

DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

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Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Cercle Clair*, 1971

'The Visible Vagina'

Francis M. Naumann Fine Art and David Nolan

By Kim Levine

This two-gallery extravaganza was dedicated to Eve Ensler. Her theatrical hit *The Vagina Monologues* inspired this long-overdue, yet unexpected, exploration of female genitalia in contemporary art. The catalogue, with text by art historian Anna C. Chave, traced the vulva motif from the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf and the 12th century Sheela Gigs to Courbet's *L'Origine di Monde* and Duchamp's *Etant donnees*. Despite the presence of works by Picasso, Man Ray, Hans Bellmer, and Andre Masson – and despite the absence of works by Ida Applebrog, who quite by chance was having her own vagina exhibition elsewhere (see review, page 112) – “The Visible Vagina” had little to do with that old bogeyman, the male gaze. And it had even less to do with Sigmund Freud's old bugaboo, penis envy.

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Instead it was an exuberant celebration of all manner of depictions of the once-taboo pudenda. These ranged, in the crammed show at Francis Naumann uptown, from Carolee Schneeman's *Vulva's Morphia* (1995) to Magdalena Abakanowicz's huge wovenjute vulval form from 1971 to Ana Mendieta's body imprints; from a prototype of the Guerilla Girl's new book, *The Hysterical Herstory of Hysteria and How it Was Cured*, to Beth B's delicate black-and-white photographs and Wangechi Mutu's gaudy *Spread Lady II* (2007). Downtown, at David Nolan, where the show was better installed, selections ranged from Hannah Wilke's chewing-gum sculptures, Nancy Spero's *Sheela and the Acrobats* (1987) and Cindy Sherman's photos of prosthetic private parts to a cozy walk-in womb from 2006 by Allyson Mitchell. Mike Bidlo, Sherrie Levine, Tracey Emin, and John Currin were among those who referred to the Courbet, while Richard Prince, James Siena, Mel Kendrick, Jeff Koons, Jim Dine, Carroll Dunham, Mark Kostabi, and Thomas Ruff represented the male end of the vulval vision – with carrying degrees of sensitivity. With no fig leaves and just an occasional phallus hanging around, “The Visible Vagina” was full of things we never noticed, along with works artists had kept hidden away. It was a fine revenge – disquieting, imperfect, humorous, startling, grotesque, and beautiful, warts and all – and an enlightening show.