

The Seattle Times

Friday, February 27, 2004 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Visual Arts

Showcase for diversity of contemporary 'queer art'

By **Tina Potterf**
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Aside from the sexuality, there's no one dominant theme percolating through the art of "neoqueer," a collection of contemporary art by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender artists. And that, precisely, is the point.

The exhibit, at Seattle's Center on Contemporary Art through March 31, is neither overtly sexual nor does it scream "homoerotic." Instead, it's a show featuring a nice mix of emerging and evolved artists whose work ranges from explicit (writer/filmmaker Bruce LaBruce's unsettling "Untitled" and Del LaGrace Volcano's "Selections from TransGenital Landscapes") to poetic and provocative (Tee A. Corinne's "Zippered Metaphors" and Robert Repinski's "True Cross," to name a few). While undercurrents of sexuality and eroticism pulsate through "neoqueer," overall it's a showcase of modern art, with a focus on quality and originality — not sexual orientation.

Two years in the making, "neoqueer" is the annual exhibit of the Queer Caucus for Art, an affiliate of the College Art Association. Seattle hosted CAA's annual conference earlier this month.

"neoqueer" features the work of 43 artists, including Robert Beck, Nayland Blake, Loren Cameron, Harmony Hammond, Ernesto Pujol, Adam Putnam and cult filmmaker ("Hairspray," "Pink Flamingos") John Waters, whose "Farrah 2000" is a must-see for fans of kitsch. The show runs the media gamut, from photography and painting to sculpture and video performance art.

A desire to raise questions, instigate dialogue and deconstruct stereotypes about what "queer art" is underscore "neoqueer."

When selecting art for "neoqueer," the show's curators, Queer Caucus members David Lloyd Brown and Maura Reilly, and Craig Houser (formerly an assistant curator at the Guggenheim), were guided by one main principle: high-quality art.

"It was specifically not about looking for queer content," Reilly said during a phone interview from her New York City home earlier this week. "We weren't looking for content that was homoerotic. It was about looking for good, solid work.

"It was about dismantling the clichés."

Historically, the Queer Caucus for Art shows are small and consist primarily of art submitted by its members, Reilly said. This year, in an effort to better promote the show and bring attention to homosexual and transgender artists, the curators decided to go big.

"We wanted to do something more blockbuster as a way to put the Queer Caucus for Art on the map and give it a new cachet," said Reilly, who's also an art critic and curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. "We wanted big names but also give the possibility for emerging artists to show."

The artists were asked a series of questions, most notably what it means to be a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender artist and how sexuality factors into their work. The curators made their final selections after poring over roughly 120 submissions from caucus members and other artists, including gay and lesbian performers and filmmakers whose work is often neglected, Brown said during a phone interview from the

Exhibit preview

"**neoqueer**," featuring the work of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender artists, 2-8 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, noon-5 p.m. Friday-Sunday, through March 31, Center on Contemporary Arts (CoCA), 410 Dexter Ave. N., Seattle; \$5 suggested donation (206-728-1980 or www.cocaseattle.org).

School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where he is coordinator of graduate and academic programs.

The white-washed walls of CoCA serve as a projection screen for several short films and video performance clips that add another dimension to the "neoqueer" experience. The films vacillate from comedic to serious, such as Ann Meredith's documentary on the flip side of drag queens — the kings — in "Strap 'Em Down! The World of Drag Kings."

The work is difficult to pigeonhole or define, which is evident in the lack of an overriding theme in "neoqueer," Brown said. "It's all over the map. You no longer have to be addressing social issues or addressing a gender awakening" such as the "coming out" story.

To illustrate the diversity of contemporary "queer art," Brown cites artists such as LaBruce, a controversial figure whose "neoqueer" piece is undoubtedly the show's goriest entry. Whereas political statements and homoeroticism dominated "queer art" in the 1980s and early 1990s, recent trends indicate a move toward subtlety and individualism.

The edge is still there, however, as in the case of LaBruce's "Untitled." The art is a series of Polaroids, encased in small "evidence" bags, ostensibly taken at a crime scene that appears to be a seedy motel where sex and foul play collide. This one is not for the faint-of-heart or those who don't like bloody images, even staged ones.

"There's an element of humor (to LaBruce's work). Some might be offended," Brown said. "It's over-the-top, almost campy in a sort of macabre way."

Other strong pieces in "neoqueer" are Harmony Hammond's "The Queer Reader," in response to the vandalism of gay and lesbian literature at a San Francisco library, and Ernesto Pujol's photographs from "The Bathers" series, which have the glossy look of fashion photography and an intimacy that draws the viewer in.

For those who enjoy good art and the discussions that such work can stimulate, "neoqueer" is not to be missed, Brown said.

"I think first they should see it because it's good art and second, because it may be work they might not see anywhere else," he said. "Go see it because it's just dam good art."

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