

Art exhibition turns its eyes on voyeurism
Show racy, but only in the telling

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The Winnipeg Free Press, Sat, Jan 20, 2001, p.B4]

By Sigrid Dahle

CANADIAN-BORN New York-based artist Charmaine Wheatley investigates audience reactions to the kinds of imagery and performances usually produced by sex trade workers for heterosexual male consumers.

It's a tricky undertaking for any young artist, fraught with many ideological, personal and professional risks and pitfalls. However, though Wheatley graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design only a few years ago, her current one-person exhibition at Gallery 1.1.1 demonstrates that, for the most part, she's risen to the challenge with considerable wit and esthetic judgment.

In a video, "Agricola Street," which documents Wheatley's infamous 1997 performance, we see her at night, sitting naked in an abandoned storefront window in a rough Halifax neighbourhood while videotaping the reactions, comments and heckles of passers-by.

"It's a woman," shouts a guy in disbelief. An obviously surprised woman bemoans Wheatley's lack of "the common sense God gave her."

In the exhibition's other video, "Cassa Rossa," we catch glimpses of Wheatley's art performance or intervention at an Amsterdam strip club.

An attired Wheatley unobtrusively enters the nightclub and quietly joins the audience. She matter-of-factly removes her clothes, drops something on the floor, bends over to pick it up, puts on her lace jacket, picks up her umbrella and casually leaves as though nothing out-of-the-ordinary has transpired.

"Cambridge Suites," an elegant, black-on-black hardcover book consists solely of what one assumes are photo-based images of Wheatley striking cliched, explicitly erotic poses.

"Moonpies," the only sculptural work in the exhibition, is a series of "six identical chocolate sculptures made from a life-sized mould of Wheatley's shapely behind." The sumptuous chocolates, each one resting on a delicate paper lace doily, are elegantly exhibited in glass-fronted display cases.

The newest and arguably the most compelling body of work in the exhibition is a series of seven book works, each comprised of a collection of card-sized, diaristic image-and-text drawings gathered together in a discarded "box," the kind of vintage metal cigar, cigarette or cigarello containers that sport product labels such as Chesterfield or Velasquez.

For the Gallery 1.1.1 exhibition, each set of drawings is smartly displayed in a grid-like fashion on one of seven table tops whose dimensions are directly proportional to the shape of the box that holds that particular set of drawings.

In these precious but occasionally slick multi-media drawings with their painfully neat handwritten script, Wheatley waxes prosaic and poetic about her day-to-day life and makes notes in preparation for her performances and other projects (all of which is reminiscent of artists' notebooks).

Much of the writing is so minuscule that it's virtually illegible to the unaided eye. But with the help of the glass magnifying lenses placed on each table and with plenty of back-breaking, foot-sore perseverance, viewers are potentially privy to Wheatley's most intimate thoughts.

All of which seems pretty racy -- but only in the telling.

Visitors rushing to this exhibition in search of a quick and easy turn-on are likely to leave empty-handed.

Wheatley's sly strategy, which appears to inform most of the work in this exhibition, is to draw attention to the viewer's voyeuristic desires by frustrating their expectations and "jamming" their satisfaction.

In the videos, for example, we see very little of Wheatley

-- the ceiling of the strip bar and the gawking audience warrant far more footage than do her bare breasts. The black-on-black images of Wheatley in the Cambridge Suites book work are virtually indecipherable unless the light is exactly right. The height and dimensions of Wheatley's display tables and the minuteness of her script will leave you feeling cramped and bleary-eyed long before you've gleaned any of Wheatley's supposed "secrets."

Charmaine Wheatley, the exhibition, is most certainly provocative. Not because Charmaine Wheatley, the artist, takes her clothes off in public or because she toys with cliched sexual imagery but because her artwork draws attention to voyeurism itself even while it makes sex seem as ordinary a part of everyday life as a trip to the john.