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## Genius is No Bed of Roses

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Left to right : Micah Lexier, *My Fear*; Andy Fabo, *Auto-da Fe*.  
Photo : Peter MacCallum. Courtesy Mercer Union

***Homogenius*, Mercer Union, Toronto,  
June 22 to July 22, 1989 —**

**T**he structure of the *Homogenius* exhibition — invitation and non-curated — raised doubts.

The premise of this exhibition, works by Canadian gay artists, “celebrating” the symbolic birth of the gay liberation movement in New York twenty years ago, smacked of failure. (There was no attempt made to connect the content of the work with the “event”.)

A Toronto reviewer described *Homogenius* as “an accomplished selection of works by an impressive roster of Toronto’s finest gay artists” — an odd description, suggesting that if one is gay, and an artist, one has to try a little harder. Being homosexual does not grant a deeper insight into the complexities of a sexual (or any other) relationship, any more than being heterosexual. (Can either claim moral superiority ?)

But having staked out the warning signs, I must add that *Homogenius* succeeded as an exhibition — a selection of bright, articulate and intelligent works

about art-making in the later part of the 20th century. If there were no salacious images or overt sexual diagrams in this “collection”, it did, at the very least, address the homophobia which has gripped institutions and social outlooks in the past few years... and if you don’t believe that this phobia exists, you need to look no further than the Corcoran Gallery’s cancellation of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition in 1989. This incident may have been a blip on the tolerance graph, but it leads one to suspect that anxiety and fear grips the good burghers of community standards as well as the boards of cultural institutions. Both are engaged in the active promotion of acceptable behavior and moral codes.

The title of the exhibition — *Homogenius* —, while a clever pun, is a term to be viewed with suspicion. This is not to say that these (or any other) artists are not capable of brilliance or insight. Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking may qualify as a genius, but Umberto Eco, for example, does not. Eco can be admired and praised for his insightful and erudite observations into contemporary culture, its shortcomings and successes. Genius rises above the role of



Left to right : Robert Flack, *Pillars*; Richard Banks, *Miserable Life* and *Chestnut Gelding*; Micah Lexier/Regan Morris, *Your Name Here*. Photo : Peter MacCallum. Courtesy Mercer Union

provocateur and addresses the unexplicable, raises questions, and pursues an intellectual model on a plane above the mundane and factual — that which is tied to the world of real things.

"Sex is bo-oo-ring"

The quote, from the late ex-Sex Pistol, Sid Vicious character in the film, *Sid and Nancy*, sums up and deflates our preoccupation with the subject. If sex is boring, then safe sex can be nothing more than banal. The artists in *Homogenius* rescue us from boredom and, by avoiding moral postures, provide a vision for the "age of reasonable pleasure".

#### *A brief tour of some of the 14 participants*

Andy Fabo, a founding member of the ChromaZone collective in Toronto in the early 80s, and its spiritual disciple since its demise, was represented by a recent large-scale drawing entitled *Auto-da Fe*. Its pointedly social and sexual reference of persecution is tempered by a sense of wit and pictorial satire — rare enough commodities when a diatribe is the common tactic.

Micah Lexier offered a quirky but resolute audio *mise en scène*. *My Fear*, with its sound component repeating the mantra of advancing age (mid-life expectancy and mid-life crisis), was set against an iconic object — a steel cut-out illustrating a birthday cake, complete with burning candles. However, its disturbing (and irritating) quality is universal, transcending the reference to the specifics of sexual lifestyle "fear".

David Buchan's work continues his photo journalistic inquiry, with a sharp parody of a "famous" (but anonymous) late 16th century French painting. A plastic bottle of detergent in the background interjects a symbol of latent Puritan morality. Buchan's image, a sexual double-entendre with no hint of sexual pornography, collapses art history into the genre of bus shelter advertising. Seeing General Idea's now-classic poodle motif exquisitely fashioned and seriously framed, in *Crème de la Crème de la Crème*, is a reminder of their irreverent strategies, which can be overlooked in their solo works (too much of a good thing.) This version of copulating poodles shares with Buchan's work the pleasures of satire and the pleasure of the object.

Richard Banks' two large-scale paintings represent a shift from his image works of the past. They posit a well-thought-out and well-crafted excursion into the

frontiers of abstraction. These paintings, verging on a monochromatic modernism, eschew modernistic bravado, but were almost overwhelmed by the compact pictorialism of other works in the exhibition.

Robert Flack was represented by three pieces, the most provocative being a recent work entitled *Pillars*. Two larger-than-life photographs of outstretched palms were layered with tattoo-like images. They resist the necessity for a narrative (pictures are worth a thousand words) and instead could have easily emerged from the subconscious territory of pleasure-pain in Paolini films.

One final "honourable" mention must be given to the Micah Lexier and Regan Morris collaborative work, produced for this exhibition and entitled *Your Name Here*. Morris' canvas, suggesting a natural decay, served as a ground for a matrix of numerals. Lexier attached a laser-cut steel outline of an arm being penetrated by a tattooing needle. Its reference and symbolism is inescapable — from AIDS to the horror of genocide.

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*Bed of roses, A Space, Toronto,  
September 9 to October 7, 1989 —*

*Bed of Roses* provided an unintentional contrast to *Homogenius*, in both its critical intent and its content. The exhibition was initiated under the aegis of The Woman's Sexual Imagery Project at A Space, responding to the need for sexual images by and for women. In this sense its guideline and mandate, no matter how well-meaning, was also its weakness. The question of whether a "new" territory of imagery for either sex, or any sexual preference, could or should be defined was not answered in the dry aesthetic of these photographic works. It is unfair to make too many comparisons between the two exhibitions. If the intention is to have a party, it's hard to miss. If, however, you wish to indulge in manifestos, there is a good chance of losing your audience before you get to the rhetoric.

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