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David Humphrey's *Clown Girl*, 2006

### BEST IN SHOW

#### **'The Visible Vagina' at Francis M. Naumann and David Nolan**

By Robert Shuster

Judy Chicago's artful *Red Flag*—the infamous photograph of her hand removing a saturated tampon—remains as fierce a declaration of feminist identity as it was in 1971, when some viewers mistook the bloody object for a severed penis. Though the work may only hint at the fanged monster of men's neuroses, its strident tone here is the exception. In this lively, upfront, double-gallery celebration of a woman's biological essence, the sculpted, painted, and photographed vaginas that crowd the spaces—nearly a century's worth, from Picasso to Carolee Schneemann—are kinder and gentler, typically offering their provocations (if any) with wry, sexual humor.

Allyson Mitchell has removed the toothy threat altogether from her room-size installation, *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*. Slip through its doorway of giant labia crocheted in pink and find yourself inside a soft, colorful sex pad full of pillows and, among other items, several pink buck-toothed beavers. More cynically, Jane Hammond skewers stereotypical ideals of family by inserting, thanks to Photoshop, porno cootch into sedate vintage photographs. And Chema Madoz, true to his elegant whimsy, perfectly captures the symbolic triangle of the mons pubis with a martini glass of dark liquid placed before a woman in white.

Numerous works exalt the contours of the cleft, some with references to Courbet's frank 1866 depiction in *L'Origine du monde*. The best of them tend toward abstraction, like Katia Santibanez's minimalist painting *Universal Pleasure*, a bifurcated, heart-shaped patch of dark brushstrokes, and the intricately whorled *Pussy*, an impressionistic image made entirely from glued thread by Robert Forman.

The most striking piece might be Nancy Grossman's *Bride* (1966), a zoomed-in view, constructed from layered leather, of a clothed woman's middle—clothed except for the center, where a shiny vulva has burst through laces intended to close a now gaping slit, implying, it would seem, an awakening from sexual repression. After viewing almost a hundred vaginas, you may get the same feeling.