

# Naked State show illuminates dark new age

Darkness falls and the only signs of life are sounds of sirens and the scurrying of rats. Wind that once cooled now feels fetid and unhealthy.

People huddle indoors, or in designated areas where they are protected by high-tech security and an army of police.

Closer encounters, mediated by layers of Latex, are no less dangerous.

Not even daylight brings relief; the very sunshine has turned deadly and must be avoided.

The signs are everywhere, all of them bad.

Superstition, plague, ignorance, religious fundamentalism, tribalism, violence and fear.

## Art

CHRISTOPHER HUME

We have entered a new age, an age of darkness, a new Dark Age.

The occasional pinpricks of light that shine through the night come from artists and those other "cultural producers" who, like so many monks busy illuminating manuscripts, toil away obscurely.

These self-appointed guardians of the humanist tradition work without recognition or recompense to keep alive the distinction between civilization and mass society.

Though their efforts are largely futile, artists gather ev-

ery so often to participate in exhibitions through which their sense of disquiet can be expressed communally. Strength in numbers and all.

The latest such expression is a group show at Harbourfront's Power Plant, titled *Naked State*, which includes works by 17 Toronto-based artists, most of them on the young side and unknown.

Their cries from the urban wilderness take many forms and incorporate many media — there's even a painter in the show.

What binds the elements of this most disparate exhibition is a common preoccupation with the body.

That can mean a lot of different things, too. In addition to being a place we inhabit physically, the body is a foreign country, full of mystery, pain and threat as well as pleasure.

In the aftermath of AIDS, the body has been turned into the ground zero of divine retribution, the vengeful male God's punishment for our sins.

Robert Windrum's *AIDS Schmoids* laughs defiantly in the face of the disease.

His tiny precious embroidery, hand-sewn on a man's undershirt, sums up the hopelessness of our position towards AIDS.

By contrast, Catherine Heard's embroidery is deliberately repulsive. Her detailed depictions of human penises are made of human hair which hangs in long strands.

Look, but certainly don't touch.

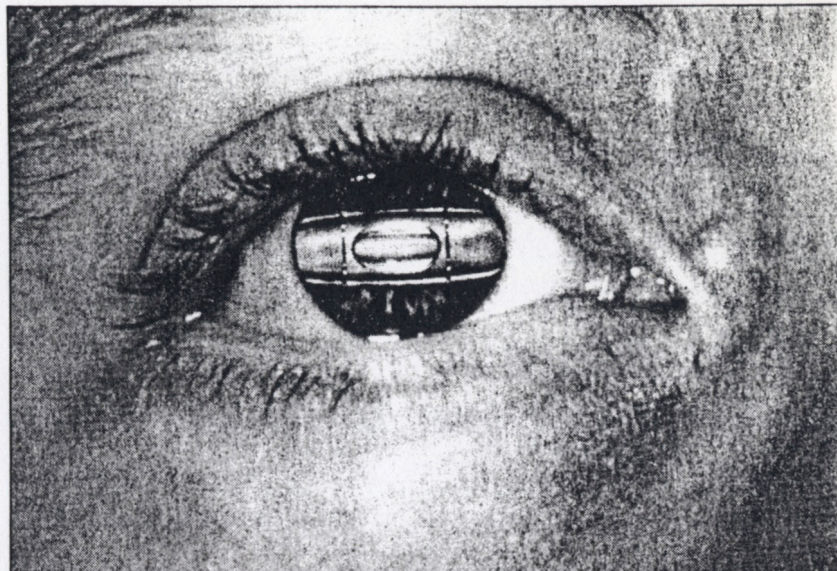
Hair also appears in a coat — you'd rather freeze than wear this — by Millie Chen.

Her piece forces a confrontation with what she calls "an economy of the body."

In the exhibition catalogue she says she is "analyzing the history of representation of the female body, and its journey from object to subject."

The male body's journey from subject to object might be the subject of Max Streicher's offering, *Boiler*.

These huge inflatable shapes — embellished phalli — rise when activated by visitors then inevitably fall.



