

## Untotal Exposure

Robert Enright

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Charmaine Wheatley is a Haligonian performance artist based in New York. She produces work in a number of media, including intimate drawings done on cards cut to fit the dimensions of boxes given her by friends, edible chocolate sculptures (called "Moonpies") of that part of her body where cheek meets cheek, and videotapes of her activities and the reaction of the various audiences who come across them. In Winnipeg she staged two performances in strip clubs to coincide with an exhibition of her work at Gallery 1.1.1. at the University of Manitoba. She spoke with *Border Crossings* in her room at the Hotel Fort Garry.

*BC: How do the various parts of your artistic practice fit together?*

CW: I feel that the paintings and the chocolates and the other work I do just take one fragment out of my sketchbook drawings and make it large. The drawings form an unedited ongoing visual diary that seems to work for me. I always have this box of paper and tools around.

*BC: In a book work called Cambridge Suites you reproduce what are probably intimate photographs, but they're rendered in such a way as to be almost invisible. Where did they come from?*

CW: I and a few friends rented a hotel room -- the hotel was named The Cambridge Suites -- got naked, went swimming in the jacuzzi and the bathtub, and took a bunch of pictures. I then photocopied the photographs onto black paper. I think it comes from a playground experience I had when I was a little kid. I saw this page of ads for a sex phone line or something and there were these black censor dots on the dirtiest parts of these little pictures, and I remember being small and trying to see around the black dots in order to catch sight of the juiciest parts. In Cambridge Suites it's as if a black censor dot takes over

the whole image. I love it when people look at that book because they hold it up to the light, they tilt it back and forth, but it's in vain because they won't see anything. What is even better than actually seeing is where your mind goes; you make it bigger, you fill in the blanks. My imagination and my fantasy are better than what reality gives me. I mean, I can always tell a better story in my head.

*BC: Why use the body?*

CW: I feel it's a place where I'm not supposed to be and so I really want to be there. It's such a high-stress environment but it's really quite protected. I think it's kind of prissy, so I want to agitate it, rile it up a bit. I want to get in there and feel it, touch it and penetrate it. It's like experimenting: if I do this, what will you do in return? What's it all about; why do people go there; why am I attracted to going there?

*BC: Have you figured out what the attraction is for you?*

CW: Maybe I like looking at the ladies. Could be that. Maybe I like looking at the guys looking at the ladies; maybe I get off on the bright lights and the glitter and the glamour; maybe I get off on the superficial sex stuff, the marketing and the manufacturing of sexuality.

*BC: It's complicated for you?*

CW: It is. Isn't it for everyone, sexuality? It's massive.

*BC: The work is really quite personal, isn't it?*

CW: The stuff that most people think is explicit, the work that's called pornographic, like the chocolate sculptures and the video work, is nothing. That's just flesh. I feel I'm being truly pornographic when I show you the unedited stuff, when you see my stream of consciousness go through drawings and bits of words. That's when I feel like I'm getting dirty.