

*Love and Scandal*  
*selections from the Hart House Permanent Collection*  
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto  
January 6 – 30, 2003

**The Set-up**

Love. Sex. Romance. Affection. These words can guarantee one thing and it's that they will take on different meanings to different people. In fact, the term "love" is so charged with emotion that its very definition can be a point of contention. While some feel its something that can be celebrated through virtually any manifestation, others believe it should be subjected to moral scrutiny since a misguided placement of it inevitably leads to scandal.

Just as our interpretations of the words "love" and "scandal" will always be subjective, so too will be the way we respond to artwork since our interpretations are conditional upon our previous personal experiences. Pretty much anything in a work of art can trigger memories that are unique to our own lives, moods and values, in effect biasing our responses.

Having said this, as a curator I'm interested in how the context of our experiences can add further subjectivity to already complicated topics. To play with this idea I've imposed a particular lens through which the artworks in this exhibition may be viewed. Perhaps there are pieces here that may have never naturally inspired you to think of them in terms of either "love" or "scandal" - will this imposed context affect your interpretations?

How do our personal values influence the way we judge works of art? Do our opinions change when we learn more about the artist, or when we discover new information about the circumstances surrounding the development of a particular piece? How significantly can context alter our opinions? Can art help us better understand ourselves?



If you've ever seen *Donnie Darko* you'll recall the scene in the film where a group of students are asked to participate in an activity that involves the classification of various scenarios within a two-dimensional spectrum where "fear" and "love" are featured as polar opposites. As Donnie points out: "life is more complicated than that – we can't deny the whole range of human emotions", and while I agree with him completely, the exercise did get me thinking. What if, as a challenge to our personal interpretations of the terms "love" and "scandal", we used this classification format as a way to approach works of art?

No – life can't so easily be divided into categories (particularly categories that aren't even necessarily opposites), but just for fun and just for the sake of curiosity, let's try it to see what happens.

### **The How**

Each work of art in this exhibition has been selected on the basis that it could *possibly* be categorized as having to do with either “love” or “scandal”. The question now is: how do we each arrive to our own conclusions?

This experiment is not intended to give concrete answers, but it can help us become more aware of the processes we go through when establishing personal responses. Using “love” and “scandal” as the lens for this exercise allows us to limit the parameters while focusing on a topic that can be very personal, therefore creating a variety of reactions.

How should these two terms be defined? That's up to you -- create your own definitions, then decide which works of art apply to each. It's not going to be easy, and you may even find yourself adjusting your definitions to make the experiment run smoother, but the idea is that you think carefully about what motivates your decisions. And yes, there is a point to all of this.

The following pages don't offer a curatorial statement in the traditional sense but you will find bits of information that I hope convey my reasons for creating *Love and Scandal* the way I did. Curating, like any other form of interpretation, is ultimately a subjective process so I'd like to uncover some of the “behind the scenes” thinking that went into my decision making.

If you've already participated in the categorization exercise described above, now is *definitely* the time to continue reading this document. As you encounter my comments for each work of art, I invite you to consider your own personal definitions of “love” and “scandal” and the impact they had on your classifications for each piece. Is there anything I've written that solidifies your responses, or perhaps invites you to change your mind? Why?

### **The What**

1) Greg Curnoe's *Calamity Corners*. (1967)

Did you ever see that episode of *The Simpsons* when Homer is employed at a daycare center? He sings: “If you're happy and you know it, say a swear!” in response to which Nelson exclaims “Boobs!” followed by Millhouse who contributes “Hiney!” and finally Ralph who chirps out “Mitten!!” Mitten?!? No kidding. To each his own, I suppose.

Did Curnoe say a swear?

2) Louis de Niverville's *Still Life with Love*.

I see the still life, but where is the love? In a 1960 article Sol Littman pointed out that even in de Niverville's happier images there is always a "vague element of threat."<sup>1</sup> I thought there might have been something suspicious going on...

3) Evergon's *San Juan Labos de Los Tres Rios*. (1992)

In a shotgun review for *Lola* magazine Julie Mollins commented on the contrasting naughty/nice qualities of this photo with such chic that it's worth repeating! She writes: "This saint does not look mournfully outward to elicit pity from an anonymous passerby. Instead, he gives guilty eyes the pleasure of pure admiration. He's got a smooth white chest, strong arms, and some not too hairy, well-defined legs. Li'l ole San Juan ain't suffering much neither. After all, he's only leaning on a pole, he's not nailed to it or anything."<sup>2</sup>

4) General Idea's *AIDS Poster*.

