



A Call To Beauty

Barbara Bickel uncovers the inner warrior



BY YVONNE OWENS

It made me weep, but not with grief. Pauline Le Bel's song lauding her mother's spirit and fire truly owned the cultural wing-clipping that strong women often endure. But her own clear voice successfully evoked that endangered passion: the lust for freedom that survives even the most oppressive circumstances. My exultation was tinged with relief; hence the tears. I should have known that visual artist Barbara Bickel would choose no less than a dynamo to work with for *Battle Cries: In Search of the Warrior Woman*, her collaborative exhibition and performance with singer, author, playwright, and songwriter Pauline Le Bel, which takes place at the Centre Gallery March 31 and April 1 (Friday and Saturday).

Bickel works in mixed media on panel to create layered images of abstract, organic forms and gestural female figures. The glazes and intruding forms appear like cultural constructs or ideological infusions affecting the women and their physical representations. Bickel's first major collaborative exhibition was 1995's *Sisters*, in which she worked collectively with 22 female artists in various disciplines. Few people would attempt such a thing, as collaboration with even one partner can be infinitely problematic. Like fractal geometry, the collaborative act can open up nested conceptualizations, raising both difficulties and resolutions until the cows come home.

Unlike the ensemble nature of traditional performing arts such as theatre or dance, visual art has long followed

the myth of the divinely inspired, usually male, solitary creator who works in fervent and lonely isolation. Bickel, undeterred by these patriarchal constructs of the artist's role, and taking the words of feminist art critic Lucy Lippard to heart, leapt in with both feet. "Collaboration is paradoxically a declaration of independence for the contemporary artist," as Bickel's artist's statement quotes Lippard, "it rejects isolation and alienation as the artist's natural fate."

Bickel is once again sounding the clarion call to creative action, this time for not only herself and her collaborator, but for every member of the participating audience. Participation is automatically engendered by Bickel's multimedia collaborations, initiating profound changes in viewer/participants. In this sense, Bickel's art is actually ritual. Furthering this effect, she tends to collaborate with women whose artistic practices are also within the realm of ritual. Over the years, these have included musicians, actors, dancers, poets, performers, and alternative healers.

Bickel's new collaboration is a taut, dynamic two-woman show in which she and Le Bel effect maximum transformative vision for the viewer/participant. Power-packed and liberating, the duo transmute rage into cathartic sound and image. Through Bickel's visuals and Le Bel's lyrics, the ideological stream of hackneyed and misogynistic media is redirected into a renaissance of new meaning. Drawing on ancient well-springs of female heritage and strength, Bickel and Le Bel continue the discourse begun with

Sisters, going deeper to reclaim the voice of the female warrior.

Bickel's mixed-media representations of women's bodies return to them their integrity, their lived experience and humanity. The marks and scars of age, childbirth, suffering, and survival inform strength, wisdom, and a palpable physical presence in the images. This subversive "rescripting" of feminine corporeality replaces the cosmetic erasures of such marks common to historical, commercial, or purveyorship portrayals of women's bodies and, in so doing, reclaims their power and actuality. These bodies are worthy of empathy and respect; they are not mere objects of voyeurism or visual consumption.

Complementing the visual with the aural, Pauline Le Bel has poured an actively creative lifetime of experience into her songs for the performance, which she will also record as a CD later this year. Her voice is passionate and expressive, and her lyrics express a dark, antic wit and clarity. Le Bel denies nothing of anger, but uses it to fuel her cathartic imagery and sound. Don't miss the opportunity to see this dynamic performer and hear these songs. ☺

Barbara Bickel's exhibition *Battle Cries: In Search of the Warrior Woman* is at the Centre Gallery (2nd Floor, 924 6 Avenue SW) until April 20. Bickel and Pauline Le Bel perform at the Centre Gallery March 31 and April 1 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$13 advance, \$15 at the door; artist's talk April 2 at 2 p.m., free admission. Phone 237-0383 for information.