

The Healer's Art

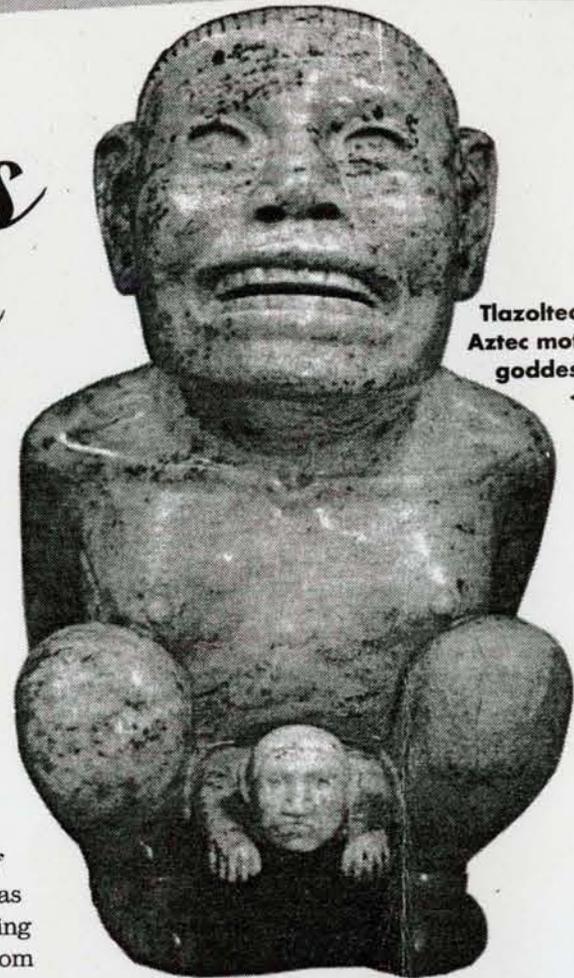
A new show offers charms to soothe the savaged breast

by Yvonne Owens

society, is that sacred space can only be approached by this particular door: life's portal.

When artist Barbara Bickel displayed her spread-eagled female figures last month in Calgary, the audience settled into a reverent trance—although one attendee later confessed to having “seen Satan.” Bickel’s *Spirituality of Eroticism* exhibit was a return to the womb as the sacred precinct, to breasts as nurturing providence, and a radical departure from either as pornography. Although Bickel’s hosts at the Centre Gallery feared for their public funding in the wake of the show, the public seemed reassured—even comforted. At the artist’s discussion, one man said, “I’ve seen pornography and I don’t like it . . . This [show] profoundly moves me—I don’t know what it is, but it’s not pornographic.”

Breasts and vulvas in their purest context are



Tlazolteotl
Aztec moth goddess

pacifying. If Bickel’s show is any indication, we stop suffering survival anxiety amid their visual assurances of nurturing. We stop wanting to fight and begin wanting to snuggle—which explains why imperialist ideologies felt it necessary to demonize or trivialize such icons. Armies are better motivated by pornography

than by reverence for life.

The breast (like the vulva) has suffered a loss of status in recent ages. Although alarming degrees of technology and surgical expertise have been directed at perfecting breasts as sex toys (more rubbery, artificial and erect), the naturally occurring ills of mammary glands, such as cancer, have received short shrift. Cosmetic surgery even serves to increase the likelihood of breast tissue developing cancer by up to 25%.

Public awareness art shows like *A Voice to be Heard* aim to correct these fatal distortions. The first benefit exhibit in this series was initiated by Valerie Pusey of Northern Passage Gallery three years ago. She describes the process of becoming aware of the disease and its toll on women’s lives: “Previous to 1996, I had lost two friends to breast cancer. It was a disease I knew little about and, other than a monthly breast examination, I confess I hadn’t thought about it much.

“In early 1996 one of my closest friends [Fran Norris] was also diagnosed . . . I was devastated and I felt completely disempowered, both as a friend and as a woman. What was the disease? What caused it? Could it be cured? What could I do about it right now? I began to read and research and the statistics were frightening—with regard to the increasing incidence and the low success rate of any cure. In sharing my thoughts and feelings with many friends I realized that, regardless of the many efforts already being undertaken to inform women of the risk of breast cancer, the word wasn’t out there enough.”

Pusey formatted her response to the crisis along aesthetic lines to address both the physical needs of the body and spiritual awareness concerning it. “The idea to present an art show in support of breast cancer awareness was a personal response to the experience of the loss and suffering of my friends—the need to empower myself through action. I also had the desire to express care and compassion through my work. I believe work and creativity are spiritually sustaining activities that can promote healing and inner peace. Taking action transformed the pain and

loss into hope, and even a cause for celebration . . .

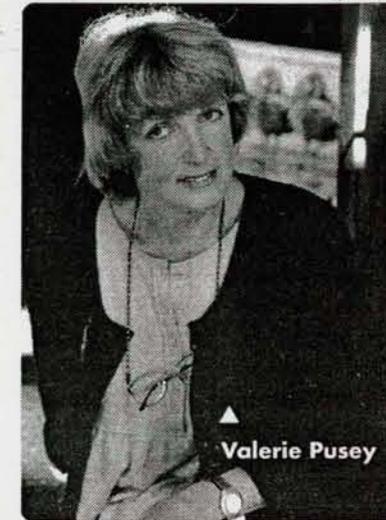
“The purpose of the show is to educate women about the importance of focusing on themselves and their loved ones,” explains Pusey. “We can find a sense of empowerment through alternative treatment combined with a traditional western medical approach. I believe holistic health and the transformational power of art and personal creativity are integral parts of healing.”

This fall, Pusey is joined by Heather Wheeler, Fran Willis, and Patty Rivard and Betty Molnar of the Victoria Art Gallery Art Rental and Sales. Barbara Bickel, Anne Popperwell, Carole Sabiston, Marlene Davis, Carol Rae, Dorothy Field and many other prominent artists have contributed works to the show. *A Voice to be Heard* takes its title from Fran Norris’s volume of poetry documenting her own emotional and spiritual journey through treatment for breast cancer (signed copies of which will be available during the exhibition). “The collective voice of the 30 women artists from across the country sends a powerful message to women,” says Pusey. “We are all at risk from breast cancer.”

Pusey’s choice of an annual art exhibit to address the issue of breast cancer is acutely sensitive to the need. Art is the manifestation of spiritual value, which is creative in nature. It has never been more obvious that women’s bodies must once again be accorded their true value. At the very least, their nurturing organs must be invested with respect for both social and personal healing to occur.

Proceeds from *A Voice to be Heard* will finance publishing projects to raise consciousness around the issue. And while previous years’ proceeds were directed mostly towards breast cancer research, some of the money generated this year will fund art in treatment centres, providing “sacred spaces” for patients. *

A Voice to be Heard opens on October 3 (reception at 7:00 p.m.) and runs until November 1 at Art Rental and Sales of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. For more info, call 384-4101.



Valerie Pusey

JENNIFER MODIGLIANI



Celtic Sheela-na-gig