



Big Sex

by Linda Park

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Big Sex. The first thing I thought about when I came across this title for the current exhibition at Manifesto (10043-102 St.) was something along the lines of Super Sex — a strip joint in Montreal. Of course, adding adjectives like "big" and "super" to the word "sex" underscores all the hype around sex and how it can sell, attract audiences and grab attention. Moreover, it makes it seem like sex is no longer just plain sex but must be qualified by superlatives to make it sound more lavish and unbelievable, thereby increasing its appeal.

In the case of the exhibition currently on display at Manifesto, however, using "big" to describe the subject of sex as a theme for art reflects the large scope of this show. Big Sex includes myriad media, styles, images and opinions.

In organizing the exhibition, curator Les Paterson decided upon a markedly unconventional way of selecting the works. By inviting specific artists to submit work rather than selectively choosing artwork, Paterson allowed for a free and impromptu interchange. The result offers quite an eclectic exploration of the theme.

The works in this exhibition, which opened last weekend, range from overt, sensational and literally big images to more thoughtful and quirky pieces that are refreshing in the context of clichéd sexual representations. It is interesting to see how, as an entirety, the diversity works together to make a colorful collage of various viewpoints on sex without discriminating on taste.

Paterson explains that he was interested in "creating a dialogue" between the various artists who were asked to participate in the show. Fourteen local artists, plus an electronica sound engineer, gathered to bring together their reflections and expressions on their interpretation of "big sex." Works from Dale Nigel Goble, Denise Beauregard, Tanya Harnett, Corey Hamilton, Jeff Graham, Jolene Wagner and Diane Boudreau and others are all represented here.

According to Paterson, though some of the work existed before he conceived of the show, other pieces were created by the artists specifically for this installation.

For artists like Wagner and Linh Truong, this will be the first time their work receives exposure in a public gallery. Paterson says the varying levels of personal evolution from artist to artist adds to the range of perspectives in Big Sex.

Truong has created four paintings that give a slight twist to the whole notion of big sex. Her take on the theme came from playing with words: "Big Sex...Little Sex...Insects...." This led her to gentle inquiries into the sex lives of bugs, which suggest the universal behavior associated with instinct and reproduction. Intimate and close-up depictions of ladybugs, intertwined dragonflies, a praying mantis eating its mate after coitus, and one grasshopper mounting another are the subjects used to offer a different perspective on the nature of sex (or is that the sex of nature?). In contrast to predictable and

hackneyed representations, Truong's work portrays a more subtle outlook to the subject matter of this show.

Photographs by Eric Stiegliz also incorporate a particular perspective on sex and sexuality. As documentary-type photos, the images allow the issues of sex and sexuality to become integral to their subjects and not a dominant focus.

Stiegliz's photographs suggest he's an observer of people and the topic of sex can be as expansive as it is unique to individuals. From his travels, Stiegliz captures punks in Amsterdam hanging out while dogs hump nearby, a lone man in New York's Times Square, drag queens in New Orleans and an odd fetus preserved in a jar in Bucharest. With a touch of irony, sex is seen to be both whimsical and a part of the everyday — even the grim aspects.

Sharing this exhibition space and adding a more earthy affectation to Big Sex is the work of Memi von Gaza. Using mixed-media sculptures comprising blood, wood, cloth and red shale, the artist creates large female forms that delve into primordial references to sexuality associated with spirituality.

For von Gaza, "the manifestation of 'big sex' is a big belly. It's the ultimate...a pregnant belly." Exhibiting a range of sculptures — from smaller-sized portrayals of fertility goddesses to larger-than-life forms of female deity figures — this artist's work demands the presence and attention that is grounded in more folkloric practices and organic materials.

Although an installation piece entitled Re-entry, by Paterson, may seem to be a contrast to abstract paintings and clay sculptures, it furnishes the inspirational tap root for the show. Set in a room separate from the rest of the gallery space, Re-entry is an illusionistic recreation of a mega-oversized, glow-in-the-dark vagina. Standing in front of this piece in the dark, at the aural whims of a specifically-designed soundscape, the viewer senses the layers of painted mylar slightly shifting to give a sense of moving in and out of this abstract tunnel. This is intended as a return voyage to our initial portal into the world, as well as a means of making reference to the primeval roots of the meaning of sex.

While it may seem that Paterson's piece merely correlates big sex with the construction of big genitalia, he explains that Re-entry is "less about a vulva than it is about birth...I sort of meditated and really thought and did some research — tried to piece together some memory of conception and birth."

As an artist and curator, Paterson is interested in the confrontational and complex implications of sex that engage the viewer directly. However you may feel about Hamilton's wilfully ugly take on porn-as-day-job in the mixed-media piece Catch Up or the monumental phallus proffered by Boudreau and Taubensee, you're certain to have some kind of reaction.

Worth noting at the July 25 opening was the musical accompaniment, designed specifically for this show. The electronic music, created by Fowl Swoop, was inspired by audio from porno movies, in addition to more sensual instrumentals, to reflect a sound that is "big and sexy." Overall, the music was an apt parallel to the exhibition.

Exploring as much of the various and diverse interpretations on sex and sexuality as there are artists working and thinking in different ways, Big Sex is definitely open to almost anything.