

Charmaine by Cliff Eyland

In a notorious 1997 performance piece enacted one night in Halifax's roughest neighbourhood, Canadian-born performance artist Charmaine Wheatley videotaped viewers' reactions to her naked body through the window of a storefront gallery. Police showed up just as she left the scene. Later that year she did an unauthorized strip show at a Halifax club (with the support of eyelevel gallery), having distributed invitations to an art audience. She also does performances in rented hotel rooms, and she regularly arranges intimate but public photo sessions as works in themselves and also as a means to create new works.

Born and raised in Canada, Wheatley moved to New York City a couple of years ago, having graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1994. "Charmaine" is a shape-shifting, in-your-face, sexually charged post-Madonna persona that Wheatley created in and of herself. She has been dubbed a "performance provocateuse." She draws, paints, makes video, book works and photographs, choosing the medium that suits the logic of a particular work.

Recently, at Winnipeg's Gallery One One One, Charmaine showed two videotapes - one of her Halifax storefront performance and the other of a strip-club intervention she did in Amsterdam. Also on display were tiny, intimate drawings with diary-like texts mounted under plexi on brightly coloured purpose-built tables; chocolate "Moonpies" cast from her ass cleavage; a hand-made T-shirt on a bewigged mannequin; a CD compilation of the fifties pop tune "Charmaine"; a boxed copy of a pornographic magazine called High Society (in which Charmaine has a covert contribution); and as gallery decor, some interior design "inventions," including an innovative candlestick holder. While she was in Winnipeg, Charmaine also mounted unauthorized performances at two local strip clubs.

Last year Charmaine met Carolee Schneemann, the pioneering performance artist, and they have since become friends. In the following quotation from 1975 Schneemann imagines the future:

By the year 2000 no young woman artist will meet the

determined resistance and constant undermining which I endured as a student ... Nor will she go into the "art world," gracing or disgracing a pervading stud club of artists, historians, teachers, museum directors, magazine editors, gallery dealers - all male, or committed to masculine preserves. All that is marvelously, already falling around our feet.
- Carolee Schneemann, from More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings

Charmaine, in the year 2000, considers Schneemann's prognostication:

A hopeful, optimistic prediction. From what I can tell feminism has made some progress since then, still I can only comment on what's going on now. I wish my work could be considered simply as being by "an artist" and not marginalized or reduced as work by a "feminist artist."

Obviously my work looks like it was made by me, a white woman ... We make work from our own perspectives and naturally gender and cultural background affect the way we see things, but I get bored when people start off talking about feminist politics when looking at my work. It's disappointing, insulting and feels like an unwillingness to really understand the ideas I am sharing with an audience.

I am not thinking feminism when I am conceiving or producing work; it's there I'm sure but it's not my motivation. Feminist issues are ambient white noise for my approaches. I am even annoyed with talking about getting equal pay for work because such dialogue diverts the focus from the work and ideas quickly get lost. I want equal amounts of respect and value. It's just, yeah, enough fucking around - stop belabouring the obvious. Let's start with specifics and maybe branch out from there - i.e. Charmaine's ass in milk chocolate or Charmaine's naked self in a strip club, instead of, for example, a white woman's ass in milk chocolate or a naked woman in a strip club. Let's make it less general.

I appreciate and value the work of Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann and I owe a lot to the spirit of

Hannah and Carolee. Other real art makers for me are Yoko Ono, because she monumentalized the small; Gabriel Orozco, because his eyes are open and his studio is the world and is not confined to four walls; Barbara Bloom, who is quiet, observant and elegant, and makes thoughtful and classy work; and Alice Neel, whose work is human. I also like painting by Jenny Saville and Elizabeth Peyton, and I think Acconci is pretty funny and I admire how he had the courage to trust his dumb ideas and how he went against and challenged (knowingly or not) the established norms of feminist doctrine.

- Charmaine Wheatley, from an e-mail to the author

Artists are used to public nudity, whether in the studio, on a nude beach or among like-minded friends, and so for many artists public nudity is not especially erotic, but somehow ceremonial and symbolic, connected to a century-old art-school tradition of the life-drawing class. Such orientation engenders attitudes to nudity and sex amongst artists that often differ from those of the wider public. Indeed, many people become artists in order to enter this culture and to sort out for themselves what looking at bodies means to them. Charmaine's work is at least partly about the mysteries and ceremonies we create around public nudity, especially as these have to do with, as she puts it: "The plainness or ordinariness of our lacklustre, God-given natural state."

Strip-club ceremonies, gay and straight, involve a hands-off form of public sex. They're about sexual power tripping, homosociality and fantasies of sex with perfect bodies. For the viewer, a strip club can be an "out-of-body" experience much like television, during which one can imagine that heaven is sex. The presence of actual bodies does not make the strip-club experience any less imaginary, but more intense.

