

TWENTY-THIRD AVENUE B·O·O·K·S

1015 NW 23rd Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97210, (503) 224-5097

Monday-Friday 9:30 - 8 pm □ Saturday 10 am - 8 pm □ Sunday 11 am - 4 pm

A New Dental Research Study at Russell Street Clinic

Are You HIV POSITIVE?

Do You Have Tooth Pain?

Do You Have These Symptoms?

Do you have a persistent tooth ache, intermittent tooth pain, or swelling in your mouth or face? Have you been told your tooth needs a root canal?

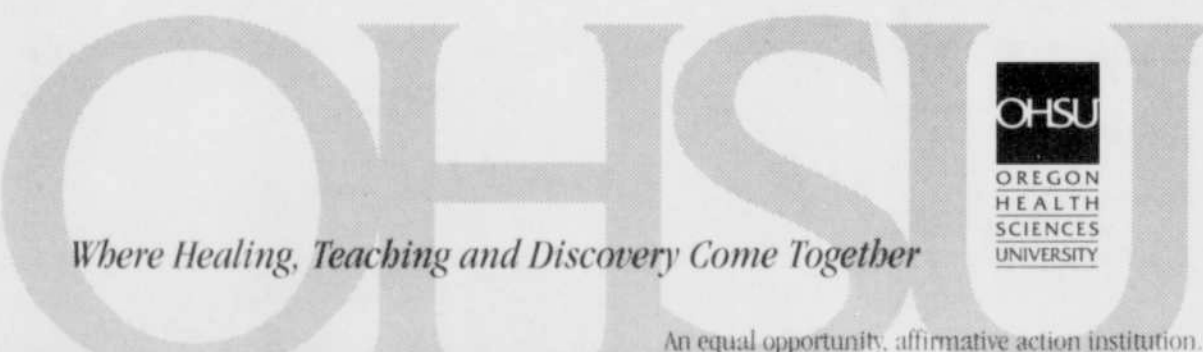
Participate In A New Free Research Study

You may qualify to participate in the *Oral Health Enhancement Study* being conducted by the Russell Street Dental Clinic, a part of OHSU. Volunteers must be HIV positive, 18 to 65 years of age and have at least 20 teeth.

Benefits

Participants will receive free root canal treatment, free CD4 counts and viral load blood tests, free check-ups, and \$125 for participation. Participants will also be helping to improve the quality of life for people with HIV.

For more information, call: **(503) 494-6300**



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HOW GREAT THY ART

A new book unveils the work of the world's lesbian artists, and defies us to deny it a place within the contemporary salon

by Bonnie Ruth Beebe

Cogito homo, ergo sum homo. That just about sums it up, I think. Not the book, *Damn Fine Art* by New Lesbian Artists, but the question, "What is lesbian art?" posed by its author, Cherry Smyth. And a damn fine book it is, not only for the first-class production job boasting lavish illustrations on high-gloss papers, but also for the historical perspective and insightful commentary by one of the lesbian visual arts' chief

