

Suzanne Shifflett is a hot topic in the Portland art community (and beyond). Stop by the Aalto Lounge anytime before June 30, and you'll know why.

The combo tattoo artist (she owns downtown's Medusa Tattoo and Gallery) and oil painter's most recent paintings are on display at the Aalto, and you won't soon forget the intimate details of sexually explicit subject matter. It's a collection that culminates years of creative growth, but Shifflett (popularly known as Fish) composes her pieces in such a way as to draw the viewer toward, not away from, her work.

The new exhibit illustrates, of course, Shifflett's talent but also her flexibility. Paintings range in subject matter from "Fetish," which depicts an amazing sensual rendering of hand, feet and penis, to "Teresa," an almost abstract image of physical form (in the chiaroscuro style of old Italian master Caravaggio) wrapped in warm, ardent light.

The photo-realistic triptych *Trio* is an excellent example of the queer artist's shift in subject matter from human forms to molded plastic toys. There are also smaller pieces in the display that take her paintings to a new abstract level. On all counts, Shifflett's pieces ooze a love and mastery of painting and look completely at home on the walls of the Aalto.

Jodi Darby: The fine artwork of tattoo artists tends to be more design-based. Your work definitely stands out as being more fluid and "painterly."

Suzanne Shifflett: It's true. It's what comes natural to me. I enjoy concentrating on the detail of an image as opposed to the suggestion of it. My work is very different than a lot of tattoo artists working in Portland.

The painting came first. I've been painting for as long as I can remember. I went to school at Parson's in New York for foundations and studied sculpture at the Portland School of Art in Portland, Maine. My concentration was sculpture, but I was painting the whole time.

JD: Your paintings at the Aalto have been described as "crossing the line from art into pornography" and have stirred up discussions.

SS: If I'm honest with myself about why I often paint such sexually explicit pictures, the answer would sound like a kind of artistic masturbation. It can be hard to sit down and just paint, so I choose a subject that is visually stimulating to me. This allows me to sit down long enough to get through the tediousness of getting those first marks on the canvas. Soon after, the act of painting becomes the stimulant.

A far as the references to pornography, that's up to the viewer. Personally I think the

Fish tale

Suzanne Shifflett
knows the difference
between
porn and art

BY JODI DARBY

difference between my figurative paintings and pornography is that there is a lot of beauty in the paintings. I've yet to see any porn that I would call beautiful. I also think the paintings are much more erotic than porn because they are more sincere. Generally speaking, people do porn because they're getting paid to do it.

Several years ago I hung a series of paintings of male and female genitals at a show at Good Vibrations in San Francisco. The show went well, and I sold quite a few pieces. When I hung the same work at a group show in Portland, it caused a lot of controversy to the point that the "inappropriateness" of the subject matter received more attention than the quality of the work itself. Compared to most other West Coast cities, Portland is definitely still the Mayberry of the art world.

