

Brutal Edges and Tender Surfaces: An Exhibition Arousing Gender-based Interpretations

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In 1997, I installed a photographic exhibition in a gallery in the heart of the capital city of the United States. This exhibition, depicting, so I thought, lovingly rendered and abstracted black and white photographs of my husband, received critical reviews from gallery visitors whose interpretations differed from the documentary perspective that I had envisioned. For example, according to Oda (1997), a middle-aged male reviewer observed “[these] works convey a sense of male objectification, in which the act of covering or exposing the male torso feels like a submissive (rather than aggressive) act relative to the gaze of the artist/viewer. Thus does the artist wind up addressing gender issues” (p. 19). Oda’s published review postdated the reactions that I observed from a number of visitors during the opening reception. I observed with surprise, that most senior and middle-aged men appeared uncomfortable when they entered the gallery, or they changed directions and did not set foot beyond the front door. In fact, my father, in his early 70s, a man who owns a collection of works depicting nude women, has suggested on numerous occasions that I would be advised to remove one particular photograph of my husband, “Wing #1,” from our living room walls. (See Figure 1.) He recognizes that male nudity was important in ancient Greek and Roman times. But he believes that in modern art history, portrayals of female nudity are more frequent and thus, more accepted. Depictions of male nudes occur less frequently, and thus raise cultural concerns about their acceptability. After querying him, my father explained, “The recent attitude reflects a common feeling that it is not ‘manly’ for a man to have an interest in the male body (of others). And this, conceivably, may have its root in an unconscious concern that one might be consid-

ered homosexual if one were too interested in the depiction of other males. For example, Thomas Eakins did a number of paintings of male nudes, and even though Eakins was married it has been suggested that these paintings reflect a homosexual tendency on his part” (R. Basseches, personal communication, March 22, 2006). In further discussion, my father wondered, “Do younger men have the same reaction, or have the mores changed in this regard?”



Figure 1. *Wing #1*, 1997, silver gelatin print, 22” x 28”,
courtesy of the artist.

Another reviewer, a young female in her 20s, offered a completely different statement about the works. She stated, “[the] new photographs of her model denote a restless search to isolate and organize form using the photographic medium” (Bargh, 1997, p. 14). Bargh’s focus was primarily on the formal qualities of the work. Nevertheless, when referring to one particular photograph, “Three Hands,” Bargh told readers of her review that “[t]he silhouette of the face and the image of the hand on a large white backdrop invokes the age-old metaphor of the hand of G-d” (p. 14). (See Figure 2.) Another viewer also derived a religious message from my work. On seeing my husband with a single arm outstretched and another holding white paper against his chest in “Wing #1,” she explained that the image represented my understanding of the crucifixion of Christ. I marveled. How could this have been my aim, when, as a Jew,

images exploring Christianity are far from my consciousness? Only after a further reflection did I recognize that my husband, with light brown hair, pink skin, and Danish/English/German features, looked like European depictions of Christ, whom, I might add, probably in life looked more like me—dark curly hair, coarse olive skin, and Semitic facial appearance.



Figure 2. *Three Hands*, 1997, silver gelatin print, 28" x 22", courtesy of the artist.

My husband, seeking to support my art career by gaining an audience for my work, took advertising posters depicting his semi-clad body to “gay” bars located near the gallery. As he pinned up the images, he realized that my name, with its absence of gender specificity, might be interpreted by the patrons as an example of homosexual sensitivity to the male form. This view was indeed verified when patrons mentioned

that “he” (the artist) had done masterful work. In fact, as my husband had expected, the poster did serve as an enticement for patrons to see the exhibition and once there, several patrons reported that their visit demonstrated solidarity with a homosexual male photographer. On reflection, we wondered why depiction of male nudity was thought to be limited to the homosexual male artist. Does art education contribute to the assumption that only certain topics are the proper subject of certain artists?

Misinterpretations of my intent continued. My husband had an unpleasant confrontation with a neighbor of the gallery who ripped the poster with my husband’s picture in “Wing #1” off a wall from which there were many other advertisements posted. The man told my husband that the neighborhood would not tolerate posting “trash.” This statement was odd in that the elderly man did not touch the other posters that were also plastered on the wall. Some of these advertised numerous events had long since occurred, and could more rightfully be considered ready for removal and be considered trash. Why did my portrayals of a male figure disturb men and become conceptual and/or visual trash?

Following the postings advertising my exhibition, the gallery received notice that it should not post advertisements in the neighborhood. Previously, other artists had advertised their more subdued and perhaps less controversial art without such vitriolic notification.

Why this Body of Work?

Nearly a decade later, few “Brutal Edges” remain on my husband’s frame. Rather, in middle age, his flesh has formed to his particular experiences including a sedentary job. My husband remains a central subject whom I capture in photographic form. I wondered what would happen were I to exhibit new photographs that I had taken of him alongside the earlier images. For an exhibition of this nature, I would be sure to systematically collect visitors’ reactions by posing and recording the answers to questions such as: Does seeing a middle-aged man’s body unclothed make you feel uncomfortable? Does a young man’s? Does a middle-aged male body connote “Christ?” Or “G-d,” as well as that of a young man’s? Does a middle-aged body serve as a catalyst for viewers’ interpretations as well as or less well than the body of a young man? The reactions to “Brutal Edges,” and responses to questions posed above with

images of males could promote discussion about the overt and covert ways that art educators direct artists' content and themes, as well as encourage audiences to accept images of varied perspectives of masculinity.

