

PITTSBURGH City Paper



FOR THE BIRDS?

Local activists challenge restaurant giant for opening on Thanksgiving

BY CHRIS POTTER / PAGE 14

[BOOK REVIEW]
PERSONALS
 (BY FRED SHAW)

I tell my freshmen-comp classes that anecdote, when written clearly and concisely, is effective because of the personal element it adds. I suspect Ann Curran feels the same: Her first collection, *Me First* (Luminox Press), trades in 101 pages of first-person poems detailing a life of encounters with writers, pals and celebs as a freelancer for various Pittsburgh publications.

Curran's work is mostly straight-forward free verse whose simple language mimics that of reportage, albeit in ways that often focus on the peripheral details of an interview or experience only now making it into print. The subjects of several poems are royalty in these parts, with Dan Rooney, Mr. Rogers, the Hillmans and Paul Mellon each getting a turn in Curran's spotlight, where she rejects PR spin in favor of humanizing her subjects, for better or worse.

In "Me and Andy Warhol," a meeting with the pop-art master leaves her speaker less than impressed: "We check out his workout spot with girly weights, / watch him react to the scorn of students, / conduct a brief interview on the way / out the door as he constructs a wall / with monosyllabic yeses and noes / to hide the person he is, was, will be ..." Curran is a speaker who persons intent on divulging something personal about these subjects, even if it's only that they're thin-skinned and egotistical.

However, this treatment cuts both ways, showing society's uneasy and fleeting views on fame, as Curran dishes on out-of-date stars like Barbara Bosson and Jack Klugman. The tone in some of these poems is gossipy, but who among us doesn't like to tell of brushes with glitterati, especially in the 'Burgh?

Yet while these poems might appeal to some, it's the poet's treatment of lesser-known subjects that has more emotional heft. In "Me and the Fish Lady," Curran writes, "She comes by bus from Carrick / with two carry-ons stuffed with clothes / and makes a Laundromat of the Y." The subject here seems more worthy of poetic treatment than others with greater name recognition. This same Y is the setting for "Me and Barack Obama," where the speaker reveals the future President's willingness to take a joke. It's moments like these that make reading *Me First* serve as proof of the human curiosity that demands that we put ourselves and others, both in and out of the headlines, under a microscope.

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AN AFFABLE TROUBLEMAKER HAS OFFICIALLY INFILTRATED THE SYSTEM

[ART REVIEW]

RIOT GRRRL, UNINTERRUPTED

(BY MICHELLE FRIED)

ACRISTING '90s revival requires proper tribute to riot grrrl — the hybrid underground movement that reimagined punk rock's DIY modes with feminist purpose. Typically, riot grrrl's legacy is told through music, but *Alien She*, at Carnegie Mellon's Miller Gallery, offers a spirited collection — part art exhibition, part historical project — showcasing the movement's artifacts while honoring its evolved second life in art in various media and disciplines. (This reviewer, though employed by Carnegie Mellon University, is unaffiliated with the Miller Gallery).

The first major exhibition dedicated to riot grrrl, *Alien She* is both instructively designed and loyal. That's unsurprising: Curators Astria Suparak and Ceci Moss were involved in the West Coast-bred scene as teens. "The participants of the original movement were in their teens and 20s in the '90s, and have since solidified their identities, interests and careers," writes Suparak, director of the Miller Gallery, in an email. *Alien She* includes works by seven artists who, she writes, "have incorporated, expanded upon, or reacted to riot grrrl's ideology, tactics and aesthetics."

As a gateway, the gallery's first floor is dedicated to riot grrrl's creative output, including hundreds of self-published zines, fliers and more, gathered from personal and institutional collections. Neatly arranged rows of paper trace a retired analog past — the Xerox-and-Sharpie, feminine brute universe of the riot grrrl — now brushed off for the archives. Learn something or get nostalgic, but save energy for the



Slumber company: part of Tammy Rae Carland's photo series "Lesbian Beds"

artworks on the second floor.

Breaking the ice are Allyson Mitchell's three towering hominids in estrus — suitably titled "Ladies Sasquatch" — whose burly-girly displays (what are they to do with no male in sight?) are betrayed by their

ALIEN SHE
 continues through Feb. 16, Miller Gallery,
 Purnell Center for the Arts, Carnegie
 Mellon campus, Oakland. 412-253-3613
 or www.cmu.edu/millergallery

craft-kitsch construction: a repurposing of granny's fabric scraps and wigs? A discarded teddy-bear collection? Neighboring this joyous barbarism is Mitchell's sly tribute to academic feminism, with a wall-sized pencil drawing depicting a robust feminist li-

brary framing a diptych of T-shirts reading: "Women's Studies Professors Have White Privilege" and "I'm with problematic." The grouping suggests that feminism is caught in a nauseating feedback loop.

