

The Sad Truth: Femme aux Bananes (Woman with Bananas)

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A furor has erupted in the art and feminist milieus and in the Quebec and Canadian media after two paintings depicting women carrying fruit on their heads were censored in an exhibition sponsored by the Concordia University Women's Centre. Originally the exhibition had been announced as "non-juried," in other words without a selection process. Among different, frequently contradictory reasons given by the Women's Centre, one member, Shira Spector, said that one of the paintings was 'racist' because the artist, Lyne Robichaud, "was exploring primitive and mythical imagery of women." "Though one image was more blatant, and the other more ambivalent," a statement by the Women's Centre's art committee said, "we could not refuse one without refusing both."

Putting another spin on the painting's rejection, however, Robichaud was informed over the phone by art committee member Sue Goldstein that "because you're white, you should stick to making paintings of white women."

However, another member of the Women's Centre, Johanne Cadorette, gave the impression that the painting was rejected primarily because of a lack of submitted paintings of women of color: "If we had a really good number of all sorts of really positive images of women of color," she said, "...then maybe a picture of one carrying bananas on her head would be a completely different issue."

In their statement of rejection, however, the Women's Centre flatly accused Robichaud's painting of "reproducing derogatory, condescending stereotypes of women of color and of all women." Basing their analysis on a "deconstructive stance," the Women's Centre stated that it was their "responsibility to refuse to display images which could be read as reproducing — whether intentionally or unintentionally — racist, sexist, homophobic, and/or violent images and stereotypes."

But in an interview in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, art committee member Shira Spector backed off from implying racist intentions on the artist's part: "No, we're not saying that Lyne intended to be racist..." Elsewhere in the interview, though, Spector affirms that the painting "is racist" because it is a "primitive image": "We are a feminist organization that doesn't want to promote racism, sexism and homophobia. We felt that [Robichaud's] image was a primitive image of women. She even said in her written description that she is exploring primitive and mythical imagery of women. We feel that this is racist. We're not saying that there aren't women who carry bananas on their head, or that this picture doesn't correspond to a reality. But this seems to be the main image of women from these countries. It reminds us of colonialism and the noble savage who is happy with her life and smiling."

"Okay, she's not smiling," Spector acknowledged, when the *Globe and Mail* reporter pointed out that she wasn't smiling. "But it's a happy image nonetheless."

Figuring out what is going on in this tangle of statements from the Women's Centre is no easy task. But it is clear that a primitivist approach is being slandered.

By the time I decided to write an article the controversy had already turned into a hotly debated media event. A call I left on the Women's Centre answering machine was not returned and the media shows on which Robichaud and Women Centre members were to be present were canceled by the Women's Centre. Later a forum to discuss the issues involved was organized at Concordia but Robichaud was not invited to the event to present her side.

In a letter to the *Link*, a Concordia student newspaper, Natalie Kauffman, a first-year fine arts student, said that her painting depicted "a woman of many colors, *not* a woman of color" and that the art committee "misunderstood my painting even after my explanation." "In many ways a self-portrait," she said, her painting was a "representation of womankind, from different cultures

and different areas of the globe” and its theme was “sexuality, cultural diversity and spirituality, exactly what the show’s objectives were.”

Lyne Robichaud, for her part, said that her painting was an “homage to the monotonous everyday tasks that women have performed as mothers for thousands of years.” But she also talks about the “over-automated, polluting and arrogant societies of the Western world” and describes her painting as a being about “a simple way of life and a connection to the earth ...We [women] began as nourishers, as gatherers.”

Here we appear to come to the offending primitivist dimension which was deemed so horrid by the Women’s Centre.

Fear of the Primitive

Lyne Robichaud had never heard of *Fifth Estate* or *Anarchy*, or primitivist precursors such as Lewis Mumford or Jacques Ellul. But her concerns and an anti-authoritarian, anti-civilization approach coincide in certain ways, and she is clearly being attacked because of the primitivist dimension.

The revolt against civilization stretches back to the rise of civilization itself. Gaining momentum with the advent of massive industrialization and the introduction of the factory system, it has experienced steady growth in recent years, now that the true extent of the damage wrought by the megamachine has become starkly apparent. The libertarian anti-civilization milieu, which has been around for about 15 years in its present incarnation, is only one manifestation of a centuries-old phenomenon. Civilization in effect produces its own negation.

The Women’s Centre, it seems, will not be satisfied with less than eradicating the word primitive: “We could not see ourselves printing that word beside the image because that would be derogatory,” according to art committee member Cathy Sisler, because, she says, the word has “been used to exploit and degrade.” (Actually Robichaud did not use the word primitive in the text which was to accompany her painting; she does use it elsewhere, however.)

It is clearly time to reclaim this word from certain feminists who are attempting to degrade me by eliminating it.