In the 1980s the internationally renowned collective of Toronto-based artists known as General Idea (AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal) became central proponents for AIDS awareness and used their art to communicate their message. As one of among many provocative works on this topic, General Idea appropriated Robert Indiana's famed "LOVE" image and using the language of the media and advertising created a "logo" in order to raise consciousness about the disease. *AIDS Poster* is a pivotal work in Canadian art history, and the ideas and emotions it conveys offers an important example of how art can promote understanding and change. Of particular significance is General Idea's choice to use Indiana's iconographic design thus signifying the controversial but often undeniable link between love and AIDS.

5) Daniel Hughes. *Woman in Hat (Artist's Sister)*. (1997)

What's happening in this scene? I'm clueless! A woman walks through what appears to be a snowy industrial alleyway, but stops dead in her tracks. Has she suddenly been struck by a mystical vision? Has she just encountered a horrifying object? Perhaps she's about to sneeze?

Upon learning that this painting was created around the same time Hughes was working on a series inspired by the notorious "seven deadly sins", I was struck with curiosity as to whether this piece might have been created with that theme still somehow in mind. Since this work is also a

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<sup>1</sup> Sol Littman. "Brilliant artists' work describes a personal hell". *The Toronto Star*. March 30, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Julie Mollins. "Evergon: *San Juan Labos de Los Tres Rios* on permanent display at Hart House, University of Toronto. *Lola*. Fall 2001, No. 10. pp 84-5.

portrait of the artist's sister, I'm further intrigued. Of course, curiosity is often brought on by a runaway imagination, so my conjectures could amount to a whole lot of nothing...

6) Greg Curnoe's *Homage to Van Dongen #1 Sheila*. (1979-80)

While reading an article by Robert Fulford about the life and art of Greg Curnoe, I came across a few lines that struck me as quite interesting. Apparently Curnoe, who found it natural to depict women erotically, was surprised when feminists challenged him - he didn't think there was anything wrong with seeing a woman he was attracted to as an object, thus his choice to paint women as objects of desire. However, as the article goes on to explain, Curnoe became convinced by the feminist perspective when one of the women objecting to his nudes was his wife and model, Sheila. As a response Curnoe created one of his text paintings with the following words Sheila spoke to him: "It just seems odd to me that all of the paintings of me are nudes -- and there's nothing personal about them at all."<sup>3</sup>

7) Pegi Nicol McLeod's *Jane Reading*. (c. 1948)

Formerly an official Canadian War Artist, when McLeod took up her role as wife and mother she turned to painting scenes from her daily life as did other female artists in similar domestic situations such as Mary Pratt and Christiane Pflug. McLeod's paintings often featured her daughter Jane and her friends, or depictions of the world as viewed through windows of the family home. This painting is without a doubt a work inspired by the type of affectionate gaze of a mother would have while taking a moment to reflect upon her child's development, but at the same time there seems to be a yearning for life beyond that window.

8) Herman Heimlich. *Carmen in a Relaxed Mood*.

There's a profound sensuality to this painting. Is it Carmen's slip of a dress? Her casually placed legs and hands? Her bored gaze -- the signature of a true diva? I get the sense that she's a dancer... but where?

9) Graham Coughtry's *Two Figures Series, #10*. (1963)

The story of how this particular piece was selected by the Hart House Art Committee from among the others in Coughtry's famous "Two Figures" series has become a favourite anecdote to share during tours of the Permanent Collection. Apparently, the daring taste for art that allowed Hart

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.robertfulford.com/GregCurnoe.html> (Originally printed in *The National Post*, March 6, 2001)

House to build its very important collection in the early years was traded in for conservatism throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, and everyone knew it, especially artists. When the Committee selected this painting Coughtry laughed and commented something to the effect of: “Go figure Hart House would chose this one -- it the only one where the bodies aren’t touching!”

10) Joyce Weiland. *O Canada*. (1967)

Among other goals, Weiland was intent to serve her country as an artist by democratizing artistic practice through the elimination of the boundaries that separated art and craft. Weiland was also interested in exploring the ways in which gender assigned appropriateness to various expressions of patriotism. To produce this print, Weiland donned a bright shade of lipstick and sang out the syllables of the Canadian national anthem while kissing them onto a lithographic stone. The idea of nationalism as being strictly communicated through military pursuits and marching bands was suddenly eradicated... but the symbolism inherent in a lipstick print also carried its own weight.

