

Barbara Bickel's *Sacred Wounding*: Woman's Body as Original Temple

THE SPIRITUALITY OF EROTICISM

A COLLABORATIVE ART EXHIBITION AND PERFORMANCE

BY BARBARA BICKEL WITH KATHRYN MCGREGOR

THE NEW GALLERY, CALGARY

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by Yvonne Owens

The Spirituality of Eroticism—an exhibition of Barbara Bickel's paintings at The New Gallery which culminated with a dance performance by the artist and Kathryn McGregor—returned 'taboo' to its original meaning of 'very holy,' and the meaning of 'fetish' to 'sacred object.' Bickel's conscious objectification is a focussing of the animist 'daimon' or 'numen' of an isolated part of the whole. It is an aesthetic act, an observation of inherent spiritual value or 'beauty.' Therefore, though powerfully erotic, Bickel's vision is far from pornographic—and public responses to her *The Spirituality of Eroticism* fell not within the realm of titillation but reverence.

In the sacred world Bickel evokes, breasts and vulvae are powerful spiritual icons; not mere visual aids for a dispirited onanism. The honing-in on specific nurturant female body parts is a function of iconoclastic reverence in Bickel's alternative system of thought, an observation of their goddess-like role as first home and first meal. It is not an objectification with an eye to divesting women's life-giving organs of their value. Very much to the contrary, this type of objectifying—authentic fetishism—emphasizes these sacred or taboo objects' divine nature. This may come as a bit of a surprise, but the precedents established during the lengthy history of erotic art and performance are on her side.

Irish tribal women bared their breasts before meeting returning warriors outside their village walls. This had the effect of gentling the berserker rage of conquering heroes, bringing them down off the high of battle so they wouldn't lay waste to their own neighbourhood. Women of ancient northern Greece are reported to have bared their vulvas in similar display to ward off attacking armies. A defensive line of this sort filled archaic invaders with religious awe. The sight of multiple images of the 'source of life'—their holiest taboo multiplied—caused them to throw down their weapons and run away.

Sculptures above the door lintels of medieval European churches show small engraved female figures exposing their breasts and genitals in the birth-giving position. Such figures are often framed by heraldic beasts. [The life-affirming figure, Freya, inspired the original design of the little mermaid in Starbuck's logo, although the coffee company has subsequently omitted the almond-shaped vulva between her fishtail legs.] These figures are called Sheela-Na-Gigs (vulva-women) in Gaelic folk parlance. Churchmen have tried to get rid of as many of them as possible, as well as the Agathas, the breast-proffering 'kindly-ones' clustered in shrines dotting the countryside. The Agathas were transmogrified into St. Agatha, an apocryphal martyr who, in current iconography, offers up her severed breasts to heaven on a golden plate. Church censors were defeated by the Age of Exploration, however, when 'kindly' images turned up all over the New Worlds. Bare-breasted, spread-legged female figures are mounted over the inner sanctum of the men's houses in Papua New

Guinea villages, and are depicted in the oldest rock paintings in Africa. Vancouver Island's Nuu-cha-nulth traditional house-painting imagery represented a similar ecological mandala of life-giving sacrality: a spread-legged 'lady of the beasts' framed by orcas. The significance of such figures, in medieval Europe or in contemporary tribal society, is that sacred space can only be approached by this particular door—life's portal.

In their purest context, breasts and vulvas are pacifying. At the fundamental level they remind us of our mothers. Survival anxiety is dispelled when we are in the midst of visual assurances of caring and nurturing. We stop wanting to fight and start wanting to snuggle—which could go far in explaining why imperialist ideologies felt it necessary to demonize such icons. Armies are better motivated by pornography than by reverence for life. If such icons are merely trivialized, they lose their power to reform and, by forfeiture, work for the forces of exploitation.

