OF SURVIVAL."

