



Censorship vs. Expression

by Claire Cummings

Movies like *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and the recent *Quills* portray the creators of pornography as tortured artists who fight against a puritanical society in defense of their civil rights. But the boundaries between art, sexual explicitness and pornography are much less cut and dried than Hollywood would have us believe. Artists like New York's Jeff Koons, whose exhibition *Made in Heaven* featured life-size sculptures of him having sex with an Italian porn star, and movies like Stanley Kubrick's notorious *Eyes Wide Shut* constantly push the line of what most would consider art.

"Pornography is one of the most overlooked aspects of film," said Dr. Bart Beaty, Film Studies coordinator for the Faculty of Communication and Culture. "If you went into a bookstore you'd be able to find 100 books on the history of film; in Calgary, maybe one on porn films."

The pornographic film industry is much larger than that of tradi-

tional film, and technicians, sound directors and other film workers move freely between the two genres. Social context is the key distinction between explicit art films and porn films.

"There's a huge reciprocal relationship there no one wants to talk about," said Beaty. "A film like *Exotica* or *Crash* is tied up in the rhetoric of artistic production. It's released to art film theatres. Porn is released straight to video, because it can't be shown in the theatre. So there's the context of who views it, and what the intentions of the audience are. *Exotica* is sold as a film about sex, but also as having a larger moral message. Porn is more blatant about 'what you see is what you get.' There's not the same pretension."

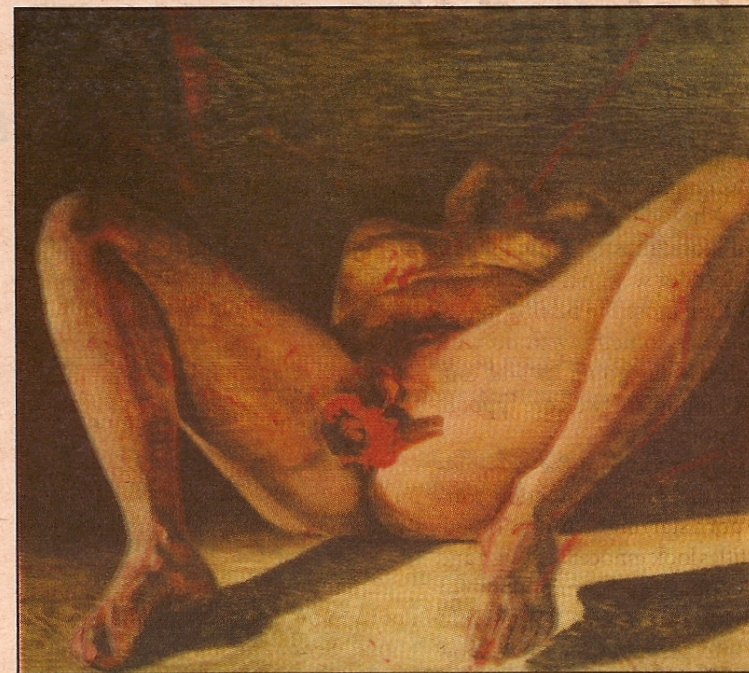
Local art gallery directors deal with questions of context as well when they try to walk the tightrope between what they want to express and what society will allow. Gallery programmers, like Tammy McGrath of the New Gallery, have to balance their desire to bring new works of

art to the public with the fear of censorship, which usually comes in the form of refused government funding. Her main concern is people who don't usually visit the gallery but see posters for shows like 1994's *Fantasmagoria: Sexing the Lesbian Imaginary* and then complain to local politicians.

"That's when we end up doing the most damage control," said McGrath. "Ninety per cent of the time they have their own agenda, they have an axe to grind. I mean, this is a conservative town."

McGrath said that public artist-run centres like the New Gallery need to be conscious of what the public is willing to accept and need to justify controversial exhibitions. The works of art shown at the gallery go through a jury process, where the artists must defend their choices of representation.

"If something gets rejected and it happened to be explicit, that wasn't the reason it was refused. We want art that is strong and resolved, and we won't censor."



McGrath said the Gallery is especially careful about public spaces because there's a difference between people who choose to come into a gallery and those who don't have a choice of what they see. Despite some controversy over past shows, McGrath said most Calgarians are open-minded.

"On the whole, the Calgary public is very receptive. I think it's because galleries are responsible. We're willing to talk to people who come in. I don't think people ever leave feeling like they've had something pulled on them."

"We're interested in critical discourse," McGrath continued. "If you just have images without a context, they don't have a function. I mean, some people would argue that *Playboy* is art. But if you're talking about discourse, it's not there."

Kathy Lynn Traybig, artist and curator for the Centre Gallery, said true discourse takes place when

instead of accepting portrayal by others. Traybig curated *Voices of Desire* and *Forbidden*, two erotica exhibits shown at the gallery. Historically, portrayals of the female figure have been voyeuristic, said Traybig, but erotic works by women have a different quality.

"I see erotica as more of an invitation; to me porn is one-dimensional. It appeals to a baser desire, there's just a basic physical response," said Traybig. "Let's face it, there are only so many ways you can do it. You can't relate, because it's just a bunch of body parts. Erotica is far more imaginative and has a tremendous sense of humour."

Traybig and other artists, critics and writers continue the conversation on the lines between art and pornography and titillation and offensiveness in the world of visual culture. In Traybig's words, "Beauty can be terrible and beautiful at the same time, and sometimes it should shock."