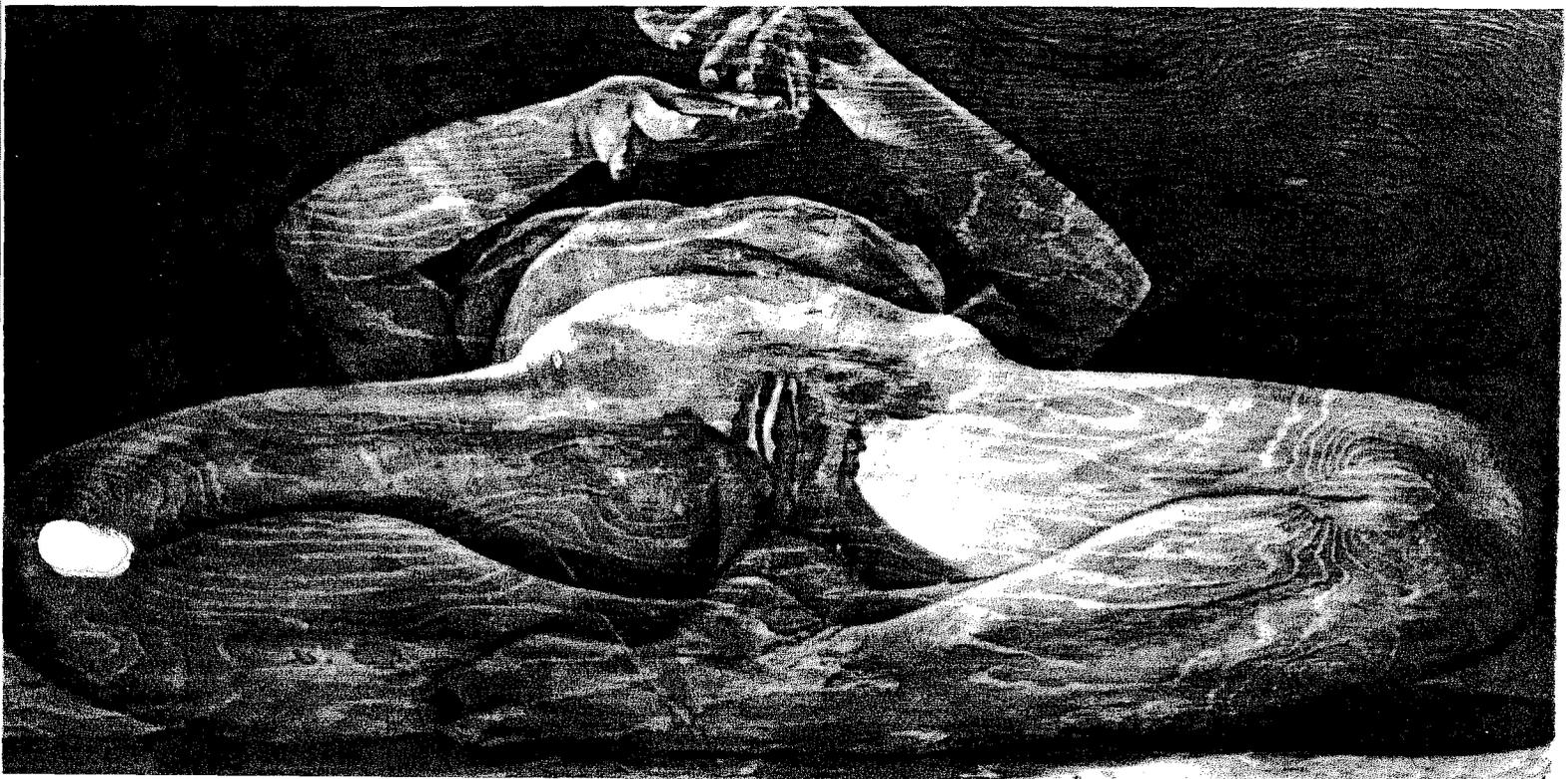
The soothing effect of breast and vulva imagery was apparent in Bickel's and collaborator Kathryn McGregor's dance, breath, and movement performance in The New Gallery. Accompanied by music composed by medieval abbess Hildegard Von Bingen

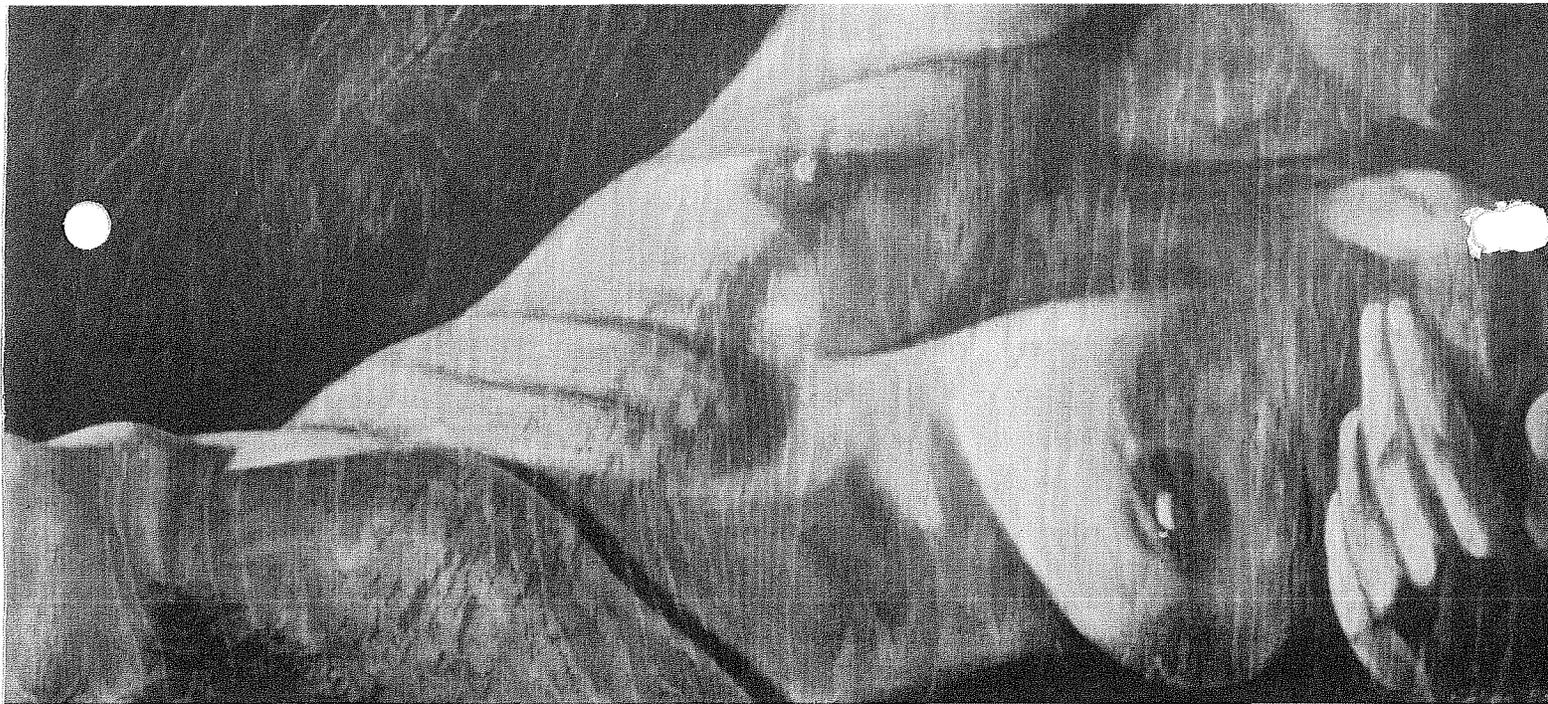
and performed to music by Sheila Chandra and other vocalists, the two women painted each other's limbs with henna, then performed self-blessings from a lustral water bowl laden with flowers. An atmosphere of trust was invoked by repeated, reciprocal touching and undulating gestures. Contrary to the embarrassed fidgeting or nervousness one might expect in response to such intimate exposure, the audience settled into a reverent trance. Throughout the performance, a pacific calm filled the gallery. [However, one attendee later confessed to having "seen Satan."]

