

PERSPECTIVE: "SUPERGIRL!" at Nexus Gallery

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City Paper welcomes Jonathan Wallis, assistant professor of art history at Moore College of Art and Design, to our Critical Mass team. His column, "Perspective," will run monthly in this space, bringing a critical eye to a visual art scene that continues to thrive in Philadelphia. Questions? E-mail Wallis at jswallis@gmail.com.



nexusphiladelphia.org/supergirl.html

Passive Aggressive, by Jody Wood

There was a knife fight last Thursday night at the Crane Building. The slashing and stabbing resulted in blood stains, yet there were no actual injuries. **Jody Wood's** performance at Nexus Gallery at the opening of "SUPERGIRL!" pitted two identically dressed women, Wood and an artist-friend, against each other; the two battled with lipstick-tipped knives to the point of physical exhaustion. The performance, preserved for the show through sculptural evidence in the form of shoes and knives on a red mat in the gallery, still resonates with me — most notably **their heavy breathing that was magnified by the silence of the crowd** surrounding them — the usual jeers and taunts of a schoolyard fight were squelched by the gallery context ("shhh... it's art"), so that **their gasps and labored breathing became sonorous**.

There are other conflicts involved with "SUPERGIRL!" of a critical nature: Provocative video work is presented in a sophisticated, dramatic and accessible manner in the space of the gallery, but **it fights a dangerously narrow representation of "super" women** (back to that shortly), and a sensational and over-generalized theme that lacks a clear sense of curatorial motivations. "SUPERGIRL!" leaves me standing at a critical crossroads, with no way out of the mired discourse other than to follow both paths in order to cover the art and the show that houses it. **Sorry, Robert Frost**, but I'm going down both...

The work of the nine female artists in the show evidences a range of possibilities in video — metaphors for personal struggle enacted within fictive and actual dramas, constructions of new worlds, physical and psychological struggles, the documentation and re-presentation of the world from the view of the individual, the manipulation of existing and past realities and even some humor and fun to boot.

Jennie Drumgoole's two videos narratives, *Husky* and *Wingbowl*, and **Kate Gilmore's** performances are standouts in the show.

Drumgoole's work is an excitingly fresh

Philadelphia-based take on the struggles between the id and the ego. One video presents a repressed and dangerous aspect of the artist named "Husky" (in a one-piece leopard body suit) who unleashes base desires, including a hoagie-gorging session complete with squirting mustard and ranch dressing poured over her body. The other represents the largely male collective id released from our "civilized" world in the frenzy of *Wingbowl*. This is Freud's sublimated discontents made manifest: misogynistic rage, fist fights, unleashed sexual desire and the gorging on the flesh of animals — think 21st-century Wachovia Center as surreal Roman Colosseum — and Drumgoole nails it.

Gilmore's performances hit us through vicarious identification with her physical use of the body. **In *Open Arms*, the silent artist gestures repeatedly for applause à la Charlie Chaplin while being pelted by tomatoes with force.** It's perfect in its simplicity, great on the big screen in the back room, and the monotonous repetition of the action reveals the slow, wearing away of her confidence and her growing sensitivity to the physical abuse. Gilmore succumbs to a defensive posture at points, but then regains her confidence and perseveres.

The video work is artistically diverse, but the show offers viewers little specific understanding of what it is doing together in a group exhibition focusing on superlative heroic female characters and/or artists. What we are told in the brochure and on the Web site is this: **The female superheroine contains many traits — she's elusive, she battles adversaries, she's an uber-woman, she achieves the impossible, and she proves she can be the most powerful person in the universe.**



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***Husky*, by Jennie Drumgoole**



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***Open Arms*, by Kate Gilmore**

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