

Integrity of the coquette  
Charmaine Wheatley enchants at Gallery 1.1.1.

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*Charmaine Wheatley Gallery 1.1.1 Until February 2*

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First I chuckled. Well, not first, since it took me a few moments to assess Wheatley's "Moonpies," displayed in the front windows of the gallery in mock-bakery fashion, for what they are. But we'll return to this.

Charmaine Wheatley is an artist of Canadian origin, whose performance-based work is represented in three main parts in the current show. One is the "Moonpies," description of which I'll save as a special treat at the end of this review. Another is a video that is the residue of a 1997 performance piece. Third, and occupying the most space in the gallery, as well as demanding the most protracted attention, is a set of sets of small cards that document a sort of journal.

These cards are the easiest to be comfortable with, probably because they mediate Wheatley's intimate frankness with display that confronts the viewer by drawing you in; you can afford to be a little shy. The other pieces are bolder, and don't leave you that luxury.

Each set of cards fits tidily into a neat little box or tin, of no more than seven inches in either dimension. The cards are laid out on custom-built (and attractive) tables, meticulously unfolded for the duration of the show. One can imagine them taken down at the end, packed up in their little containers and locked away like a teenage diary, 4-ever.

A lot of Wheatley's exhibition draws its energy from what happens when that matter for public exhibition bumps up against the intimately personal, and tiny sparks fly all over.

For example, in the journal cards, she records information at various levels of intimacy and privilege, but in a tiny script, in a format made precious by the neat little boxes

they fit into. Still, the cards are carefully arranged for our consumption, and in fact there are little magnifying beads on top of the display, an invitation to pore thoroughly over the pieces, your nose almost touching the glass table top. When you get down there, you'll find all manner of information, from sketches of random persons and to-do lists to detailed emotional monologues and phone numbers. There's even a section that records the planning of the Gallery 1.1.1 show.

Wheatley beckons us in closer, then allows us to see likely more than we bargained for. The tension between the promise and the delivery, once you stick your neck out to accept it, can both attract and repel a viewer at different points.

It's a coquettish game, where the artist is clearly skilled enough in the execution that she is really in control of the viewer's experience, even when she seems to be giving away too much.

This is crucial, especially to the other pieces here. It is only through wit that Wheatley's work can assert dominion over the viewer, and it is a delicate construction that draws us in with such transgressive intimacy while preserving its own integrity. It might seem at first as though Wheatley's work should lay her bare and vulnerable. Instead, the exhibition consistently asserts her control of the experience.

As if illustrating this, in the performance video [entitled "2385 Agricola"] she sits nude in a storefront display window after dark, and passersby react on their own terms to her presence, but she's the one holding the video camera. It's not a sophisticated trick, but it underlines the fact that the party who offers more intimacy is not necessarily in the submissive role. Also, the intimacy she offers is bounded: she is behind glass, on private property; she has taken charge of the situation, though it doesn't appear so at first look.

Or there is the *coup de grâce*: the "Moonpies" are chocolate sculptures cast from an impression of Wheatley's ass cleavage. This may strike you at first as a good or bad joke. It may provoke feelings of disgust, desire, or confusion. Whatever may be, it's the manipulation, the

provocation that matters, and that demonstrates in the most delicious way her subversion: whatever she exposes here, she is never a victim of the exposure. We viewers are the objects of the experience, very much on Wheatley's terms.