

## **WIMODAUGHSIS: Vagina Festival Art Exhibition 2008**

The aim of the Vagina Festival Art Exhibition is to highlight the experiences of women, which are rich, varied, joyous as well as trying. (In this election year, we have seen the scuttling of the campaign for a female president, which indicates that nearly ninety years later after women fought for the right to vote, the struggle for equality and respect remains.) The point is not to be reductive: it is not us vs. them, or women vs. men. We, all of us, are in this together. The Vagina Festival is the brainchild of Alexandra Jacoby, an articulate feminist, and a labor of love by all the women and men who have made it possible, and I am especially grateful to the artists for their invaluable vision. In the spirit of continual striving for dialogue, understanding, and seeing things from a different perspective, we welcome you to consider and enjoy the works of the artists and acknowledge all of our "wimodaughsis (wives, mothers, daughters and sisters)," as coined by the black feminist, Anna Julia Cooper.

*Egg* by Owen Harvey is a fitting opening to the exhibition because it also represents the beginning of life and the unity of the family, and simultaneously the white color signals an embrace of others, as well as pointing to the possibilities for affecting change. In a playful way, Jenny Laden's *Wondermama* addresses the amazing efforts of mothers and asks what would it be like if we raised a race of Wonder Women? In Hillary Harvey's *Zoe with Magnifying Glass 2*, the emphasis is on the girl's curiosity and scrutiny of the world. Women are constantly subjected to the magnifying glass by the masculine gaze, as well as the criticality of other women. The pretty and pink dress embellished by Jill Kerwick in *If You Can't Say Anything Nice* recognizes that girls are socialized to speak gently, but this does not prepare them for the demands of the wider world. *The Cutting 4* by Fiona Dent exposes the practice of female genital mutilation with its concomitant mental as well as physical violence, which wreaks loss and trauma to girls as young as seven years old. FGM is a procedure that involves partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for

cultural or religious reasons. In addition to denying girls sexual gratification and supposedly securing a wife's fidelity, the cutting is a prerequisite for marriage in communities where women do not have the option of choosing a career. When reading the title of Fahimeh Vahdat's drawing, "*The Soldiers Are Coming*," it does not refer to the promise of rescue. Instead, it is a threat alluding to the rape of girls and women that is ubiquitous in times of war.

The journey of life and death, as symbolized by the water, in Grimesa Amoros' video *La Procepción's* is an homage to women as givers of life and the connections between all people. It was inspired by the processions in Lima that she witnessed as a child. They were replete with people dressed in blue, evoking images of waves, water, and the cycle of life. Simone Stoll explores a more familiar ritual, that of women polishing their toenails, in *#1 (Hottest Pink)*. Belying this seemingly innocent activity, the painting of toenails is fraught with frustration and bespeaks of women's self-inflicted injuries to the body and spirit. In light of the things we do to ourselves, the Canadian artistic duo, Finger in the Dyke (Shawna Dempsey & Lorri Millan), implores us to think in *Consideration Liberation Army*. Significantly, they don't tell us what to think, but the very act of contemplation is in itself liberating.

Alexandra Jacoby's *vagina vérité*® is a direct and honest exploration of vaginas, that much maligned body part, in all its variety and beauty. As photographed by the artist, the vaginas, or unmanipulated alternative portraits, afford us an opportunity to reclaim ourselves, body and soul. Stephanie Dinkins' *Americana I Print* spotlights the invisible character in Ralph Ellison's excoriating book *The Invisible Man* – that of the black woman. Not only gender, but race remains a pernicious issue in the U.S. In *The Bra Shop*, Christine Gedeon captures a unique perspective on the experience of being fitted for a bra. It raises the question of women's relationship to their breasts, and society's strictures for not measuring up to its impossible ideals. *Turn On* by Dixon Stetler, Betty Dodson and Dan Brawley humorously focuses on the clitoris, here substituted by the

light switch. By being absent, the artists invoke the presence of the clitoris, which is the site of women's orgasm. Also, the clitoral map references the ground-breaking work of sexologist Betty Dodson and her collaborator Grant Taylor. The profusion of contraception on Dixon Stetler's girl scout badge, *Always be Prepared*, evokes the vigilance of women, who often solely bear the responsibility of raising a child although it usually takes two to create a baby. Zoe Markwalter's *Addressing the Box* affords us another view of vaginas outside the delimiting stereotype of reducing women to their bodies or the assumption that all women are the same. Lastly, let us untie the *Apron Strings* in Emily Bicht's art, and afford women a greater opportunity to pursue the other challenges of life.

To conclude, the words of the abolitionist Thomas Macaulay, as quoted by Anna Julia Cooper, are still relevant today: "You may judge a nation's rank in the scale of civilization from the way they treat their women. " Women, treat yourself well, and request others to treat you as they would want themselves to be treated. Women's agency is vital for a democratic society, and it is everyone's concern. Feminism isn't a bad word: the dictionary defines it as a theory advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men. In addition to theory, practice is need, and practice (almost) makes perfect.

For Eleana

Rose Merola