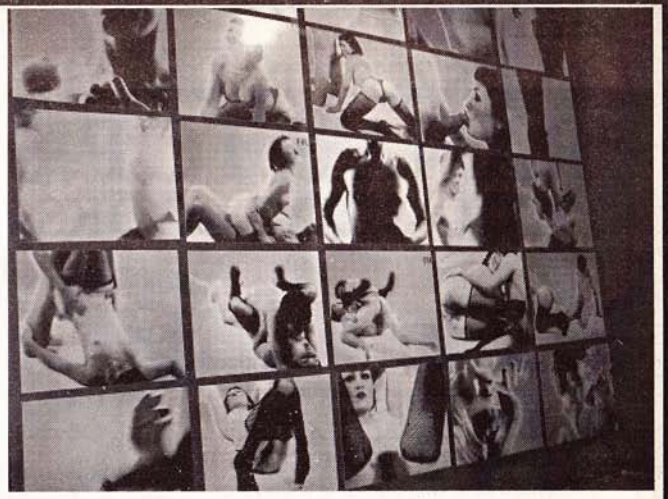
Steaming up the Bakery

By ANNA KESSON



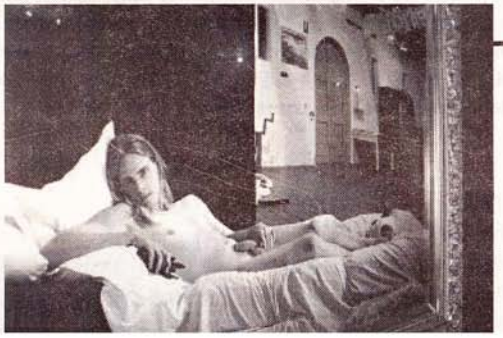
According to the director of Adultshop.com, the line between porn and art is a thin one. Slippery, ill-defined and, therefore, flexible. But in SEX: Adultshop.com Erotic Art Award Exhibition, the artists are concerned with not simply exploring this line, but with elucidating it, interpreting and searching for what sex, and everything that surrounds it, might mean in a society that seems to privilege self-sufficiency but in which we are desperate for connections.

In Puppy Love, a gorgeously irreverent work, desire, fun and self-indulgence evoke uninhibited joy and playfulness. This is a work that's full of games, a lighter piece perhaps, but no less effective in its playful sexuality than the ironically dark Vagina Dentata. No exhibition with sex as its theme could miss one of these, and it's a strong work: sharp, scissor like and dangerous – female sexuality at its vicious 'best'. Modern Man Reclining is an interesting take on Titian's Venus of Urbino. This time there's a naked man, lying long, flaccid, and passive. It's also a reworking of the traditional male voyeuristic gaze: this time he's objectified for women and men, his body becoming the subject of our voyeuristic gaze. Some of the video installations work through this issue too: in one we're shown a man masturbating in what looks like a nightclub bathroom. There's hazy pink and orange lights, a muffled soundtrack and his face contorting into a groaned out moment of culmination. All this is put on display for us, the audience, and then, as he stands wiping himself in front of mirrors and cameras, we see someone else watching in voyeuristic delight.

There's much more. The exhibition has over 50 works from artists all over Australia and it's well arranged in the intimate space of the Breadbox gallery. It's also encouraging to see 'good corporate citizenship' through the partnership of Adultshop.com and Artrage in conceiving of, facilitating and curating this exhibition. While it certainly does ask questions about what constitutes the erotic or the pornographic and what makes it different from art, I think it would be a shame if censorship and questions about its inconsistencies were all that you got from Sex. It's important, I think, to remember that notions of the erotic, of sexuality, even of pornography go further than being issues of individual governance and public legislation. Rather, it is because they cut to the core of humanity, of social interaction and of individual identity that they must inevitably lead to arguments about censorship or individual choice. Thankfully, the artists seemed to get that. While they were certainly concerned with these issues, they were also able to address wider implications of such an exhibition: cultural notions of normality, deviance, gender constructions, beauty, intimacy and the relational aspects of sexuality.

The exhibition is going to be an annual event here in Perth, and as Marcus Canning, the eloquent director of Artrage pointed out, it's a good thing for a slowly maturing country like Australia, for it shows an ability to engage with issues that matter and, as Alisdair Foster, Director of the Australian Centre of Photography, pointed out, be artistically dangerous: for it is more risky to create erotic art than landscapes. Sex is going to be a significant annual event (it's already made page three in *The West*), and could quite possibly be a well-needed stimulant for the art scene, locally and nationally. I'm definitely going back for another look. ■

Sex, Adultshop.com Erotic Art Award Exhibition is being held in the Breadbox Gallery at the Bakery Artrage Complex, James St until Nov 13th.



Anna Kesson, "Steaming at the bakery", Pellican, October, 2005, Vol. 78, Ed.8