11 & 12) Lawren Harris’ *Lake Spruce and Mist* (c. 1920) and Bess Harris’ *Mountains at Maligne Lake*. (c. 1925)

I was floored when I learned that Bess and Lawren left their spouses for one another, but I was all the more fascinated by the details Joy Tyndall, Canadian art observer, so kindly shared with me:

What was going on between Lawren Harris and Bess Housser, wife of his friend and fellow theosophist, Fred Housser? Did it begin at the Studio Building when Harris painted Bess’ portrait in 1920? Toronto society was shocked. And fascinated. Yet their theosophical relationship was entirely chaste (as the pair always maintained), both before and after their 1934 marriage. Thirty-five years of wedded, *celibate* bliss?<sup>4</sup>

Joy reminded me that Toronto’s “upper class” were expected to set a precedent as guardians of social decency, so I wonder exactly what effect this news might have had at the time. Is an affair without sex still an affair? Can extra-marital intimacy be justified if it is motivated by shared spiritual values?

13) George Hawken’s *Joel (With Vinyl Blind)*. (1985)

This painting didn’t single handedly motivate me to curate *Love and Scandal*, but it did play a very significant role. When not hanging in the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hawken’s *Joel* is located in Hart House’s North Sitting Room, but a couple of times I’ve been asked to recommend its

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<sup>4</sup> Correspondence by email, December 2002.

relocation. Why? Well, apparently a few meeting Chairs have found it difficult to call their groups to order in the room on account of a visible penis is causing a commotion.

Yes – this painting is highly erotic, but it also seems to be tempered with a gentle affection. After all, *Joel* is a portrait of a lover. But besides that – what’s the big deal?

14) Jack Wise’s *Flesh Flash*. (1971)

I didn’t know anything about Jack Wise before finding myself curious about the title of this work. A website dedicated to his memory<sup>5</sup> describes him as a deeply spiritual man who advocated the joining of Eastern and Western values and lifestyles. His art was often based upon traditional Chinese calligraphic techniques but his other influences included such things as physics, world religions, and his home surroundings of the Pacific Northwest. Wise rejected the idea of art as a commodity but rather viewed it as a form of communication. I have since learned that this (potentially scandalous) title *Flesh Flash* is simply one among many others including: *Louis Riel--Dead or Alive*, *Acid Test*, *December Goes Missing* and *Soft Landing on Venus*.

15) Dennis Burton. *Yonique Metaphor – The Orchid*. (1967)

I still can’t decide. Was Burton’s series featuring female genitalia motivated by a genuine respect and appreciation for vaginas... er, I mean, women, or was he simply cashing in on the whole whirlwind of the sexual revolution? Maybe he was just looking for a way to shock his audiences? In a 1965 interview Burton commented, “The 20th Century woman is a packaged commodity. She is presented in advertisements, the entertainment field, and men’s magazines as an intimate object divested of her humanity leaving her only as a sex symbol. I quarrel with the resulting loss of her humanity. In my work, I express my love for the container and especially for its contents.”<sup>6</sup> I wasn’t around in the 1960s so I can’t appreciate the climate of this topic first-hand, but while I see what Burton claims to be doing, I’m not I’m convinced by his methods. What do you think?

16) Aba Bayefsky’s *DP Mother and Child*. (1948)

If breastfeeding weren’t such a hot topic of debate there wouldn’t be so many groups fighting for women’s rights to perform this activity when and wherever their infants require. Breastfeeding is natural, normal, and apparently the healthiest way for babies to be nurtured so what’s the fuss if it’s depicted in a work of art?

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jackwise.net>

<sup>6</sup> Colin MacDonald. *A Dictionary of Canadian Artists*. Vol 1. Ottawa: Canadian Paperbacks. p 106.

17) Prudence Heward's *Dark Girl*. (1935)

This painting makes me uncomfortable. It has always made me uncomfortable, and until the nude model featured actually speaks out loud: “*Oh no no – don’t worry about me! I’m okay – I’m just acting*”, I’ll remain uncomfortable. On the one hand this could just say a lot about me, but on the other hand it could speak to the artist’s ability to understand and convey profound human emotions. It could also express the artist’s ability to expose significant social issues such as the divide that existed between white women with time for leisure pursuits, and black women who needed to work for their living - a divide between artist and model that extended well beyond the studio.

Readings of this painting have typically been from a formalist perspective but recently Charmaine Nelson curated an exhibition titled “Through An-Other's Eyes: White Canadian Artists - Black Female Subjects” that successfully rekindled discussion about numerous artworks (this one in particular) to remind us how valuable socio-cultural readings can be in order to recognize a wider range of possible meanings.

