

The Washington Post

Art: Beneath The Fig Leaf -- At Clark & Co., 'True Phallacy' Takes a Look at a Symbol of Power

by Paul Richard, December 4, 1993

Its precedents are scattered, its contents problematic, but the behind-the-codpiece art show opening today at Clark & Co. in Georgetown has one thing in its favor. Its timing is just right.

"True Phallacy: The Myth of Male Power" is, yes, a show about the penis - and, as if you haven't noticed, penility is in.

Blame Beavis, Butt-head, AIDS or Lorena Bobbitt, but do they alone explain why on Nov. 29, the distinctly-staid- turned-salty-tongued New Yorker published not just one, but three, penile cartoons? Blame fierce gay liberation, and the howls of Jesse Helms, feminists, comedians or all of them together. But whoever is responsible, there is no doubt at all that a new concatenation of naughtiness and news has lately changed old rules.

Old euphemisms have been discarded. Headline writers, columnists, and talkers on TV have now been freed to use the word with an antic glee suggesting kids let out of school. It should not be surprising, then, that artists, 36 of them, now have followed suit. Or that Alison Maddex, the 27-year-old curator who sought them out, has put their work on view.

Some of them are excellent (Joe Shannon, Manon Cleary), lots of them are not, but all address their subject without qualms. The fig leaves have been blown away. They crackle underfoot as one confronts the paintings, the sculptures and assemblages, videos and photographs, gathered here together. Depending on how one calculates - should one count the obelisks, the candles, the bananas? - there must be a hundred phalli displayed in the gallery at Canal Square, 1054 31st St. NW.

Do they startle or offend? The answer, it turns out, is not much, and not for long.

Penises concealed, or perhaps imagined, may threaten or intrigue with their supposed potential, but once they are presented, at least in works of art, they don't do much at all. Even Freudians attuned to detecting phallic symbols in scepters, swords and spires are likely to be nonplussed by pictorial reiterations of the thing itself. Traditional aesthetics, it turns out, are not much engaged here. Though most of us have learned to gauge the various qualities of secondary sexual characteristics, of rounded hips or muscled torsos, the primaries are something else.

Long before one leaves this show, penises begin to look as interesting as ear lobes.

More interesting, more curious, is the way the exhibition keeps elbowing the ribs of politics and visual art, high as well as low.

Feminisms of various sorts lurk behind this exhibition. Sometimes, as in Cleary's meticulous small oils, one senses a response to the hegemony of the male gaze, the use of women's bodies for male delectation. Okay, her pictures seem to say, now it's time to turn the tables. Maddex, who describes herself as a homosexual and as the "significant other" of Camille Paglia, the critic and polemicist, has something else in mind.

"Now is the time for all pro-sex, pro-art, pro-beauty feminists to come out of the closet," wrote Paglia two months ago in the pages of this paper. "Maddex and I," she continued, "have created what we call Neo-Sexism, or the New Sexism... The New Sexism puts sensuality at the center of our responsiveness to life and art."

There is male homosexuality in this show as well. Often it descends to the level of the pinups found in gay guys' magazines, circa 1953. The work of David Sprigler, of Philadelphia, for instance, is represented by a photograph of a nude and sulky fireman, and another of a lad posed among fluted columns. Baltimore's Jose Villarrubia, who shows a dark-eyed bullfighter with bulging pants, does similar work.

NUKI's is better. NUKI was the pseudonym of Daniel Webster Millsaps III (1919-1984), the late publisher of the Washington International Arts Letter. Millsaps, a bit obsessed, drew and photographed his phalli as the sweetest of companions, as friendly little dolls or as costumed toys. He'd dress them up in sweaters, or in small brocaded jackets, or lovingly surround them with Christmas decorations.

Other works of gay art here are considerably less sweet.

The harshest pay boring homage to Robert Mapplethorpe, mostly by imitation. Mapplethorpe liked studded black leather. So does New York's Joe Kaminsky. Mapplethorpe liked pain, as also does Kraeg Terry, a West Virginia photographer whose props include plumbers' tools and rat traps.

Works of art of these sorts - that refer to pain and porn and other zones of the forbidden - today are rather chic. Significant new art is made at the fringes of society, or so runs the argument, and since sadomasochists, gays and, perhaps, pornographers exist at the margins, their art should be seen. Though Maddex has included works by such ideologues, they do not rule her show.

They are, for one thing, much outnumbered by the humorists. Groover Cleveland, for example, pays a sort of dual debt to Keith Haring and Rene Magritte, when he redoes the Belgian painter's famous "Ce n'est pas un pipe" ("This Is Not a Pipe") with just what you'd expect. Maddex herself is represented by photo collages in which the crucial roles are played by croissants and cannoli. San Francisco's John Priola is represented by a delicate little cloud study that might almost be an "Equivalent" by Alfred Stieglitz. Washington's Jim Sottile, while following in the wake of the famous Plaster Casters of early rock-and-roll days, has not relied on stars; he's instead cast himself.

These artists have got into the mood of the thing. They're having fun, the sort of fun that's often been a part of the art community's more rambunctious shows. But that's not true of all the painters here. Washington's Steve Ludlum isn't out to tease anybody. He makes near-abstract collages of delicacy and strength.

Joe Shannon isn't playing games either. True, phalli appear in his paintings and his bronzes, but they're incidental. His subject here is Actaeon, the hunter of the myth who, transfixed by Diana, and caught between the realms of the human and the animal, is being turned into a stag. Shannon also paints satyrs and portraits and self-portraits. He's among the most ambitious traditionalists in Washington. For seriousness and reach, his "The City in the Country" (begun in 1986, reworked in 1988, 1990, 1992) looms above the other objects in this show.

While "True Phallacy" might well strike the public as both new and naughty, it's worth remembering that its subject has been seen before in the nobler zones of art.

The Greeks didn't hide it, nor the Romans or the Hindus or many of the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Nor, for that matter, did the Roman Catholic masters of the Renaissance in Italy.

Titian, Michaelangelo, Andrea del Sarto, Giovanni Bellini, Verrocchio, Veronese and Filippo Lippi were but a few of the Catholic painters who placed the genitals of Jesus at the center of their deeply proper, deeply pious works of art. They weren't there to titillate. They were presented, as Leo Steinberg tells us in "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion" (1983), as a kind of visual "pledge of God's humanation."

"In many hundreds of pious, religious works, from before 1400 to past the mid-16th century, the ostensive unveiling of the Child's sex, or the touching, protecting, or presentation of it, is the main action.... And the emphasis recurs in images of the dead Christ, or of the mystical Man of Sorrows. All of which has been tactfully ignored for half a millennium."

Which only goes to show that pruderies adjust, that moralisms change. "True Phallacy" - which is likely to be castigated, or giggled at around the water cooler, or promoted as a weapon of one sort or another in the sexual revolution - may tweak the wave of fashion, but it isn't likely to deflect the history of art. The show has a bit of spice, and saucy humor, and ideological punch, but it does not have a lot. If you've seen one, you've seen 'em all is the unavoidable truth that damps the whole endeavor.

Michael Clark of Clark & Co., who explains that "nobody sells much of this stuff," is asking viewers for \$5 donations, adding, "We're not forcing anybody to come in here." They'll come anyway. "True Phallacy: The Myth of Male Power" will close Jan. 2.