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## ART : And When They Were Bad . . . : With humor, sarcasm and brazen sexuality, the bicoastal 'Bad Girls' celebrates the women who operate outside the bounds of old notions of propriety

January 16, 1994 | HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is chair, department of liberal arts and sciences, Otis College of Art and Design. and*

" *Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before.* "--Mae West

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The Hollywood steam queen who noted that good girls go to heaven but bad girls go everywhere seems to be the figurative godmother of a new art movement.

After two decades of serious thinking and writing on the subjects of feminism and post-modernism, hundreds of artists have decided that being a bad girl is a good thing.

That's the premise of a bicoastal art exhibition organized by New York's New Museum director Marcia Tucker and San Francisco-based independent curator Marcia Tanner.

The two women noticed a widespread movement toward funny, sarcastic and brazenly sexual work being produced by an increasing number of artists--women as well as men. The results of their collaboration are displayed in the two-part show titled "Bad Girls," whose first part is currently at the New Museum, and "Bad Girls West," opening Jan. 25 at UCLA's Wight Art Gallery.

Tanner explains "bad girl" art:

"What really distinguishes it from previous feminist work is the use of humor as a strategy of subversion. And it operates outside the bounds of feminine propriety. It is not ideological, though it is operating from a position of power and liberation."

As with so many projects in the women's art world, the exhibition evolved out of friendship and phone calls, in this case more than a year ago. Tucker plunged ahead to visit studios and commission work in New York, but Tanner found herself stymied.

Although California is rife with bad girls (and boys) making good art, Tanner could not convince any venue in San Francisco to support such an exhibition.

Finally, she wrote to her colleague Henry Hopkins, former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and now Director of the Wight Art Gallery at

UCLA. He agreed to underwrite the controversial show with help from the California Arts Council and the UCLA Art Council. Tanner now thinks it was the optimum solution, since many works in the show explicitly confront stereotypes of women reinforced by the media.

"The fact that so much of the show deals with perceptions of femininity makes its proximity to Hollywood with all the film and TV industries a wonderful place to be," she says.

Presenting the show in L.A. influenced Tanner's decision to choose many works dealing with pop culture and celebrity, such as Kathe Burkhart's frightening paintings of Elizabeth Taylor undergoing plastic surgery, Deborah Kass' Warholesque paintings of Barbra Streisand and Nancy Dwyer's sculpture of giant balloons spelling out an inflated "EGO."

What began as a relatively small show snowballed as the curators found more bad girls making art than they had initially suspected. "Once the word got out, we were inundated," says Tanner. "There was a tremendous amount of work, especially in Southern California. You could have filled the Cow Palace. This is a major social phenomenon."

Tanner selected work by 40 artists, including Judie Bamber, Kim Dingle, Lauren Lesko, Theresa Pendlebury, Megan Williams and Millie Wilson from L.A., and fairly established artists from New York, such as Marlene McCarty, Lorna Simpson and Rona Pondick. Pondick has roped together a pair of 13-foot-long double mattresses and attached dozens of baby bottles filled with milky white or suspicious black liquids. Tanner refers to this sculpture as a "grotesque body," referring to messy physical and psychological concepts that confront the rationality of late modernism.

Among the men are Jerome Caja from San Francisco and Ken Aptekar from New York. Aptekar parodies traditional interpretations of old master pictures by combining them with text etched on glass panels. Raphael's 16th-Century "St. George Fighting the Dragon"--a knight in armor defending a damsel in distress--is labelled "Job Security."

This mixture of known and lesser-known artist is purposeful. "I didn't want this to be a provincial show," explains Tanner. "I wanted it to be representative of the best work I could find. I thought it was important to present the West Coast artists in a larger context."

Tucker decided to provide exposure to the largest possible number of lesser-known artists--more than 90 are in her two-part show--including many from the West Coast. Among the men featured are L.A.-based Dani Tull and Keith Boadwee. Tucker defends the joint decision to include men in the feminist exhibition: "Not only do I not think that people addressing the issues are not divided by age or race, they are not divided by gender either. Cary Leibowitz said that the men who are doing work in this area are trying to be good boys rather than bad girls!"

Tucker says the show came from her "lifetime commitment to feminism and of seeing a lot of work that was really good but that struck me as addressing the issues in a different way. The work had to be humorous and transgressive. Humor alone won't create the changes in perception that I'm interested in. And transgression alone might not. The combination is a double whammy in terms of feminist and gender issues. You can say very difficult things if you can make people laugh."

