

Exploring the feminine

Inaugural exhibit at ATHICA opens the door on women's issues

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By Mary Jessica Hammes

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Andi Steele's "What Keeps Us" is an elegant rack of black painted steel. Small, ghostly female torsos, limbless and cast in white paper, float in the air. Tidy rows of black steel hoops, extending from the vertical lines of metal, strangle their necks.

"When the idea first came to me, I was in a place where I wasn't doing anything I wanted to be doing," Steele explains. "I started thinking about what keeps us from taking the leap to do what we want to do. It's that constriction."

The constriction, she adds, might be a job, family pressures or societal norms -- all things certainly experienced by men and women. Yet the focus of "Raw Womyn," the inaugural show of Athens' newest gallery, ATHICA: Athens Institute for Contemporary Art Inc., is decidedly feminine. Co-sponsored by the Women's Studies Program at the University of Georgia, it is also an official Women's History Month 2002 event.

Curator and ATHICA director Lizzie Zucker Saltz initially planned for a show of figurative art, but then expanded it to art dealing with body image, she says, favoring the visceral over the comfortable.

It's a fine idea, as Saltz says the gallery's purpose is, in part, to "provide a place for people in the community to be enriched culturally and also be challenged by new ideas."

As Saltz says, some of the subject matter of the art is not comfortable to study. Charlotte DeVine's dioramas address domestic abuse; Alicia Caban Wheeler's ceramics encounter terrifying memories of childhood molestation. Other work is more subtly queasy. Laura Foster's "Blastocyst" sculptures, commenting on reproductive technology, are made in fleshy pinks and resemble ground, meaty intestines encased in twisting jump ropes, capped by bulbous organs.

Chris Hall, the only male exhibiting (his work here is slyly attributed to "Chrissa" Hall), provides a humorous send-up of want ads in his paintings. "Female No Arms Very Submissive Looking For Good Times" reads one painting, anchored by an indeed armless woman with the smaller warning in the corner: "Conditional Love."

Raw Womyn

When: March 9-April 6; opening reception is 7:30-10 p.m. Saturday, March 9, with local band The Lovers performing at 9 p.m.

Where: ATHICA: Athens Institute for Contemporary Art Inc., Chase Street Warehouses, Unit 4; entrance is on Tracy Street off Barber Street

Cost: Free

E-mail: info@athica.org

More info: www.athica.org



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There'll also be an open house for the gallery and art studios available for lease at ATHICA from 3-5 p.m. Sunday, March 10; for more information call (706) 354-1277 or (706) 338-3530.

The New York-based Dyke Action Machine offers more levity, albeit wrapped around important issues, with its posters. The Machine's driving artists, Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner, explore temporary gay issues including arguments for and against legalization of gay marriage. "Is it work being boring for a blender?" the poster asks in girly pink cursive, above two brides in their gowns, their faces fixed in mock glee. "Gay Marriage -- You might as well be straight," the poster decides.

Joni Younkins-Herzog again supplies a collection of gourd-like sculpture, suggesting sexual organs, often hermaphroditic. "Prickle" is one such voluptuous shape in smooth pink marble. In the mouth of the sculpture is a lush and dangerous lining of dark thorns.

The exhibit will serve as a backdrop to a performance event benefiting Project Safe at 8 p.m. March 30. The show features Tara Rebele's one-woman show "And I'm Not Jenny," and local band Polemic.

ATHICA is a non-profit organization, supported by the local five-member FiveArt Inc. and housed in the Chase Street Warehouse Condominium Association, a blossoming artistic community near Chase Street. For more information on how to help ATHICA, there is a wish list of office supplies on its Web site, www.athica.org.

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