

BOOKS & VISUAL ARTS

Muffled anger and fantasy with edge

Three artists deal with the female experience in show at Saidye Bronfman Art Gallery

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It's hard to be a woman, and even harder to become one - to judge by some of the work in three concurrent shows now on view at the Saidye Bronfman Centre. The artists, Eliza Griffiths of Ottawa, and Torontonians Gretchen Sankey and Julie Voyce deal with female experience and issues. But for sheer pain and anger - or reasonable facsimile thereof - the work of Griffiths is the clear winner. Because Griffiths's paintings, in particular the Karate Girls series, are somewhat poster-like, they have an emotional punch that is as much kneejerk as it is straight from the wounded heart.

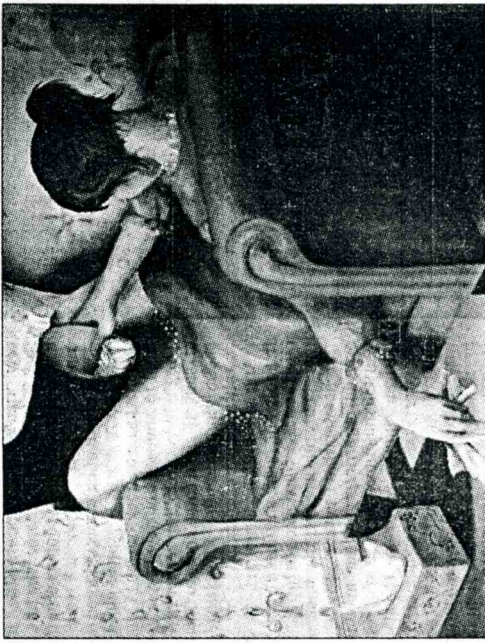
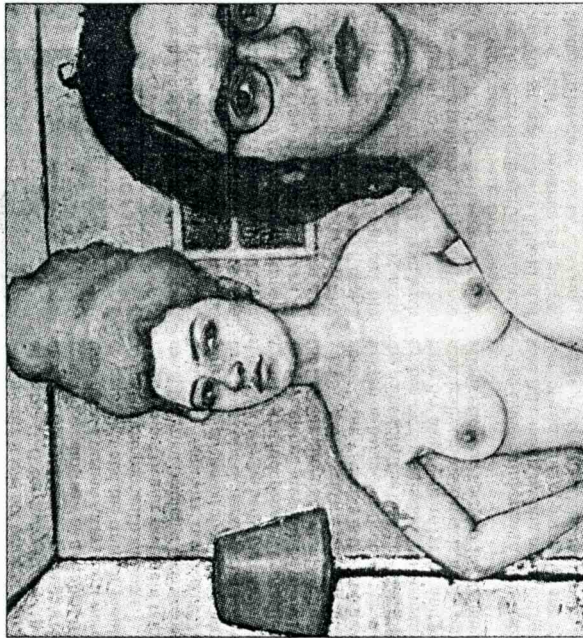
That the colour of the girl's hair changes in each painting suggests that identity is just another something we wear. But the sullen-snarling face remains a hex-like constant - quite realistic, yet as symbolic as one of those Medusas the ancient Greeks carved on the front of their temples.

It seems all the paintings focus on this same girl, just out of adolescence. Apparently, she is a composite of people the artist knows. According to David Liss, director of the Saidye Bronfman, "everybody seems to think they recognize the young woman."

But, then, perhaps anger is generic, by definition a no-name brand. It's the same in all of us, though some have been given far more generous helpings. Like all emotional extremes, anger tends to iron out individuality, turning the human face into a specimen or emblem. Maybe that's why it's so insulting to tell someone you like them when they're mad.

The almost-standard settings for Griffiths's images, consisting of tasteful, decorator expanses of colour, belie the anger. Hinted is that the portraits are really illustrations designed for some kind of high-school text or educational cartoon on growing up.

Of course, the various bits of hardware decorating the girl's sturdy body lead us to think that somehow the illustrations have gone out of control. This moppet, wounded by herself and others, may not be the dream of every home-room teacher. In fact, we're never quite sure whether she is for real. The bruises and, in one case, blood dripping from a nostril, worn like badges of courage, indicate that this is



"Everybody seems to think they recognize the young woman" depicted in *The Flamingo Room* (left) and other works in a series by Eliza Griffiths. Above, one of the paintings in the series *The Bible According to Barbie*, by Gretchen Sankey.

Other biblical subjects in Sankey's art include Washing Christ's Feet and the story of Lazarus, with a small cast of dolls peaking out at two house slippers resembling monstrous rabbits.

If dolls are where the conscious and subconscious intersect, fairy tales are the edge where the conscious leaves off. In her watercolours, Julie Voyce expands on the concept of fairy tale, allowing old favourites, like Little Red Riding Hood, to spawn whole new kingdoms of fantasy. In a painting titled *Bad Day*, Voyce depicts the process of becoming emotionally - or even physically - undone.

This is an especially "bad day" - for the giant, looping tears framing each non-blinking eye seem to pull away whole portions of the face of the person crying. And, in turn, the tears reconstitute as human heads - reproduction without the help of a partner.

In another perhaps more amazing - and oddly lovely - scene, called *Two A.M.*, a yellow-and-blue globe crosses the murky night sky. Attached to this planetary fragment is an almost transparent parent head. If ever there were a vision, this is it. The head, bulbous like that of a baby, is joined to the forehead by an iridescent pair of lips. It's almost

too easy to "read into" the picture, really a kind of Rorschach test. Possibly, what we witness is the innocent attachment of a child to its mother's breast, a tender subject endlessly replicated during the Renaissance. But, just maybe the two "spheres" are engaged in friction of a more lustful nature. Could this be an alternate form of porno, pressure-cooked to perfection in the depths of the psyche?

Like that of the other artists, Voyce's career is beginning to take off. But, apparently Voyce's "day job" continues to be as a cleaning lady. (A recent voice-mail communication from Voyce to the gallery ended with the artist labeling herself, "cleaner of dirt, maker of things.") Yet, Voyce's intimacy with the banal hasn't kept her from seeing the transcendental light.

The imagery occasionally wobbles into the realm of whimsy. More often, however, Voyce manages to dust off old archetypes and entirely transform them. Surely, Blake must be one of her heroes.

Works by Eliza Griffiths, Gretchen Sankey and Julie Voyce will remain on view at the Saidye Bronfman Art Gallery, 5170 Côte Ste. Catherine Rd., till Feb. 15. Telephone: 739-2301.