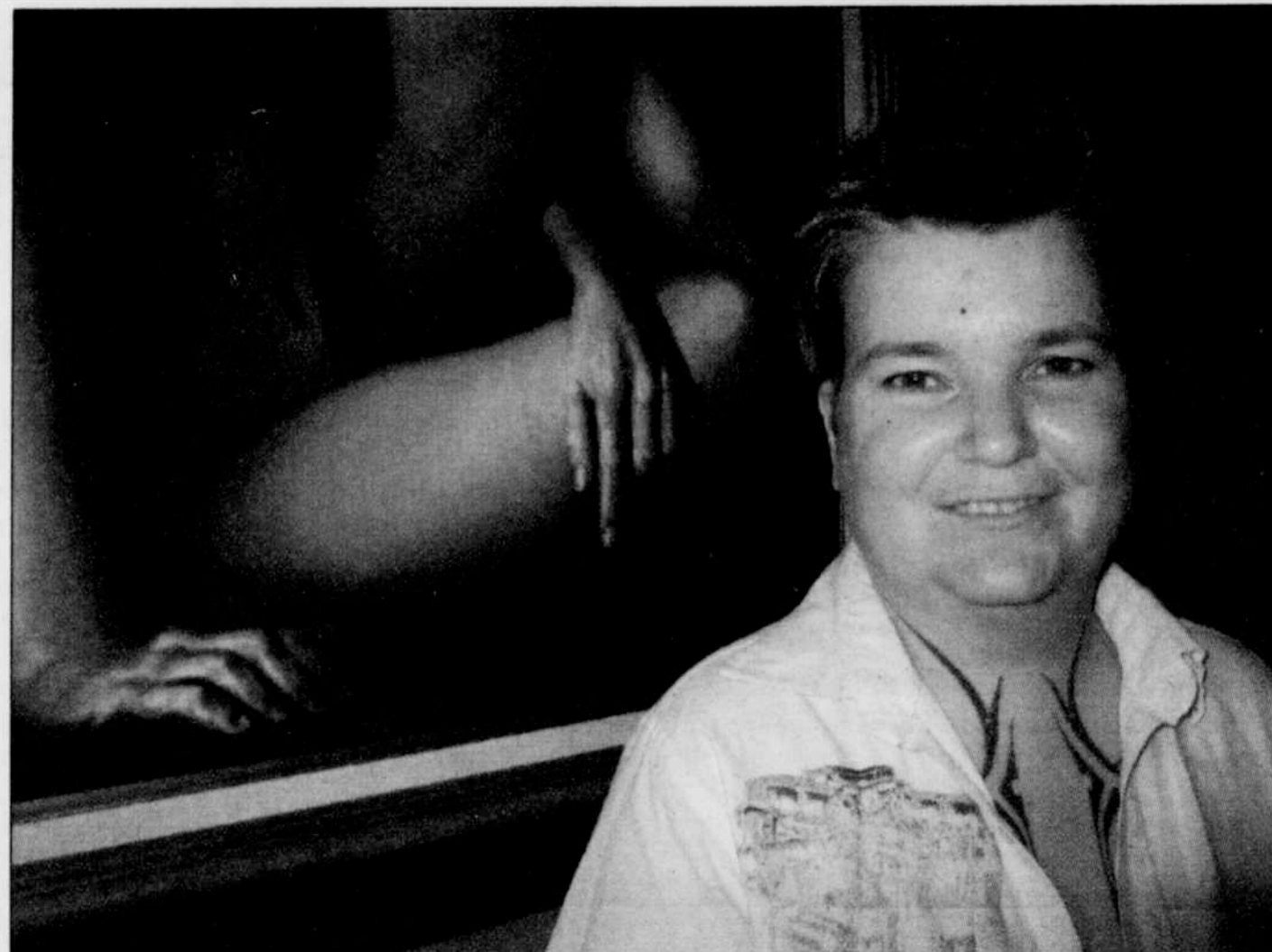
JD: Why do people feel so uncomfortable about sexually explicit images?

SS: Because it causes them to think or feel things that they might not want to. Instead of exploring the reaction, they blame the image. I have always wanted to make art that affects people [at] a very deep, visceral level. When the viewer looks at a painting, I want it them to feel it at a gut level.

JD: You've mentioned Robert Mapplethorpe as someone who has inspired your work. Anyone else?

SS: I really love contemporary figurative painters like Odd Nerdrum and Lucian Freud. Nerdrum's paintings are beautiful...his work doesn't try to make the subjects look beautiful. He includes sags and marks of age that make his paintings incredible.

In my paintings, I do the opposite. I try to push the subject right up to the edge of the canvas so that they are right there for the viewer to deal with. I think it makes the viewer's perspective seem less voyeuristic because they are not looking in at the subject from a distance. It seems more "user friendly."



Portland artist Suzanne Shifflett and friend hangin' out at the Aalto Lounge

I also really love Louise Bourgeois. Not so much for her work itself as for her perspective on art. A lot of her sculptures are taken from images and textures that she remembers from her childhood and talks a lot about the importance of that childlike perspective that all artists tend to keep alive.

JD: So where do the toys fit in?

SS: [Laughs] I started using toys as a subject for my paintings after I broke up with my girlfriend who I had been using as a model. I kind of realized that when I was painting this person who I was excited by physically, I paid more attention to that aspect—the person who I was painting—than the act of painting itself. Only when I was forced to work on different inanimate objects did I really begin to fall in love with the act of painting. It became a more complete meditative activity for me.

I started painting toys because I've always loved those little 1960s sculpted plastic Army men and GI Joes. I began photographing them close up and painting them really large, sort of like the way a little kid would see them. The whole thing excited me enough that I wanted to keep doing them.

JD: What would you like the viewer to take away from your work?

SS: I'd like people to expand their ideas of what art is or isn't.

It's also important to me, especially through doing shows at Medusa, for folks to see that there are artists everywhere and to support them. Everyone knows an artist. Everyone, for the most part, can have other artists' work hanging above their couch. It's important for the person making the art to feel supported in their work, and it's good to get the average person thinking about buying art.

It's also very important to me for people to be more open-minded and accepting of ideas and lifestyles. Not just tolerance—acceptance. The two are very different.

I think that sexuality needs to be out in the open for all of us to function as a healthy society. It's something we all do; it touches all of humanity, and maybe that commonality is something that we as a society fear most. Maybe if people had sexual freedom, they would have more opportunity to be artistically free. **J**

Recent paintings by SUZANNE "FISH" SHIFFLETT hang at the Aalto Lounge, 3356 S.E. Belmont St., through June 30.

JODI DARBY is a Portland writer, graphic designer and radio producer.

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