Primitive, for me, simply signifies the antidote to civilization. However, there has been debate about the word in the anti-civ milieu itself. Heme of the French journal *Point D’Interrogations*, for example, has called it a “limiting, fragmented label,” a term which “tends to mask the roots of our rejection of this world. Our disgust becomes not the product of what we in effect are living and undergoing on a daily basis and the thoughts that it gives birth to in us, but of an ideological reference to another kind of society about which we have no direct knowledge.”

In any case, mine is only one among not infrequently clashing approaches in the hardly monolithic anti-civ milieu, where outlooks range from positing a pre-language golden age, as John Zerzan does, to the *Fifth Estate’s* emphasis on community and defending past and present indigenous groups, to the approach of Feral Faun, who, while integrating a critique of technology and civilization, says, “I desire something new, something which, to my knowledge, has never existed,” to approaches within the anarchist tendency of Earth First! (See the recently released third issue of *Live Wild or Die*). And beyond the anti-authoritarian anti-civ milieu as such, of course, are all those who, past or present, have practiced low-tech or subsistence lifeways.

Though acknowledging that the word primitive might have positive connotations for others, “You can’t unload all the baggage that word carries,” according to Cathy Sisler. But the ‘baggage’ problem is clearly the Women’s Centre’s: they seem to have accumulated an enormous amount of it and of the variety whose claims to be authoritative become all the more strident the more the ideology in question becomes patently dysfunctional. “We are in the vanguard,” Women’s Centre coordinator Margot Lacroix revealingly rants, which for her indicates being in line with the latest theoretical approach (i.e. academic fad). “You have to retain your critical tools, you have to *pay attention*” lectures Lacroix, as if a subtle, supple critique were being honed as opposed to wheeling out a monstrosity, their “deconstructive stance.” The Women’s Centre complains about ‘ridicule’ in the media. But nobody obliged them to become a laughing stock — they brought it entirely upon themselves. After talking about ‘responsibility’ everywhere in their statements and interviews, they should find it self-evident that actions like theirs cause reactions.

Primitive Stereotypes and Stereotyping Primitivists

But if after the initial firestorm one might have expected the Women’s Centre to become a little less categorical in their assertions and judgements, to back off a bit, such thoughts were quickly laid to rest. “We are not here to justify or apologize for our actions,” as Cathy Sisler put it. The Women’s Centre just doesn’t seem to “get it,” so detached from reality has their approach become. Unable to “pay attention,” to listen to what is actually being said, or to shake free from their rigid grid of academic pigeonholes, the Women’s Centre only manages to superimpose its own galaxy of stereotypes, whereby what are considered primitivist approaches are equated, in Shira Specter’s term, with a kind of ‘colonialism’. Referring to the short statement which was to have accompanied Robichaud’s painting, “That’s the kind of thinking that has kept black people down at the bottom of the social ladder for centuries,” Cathy Sisler is reported to have said in an interview with Barbara Black for a Concordia student newspaper. But it is most of the Women’s Movement itself — after a brief, exhilarating battle against hierarchy as such in the ’60s and early 70s — which has accepted a life-as-a-“social ladder” worldview and which has adopted as its primary goal the assurance that an equal number of women can elbow their way to the top.

In the Guatemalan native villages I visited the preferred way of carrying medium-size loads is on the head. But for Gail Velaskasis, the chair of the Concordia Faculty of Arts and Sciences, if I have images of women carrying objects on their head in my mind or express them as words and images, I become guilty of using racist, derogatory, condescending stereotypes ...unless, she informs us, with respect to Robichaud’s painting, they are there within a strictly pedagogical framework: “enlightening the public concerning the plight of black women.” The unlamented “socialist realism” of the Stalinist era is not dead, it seems, but is only being modernized and recycled as what might be dubbed “deconstructive realism.” In her painting Robichaud may or may not have succeeded in conveying all the nuances and emotions she desired: what is at issue here is not a question of esthetics or ‘talent’ but the implementation of a form of cultural terrorism. In line with a vanguard approach, judgements concerning Robichaud’s painting, however contradictory, all seem to be pronounced with a uniform self-assurance. Where Shira Specter sees a ‘happy’, ‘smiling image, Gail Velaskasis perceives a “beast of burden.”

But on another level there is of course a question of ‘colonialism’, and of ‘savages’ who are ‘smiling’ and ‘happy’. The colonized, according to the colonizers, could not be other than pleased

to play their assigned role in the natural, cosmically-ordained scheme of things. Like Shjra Spector the colonizers perceived smiles that weren't there; blacks on the plantation, for example, could only be carefree, happy, content with their lot. For the colonizers gave the colonized the greatest gift of all — the exquisite luxury of basking in the presence of the colonizers and their culture, their science, their truth, their stern but upright justice. Unfamiliar primitive lifeways were proof of an inferiority which justified expropriating the land of the colonized and turning them into peons or slaves.

Art and the Primitivist Perception

Attitudes toward art in the anti-civilization milieu are diverse. For example in “The Case Against Art” and other writings, John Zerzan took a negative tack, questioning symbolism and representation as such, whereas in an exchange which took place in the *Fifth Estate* a few years back George Bradford and others were generally favorably inclined toward art and culture.

