

wimodaughsis
Vagina Festival 2008

The aim of the Vagina Festival Art Exhibition is to highlight the experiences of women, which are rich, varied, joyous, as well as trying. (In this election year, we have seen the almost nomination of a female president, which indicates that nearly 90 years later after women fought for the right to vote, the struggle for equality and respect remains.) The point is not to be reductive: it is not us vs. them, or women vs. men. We, all of us, are in this together. The Vagina Festival is the brainchild of Alexandra Jacoby, an articulate Feminist, and a labor of love by all the women and men who have made it possible. In the spirit of continual striving for dialogue, understanding, and seeing things from a different perspective, we welcome you to consider and enjoy the works of the artists and (recognize/ honor/acknowledge) all of our "wimodaughsis" (wives, mothers, daughters and sisters), as coined by the black feminist, Anna Julia Cooper.

Egg by Owen Harvey is a fitting opening to the exhibition because it also represents the beginning of life and the unity of the family, while at the same time the white color signals an embrace of others, as well as potentiality of affecting a wider world. In a playful way, Jenny Laden's *Wondermama* addresses the amazing efforts of mothers and asks what would I be like if we raised a race of Wonder Women? In Hillary Harvey's *Zoe with Magnifying Glass 2*, the emphasis is on the young girl's curiosity and scrutiny of the world. Women are constantly (put under/subjected to) the magnifying glass by the masculine gaze, as well as by other women. The young girl's dress embellished by Jill Kerwick in *If You Can't Say Anything Nice*, points to the socialization of young girls to speak gently, but this does not prepare them for the demands of the wider world. *Cutting* by Fiona Dent exposes the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) with its concomitant mental as well as physical violence, which wreaks loss and trauma. Words that *The Soldiers Are Coming* by Fahimeh Vahdat is not a rescue, but a threat alluding to the rape of girls and women that is ubiquitous in times of war.

The journey of life and death, as symbolized by the water, in Grimesa Amoros' video *La Procesión's* is an homage to women as givers of life and the connections between all people. It was inspired by the procesiones (check accent) in Lima, her witnessing as a child, as people dressed in blue evoked images of waves and the cycle of life. Simone Stoll explores a more familiar ritual, that of women polishing their toenails, in *#1 (Hottest Pink)*. Belying this seemingly innocent activity, the painting of toenails is fraught with frustration (stronger word!) and bespeaks of women's self-inflicted injuries to the body and spirit. In light of the things we do to ourselves the Canadian

artistic duo, Finger in the Dyke (Shawna Dempsey & Lorri Millan), implores us to think in *Consideration Liberation Army*. Significantly, they don't tell us what to think, but the very act of contemplation is in itself liberating.

Alexandra Jacoby's *vagina vérité*® is a direct and sincere (honest) exploration of vaginas, that much maligned body part, in all its variety and beauty. As photographed by the artist, the vaginas, or unmanipulated alternative portraits of women, afford us an opportunity to reclaim ourselves, body and soul. Stephanie Dinkins spotlights the invisible character in Ralph Ellison's excoriating book *The Invisible Man* – that of the black woman. Not only gender, but race remains a pernicious issue in the U.S. In *The Bra Shop*, Christine Gedeon captures a unique perspective on the experience of be fitted for a bra. It raises the question of women's relationship to their breasts, and society's strictures for not measuring up to its impossible ideals. *Turn On* by Dixon Stetler (and Dan Brawley?) humorously focuses on the clitoris, here substituted by the light switch. By being absent, the artists invoke the presence of the clitoris, and it is recognition of the site of women's orgasm. Also, the clitoral map references the groundbreaking work of sexologist Betty Dodson and her collaborator Grant Taylor. Lastly, Zoe Markwalter's *Addressing the Box* affords us another view of vaginas outside the delimiting stereotype of reducing women to their bodies or the assumption that all women are the same.

To conclude, the words of the abolitionist Thomas Macaulay, as quoted by Anna Julia Cooper, are still relevant today: "You may judge a nation's rank in the scale of civilization from the way they treat their women." (reversed symbol) Women, treat yourself well, and we entreat others to treat you as well as you would want yourself to be treated. Women's agency is vital for a democratic society and everyone's concern.