To answer my questions, I decided to seek viewers' responses. In late March, 2006, I displayed 14-framed photographs in my studio/gallery in a cooperative art center in Richmond, Virginia over the weekend that the center held a hugely popular public open house. Six of the photographs were images I had shot in 1997, and were presented in gray mats in simple black 22" x 28" frames. Three of these images are included here, "Wing #1," "Three Hands," and "Translucent Cape." (See Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3.)



Figure 3. *Translucent Cape*, 1997, silver gelatin print, 28"x 22", courtesy of the artist.

The other eight images were new photographs, also black and white, pre-

sented in a considerably smaller format, in 16" x 20" frames with white mats. In one of these images "Looking Upward," I made a conscious reference to European depictions of Christ and also to "Translucent Cape." (See Figure 4.)



Figure 4. *Looking Upward*, 2006, giclée, 20" x 16", courtesy of the artist

Another of the new images, "New Wing" was intended to reinterpret the older work, "Wing #1" and was hung adjacent to it so that viewers could compare and contrast the two easily. (See Figure 5.) Finally, I include "Triple Curve" which was presented in the exhibition as a way to make sure that viewers could not escape noticing how my husband's body had changed over the 10-year interval. (See Figure 6.)

Since I was out of town at the time of the open house, I posted a questionnaire in the front window of the studio/gallery and also inside the studio directing visitors to share their answers. In addition to five

questions about viewers' opinions mentioned above, I also asked three demographic questions, "What is your gender?" "Are you an artist?" and "What is your age?"



Figure 5. *New Wing*, 2006, giclée, 20" x 16", courtesy of the artist.

Regrettably, I received only six completed questionnaires from the opening reception, (and only eight more have come in during the two months that the exhibition has been on display), making interpretation of viewers' responses difficult. All six answered that they were neither uncomfortable seeing a middle-aged man's body unclothed nor uncomfortable seeing a young man's body unclothed. Interestingly, three of the six stated that they did not think that a middle-aged body suggested "Christ" or "G-d" as well as that of a younger man's. Two who responded in this way were younger than the other participants. All but one participant suggested that a middle-aged body serves as a catalyst for viewer's interpretations as well as the body of a young man. Four respondents

didn't believe that art education contributes to the assumption that only certain topics are the proper subject of certain artists. One did believe that art education contributes to the assumption, and one respondent was unable to answer the question. The responses came from one individual 18-19-years-old, two individuals in their 20s, two individuals in their 40s, and one who identified himself/herself as 50s. Two respondents were not artists, while the other four were. Few patterns can be understood from these responses because there are so few, except to suggest that most people attending this open house didn't choose to offer their views about male nudity in art for this particular questionnaire. Had I been able to attend the opening reception, I wonder whether there would have been more responses, or whether the evidence of few responses points out that male nudity is still a concern in 2006 such that only a few people were willing to put to paper their opinions about the works.

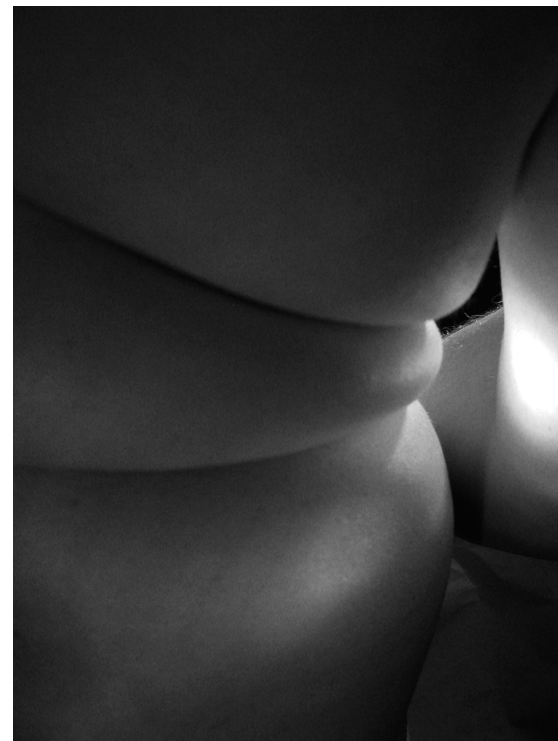


Figure 6. *Triple Curve*, 2006, giclée, 20" x 16", courtesy of the artist.

Editors' Comments:

After discussion with K.B., we all agreed that the issues she raises are really important and she agreed that our dialogue—between the editors and the author—should be part of this article, so here we go:

Culture has “taught” us how to look, what to look at, and when it is appropriate to look (Foucault, 1979). There is considerable literature on “the gaze” and how it privileges and genders positionality whether it’s male, female, adult, child (see McClure Vollrath article, this issue), homosexual, or heterosexual. While it was not K.B.’s intention to objectify her husband’s body in these photographs, viewers of these exhibitions took cues from their cultures and environments and educations to make sense of the imagery within their own contexts. In spite of the critics misunderstanding of her intention, legitimate meanings were constructed. From a Barthesian point of view (Barthes, 1968), which argues that the intentions of an author are meaningless to the interpretation of a text, when the photographs become part of culture through their gallery displays, her intention as an artist loses relevancy. Because this theory claims that the author’s intentions are not relevant, it gives power to the readers (and viewers) to interpret as they will. Barthes (1977) concluded that the *Death of the Author* was the *Birth of the Reader* (and viewer). According to this theory, any given text consists not of one authorial voice but of multiple genres, outside influences, subconscious drives, and preexisting texts that constantly shape and inform all communication. For this reason, Barthes argues, critics should use texts as a space for free “play” that cannot be defined by any univocal statement of right or wrong with regard to the author. Rather, interaction with the text generates its own pleasure in an act that, for Barthes, closely mirrors sexual intercourse. [Maybe that’s why we love going to galleries.]

References

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