

by
Lisa
Balfour
Bowen

Anatomy, surgery, illness —
it's all raw material for
Toronto's new young artists



Body language

Just because the Art Gallery of Ontario is grabbing headlines with its Barnes Collection blockbuster doesn't mean that other worthy Toronto shows should be ignored. One such exhibition is *Naked State: A Selected View of Toronto Art* — a perfect counterpoint to the Barnes — on at Harbourfront's Power Plant, 231 Queen's Quay W.

On view 'til Nov. 6, it showcases 30 groundbreaking and unorthodox creations dreamed up by 18 young and emerging artists who are producing some of the most compelling art to be found anywhere in Canada today.

Although they now live in Toronto, these artists have come from or been trained in cities across Canada. Ranging in age from early 20s to early 30s, they use materials as unconventional as human hair, glass eyes, surgical instruments, plastic dolls and aromatic spices.

Power Plant curator Louise Dompierre explains she chose *Naked State* as the title for this often bizarre yet exhilarating exhibition because much of its art reveals a "heightened awareness of the vulnerability of our physical bodies and of our mortality." Indeed, the subjects of anatomy, deformity, surgery and illness — particularly the horror of AIDS — are never far from the surface of this show.

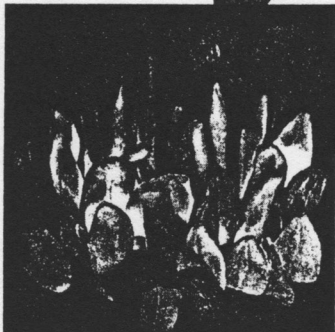
To discover this new generation of artists, Dompierre visited well over 60 artists' studios. She is convinced the Toronto art scene is experiencing a whole new resurgence. She sees the emotionally charged work as a reaction to the narrowly focused, highly intellectual and theoretical art produced over the last two decades. "To resituate themselves, many emerging artists now feel the need to look internally, in a distinctly personal way."

Despite the undeniably depressing themes evoked in *Naked State*, there is much humor too. It's a display that presents all sorts of weird and wonderful, funny and frightening contradictions, tensions and ambiguities.

Imagine making artworks out of a barber's chair. Or an ordinary briefcase. Or a physician's scales. Yet this is exactly what Francis

UNTITLED, 1994 ...

Above, this is a detail of a photographic self-portrait by Michael Buchanan, with a carpenter's spirit level replacing the eyes' irises. We view the world through technology now. How do we keep things level and in balance?



ALCHEMIST'S TONGUE, 1993 ...

Above, Calgary-born artist Max Streicher has created a composite work of sulphur, glycerine soap and light bulbs. This emotional and romantic piece looks like a cluster of small stalagmites lit with a warm interior glow. "The tongue is a threshold organ," Streicher says. "It stands between inside and outside, between the mind and the gut. A tongue tastes, it speaks, it screams, it screws, it sings."

LeBouthillier has done in two witty installations which use video equipment to project ironic gestural performances on miniature screens.

Then there are the oversized mitt and monumental sock hand-knitted by Janet Morton on needles the size of drumsticks. And the menacing surgical instruments whose threatening shapes are softened by the embroidery floss with which Michelle Gay has attached them to pristine pieces of pure white damask.

Crown of Thorns, a dramatic and fragile sculpture by Lois Andison, possesses obvious



TEMPLATES FOR MALE PATTERN BALDNESS, 1993 ...

Above, Scarborough's Francis LeBouthillier's materials include a barber's chair and two video monitors — one on the ceiling and one on the wall — showing images of shaving. The work, which includes a child's chair superimposed on the adult barber's chair, comments on the social ideal of masculinity.

religious connotations as well as irony stemming from the fact that the red blood of Christ is simulated by iodine — a healing substance — in the glass thorns which Andison has so hauntingly created.

Several other memorable items are floor pieces, one being a group of snake-like, rice-filled men's ties on which portions of the Indian Act are screened. Created by Teresa Marshall, of First Nations ancestry, these ties carry a clear political message as well as possessing an attractive, sinuous, decorative appeal.

Dompierre has made sure that *Naked State* appeals to every one of our five senses except taste. Even that elusive sense is evoked by a series of stewing spices — such as cloves, cinnamon, ginger and licorice — which Millie Chen has stuffed into wall crevices beside the Power Plant's stairs.

Chen has also created a coat constructed from human hair and silicon. On the back, the word NAKED appears in a clear and ironic reference to the show's title. The body is also evoked by Greg Hefford who, using five revolving light projectors, makes male and female sex symbols — of the type found on public washroom

doors — dance around the ceiling like fireflies.

Several other works emit distinct sound effects. For example, Harla Hlady's *Beauty* consists of a gallery full of wall-mounted plastic dolls resembling the heroine in *Beauty and the Beast*. Activated by sensors, timers and electric motors, these are mechanically forced to whiz around like whirling dervishes.

Another, much sadder piece by Max Streicher, consists of three oversized white figures whose shapes expand and deflate with a soft sighing sound when their balloon-like forms are set in motion by a foot pedal.

Carl Skelton is responsible for *Diorama*, an unusual floor-to-ceiling installation made of what look like hoses or branches stuffed with glass eyes. These glint and gleam and almost seem to spy upon the viewer from their darkened chamber.

Only three paintings made it into this show. All are by Corneil Van der Spek and depict the bulging, vein-articulated muscles of oil-skinned body builders.

If all this sounds weird, funky, grotesque and unsettling, it is. But *Naked State* is also full of fresh inventions and unexpected entertainment.