

## **EXHIBITION REVIEW**

“Disability and Liberation

CARA art exhibition at Seattle Central”

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The T-shirt says "Overcome" on the woman in the wheelchair, as children with various visible and invisible disabilities climb over her and surround her. The life-size dolls by Sarah Megyar represent her current state of mind, that what we need is love and compassion. "Mamacita," as the piece is called, is one of many works currently on view at a very special art exhibition being held at Seattle Central Community College until Dec. 12.

Joelle Brouer, the community organizer for People with Disabilities at Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), has organized the art exhibition, "Defining Ourselves: Disability, Body Image, Sexuality and Liberation." Brouer has been working for months on this project as part of her job of encouraging informed decisions around sex and a positive feeling around disability. As she put it, "Some things aren't intellectual." She was trying to think of a way to engage people differently, and a way for people to define their own experiences, which was what led to the idea of an art exhibition.

It is wonderfully successful. All of the pieces emphasize body image, sexuality, and liberation. Brouer wants to increase the dialogue around how we feel about bodies and sexuality, and what liberation can look like. The artists express themselves in positive images. Only a few pieces specifically depict disability, and when they do, as with "Mamacita," they energetically alter our preconceived ideas.

Alisa Bierra, the program coordinator for CARA, told me about the organization and its work with marginalized communities. CARA has four community organizers who work to address the oppression of people of color, those with disabilities, the poor, and the young who are rape survivors. Although the majority of rape survivors are women, it also affects men, particularly in the communities of the disabled. Rape of the disabled is almost always by someone they know, and it is often repeated more than once.

One of the purposes of CARA is to pressure the state to conform to the Olmsted Act, which stated that people with disabilities cannot be institutionalized against their will.

The art exhibit addresses the idea that people with disabilities are often seen as not fully human; so they get raped because the idea is that it doesn't matter and no one will really care. In this show the disabled are addressing positive body images, sexuality, and other topics that forcefully emphasize their own humanity.

Kristina Knoll uses words as physical objects based on her different experience of reality. Her images convey the way she perceives language as a dyslexic person. As soon as we look at them we can immediately understand the struggle that a dyslexic person has in order to learn to read and write.

Sharon Jodock-King strapped a camera onto her wheelchair with a timing device and then photographed herself lying sensuously in a flowering field. (This work is on loan from Very Special Artist, a program for Artists with Disabilities at Seattle Center).

These works are as diverse as the artists who made them. Each artist has his or her own story. Sarah Megyar, for example, describes herself and her work in this way:

"I'm a 48-year-old woman who has been on the street on and off since being orphaned at 14. Over the last 15 years I've gradually lost mobility due to arthritis, repeated physical abuse, obesity, and drug abuse. After getting 'clean' I came to Seattle and found it to feel like home. I've settled here and want to give back something to the city that opened its arms and hearts to me.... Making dolls has helped me stay connected."

In making "Mamacita," Sarah made a list of disabilities. The list, she says, "got enormous." As she made the dolls for the sculpture, she let them become what they wanted to become. She began thinking about the process of making judgments, and who were the source of judgments. It was a real catharsis for her.

In addition, "Mamacita" was altered by September 11. She was originally planning a militant in-your-face piece, but after the catastrophe of the WTC the piece took on a life of its own and became a work about loving and enfolding and caring.

That is really the purpose of the art exhibition, to help all of us to understand, to care and to love.

"Defining Ourselves: Disability, Body Image, Sexuality and Liberation" will run through December 12 at the M. Rosetta Hunter Gallery at Seattle Central Community College, in the middle of the main building on Broadway. The gallery is open Mon., Wed., and Fri., from 9:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m., and Tues. and Thurs., 5 - 7 p.m.