WINNIPEG: FRIDAY, JANUARY 12, 2001

The Players

Camera one: Tim Phillips, a young video artist (looking the part of a lonely frustrated regular)

Camera two: Dominique Rey, a young painter and photographer (just pleasing her man)

Dominique's chaperone and boyfriend: Kevin Barkman (Jock)

Driver: Jaclyn Hunter, an art student
Jaclyn's chaperone: Cyrus Smith, an art student

Charmaine's piece addresses a two-tiered audience. First, there's the regular strip-joint clientele. And then there's us: Cliff Eyland, Meeka Walsh, Robert Enright, Steve Swan, David Wityk. Meeka Walsh is the editor of Border Crossings, a Canadian art magazine, and Robert Enright is a CBC television visual arts critic who is also associated with Border Crossings. Steve Swan and David Wityk are art students.

First Stop: We will call it Club A.
Charmaine and crew enter at 10 p.m. Dominique and Tim are wired with hidden video cameras. Jaclyn and her chaperone, Cyrus, are getaway drivers who sit near the door ready to dash to the car. Enright, Walsh, Swan, Wityk and myself are witnesses who have been asked by Charmaine to sit in the audience, enjoy a beer and watch the show.

As Club A is the biggest and most informal of Winnipeg's strip clubs, it has no cover charge. Most of the audience look like working-class men. This club's two announcers are moonlighting, so they tell us. They say that they work for a local radio station called Power 97. Posters for Power 97 and Budweiser beer festoon the bar. The music is AC/DC with the occasional Tragically Hip number. The place has a pinball machine and a pool table, two long bars and a door to the hotel lobby. Lights line the curvilinear stage. Half-clad girls walk around selling tickets for a dollar each toward a draw for individual dances.

Club A is the sleazy bottom of Winnipeg's strip-club circuit. Charmaine is dressed like a stripper or prostitute in a skimpy white outfit and white fur jacket. She sits down on a chair, ringside, and begins making conversation with the guy beside her. Dominique and Tim position themselves so their lapel cameras can capture her performance. We - the collaborators - do not acknowledge each other. Music blares as one of the "real" strippers dances: after licking a rolled-up poster of herself she slides it between her legs and then throws it our way. I watch as it grazes Steve Swan's head and bounces off a large belly behind us.

Charmaine gradually - one could say casually - disrobes as

she sits ringside. A heavy-set waitress becomes alarmed, turning Dominique's way in open-mouthed astonishment - a double take - as if to say, "What is the woman doing? Doesn't she know that nudity in a public place is illegal?" A man with a big cell phone strapped to his belt - we assume he is the manager - runs over, grabs Charmaine's arm and shouts at her under the bump-and-grind din. He twirls his hand at his head in that distinct gesture - he thinks Charmaine is crazy - and ends the Club A intervention as he throws her out. Outside, patrons crowd around her as she gets into the getaway car. It's clear they too think she's crazy but they'd still like to pick her up.

Second Stop: We will call it Club B.

Charmaine and crew enter at 10:40 p.m. after a ten-minute car ride from Club A. Club B is polite, clean, well-lit, maybe even sexy. A friendly, middle-aged white-haired woman in a pink coat greets us as we enter, and collects the five-dollar cover charge. Club B is the most up-scale strip joint in Winnipeg. It is located in Winnipeg's French quarter, a quaint community called St. Boniface. Charmaine walks in, sits down alone at a table and quietly orders a drink. She visits the ladies' room and then returns to her table. She negotiates with staff members, persuading them to let her on stage, where she does an amateur performance, disrobing to great applause. She returns to her seat for a while and then quietly leaves with Cyrus and Jaclyn.

Charmaine on Club B:

"I asked a bouncer wearing a black tie if I could take a turn swinging on the pole. He said no. A little later the black-suited and T-shirted manager told me I could dance but I had to dance for a whole song and I had to show 'booty.' Later, he came back to say I couldn't let guys touch me on the stage because there were undercover cops there. Like a proper amateur I got some beer bellies to pull off my furry thong and untie my furry top, and then for a whole song I swung around the pole without any skill."

Tim Phillips on Club B:

"She looked like she was really self-conscious and out of her league up there on the Club B stage, but there was quite a bit of support for her in the crowd. The Club B deejay called her 'shy' in his announcement. She got howls of support because she was shy and vulnerable and people thought they could get to know her and hang out. That's what made the night for me. It was so different from Club A."

The next day Charmaine dressed in white and went to the outskirts of Winnipeg with David Wityk to stage a "disappearance," a kind of counterpoint to her strip club appearances. Wityk documented her pale figure as she walked into a sea of snowy white prairie farmland that Charmaine said "fused seamlessly with the vast foggy white prairie winter sky." After staying up all night with Wityk in the darkroom printing photos of her disappearing act, Charmaine caught her flight back to New York.