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At Conner Contemporary, Provocative Bodies of Work

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What a minefield Zoe Charlton laid with "Family," her series of spare, large-scale drawings of naked black women now on view alongside the works of two other artists at Conner Contemporary Art.

Working that age-old art historical trope, the female nude, the Baltimore-based artist lobbs a volatile challenge to stereotypes of race and gender. So much so that her work forces a critic's hand: If I'm to engage Charlton's pictures in anything but superficial terms, I must say the unmentionable.

For starters: Charlton's women don't just deter our gaze -- they repel it.

Some bear blank, zombielike expressions. A few pose in exhibitionist stances reminiscent of pornography. But most are seated on their rumps or crouched on their knees, disinterested odalisques with hefty physical presence. Several sport raccoonlike dark circles under haggard eyes; they appear haunted and old even as their ample bodies put them closer to 35 than 60. Their hair, held back in rags, goes every which way in a wiry spray. (We can't show you the images in this newspaper; visit the gallery or its Web site.)

And here's where the trouble starts. These are, by most accounts, ordinary women of hefty but not grotesque physique. Perhaps they didn't feel like putting on makeup today, or they got a rotten night's sleep. Yet I cannot help but register how unfeminine, how hulking, and how in-your-face Charlton has rendered their ordinariness.

And then the cascade of questions: By whose standards of beauty? White? Black? Thin? Thinner?

Like other major women artists of this moment, Charlton uses the naked female form to provoke. She works in the vein of cut-paper silhouette maker Kara Walker, although Walker's well-turned images are slicker and more digestible, even when their subjects are rape and sodomy. Charlton also recalls South Africa-born artist Marlene Dumas, whose works on paper feature women culled from pornography; yet Dumas's images retain some of their source material's seductiveness, even if that source rankles. Charlton never seduces.

Instead, Charlton's rawness seems calculated to conjure a series of responses. First, the visceral chafe. Next, the rational, politically correct mode. A cynic might call Charlton a master manipulator.

Or is she, perhaps, in earnest? At times, it's hard to tell.

The artist claims that the models for "Family" are her cousins. If so, this is a strange family indeed, one that lolls around mostly naked sporting knee socks or golden crowns. (Charlton renders these little adornments in variously colored washes -- bright pink, shiny gold -- that stand out against the gray pencil lines of her figures' bodies.)

By claiming these women as her cousins, Charlton classifies these pictures as normal family stuff, about as charged as a Memorial Day picnic. The effect is disconcerting.

Leigh Conner, Charlton's dealer, plays along. Leading me through the show, Conner describes the poxlike array of pink strips pasted to one "cousin" as birth-control patches; the knee pads of another are remnants of the woman's sadomasochistic past, the dealer tells me. Conner presents this background as if it were the most banal of family details.

But Conner never talks about the fact of these naked, in-your-face women. It's as if Conner and Charlton want me to see family portraits instead of extraordinary nudes. Or perhaps they expect me to be so post-race and post-gender that I don't see these as highly political works.

Surely my reaction to these drawings betrays the fault lines of my own inner feminist -- a strong presence indeed, but one complicated by all manner of psychic inconsistencies. Here I am forced to face, guiltily, my reaction to these unadorned, un-Pilatesized bodies. Charlton puts me in a tough place.

Do these pictures rely too heavily on provocation? I suspect I'll be thinking about them long after Charlton's exhibition closes.

Gabriel de la Mora

Speaking of body issues: In Conner's video room, the gallery screens "39-G.M.C.-23. sept.2007" by Mexico-based artist Gabriel de la Mora. Here we watch 20 minutes of the artist beating himself (in the form of a pinata) to virtual death and then cleaning up his papery entrails.

De la Mora's faux self nearly replicates his real one. His likeness sports Prada shoes (or knockoffs) with that red stripe down the heel, a white button-down, dark pants and red glasses on a bald head. When the living artist takes a red baton to his false self's kneecap, a shock of red confetti sprays out in bloodlike spurts. On and on he goes, until only a head remains.

There's an interesting sadism to this process; it's self-loathing enacted not with cigarettes or risky behavior, but rather directly and physically.

The video's denouement, however, leaves more to be desired. Once the flogging has ceased, the artist spends nearly eight minutes on his cleanup, and this without benefit of a broom. We watch as he sweeps up shards in painstaking handfuls, depositing them in a clear plastic box brought for the occasion.

The aim is to poke fun at his country's penchant for relic worship -- he paints it here as idiot grunt work. Yet this same sequence advances every cliché of artmaking, what with its tedious pace and navel-gazing theme.

Like an indulgent director's cut, "39-G.M.C.-23.sept.2007" could use a good editor.