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Sharron Corne: From Solitary Artist To Radical Feminist

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Sharron Corne parle de la pénurie de femmes artistes dans les arts traditionnels et suggère des stratégies susceptibles d'apporter des changements.

1975 was International Women's Year. Poor day care, unequal pay and property-sharing were well known issues. But the idea of woman as a separate entity in the arts was relatively new. It was in honour of IWY 1975 that the Winnipeg Art Gallery Women's Committee planned an exhibit of how women were portrayed during the 19th and 20th centuries.

When Winnipeg artist Sharron

Corne read about the event, she was furious. Since virtually all recognized artists before 1960 were male, why use money meant to further the status of women — to display male art?

Corne and eight colleagues pointed out the problem. Little did she know she would be in a major public controversy that changed the course of her life in the following months.

Neither the director of the gallery nor the Women's Committee was open to changing the show. After some debate, Corne's group decided to ask for its own exhibit space. In May, director Roger Selby agreed and the show date was set for November 1975.

The task was almost impossible. Most galleries take 18 to 24 months to mount an exhibit. The Women's Committee had \$10,000 — a full-time curator and more than 100 volunteers. In contrast, Corne and colleagues (now only four) — inexperienced and with no money, applied for a federal grant.

In mid-August when hope seemed gone, a cheque for \$9,500 arrived and the first national juried exhibit by women artists in Canada was on — *Woman as Viewer*.

By this time, Corne and art historian Marion Yeo were working alone, trying to locate women artists, their slides, judge them and send out notices for the show. Within 10 weeks, working day and

night, they solicited 400 applications. Corne and Yeo had launched their search for a 'very special kind of work — feminist, how women viewed themselves and their world.'

Meanwhile, the search for money continued. Although they turned up \$5,000 from the Manitoba government and \$2,500 from the city of Winnipeg, other complications arose. Director Selby insisted the gallery appoint a juror — a male director of the university art school was chosen.

Three weeks before the show, the national artists association threatened to boycott and picket the exhibit unless \$2,500 in rental fees were paid. Budget gone, Corne and Yeo could do nothing to stop the protest until Canada Council provided funds.

As if that were not enough — the printer refused to do the show catalogue because it had pictures of male nudes. Then a mail strike caused Toronto artist Badanna Zack's work to arrive late and Selby refused to allow her series of aluminum male genitals to appear in the show. He pleaded lack of curator's time but Corne still believes he was censoring the art.

Finally, *Woman as Viewer* opened. Press reports claimed it was the most successful exhibit the Winnipeg Art Gallery had done in two years. Victory. But Corne was depressed. For the first time in her life she had done battle in public and loved it. She had dedicated her energies to the cause of art and now she was faced with returning to her secluded family life and studio.

But solitude did not last long. The Manitoba Provincial Council of Women asked Corne to chair its Arts and Letters committee and realizing groups make more progress than individuals, Corne accepted. Her project: a study of the status of women in Manitoba arts institutions.

Combing through the libraries of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba Arts Council, Manitoba Department of Public Works (then commissioning art), and the School of Art at the University of Manitoba, Corne turned up a bleak picture.

While more than 70 per cent of

the University's fine art graduates were women, only two of the seventeen professors in the faculty were female; in five years, the Winnipeg Art Gallery had thirty-six one-person exhibits but only two featured works by women; of the forty board members for the Art Gallery, only ten were women; and of the twelve members of the Manitoba Arts Council, only three were female.

After presenting her report to the provincial cabinet in March 1977, the MAC endorsed Corne's recommendations. She called for an affirmative action program to better represent women artists in shows, selection juries, school staff and boards and committees dealing with the arts.

Selby called the survey inadequate and challenged Corne's statistics. Arts Council director Ernest Stigant said women did not get as many grants as men because they did not apply for them.

Corne revamped the report for lobbying purposes in 1978 using institution statistics and reaction was limited. The Arts Council was more concerned with living wages for all artists and the Winnipeg Art Gallery did not respond. Only Manitoba's Minister of Cultural Affairs, Norma Price, offered any hope.

When Corne told Price if nothing was done, public works grants would continue to discriminate against women, she was amazed to hear the minister agree. Price agreed to educate the institutions she funded.

Corne's report to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee in June 1981 (on behalf of the National Council of Women) shows slim advances. In 1980, the Winnipeg Art Gallery had eight one-person shows — three by women, two of whom were dead and the third was American. Between 1976 and 1979 — 10.5 per cent of the work added to the gallery's permanent collection was by women; in 1979–80 that had risen to 24 per cent. The Manitoba Arts Council's jurors were reduced from one-third to no women. The University of Manitoba's School of Art had one

professor teaching women's art history but when she went on sabbatical in 1978–79, the course was discontinued.

In spite of this 'Things do seem to be looking up,' muses Corne, but she quickly adds, 'It's good, but not adequate.' Her report still calls for incentives for women artists and quotas to include women in funding, teaching and governing the arts; inclusion of women's content in educational programs and special measures to mount women's exhibits.

The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women is also preparing another study in the same field. The London Art Gallery plans a second national juried exhibit of women's art.

It has been a dynamic period. Looking back to 1975 she remembers that in only months she was propelled from being a solitary painter of sexual images she barely understood — to radical feminist. Now she is the speaker for the woman artist in Canada as a paid member of the prestigious National Capital Commission Advisory Committee on the Arts.

But more than this, Corne has grown as an artist. She is no longer afraid of the meaning of her sexual work and how friends and family will react. Now, she has the confidence to present her work at Montreal's Powerhouse Gallery. Recently she approached *Saturday Night* editor Robert Fulford and co-worker Joan Murray to be included in their book on erotic art.

How this new assertiveness will affect Corne's art is yet to be seen. After six years of politics, she hopes to return to her studio full-time, to the working world of art, redefined as a mother, wife, artist and most of all, as a woman.

1 *Splendor in the Grass*,
16" x 20",
Acrylic on Board,
Womb and Phallus Series,
By Sharron Corne

2 *Double Rape*,
36" x 48",
Acrylic on canvas
Womb and Phallus Series,
Sharron Corne