But the art milieu is clearly one of the precursors of the contemporary anti-civilization milieu. Fauvism, Surrealism, Picasso, and Cubism-primitive influences permeate modern art, underscoring the magnitude of the purification process undertaken by certain feminists. The question of artists and primitive influences is complex, and perhaps best approached with considerable caution. Around the turn of the century exhibitions of African masks, for example, could be seen in European cities and exerted a profound influence on Picasso and others and had a more diffuse effect on the milieu as a whole. Often these influences were primarily aesthetic and did not necessarily imply a profound questioning of civilization or its rejection. At times, primitive influences were only one among an array of factors affecting an artist's style, or represented a phase the artist was passing through. As well, ubiquitous buying and selling was also having its corrosive effect, with other factors tending to be displaced by the art-as-commodity aspect. Ironically, some works by famous artists influenced by primitivism now fetch colossal sums on the art market.

In an interview about the controversy in the *Montreal Gazette*, Jean Parris, a black woman, also had harsh comments about the painting: “To a modern-day black woman that image is stereotypical. It's like continually portraying a black man with chains on his feet. Why can't artists today depict us as people who have an education and accomplish things, just like whites.” But in an article in *La Presse*, Vivien Barbot Lymburger, a woman of Haitian origin, said that “Lyne Robichaud's painting allowed me to recreate an entire slice of my childhood. So for me it is in no way a stereotype and represents what is probably still taking place in many countries...Concealing certain conditions which are specific to black women, in particular in order to exclusively favor representations of American-type ‘success stories’, would have a much more pernicious effect on the status of women, in my opinion.” Linda Dyer, a woman from Trinidad, said in a letter about the controversy that “For the first 18 years of my life and on annual visits thereafter, I would sit on my mother's front veranda and watch women and men returning home from their nearby farms with the day's harvest of bananas, cauliflower, baigan, plantain or cabbages. On their heads, of course...carrying loads on the head provides the best distribution of weight for the human frame and so creates the least strain on the spine.” Clarence Bayne, a black man, said, “I don't see any uproar in the black population about this...It's not an issue...Some white people are getting too sensitive.”

This is clearly delicate territory, but I will attempt to tread firmly, if carefully:
Every people has its roots in primitive life-ways; for each, civilization is only a very recent phenomenon.

- I am part of humankind and all of humankind is part of me. Through exploring the primitive lifeways of different peoples, images gather in my head (though personally I have no particular desire to express them as visual art).
- The self-images of a group undoubtedly constitute the most valuable source of understanding about that group. However, the ethnic group is not the final arbitrator of the images that concern it. Images are not the private property of the group. They belong to everyone.

A New Apartheid?

Nationalists of different stripes (feminist nationalists, gay nationalists, black nationalists, etc.) will argue that the opinions of people who are not members of a group are inherently invalid or even, as Robichaud was told with respect to black people, that they should not express them. “Does that also mean,” Robichaud notes, “that women should only paint women, and men only men, and that you have to be a dog in order to draw a dog?” Having opinions about a group and expressing them, according to a certain discourse, becomes itself a form of imperialism. In practice this outlook usually translates into expecting non-members of the group to rally behind cultural and political elites of the group in question.

The media were “just waiting in the wings to jump on this one,” noted Julianne Pidduck, whose weekly ‘Female Persuasions’ column appears in the free, ad-financed cultural tabloid the *Montreal Minor*. The media in effect went bananas. (At least) 14 letters and 30 articles have appeared in the print media, and 15 electronic media pieces have been cranked out. Soliciting calls to their “Info-Line” the *Montreal Gazette* made “Is this picture racist?” their question of the week. Pontificating editors and columnists spouted banalities from their press pulpits. The censored image appeared on the front page of the *Montreal Gazette*, in *La Presse*, *Le Nowelliste*, *Le Soleil*, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (the Canadian equivalent to the *New York Times*), *Voir*, the *Fredericton Daily Gleaner* and in other papers, flashed on TV screens across Quebec and Canada and was bounced off a satellite and into homes around the world. Taking a line from censors the world over, the Women’s Centre claimed that Robichaud’s painting was not censored because it could be displayed elsewhere, a result they certainly did much to bring about!

Appalled by the reaction of the media, Lyne Robichaud said, “It makes me sick,” concerning the question of the week gambit. She was also bitter about being, in the words of Nancy Cole, a feminist artist from Toronto, “unjustly accused” of racism. Indeed, the smear campaign mounted by the Women’s Centre has amounted to a veritable witch hunt. If they can do this to Robichaud (who complained that the Women’s Centre never even bothered to arrange a meeting with her), it can be done to anyone who, in Shira Spector’s words, is “exploring primitive...imagery.”

In the name of anti-racism, a new apartheid is being born. Or in Sue Goldstein’s words, “Because you’re white, you should stick to making paintings of white women.”

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