She goes on to explain the shift in attitude: "When the women's movement emerged in New York in 1968, rage was attendant to it. There was a real fury over what had happened, at the agents of its happening and at ourselves for letting it happen. Now we're past the rage and into more of a refined tool for dismantling the master's house. Younger women have benefited. They can see the issues, but it's not the same as 25 years ago."

Tanner adds that the title comes from the notion that women are redefining their own images and reclaiming language.

During the 1970s, as the women's movement gained momentum, the term "girl" came to be considered pejorative in describing women over the age of 12. Picking up on the slang used by African American women, especially in music, the words *bad* and *girl* now mean good and friendly--as in "Girl, you are *bad*!"

From a curatorial stance, Tanner says, "Bad Girls" is defined as the opposite of good girls, which is a patriarchally imposed definition. In the "Bad Girls" catalogue, she writes:

"Good girls . . . act feminine, i.e. modestly, quietly, in ways unthreatening to men. They put others' needs and wants first. They may wield power or be aggressive but covertly, through passive manipulation.

"Good girls don't talk openly about their own sexual proclivities and erotic fantasies, which are assumed to be heterosexual (male-centered). They don't forge their own persuasive, contradictarian language . . .

"Since many men are alarmed by women with a sense of humor--a live giveaway for a mind and passions of one's own--good girls confine theirs . . . Good girls don't laugh in public, never loudly, and certainly not at anything dirty. . . . The 'bad girls' in these exhibitions flout all these precepts. . . . Not only are these artists disobeying explicit commandments enjoined by the fathers and handed down through the mothers' complicity, they're ignoring the entire myth of male hegemony, of paternal lawgivers in art and everywhere else."

In the catalogue, both curators have written clearly about the ideas behind "Bad Girls," yet the artists have thoughts of their own.

L.A. artist Judie Bamber was censored last spring when her vibrating vagina sculpture was covered after it offended a member of the Hollywood Arts Council in an ad hoc group show held at the defunct Newberry School of Beauty. This exhibition includes other sex-toy sculptures, as well as her paintings of beautiful B-movie vampires. The title of the series--"How Do You Trust Someone Who Bleeds for Seven Days and Doesn't Die?"--is an example of an offensive sexist joke that is reclaimed and invested with humor in its unexpected context. Bamber says, "When I think of bad girls, I think it means you take pleasure in your sexuality. I don't think that's a negative, but I think society thinks that it's bad. I guess I struggle with that connection, the whole assumption that because you make work about sex that you're available sexually. I can't wholeheartedly embrace it, but I accept the idea of turning it around."

New York artist Elizabeth Berdann is making her L.A. debut in this exhibition and having a concurrent solo show at the Ruth Bloom Gallery in Santa Monica. At the Wight Art Gallery, she has installed "Freak Show"--48 miniature paintings of female posteriors selected from pornographic advertisements and surrounded by leering slogans like "You won't believe your eyes." The companion installation at the New Museum is "The Topless Hall of Fame," tiny portraits of breasts and the names of the strippers who own them: "Dixie Dynamite" or "Montana Mounds."

"These represent the 'bad girls' of our culture," says Berdann. "I was struck by the similarity of the ads for pornography with 19th-Century circus advertising. A lot of the language was duplicated as though women were freaks men would come to see."

Nancy Dwyer designed the New York "Bad Girls" logo, a Cheshire cat smile. She is known for comical word play in her paintings and sculptures and, for the New Museum, she fabricated a series of chairs and hassocks shaped like the letters in "ha-ha-ha."

"Some of the elements in my work that are usually overlooked, or merely tolerated, in this show are celebrated," says Dwyer, "the rudeness, the humor, the literalness and the pleasure. I've spent a lot of time developing my work formally so I'm a good girl in the art world, but I've always had to satisfy the other side with humor."

And why humor?

"Because it's transgressive and anti-authoritarian," continues Dwyer. "It's hard to take a lot of the doctrines of art-making seriously after a while if it's clear that you and your (style of) work have been excluded. Also, humor is a way to ingratiate yourself in a world you don't feel comfortable in."

Or, as comic Kate Clinton quips, "She who laughs, lasts."

*\* "Bad Girls West" opens Jan. 25 at UCLA Wight Art Gallery. In conjunction with the exhibition will be a video program organized by New York video artist and filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, as well as a performance art series related to the exhibition. For further information, call (310) 825-9345.*