18, 19, & 20) Robert Markle's *Untitled 73* (1973), *Secret Blues* (1980) and *Powdery Tremble* (1980)

Robert Markle established his career with a reputation for painting highly erotic female nudes but it was “Eros 65” that confirmed this association once and for all. In 1965 police raided Dorothy Cameron’s gallery on the grounds that paintings in the “Eros 65” show were obscene, in effect igniting the one of the most significant cases of art censorship in Canadian history. Cameron was charged with obscenity and five pieces by Markle were among seven works of art confiscated. Cameron was convicted and fined \$350, but not without taking the case all the way to the Supreme Court. Markle’s widow, Marlene, recalled the experience: “It was quite devastating, truly a torment. It took over everybody's life. In the end, Robert's paintings were returned, wrapped in plain brown paper, with the proviso that they not be shown publicly.”<sup>7</sup>

21) James Lahey's *Male Pelvis with Warm Black and Grey*.

I don’t remember what my first thoughts were concerning the subject of this painting, but while the following hadn’t occurred to me, I now can’t think of anything but.

It was while working with the gallery’s files for this painting that I came across an interview wherein Lahey discussed his experience working with human bones as subject matter for his work. He noted his discovery of the pelvis as most fascinating: “its so architectural and so symbolic of our

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Hume. “News”. *The Toronto Star*. October 11, 1994. p A1.

desires... [as a powerful metaphor] the pelvis is the seat of lust [since] two pelvises coming together is what's generally needed to create life.”<sup>8</sup>

22) John Goodman Lyman's *Portrait of Isabel Nixon-Ralph*. (c. 1932)

I don't know how Lyman came to paint this portrait, nor do I have any evidence that Lyman may have been in love with Ms. Nixon-Ralph, but as far as I'm concerned, his seductive rendering of her eyes and his decidedly mischievous interpretation of her smile just scream infatuation! One thing I do know is that Lyman married Corinne Saint-Pierre in 1911, and the portrait he painted of her (which can be found in the Musée du Québec's collection) isn't quite so captivating. ... Not that this necessarily means anything. Hmmmmm. Now I *really* want to know: who is Isabel Nixon-Ralph?

23) Cathy Daley. *Untitled*. (1996)

Daley's series examining the female dress is both playful and critical as she recognizes the empowerment and enjoyment women can derive from symbols of fashion, while still taking note of the imposed artificial representations that frequently create media and fashion "victims". Acknowledging that clothing can allow women to positively express their sexuality, Daley also raises important questions about the tension between voyeurs and exhibitionists - those who are deliberate, and those who are not.

24) Janieta Eyre's *Making Babies*. (2001)

Could there possibly be a more determined tactic for subverting the romantic notion of marriage and children? The act of love, celebrated for its power to create another human being, is traded in for a scene of domestic drudgery where Eyre dissects the "magic of life" to reconstitute motherhood as a boiling pot for a biological stew.

25) Andy Fabo's *Dream Angel*. (1985)

The strange thing about incubi and succubi is that they are (very specifically) naughty demons that visit sleepers of opposite gender... which may well explain why this figure is truly an Angel.

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<sup>8</sup> Deirdre Hannah. "James Lahey's pelvis study taps centuries of inspiration". *Now*. May 12 – 18, 1994. p 64.

## The Why

Whether viewing (or curating) works of art, the interpretive processes engaged are entirely subjective since they draw upon our personal experiences which constantly grow based upon the ones that existed previously. How often do we encourage ourselves to be conscious of this fact, and how often do we give it consideration when we place value judgments or make decisions?

*Love and Scandal* is an experiment in many ways: as a challenge to the traditional role of a curator, as a concept test for a no-tech “interactive” art experience, and as an opportunity to engage gallery visitors with artworks on a different and more personal level. With this statement I’ve aimed to create a unique (and hopefully enjoyable) curatorial document; just as a fellow gallery visitor may share casual anecdotes inspiring us think differently about art, maybe this statement can do the same.

By attempting to literalize how we build experience and how it affects our interpretations I hope I’ve emphasized the important role that personal knowledge and value structures play in the foundation of our responses. Furthermore, I hope I’ve managed to create an environment where independent responses are both encouraged and appreciated.

It’s impossible to expect that we’ll connect with every work of art we encounter, so more realistically, we should strive to feel comfortable approaching any piece and contemplating our responses to it insofar as they are affected by our personal experiences. Detailed information about an artist, specific work, or theory can always help to establish multiple understandings, but without the ability to ask our own questions, additional information is a limited interpretive tool anyway.



*Love and Scandal* is just one entry point into larger issues on the topic of interpretation, personal meaning, and the role of art in our individual lives and collective cultures. What did you think? I’d love to know! Direct your comments to [milena@shintai-z.com](mailto:milena@shintai-z.com).

– Milena Placentile, Curator  
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