rish tribal women often met their returning warriors outside the village walls with breasts bared to calm the berserker rage of the conquering heroes, so they wouldn't lay waste to their own homes. Women of ancient northern Greece also presented their vulvas in a similar display to ward off attacking armies. A defensive line of this sort filled archaic invaders with religious awe. Seeing the arrayed images of the source of life-their holiest taboo multiplied-caused them to throw down their weapons and flee.

Across Europe, small engraved female figures expose their breasts and genitals in the birth-giving position above the door lintels of medieval churches. They're called sheela-nagigs ("vulva-women") in Gaelic folk parlance and are the foremothers of the little mermaid, Freya, in the Starbucks logo, although the coffee company conceals the almond-shaped vulva between her fishtail legs. Churchmen of ensuing ages tried to destroy as many as possible, along with the agathas, 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.

Censors were frustrated, however, by the Age of Exploration, when similar images turned up all over the New World. Bare-breasted, spread-legged female figures are mounted over the inner sanctum of the "men's house" in Papua New Guinea villages and are among the oldest rock paintings of Africa. Here on Vancouver Island, Nuu-chah-nulth images of the "Absolute" represent a similar sacred mandala. The significance of such figures, in medieval Europe and contemporary tribal

The Healer's Art

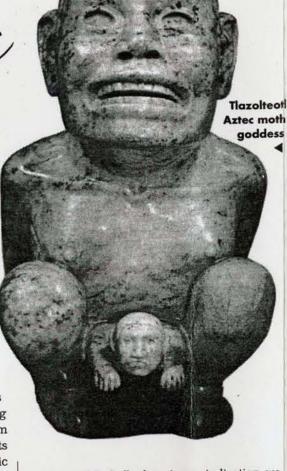
A new show offers charms to soothe the savaged breast

by Yvonne Owens

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

hen artist Barbara Bickel displayed her spread-eagled female figures last month in Calgary, the audience settled into a reverent trancealthough 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



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%

bublic 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."

Valerie Pusey

CITYLIFE

his 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

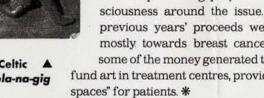
are all at risk from breast cancer."

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



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.



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