

## Taste the Whip

Gallery Paradiso

explores the libido aesthetic

by rose apodaca jones

There's no telling what can happen when someone gets a taste of the whip. It's mid-evening at Gallery Paradiso's opening party for "Wicked: the Aesthetic of the Libido," and it's starting to get very weird. The culprit is not the vinyl-wrapped woman living out the party as Barbie and posing for pictures, nor the other guests who arrived in their finest bondage fashions. They're all as predictable as the wine at this event.

What is curious is the gaggle of young women who playfully fight for control of a black leather bullwhip, the remains of the carnet in their paper cups sloshing onto the concrete floor.

Victoriously flailing the whip, one of them teeters dangerously across the room to a grinning guy in jeans and a sweat shirt. Pleased, he flirts: "You naughty, naughty girl!"

This was one helluva party favor. Its temporary keepers would invariably lose control of their social senses. Guests giddily shed conformity. Instantly, they became dominatrixes! Teases! Tiger trainers!

These women, who arrived in their finest femme fatale attire, fought for control of it, running around the gallery in a titter.

If "Wicked" was designed to further chip away at the apparently quasi-universal belief that sex is somehow an anathema or, worse, some condition that's somehow not quite natural, it certainly elicited some funny reactions from the guests.

Perhaps that's because most works assembled for the show had some link to the kinds of sexual adventures

ish pastel-oil renderings of Barbie in bondage do more to expose her own stunted ken on the topic. Barbie has been vogueing the sexual fantasies of artists as far back as the early '70s. Depicting Babs in a breast-exposing corset is as novel these days as catching a teen in vinyl jeans at the mall.

Nearly as common a staple in contemporary erotic art—or Orange County, for that matter—are strippers. Usually one could give an artist that it was really an excuse to see a bunch of nekked ladies. In photographer Janae Dimick's case, it was apparently a way of cloaking her stripping job in the respectability of art (hey, it was her—not me—who quickly explained it away with that reason). While her black-and-white photographs include the usual arty-strip-joint images (boobs and shaved-crotch shots), a few do stand out beautifully because they capture the dancers when they're in their own world and oblivious to the camera. One presents the imperfections of the female body in all its glorious natural state. Another catches a dancer crashed out her dressing-room floor.

Dimick, who's been shooting for less than two years, said she only took the stripping job to get into the culture and gain the dancers' trust. "What a sacrifice. Of course, with her series completed, she has yet to quit. "I'm planning to do it soon," she said, "since I got what I wanted out of it." And dancers complain that it's those Y-chromosome customers who are using them.

Another—yawn—waste of space was Nancy Roberts' wall-sized rendering of two bald guys in bondage creating a human fountain. This stuff couldn't get Rohrabacher to blush. Roberts saves her name, however, with *The Chemical Goddess*, another larger-than-life Technicolor nightmare of sex, power and money between men and women. Give this one your patience and time. It's as crammed with color as it is with messages: a woman's face that is half happy, half sad; a needle in her leg representing the artificial substances some women inject to compete in a society weighed down by ageism and sexism; barely dis-

cernible feet that suggest Chinese foot binding, a practice that hints at fetishism.

In fact, it's when the artists dare to go beyond the hackneyed, oh-so-lurid sex topics—which Roberts accomplishes in her threesome painting—that the show really gets wicked.

Buried memories are at the core of John Dillemluth's puzzle-like cutouts. From opposite the room, his balsa wood shapes scattered on the east wall of the gallery suggest forms and crevices of biology from the waist down. Move up to inspect the pieces, and the faded images become increasingly disturbing: the artist, nude, posing provocatively (or simply nude but naturally?) in situations that, because of the way the duo-tone photography is cropped, are occasionally left to the imagination. (Dillemluth used an emulsion process on the balsa that

Martinez didn't limit herself. Tiny condoms have been altered with shiny, heavy silver metal tips dotted with rhinestones. And plastic teardrop containers were filled with a bubbling yellow jelly and fake strawberries.

Siobhan Arnold, too, considers how the prosaic can become an exalted object of fetish worship. Shoes, primarily those that are made from black leather, have long been a cherished icon. Arnold has deconstructed and dissected a few of these to the point that any obvious reference is forever obliterated. This is not unlike what happens when something as inanimate as a shoe takes on an erotic life for the shoe fetishist.

The end result of Arnold's transformations look more like codpieces or some other sex accessory. Stretched out in their framed settings, they further



Nancy Roberts' *The Chemical Goddess*

made it like photogenic paper.) Complicating the images are child-like crayon marks scribbled over several of the cutouts. This is the stuff psychoanalytical wet dreams are made of. The drawings, relayed Dillemluth, "are automatic scribbles where the pen becomes sexual."

Perhaps Regina Rioux-Martinez felt the same about her knitting needles. Her daintily crafted offerings provided something this exhibit lacked at times: witty originality. Rioux-Martinez took the process that created our favorite, comforting blanket or the protection of a sweater and turned out body parts that can, presumably, be loved just the same. Make that fetishized. Detached from the part of the body and realized in a medium that demands touching, these items are the patent-leather stiletto's arty cousin.

There are the stuffed, pink crochet sacks that hang heavily. The insinuation that they're knockers are punctuated by white stars where nipples would be. Deserving a pedestal covered in lavender taffeta, tiny black and pink vaginas have been tightly looped in a shimmering thread; they resemble coin purses. Like any good craft queen, Rioux-

resemble roaches. Either result generates as much fascination and repulsion among the general public. But the status quo human reaction to either hobby becomes even more ridiculous when the object is pinned down under glass for study. It's a point Arnold seems to emphasize in the choice of novelty backdrops made from pink floral prints, fur, gold quilt and textured red velvet.

There is plenty more—good and bad, artistically and morally depending on your personal tastes. Yes, there's even a collection of whips with handles made from toys and household tools.

Of course, to some folks, anything other than the missionary position between a man and a woman is subversive. Art, in its own way, enjoys the prerogative to be subversive, to shock the sensibilities. Overall, the "Wicked" exhibit aims to please. It just takes a little patience to get beyond the conspicuous clichés to appreciate the real thrill. **W**



Siobhan Arnold's art



WICKED: THE AESTHETIC OF THE LIBIDO

Gallery Paradiso  
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Mon.-Sat., 10 a.m.-6 p.m.  
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