Pandora's Box
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A slave sucks the penis of her hanged master; girls frolic naked in a playground; portraits are collaged from fragments of porno magazines; and hookah pipe hoses snake into a woman's various orifices. This is not your mother's feminist art.

Pandora's Box is an ambitious group show squeezed into the Dunlop Art Gallery's modest space within the Regina Public Library. The daring exhibition's profusion of bare and often disturbing bodies led the management to black out the gallery's large windows and door. Those who dare breech the barrier are rewarded with a refreshment of feminist art. Curator Amanda Cachia has assembled dozens of pictures and one video from artists, mostly in their thirties, of many nations and ethnicities: Laylah Ali, Ghada Amer, Shary Boyle, Amy Cutler, Chitra Ganesh, Annie Pootoogook, Wangechi Mutu, Leesa Steifler, Kara Walker, and Su-en Wong. While a few engage traditional 'women's issues', most seem unbounded by feminism's imagined restrictions.

Leesa Streifler, the group's senior artist, engages the familiar critique of gender socialization but suggests that this process is less imposition than dialogue. Her work consists of portrait studio photographs of herself at five and fifteen. Handwritten fragments, contemporary characterizations of her previous selves, swirl around and over her likenesses. The text on other portraits seem to record her mother and father arguing over the appropriate degrees of 'discipline" and "control." It may also be that artist's voice is included in this exchange, or even that this is the artist's internal dialogue concerning her own parenting. Her thoughts on correct child rearing and the exercise of power seem no more resolved that her parent's. This recognition inspires empathy rather than the usual pity and contempt for previous parenting styles. The debate seems to be about whether the child is a "canvas" to be written on, or has an innate personality ("her independence") that necessitates parent-parent-child negotiation. The intertextual play, the endurance of the faces despite defacing attempts and Streifler's acknowledgement of her complicity in this intergenerational project seems to favour a dialogic approach. Perhaps feminism has been the most self-conscious and anxious, but also most thorough, complex and successful social movements in human history because its practitioners have chosen not only to answer for themselves, but also to their own mother's and children.

Annie Pootoogook's drawings are poignant observations of everyday life. The style is simple but the insights are profound. While few share the specificity of her Inuit life, the broad strokes are universal. Three of her pictures depict domestic scenes. A young mother breastfeeds her child while her partner fiddles with a stereo. An older man watches his wife do the washing. A woman glances up from her work packing up the camp to see her husband relaxing with a cup of tea.

Pootoogook shows men who are selfish, lazy and indifferent and hints that this behaviour is generational. If we are in a liberal mood, we might project post-colonial explanations

into these pencil crayon marks. But the look in the grandmother's eyes as she gazes at her life-partner, suggests that she is looking for a little help, not a theory. Pootoogook does not seem particularly interested in whether the unequal division of gender role labour is due to colonialism or traditional culture, she gently displays the inequity in the hopes that it raises consciousness and provokes individual change. Aboriginal teaching is by example and narrative rather than by explicit direction. The artist shows how things are and invites us to conclude that they should be otherwise.

Hope comes in a fourth drawing. A young father ties his son's jacket. Perhaps the habits of previous generations might be undone by this one and passed to his son. Both man and boy look happy with their relationship. Whatever the reasons for the social disconnect between men and women and children, the first step to reconnection is consciousness, the recognition of a lack. The next step is engagement.

Wangechi Mutu's grotesque collages of women's faces from fashion and pornographic magazines is a familiar indictment of the objectification of female bodies made stranger by the inclusion of ethnographic sources. Mutu's mutilations recall the 18th and 19th century cataloguing of racial types that included the examination of genitalia around the world. Her use of clipping of animal parts indicted the association of females with nature and beasts. However, a less rote reading might see these monstrous faces as expressions of what identity feels like from the inside; multiple selves, made up of numerous aspects both received and innate, cultured and animal, static and revised.

Few of the remaining works in Pandora's Box are so overt in their engagement of women's issues. Most are subjective and idiosyncratic. Shary Boyle's surreal fairy tales combine innocence with dark ritual and Amy Cutler's woman attracting a flock of swallows with her birdhouse head are open to numerous associations and interpretations. Rarely do the younger artists reduce their images to illustrations of theory. Most are unresolved and cryptic expressions. They embody rather than attempt to explain and resolve conflicted states.

Kara Walker's film, "Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions" (2004), is a short, black and white silent movie that combines shadowbox puppet theatre with stop-action animation. The story seems a revenge fantasy in which a slave girl lynches her master/lover. The narrative climaxes with the young woman sucking on the erect penis of the hanged man resulting in Jackson Pollockesque spurts of paint. The dream-like film complicates the master/slave dichotomy and denies easy moral calculations when love and sex mix with race and power. Walker, and others in the show, seems to be suggesting that feminisms that focus on the social and do not consider the uncontrollable personal territories of desire, contrariness and the carnivalesque will compose an incomplete picture of female experience.

Most of the works in Pandora's Box subvert, pervert or at least reconsider childhood innocence. There are many naked girls here, naked and strange. Shary Boyle's surreal, pre-pubescent girls are fabulations that cavort through unreal space, emergent but indecipherable and unruly unconscious contents. Su-en Wong conflates her adult and

childhood bodies, multiplies them and sets them loose in the playground. Her precocious clones reveal doings beyond adult surveillance. The child/adult blend suggests that subjective perceptions of childhood experience construct adult selves as richly as do more traceable social factors. Boyle adds the unconscious elements to the mix, suggesting that there are irresolvable sources of our selves beyond the discourse of reason.

In her excellent catalogue essay, Joan Borsa explains that many artists are uncomfortable with the term 'feminism' because they have "a desire to set the terms of one's own practice." To some, feminist art is a time bound category, a movement that began forty years ago, flourished in the 70s and 80s, and then survived, during the 'backlash era,' only in the academy as a pedagogic form. Contemporary artists are as style sensitive as academics. No one wants to be identified with yesterday's fashion or theme, unless they can find a way to renovate it. For her part, Borsa aligns these artists with third wave feminism: less collective, less political, more individualistic and subjective than the second wave. Most refuse the style of the older forms of feminism and feel no obligation acknowledge its history while enjoying the benefits. Artists, like the rest of us in this amnesiac age, advance by limiting our knowledge of the past or by interpreting it to suit present desires. Pandora's Box has us wonder what has been lost and gained in this dramatic shift in approaches to women's experience and expression.