

Seeing a world that could be;

A group show is united in addressing the barriers that abound.

By Alice Thorson

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Imagine a world where love, pleasure and generosity are first principles. Acceptance is a given and so is freedom.

"Ecstatic Resistance," a group show at Grand Arts, conjures just such a world and identifies the obstacles to achieving it.

Guest curator Emily Roysdon, an artist, curator and writer based in Stockholm and New York, doesn't pull any punches in her statement for the show: "Ecstatic Resistance wants to think about all that is unthinkable and unspeakable in the Eurocentric, phallogocentric world order."

A sign at the door features a printed warning that the exhibit "contains materials which may not be suitable for all audiences," followed by handwritten remarks, including, "If you're offended, so are we," "Your feelings are your fault" and "Our Bodies, Our Selves."

The exhibit opens, appropriately, with a wall of photographs of bodies, which is where society's repressive rules and categories -- and the power relations built on them -- begin.

Titled "Positive Reinforcement," the huge photo collage, including two slide-show insets, was made specifically for this show by New York artist A.L. Steiner and is accompanied by a soundtrack created by Cody Critchelo, Peggy Noland, Jaimie Warren, Ashley Miller and other talents from Kansas City and beyond.

The display is a mash-up of nude, partially nude, painted and tattooed bodies, bodies engaged in sexual interactions and bodies at play. Yet the affirming note issuing from this carnival of flesh functions to deflect both prurience and voyeurism.

The subjects' disarming frankness and lack of self-consciousness also pose a tacit challenge to the many industries that profit from people's dissatisfaction with their bodies.

Here, it's all good.

Nearby, sounds of a heartbeat emanate from a beaver dam constructed by Jeanine Oleson, who paired it with a ziggurat that emits vaguely militaristic sounds. The two structures represent diametrically different relationships with the environment. Dams prevent erosion and help create wetlands; ziggurats (Mesopotamian temple towers) served in part as places of safety from rising waters.

Nature and culture vie throughout this exhibit, which is filled with reminders that the ideas, behaviors and beliefs that many people accept as part of the "natural" order of things are really cultural constructions that benefit some groups at the expense of others.

Roysdon's exhibit honors veteran conceptual artist Adrian Piper with the inclusion of her classic "I am black" business card, dating to the mid-1980s.

Tired of hearing racist remarks made by white people who assumed she, too, was white, Piper designed the light brown card to be handed out in social settings. It is printed with several paragraphs of text that lay out her objections and concludes: "I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me."

Piper designed a companion "calling card" to fend off unwanted flirtations: "Dear Friend, I am not here to pick anyone up or to be picked up. I am here alone because I want to be here, ALONE."

The two cards helped lay the groundwork for more than two decades of discussion about categories and assumptions made on the basis of sex, gender and race, the primary concerns of postmodern and, later, "queer" theory.

Roysdon's exhibit is largely premised on the latter, and, as Grand Arts executive director Stacy Switzer points out, "a queer perspective is different from a gay perspective."

A gay perspective accepts the idea of a "gay" category of people. Queer theorists, in contrast, reject categories and fixed identities altogether.

"The term 'queer' is an open identification," Roysdon said in a recent e-mail, "and implies no particular desire, practice, body, biology, gender, etc. It's valuable for people who live at the intersection of multiple identifications."

A broadside, created by Dean Spade and Craig Willse, functions as a kind of Rosetta stone to the exhibit's radical re-envisioning of possibilities. Half of the sheet is printed with an essay by Spade challenging "stateness," or society's

decision to abide by a shared set of rules in the interest of orderly human interactions.

We believe "we cannot live without (stateness)," Spade writes, yet he is troubled by what he calls "the violence of standardization."

Willse's adjacent essay asks what utopia might look like to an imagination freed from the myths, norms and fears of the past.

Celebrated Israeli artist Yael Bartana envisions such a utopia in a powerful video. In "Mary Koszmary (Dreams and Nightmares)," a young man, played by left-wing Polish activist Slawomir Sierakowski, strides into an abandoned Warsaw stadium and gives an impassioned speech imploring 3 million Jews -- the number of Polish Jews estimated killed in the Holocaust -- to return to Poland.

"We need you," he thunders. "Today we are fed up with looking at our similar faces. Let us live together. We will become you, and you will become us."

As he speaks, a small gathering of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts creates a stencil in white chalk on the ground that states: "3,000,000 Jews can change the lives of 40,000,000 Poles."

While rooted in the specifics of Poland's history, the stirring production amounts to a grand plea to eradicate the divisive concept of "the Other" and all the cruelty and conflict it has produced.

Artifice and fantasy are frequent touchstones in this exhibit -- in the stills of renowned German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger and in a video by the Los Angeles-based collective My Barbarian in which costumed players sing of the time-honored gap between rich and poor.

"Ecstatic Resistance" is all about creative critique, addressing hidden histories and resetting a record dominated by straights.

In one of several featured videos by Sharon Hayes, a male speaker talks about the important role of lesbians in the women's movement and their subsequent sidelining by the mainstream in the interest of political expediency.

It resonates with a president who has talked a good line on gay rights but is wary about the political fallout of acting on his promises.

Yet Roysdon's project, which "asserts the impossible as a model for the political,"

looks well beyond legislative solutions in its vision for a future without oppression.

"Ecstatic Resistance is about waiting," she says. "The impossible always arrives."

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THE SHOW

"Ecstatic Resistance" is on exhibit at Grand Arts, 1819 Grand Blvd., through Jan. 16. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and by appointment. For more information on this free event, call 816-421-6887 or visit www.grandarts.com. Photo Caption: No Art

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