

## ART

## Show seeks to address sexual viewpoints

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EAST CHATHAM — These are strange days for sexuality and the expression of sexuality. The National Endowment for the Arts has become increasingly edgy concerning the funding of anything that could be even marginally seen as sexually provocative or apart from a fairly conservative model of sexuality.

Feminism and feminist criticism have fought

**"ETHICS OF DESIRE: SEXUAL IMAGINATION AND ARTISTIC CHOICE."** Five Points Gallery, East Chatham. Noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday. Ends Sunday, Feb. 24. 392-5205.

hard to reshape the manner in which we perceive sex, with the residual effect of making every action, image and exchange sexually analyzable and promoting a continual second-

guessing of every sexual motive for both male and female.

Amidst this there is an increasing social need for visibility for sexuality and sexual preference. The makeup of society's sexuality is not as one-sided or as simple as it once seemed. The bottom line seems to be sexual pluralism. What one person finds sexually alluring, another finds exploitative, and yet another repulsive.

"Ethics of Desire: Sexual Imagination and Artistic Choice," currently on view at Five Points Gallery, seeks to address this plurality of viewpoints without passing moral judgment, and to explore the often (one could argue always) present relationship between sexuality and art-making.

Of course, as a private gallery deriving no federal funding, Five Points sidesteps the whole Robert Mapplethorpe/NEA controversy and directs almost audible disdain at North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms, the primary proponent of restricted funding.

It seems that one of the goals of a show such as this is to address the viewers' own sexuality and viewpoint and confront that stance with differing but equally genuine positions. Ideally, this confrontation would lead to a heightened understanding and tolerance of others' views. At the very least, some self-reflection may result.

Nearly 50 pieces make up "Ethics," with works running the gamut in media as well as sexual content and approach.

Michael Meads' large acrylic triptych "Common Denominator" functions as a memoir of the pre-AIDS salad days of homosexuality, a kind of altarpiece to the loss of those carefree days.

On either side are black line drawings on a hazy field depicting Meads and three other young men. Over each figure has been scrawled text, but in almost all cases no more than fragments are legible. The center panel is a post-bacchanal scene of the four sleeping men illuminated only in the glow of the fireplace.

The painting is a cross between a cartoon realism (recalling Thomas Hart Benton) and the type of rendering characteristic of propaganda posters of the 1920s. The piece remains, despite its large scale (73 by 133 inches), a touching, genuine memorial to Mead's past.

In Steve Smulka's "The Hunters" (oil on linen), a posed, coolly stoic female figure clad in draped fabric is placed before a Peter Bruegel painting. The Bruegel portion, a direct copy of "Hunters in the Snow" from 1565, is rendered as similarly as possible to the original and depicts three hunters

and their dogs atop a snowy hill overlooking a small town and two frozen skating ponds.

The woman, however, is rendered hyper-realistically, quite differently than the snowy scene. The warm light that illuminates the fabric that covers her additionally hints that she exists not within the depicted scene but in front of it. In the detached, almost David Lynch-like animatronic character of her gaze she seems to both confront and ignore the viewer.

Smulka opens some interesting doors, but rather than concreting a statement opts to leave them ajar. The result establishes a disarming and provocative relationship between sexuality and hunting. The work remains a haunting, synchronistic layering that hints at the sexual implications and eroticism of hunting as well as the more obvious hunting aspects of sexuality.

In a manner similar to Smulka, Bill Wilson's "In the Balance," a small oil-on-copper work, plays off of a well-known painting by Jan Vermeer. The scene depicts a robed woman standing at a table. In her hand she holds a balance, on one side of which has been placed an amputated male organ. Behind her, worked into the surface of a painting, are writhing creatures that at times resemble genitalia and bodies themselves.

Echoing the chaos of these "body monsters" is the lushly painted fabric heaped on the table in which can be seen innumerable sexual organs. Unlike Smulka, who layers on top of an appropriated image, Wilson here has altered the original to create a surreal, eroticized place where sexuality exists in its most blatant forms.

Iain Macchell's small, sculptural wall piece works more abstractly than most of the pieces included in the show. Titled "Yink Yank," Macchell's piece is flesh-like in appearance. A thick, seemingly veined coil extends from a bulbous form and wraps once around a recessed, slightly askew plane. Made of steel, paper and wax, Macchell's form evokes dismembered genitalia. A sense of mourning and loss emanates from the work, unpleasant cracks interrupt the surface, and the time-worn appearance of the skin conveys a somewhat less than virile, elegiac intention. As a kind of preserved fossil, Macchell's work creates an introspective counter to macho pretension.

In times when sexuality and the expression of sexuality is increasingly threatened, forums for the exchange of such ideas will become critical as the antidote. With "Ethics of Desire," Five Points has dived headfirst into the foray.