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ALLYSON MITCHELL
Serious Fur

October 12 to November 10, 2007
Reception: Friday, October 12th 8:00pm to midnight

Note:

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THE WOMAN'S REALM

Sbolem Krishtalka

For your perusal, select moments (some regrettable, some not) from my history with feminism:

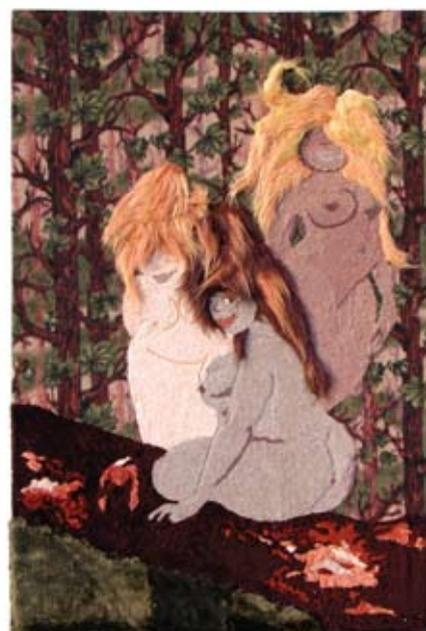
- Reading through the "Women in Rock" issue of *Rollin Stone Magazine*, in which Joan Baez claims she's not a feminist and goes on to berate the women's movement for ignoring the suffering of the wider human race. (Joan, we hardly knew ye!)
- In college, after joining the "Young Amazons" club for specious reasons, single-handedly derailing one of their meetings by trying to argue that women-only spaces and the "Take Back the Night" march, respectively, are by definition sexist (this, in case you were wondering, is one long, deeply regrettable moment).
- On a very recent trip to New York, at the Printed Matter art books and multiples store, browsing through an old Guerilla Girls compilation of posters, and finding their collection of statistics and slogans powerful, relevant and winning.

Somehow, feminism has become déclassé. I have no firm sociological data to support this vastly generalized assertion, but I feel that a good look around garners enough evidence to confirm it. For your consideration, a brief list: the recent spate of 'woe betide the liberated woman' books (such as *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both* by Laura Sessions Stepp); dating etiquette books for women, which range from the genteelly reactionary to crassly manipulative (let me remind you of *The Rules* by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, which, at current writing, has spawned a series of spin-off books and an incorporated consulting firm) whose collective motto, like a slap in the face to feminist scholar Irina Dunn, seems to be "a woman needs a man like a fish needs water"; "The Bachelor," reality television's continuing (and ever-popular) exercise in harem mentality as spectator sport (to say nothing of its less successful and sometimes more offensive spin-offs); the strange and admittedly alluring repackaging and marketing of queer life in the form of prime-time soaps like the L-Word. And this is just in the realm of the media. I could go on – into the dominion of politics (isn't Condoleezza Rice an interesting little phenomenon all to herself?), of economics, of business.

Allyson Mitchell knows feminism. Allyson Mitchell knows of feminism's tenuous foothold in the public imagination, and Allyson Mitchell is fighting the good fight. What is more, and what is more crucial: Allyson Mitchell knows how to fight the good fight.

Taken as a whole, her work thus far is one labyrinthine, encyclopedic attempt to come to grips with the herstory of feminism. She rides its various waves, navigates the currents and counter-currents, all the while maintaining a keen awareness of its backlashes and undertows. More importantly, her eye is always fixed on the far shore; it is the wider context that matters, because the lands that border feminism have as much to do with its shape and behaviour as the actions of its theoreticians and practitioners.

Her work centres on the representation of the woman and the woman's body. Her earlier forays into *Playboy* cheesecake images abound with depictions of curvaceous femmes in all their cheeky cavortings, their ample busts, bums and thighs merrily jiggling every which way. Her more recent *Lady Sasquatch* series, consisting of totemic faux-fur monuments of roaring and rearing Sasquatchettes, is an exploration of feral lesbian sexuality sans the media-friendly veneer of lesbian-chic, Ellen and Portia and company. Recent additions have begun to expand the concentration on women's representation to include the notion of community: her 'familiaris' – tiny, scorching-pink forest creatures, each named after one of Mitchell's friends. This is her version of sisterhood, a lesbian community proper whose messy realities are both informed and ignored by the fun-house mirrors of the aforementioned popular media.