A counterpoint are Tammy Rae Carland's large photographs that pause overthinking. These include the romantic, slept-in colorfields of "Lesbian Beds," while the empty stages in "I'm Dying Up in Here" evoke awkward stillness, as if the performer had just fled the scene. Carland talks love, anxiety, attachment and queer politics without bristles.

There's also a career-spanning collection by filmmaker, performer and author Miranda July. A sure highlight is her video "Nest of 10s." It's worth the 10 minutes — rarely will you find such provocative, sometimes

arts

difficult, push and pull about gender, sex and class in such a deceptively banal narrative.

The third floor further reconciles art and post-riot grrrl acolytes, starting with L.J. Roberts' crowd-pleasing, 15-foot-tall barbed-wire fence encased in fuchsia yarn and titled, "We Couldn't Get In, We Couldn't Get Out" — an impressively belabored sculptural trope. Roberts' other works borrow from the visual language of protest, including a giant flag, originally installed on a church steeple, reading "Mom Knows Now," which wall text characterizes as "a coming out and a declaration."

Stephanie Syjuco's brainiac installations mark the intersection of sociocultural provocation and dry humor. "The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)" is a participatory work, inviting viewers to crochet knockoffs from a catalog of hacked patterns, from Gucci purses to Burberry scarves. Syjuco's visually tame projects give me a thrill: An affable troublemaker has officially infiltrated the system.

Riot grrrl found empowerment through its marginality as a radical movement, a sensibility distinct in works by Ginger Brooks Takahashi. She's a founding member of feminist genderqueer art collective LTTR (which formerly stood for "Lesbians to the Rescue"). "A Wave of New Rage Thinking," reads a post-apocalyptic-looking piece of signage tacked to the wall that Twitterizes the first floor's famous riot-grrrl manifesto. "Feminist Body Pillow" is a fleshy dog-pile of stuffed T-shirts printed with racy though delicate assertions of lesbian lust and queer visibility.

Also featured is Brooks Takahashi's traveling Project Mobilivre-Bookmobile, "an effort to bring artists' publications to a wider audience while demystifying bookmaking with workshops." Altogether, Brooks Takahashi uncovers feminism's tendency to vacillate between friendly separatism and determined community-building.

Community-building, a withstanding preoccupation among feminists and artists, is central to Faythe Levine's photographic series "Time Outside of Time," which documents off-the-grid communities.

Alien She is superbly designed, comprehensive and approachable. But it's important to remember that riot grrrl was anti-authoritarian, gritty, screechy. It revealed in failure and was intentionally unsuitable for mass consumption. One wonders whether institutional sanctioning of such movements is the compromise required to get them into history books. If so, perhaps it's OK, because this exhibition's authors were directly involved with the movement. Nonetheless, *Alien She* resounds riot grrrl's, and feminism's, hold on contemporary life. It says, "This happened, keep going."

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[ART REVIEW]
PLACEMENTS
 (BY NADINE WASSERMAN)

For the 2013 Carnegie International — curated by Dan Byers, Tina Kulicki and Daniel Baumann — Carnegie Museum of Art director Lynn Zelevansky emphasized the importance of place. For most of us, a firm sense of place is at the root of our identity. Whether it's where we grew up or where we live, the particulars and history inspire pride and nostalgia.

In his series "What Makes Me Understand What I Know?," He An uses large neon characters pilfered from the signage ubiquitous in Chinese boomtowns. The characters spell out two names: his father's and that of a Japanese adult-video actress. Globalization tends to homogenize and transform a place until it is unrecognizable. The series explores intimacy familial and virtual to meditate on the alienation caused by rapid development.

Particularly poignant in the halls of the museum built by industrial titan Andrew Carnegie, He An's series is echoed in Zoe Strauss' Homestead Project photographs, which chronicle a community transformed by boom and bust.

Amar Kanwar's films similarly record the transformation by industry and urban growth of landscape in India. But where Strauss portrays specific Homestead residents, Kanwar, like He An, prefers a mood of disconnection and isolation.

Industry is also captured in the work of Yael Bartana, but instead of faceless globalization, she focuses on workers building by hand. However, far from sanguine, her two films explore the failures of Zionism. In an edited version of 1935's propagandistic "Awodah," smiling pioneers conquer the desert. In "Summer Camp," Bartana documents efforts by the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition to rebuild a Palestinian home destroyed by Israeli authorities. Like Bartana, photographer Joel Sternfeld captures the failures and triumphs of revolutionary ideas. His series "Sweet Earth" documents American experimental utopias.

Evoking a similar mixture of melancholy and optimism are the photographic portraits of Zanele Muholi. These images, declarative like Strauss', show people from South Africa living with adversity (in this case, confronting homophobia). In company with Strauss and Muholi are Henry Taylor's portrait paintings, which capture the milieu surrounding his Los Angeles studio. Taylor portrays people from the neighborhood as well as iconic figures like Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton.

By focusing on place as both a global and local concept, the International underscores the importance of locale and community in a rapidly changing landscape.

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