

NOT SHEEPISH

RADICAL EROTICISM AT DALLAS CONTEMPORARY

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While usually deemed “morally reprehensible” at the time of censorship, banned artwork of a sexual nature historically serves a higher purpose: it nudges mass culture toward its own expansion. Artist Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of men in sexual scenes were notoriously censored by the Corcoran Museum in 1989—a mere twenty-seven years later, this imagery is freely available to anyone with internet access.

In the 1960s, women artists began making work that questioned their role in society. A lexicon of feminist artmaking was eventually developed, comprised of work that contextualized women’s ongoing struggle to find equity in public and private realms. A strain of this type of work explored, in the most explicit ways possible, female sexuality. Because this work illustrated nude forms and penetrative sex, it was censored from exhibitions, prompting a group of artists—led by Anita Steckel and including Louise Bourgeois and Hannah Wilke—to form the FC (Fight Censorship) group in 1973.

The work of four artists who created in this tendency—Joan Semmel, Anita Steckel, Betty Tompkins and Cosey Fanni Tutti—is being newly considered by curator Alison M. Gingeras in her current exhibition “Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics.” The Gingeras-coined moniker “black sheep feminism” has a double meaning: it refers to the fact that all four artists were censored at some point in their career, and also reflects the artists’ greater or lesser exclusion from the feminist art canon. Rather than denouncing archetypal sex roles, these artists often depicted what could be termed a ballad of sexual equality. In a panel moderated by Gingeras, painter Joan Semmel—whose lush sexual scenes render intertwined bodies in mesmerizing tones of green, purple, pink and blue—explains that she sought to portray, “How a woman feels about sex and what turns a woman on...it wasn’t my need to elevate pornography—it was my need to elevate sex.” The artist used the messy realm of intimacy to explore an idealized philosophy of sex, one that depicts the joy of two people entering each other for mutual gratification and meaning.



Here, Gingeras speaks about her thought process behind the exhibition.

When dealing with the work of four different artists, who all created their work using very different techniques and conceptual agendas, what was your strategy to allow the pieces to converse with one another effectively in the space?

I tried to install the exhibition in a way that both allowed the internal formal and conceptual logic of each artist's work to be coherent without completely sectioning the artists off from each other. There's almost a cinematic narrative that gets constructed, first with a Steckel phallic flower painting and her key quote about allowing the penis into the museum: "If the erect penis is not wholesome enough to go into museums, it should not be considered wholesome enough to go into women." This is followed by Cosey's *The Kiss* [a black and white diptych photograph of the artist French kissing her image in a mirror], and quickly, like in an erotic film, the imagery becomes more heated, with a suite of Semmel's paintings of couples in coital embrace. The four Tompkins paintings are at the far end of the gallery, so that they can operate as virtual close-up jump cuts, and also oscillate between figurative and abstract images that the viewer can appreciate as they get closer to the paintings (from across this rather huge gallery space).

Do you feel shows in this vein assist in creating—in a broader cultural context—deeper and more nuanced discussions about sexuality, art and censorship? How so?

I think this show demonstrates that ideological schisms within even the most radical and progressive branches of feminism are still unresolved, and gives equal space to divergent positions. The show

doesn't offer a conclusion or come down with a judgment about which side is correct (pro-porn or anti-porn, for example). I think that considering how far we've come as a society, to see an exhibition like this in a museum allows the audience to perhaps reflect on the legacy of feminism within this narrow sphere of representation, and how the legitimization of these artists reflects the gains that women have made in terms of asserting their economic, social and political autonomy.

Are you surprised that this work is still considered shocking?

I was actually super surprised and elated that the show in Dallas—a city that is something like 30% fundamentalist Christian and nestled in the heart of Ted Cruz country—did not elicit a knee jerk reaction. The opposite happened. The audience I met was empowered by an exhibition that brought the whole topic of feminism to the fore and welcomed the opportunity to use the exhibition as a means to generate conversation about the legacies of feminism in their community. It was super moving to meet a host of young people, students mostly, who had driven to Dallas from as far away as Austin to come to the panel discussion. It seemed to have a real impact that way. It wasn't shocking to them, instead it was substantive.