Bickel's *The Spirituality of Eroticism* art exhibition and performance was a return to the womb as sacred temenos, a return to breasts as nurturant providence, and a radical departure from either as pornography. Although the staff at The New Gallery feared for their funding in the wake of the event, the public seemed reassured, even comforted. At the artist's discussion the day after the performance, one man said, "I've seen pornography and I don't like it...This profoundly moves me. I don't know what it is, but it's not pornographic."

The breast (and the vulva) has suffered a crucial loss of status in recent ages, incurring a host of abuses that include violence toward women. Some of

Divine Ancestress, mixed media on wood, 48" x 24", Barbara Bickel.





Orgasmic Draw, mixed media on wood, 24" x 11", Barbara Bickel.

these abuses run along lines of simple neglect. Medical funding, scientific research, and popular concern are not wasted on objectified glands whose main cultural value has been reduced to that of a softly pornographic plaything for men. Although alarming amount of technology and surgical expertise have been directed towards making breasts into more perfect sex toys (more bouncy, erect, and rubbery), the naturally occurring ills of mammary glands have received short shrift. Cosmetic surgery aimed at further objectifying the human mammary even serves to increase the likelihood of breast tissue developing cancer by something like 25 percent. It is no exaggeration to say that the degradation of breasts' spiritual value, and artificial breast enhancement as masculine sex aids, has become life-threatening. [Bickel recently showed her work in the Victoria Art Gallery's breast cancer awareness-raising group show, *A Voice to be Heard*.]

Some of Bickel's painted images feature breasts and vulvae with large, red open flowers. Others have red pigment flung across the frame, as if the organs were blood-spattered. Bickel's use of red is interesting in light of the fact that breast milk is manufactured by the female body from blood. Blood attends the saving of women's lives threatened by breast cancer as well as the mutilation of breast tissue for cosmetic purposes. A show of blood attends defloration, menstruation, and birth. During the exhibition I overheard one woman comment that she "saw" rape in Bickel's images, but the greater truth is that acts of profound creation are sometimes as violent and painful as acts

of destruction. The significance of the womb as sacred temenos once included its role as earthy tomb.

Bickel's images, drawn on board with colour glazes and transparent tints that revealed the wood grain underneath, remind us of the nobility of vulnerability. The organs of sex, gestation, and nurture are fragile but resilient, specific yet accommodating. They sacrifice much in providing pleasure, reassurance, and life. And as sacrificial woundings, their most profound functions are redemptive.

The original meaning of 'sacrifice' was 'to make holy.' People or things were 'made holy' by their numinous ability to grant life. In Bickel's vision, eroticism is holy and women's nurturant organs have a leg-up on the sacred precedence issue. •

Yvonne Owens lives in Victoria, BC, and is a regular contributor to *Artichoke*.

Barbara Bickel currently resides in Vancouver, BC.



Above: *The Spirituality of Eroticism Altar*, mixed media, 88" x 108" x 6", Barbara Bickel.

Below: Kathryn McGregor and Barbara Bickel in *The Spirituality of Eroticism* performance. Photo taken by Alanna Lafayette.