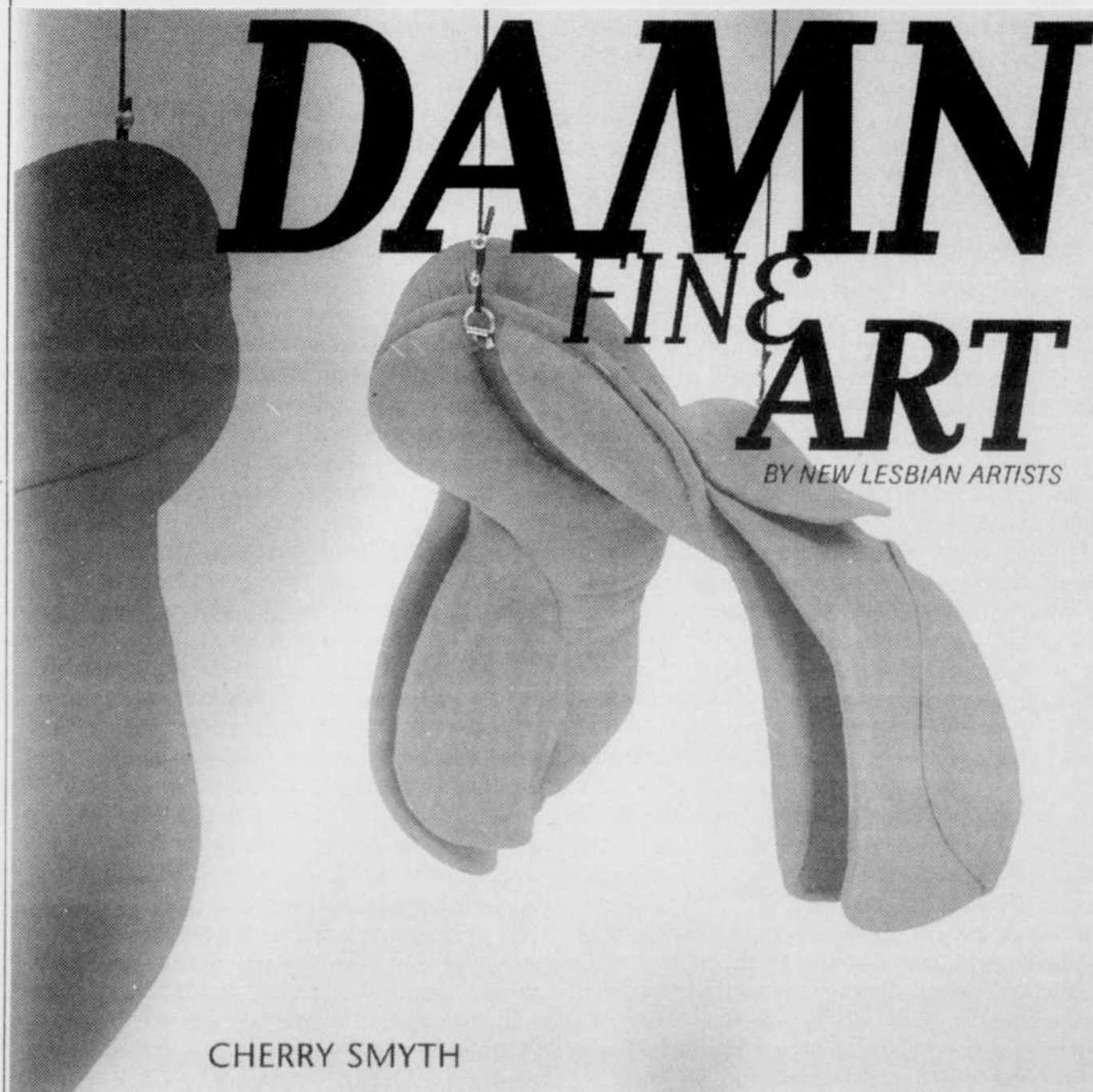
garde, if art history is any guide, should work in the artists' favor, at least to attract publicity. Then my friend pointed out that, contrary to the whine du jour, artistic standards are not set by straight male capitalists, but rather by gay males. By my calculations, this twist of fate leaves lesbians—afflicted as we are with flair gene deficit disorder—thrice removed from the glitter of center stage.

So I am delighted that Smyth has sleuthed out several dozen first-rate artists from around the world and, in what her publisher calls a "groundbreaking book...the first ever to focus exclusively on lesbian art and artists," has given us not just a direction but a destination for our claim to cultural legitimacy. If, as Milan Kundera has been quoted as saying, the function of art is to "speak truth to power," then the artists Smyth has introduced to us have learned to shoot with the general's weapons, and in the best tradition of artist as provocateur, they are aiming squarely for a spot between the eyes. While there is no identifiable lesbian style to wrap around this work, its content is boldly queer.

Cherry Smyth, a London journalist and media critic, is also the author of *Lesbians Talk: Queer Notions* (Scarlet Press). She has organized *Damn Fine Art* around a series of political statements which she uses to illustrate that artistic images are

Books

advocates. The mission accomplished here is a collection of work which represents not a "restrictive...vision based on a...crisis in identity," nor "definitions...inherited from lesbian cultural feminism," but rather work which is "informed largely by white, male traditions." In short, Smyth has done for lesbian art what E. J. Levy did for lesbian literature in *Tasting Life Twice: Literary Lesbian Fiction by New American Writers*. She has used the standards established by our cultural progenitors to select examples of work executed by artists who think



CHERRY SMYTH

queer—work which excels when measured against those standards—then dared us to exclude these artists from the contemporary salon based on their technical merit.

I confess that I haven't studied modern lesbian art, or rather have never encountered any worth studying, and I recently worried out loud to my scholarly friend who writes museum reviews in New York that art created by lesbians is probably relegated in the art world to the same intellectual ghetto where Cheez Whiz on a Ritz passes for lesbian cuisine. This, I assumed, would account for the lack of funding for exhibitions, published collections and marketing vehicles that might otherwise have brought some attention to the work of this community. The fact that the work is avant

the visual interpretations of an intellectual movement, so that lesbianism, in this case, becomes more than a private choice about sexuality. "Queer" is a way of seeing the world and a position from which to be in it, and the position staked out by the best lesbian artists working today is Jesse Helms' worst nightmare. With this publication, lesbianism itself, not just lesbian art, moves far beyond the rainbow sticker and pink triangle: The coy maneuverings of Ellen DeGeneres can hardly prepare the sleeping giant of the mass audience for the sensual assault that awaits it out on the edge of creative identity.

Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists by Cherry Smyth. Cassell, 1996; \$29.95 cloth.