

ARTFORUM

MAY 1994

LOS ANGELES (Sigh) Benjamin Weissman If a curator from a large institution asks you, a young artist, to be in a group show entitled "Liver Tartare: The Blanche DuBois in Us All," you cross your fingers, try not to be cynical, and say, Yes. The same goes for "Bad Girls West." You either produce specific works that address the idea of a girl being bad (beating up boys or playing with yourself) or you forget about the theme and simply show your current work. After all, you were invited to be in the show because you or your art are apparently synonymous with badness. Maybe you drink too much, you've had sex more than once, or you don't always excuse yourself when you get up from the table. When someone calls you a lady, you laugh out loud. In short, you're the stuff myths are made of.

Maybe one shouldn't get caught up in the title, idea, or theme, right? Best to just look at the work and let the objects do the talking. So what if the idea is backward, the artists don't have to be the curator's victims. Like dorked-out parents grooving to the newest sound, curators blow it all the time.

This show thinks it can tell us who's really down, who's hip to the filth, who chants the party slogan most fiercely. Inquiring minds want to puke.

With the help of a few boy artists (honorary girls with penises) cast in the role of P.C. preachers, we can all lament straight-white-male dominance and other oppressive European inventions, but it's hard to swallow the claim either that being bad is politically correct or that political correctness is a major component of being bad. Good girls, frigid and prudish—too chicken to cut the balls off their fellow man—are all caught up in form, or so the logic runs. True or not, this grab-bag, circus atmosphere makes it difficult to read individual pieces on their own terms, no matter what their biases. The cards are stacked in favor of the loudest, biggest, and brightest; the most aggressive works catch the eye and take the sassy prize. One can see the troubles the curator faced when one of her Bad Girls failed to shout the gospel in the proper maddening pitch. Works that traffic in subtlety are hunched in the corners, staring at their feet. Artists who make formally astute, layered work are punished for it (Girl, who are you trying to please?). One gets the impression that "the struggle" is stuck on stock issues lifted from an outdated

sociopolitical context. It's time to examine and break through the basic tenets of '70s feminist art: to recognize that gestures à la Judy Chicago now seem dated, slightly comical in their directness—naïve.

Sure, a new generation of artists is trying to crank things up a notch, to get in your face, but the one-note simplicity of their works too often goes unchallenged. Lauren Lesko's *Coifed*, 1993—a condemnation of the man behind psychoanalysis—consists of an analyst's couch manicured like a poodle. (Read: poodles are just like a woman, i.e., clipped poodle-hair equals oppression equals Freud.) It's instant art—a loaded sign (the analyst's couch), add irrelevant associations and stir. And then there's *Tailhook*, 1993–94, by Lillian Ball: a narrow corridor lined with 34 condom-clad speculums. Viewers run the gauntlet, or at least think about it. The male gaze turned inside out? The vagina looks back? There are also slick portrayals of the organ it-



self, such as Millie Wilson's red-velvet hood, in which luscious, folded fabric set in an ornate picture frame suggests a giant clit flap via Little Red Riding Hood—it's gothic, gorgeous, and possibly even wearable. The badness is elegant, safe, conventional, and, most important, museum-ready (see Robert Morris' *House of the Vetti*, 1983). Conservatives and the institutions they sustain have always taken pleasure in transgression, donning radical chic and wearing it like an ironic charm. (Remember, J. Edgar Hoover was a bad girl too.) Endlessly harping on about sexual identity to assert difference and disenchantment, these artists end up presenting a sell-out alternative; trafficking in generalities, they attempt to turn the male vernacular against itself but succeed only in buying into what they purport to critique.

At least a third of the work in "Bad Girls West" is articulate and amusing, rising above the show's

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lame concept. Despite the grotesque ripoffs, pitiful clichés, empty formalisms, and aspirations that strive for little more than the power of a tabloid headline, there are more than a few cold, hard gems in this show (in fact, far too many to mention here). Works by artists like Jeanne Dunning, Kim Dingle, and Elena Sisto have a powerful dignity and stand out as more than mere one-liners. Dingle and Sisto are both incredibly loose painters whose works dip into a strange behavioral brew to deliver genuinely perverse returns. They're smart, void of cheap tricks, and they elude the quick read. Dunning's neoprene-latex "skin" sculptures, pocked with imperfections, are simultaneously lyrical and deadening. Presented on white pedestals, her flesh slabs, objectified to the *n*th degree, send one down disturbing paths, suggesting both the pursuit of cosmetic beauty and Nazi lamp-shades. Another cool piece of morbidity comes from Jennie Nichols: brilliant lighting reanimates two huge, if unassuming, human-hair balls. Sullenly turned toward the wall, as if in conference, they look a lot like oversized decapitated heads. These works succeed because there is no lesson plan, their esthetic is free-floating, their meanings uncertain, and they do much more than trumpet the identity politics of the "girls" who made them. □

Benjamin Weissmann's collection of short fiction, *Dear Dead Person*, is forthcoming from Serpent's Tail / High Risk Books.