**NAKED STATE:** Untitled work by Michael Buchanan part of body-obsessed show.

Up and down, aroused and apathetic, his transformative work adds a reassuring note of humor to a show that's generally grim.

Lois Anderson fills her glass-tubed crown of thorns with iodine to resemble blood.

Teresa Marshall inflates neckties so they become snakes and turns a man's coat into a straightjacket.

Michelle Gay sews surgical instruments into damask panels.

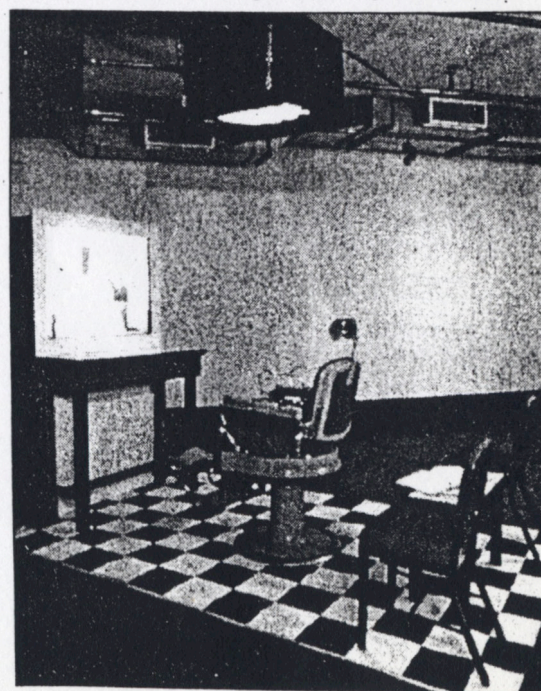
Along with their corporeal preoccupations, these artists bring an unnerving degree of obsessiveness to their work — those monks again — as if the fact of art's irrelevance had freed them from any consideration beyond the work itself.

Like illuminated manuscripts in a time of widespread illiteracy, it is intended for the most exclusive of audiences.

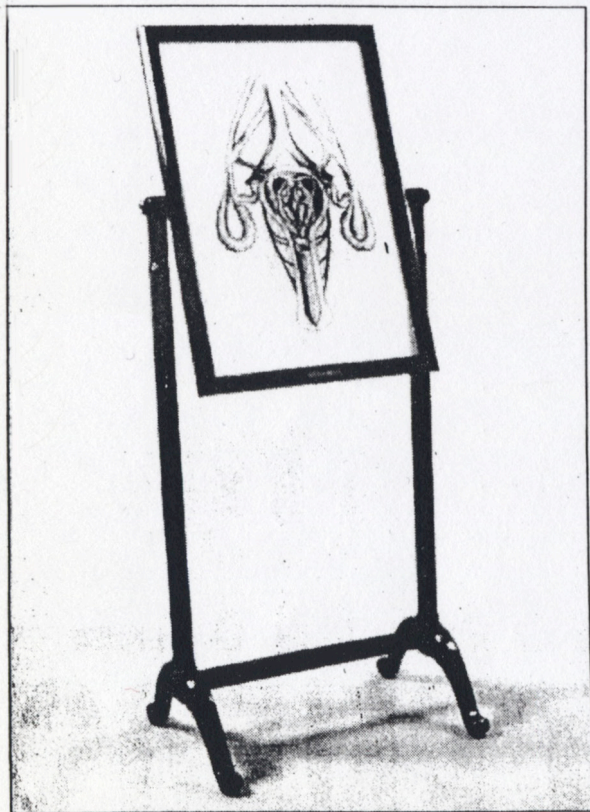
Holy fools that they are, these artists are determined to extend the borders of contemporary art beyond Modernist dogma.

They remind us of art's lost power to remove the darkness and help humanity find its rightful place in the light.

The show continues until Nov. 6.



**FRANCIS LeBOUTHILLIR** uses mirrors, VCRs and barber chair in his *Templates For Male Pattern Baldness*.



**CATHERINE HEARD** embroiders human hair into detailed penises that are deliberately repulsive.