The Michigan Three



It Ain't Gonna Lick Itself

But to anchor these works to the single issue of women's representation is to miss not only the wider point, but also the profound complexity of Mitchell's overarching project. There is a staggering theoretical promiscuity to these works. To wit: consider the centrality of craft to Mitchell's project. The *Playboy* ladies are fashioned out of shag and faux-fur and velveteen, all stitched together like some kind of softcore lezzie porn mid-1970s needlepoint exercise (like Tee Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* by way of a fabric store). Stitching, needlepoint, homemade décor: craft is traditionally the woman's realm. Thus, in one fell swoop, Mitchell gathers a whole host of references under her tent: the rusty oranges and chocolate browns of the faux-fur irresistibly recall a kind of '70s suburban Americana that not only fixes her subjects in a recognizable past, but fixes them in the heyday of second-wave feminism; the method recalls other artists who used craft as a means to their feminist ends: Faith Ringgold, Judy Chicago, Louise Bourgeois; and the *Playboy* source material recalls Gloria Steinem's stint of stealthy reportage at the Grotto. Mitchell is launching her attack from home turf.



Aleesa (2006)

Which brings me to what queer theorist David Bergman and I might call “imperialism with finesse.” Mitchell is not condemning these busty, dimpled *Playboy* representations: there is no scolding belligerence. On the contrary, she acknowledges their unabashed hotness, but recognizes the need for a subtle shift in context. And in that shift, she ends up subsuming her subject. She has taken what could be construed as a smarmily misogynist sexploitation object, and repurposed it. By rendering it in shag, by devoting her crafty lesbian energies to it, by translating it into the language of her foremothers, she has made these cheesecake dolls into rollicking Sapphic bump-and-grinders. This is the art of Mitchell’s work, this act of image colonialism, this translation of boy’s dirty picture vocabulary into the syntax of the Women’s Realm, with all the flair and panache of a magician turning a rainbow hankie into a cooing dove.



Deanne (2006)

In that feat of legerdemain – that prestige flourish that hides the subtlety, the theoretical know-how, in short, the conceptual craft – lies all her deftness as an artist, because it’s in that magical translation that the fun of her work resides. And, lest we forget amidst all this talk of Art, her work is literally nothing if not fun; without the fun, without the sly winks and the campy, puckish spirit, feminism would be mired in a tedious bog of pure theory. Mitchell will have none of that: she’s a bra-burner, to be sure, but it’s as a means of starting a raucous bra bonfire, where the ladies are large and lusty, the beer flows freely, and there’s plenty of plush to go ‘round.

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Allyson Mitchell, *Serious Fur*, October 12 - November 10, 2007

STRIDE

Hilary Knutson - Director
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This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Sholem Krishtalka who has been chosen by the artist because of his particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about contemporary art.

Photography by Cat O’Neil.

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Gallery hours: 11 AM - 5 PM, Tuesday - Saturday
Admission is free and all are welcome.



MD3DESIGN
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Artist Biography:

Allyson Mitchell is a maximalist artist working predominantly in sculpture, installation and film. Since 1997, Mitchell has been melding feminism and pop culture to play with contemporary ideas about sexuality, autobiography, and the body, largely through the use of reclaimed textile and abandoned craft.

Her work has exhibited in galleries and festivals across Canada, the US, Europe and East Asia. She has also performed extensively with *Pretty Porky and Pissed Off*, a fat performance troupe, as well as publishing both writing and music. She recently completed her PhD in Women’s Studies at York University, where she also teaches cultural studies.

Allyson Mitchell’s work has been generously supported by the Chalmers Foundation, Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario and Toronto Arts Councils and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Allyson Mitchell is represented by Paul Petro Contemporary Art in Toronto
www.allysonmitchell.com

Writer Biography:

Sholem Krishtalka is a painter currently based in Toronto. His work revolves around ideas of camp, theatricality, the operatic, and the intersection between private and public histories. He has an MFA from York University. He realizes that it always sounds apologetic and self-justifying when men call themselves feminists, but nevertheless, he would like to affirm his solidarity with the sisterhood.