



# BEAUTY AND THE BODY

*Julie Berkbuegler's 'Liquid Gold' at Barn Light East*

The idea of using found objects in art goes back to the beginning of the modern era, more than a hundred years ago, when Marcel Duchamp entered a porcelain urinal signed “R.Mutt” to be exhibited at the Grand Central Palace in New York City.

Titled *Fountain*, Duchamp’s piece was rejected by the exhibition committee but now is discussed in art history texts in colleges across the country as a fine example of conceptual art, marking a moment when artists freed themselves from traditional media.

“Liquid Gold,” a phrase used to describe mother’s milk, is the title of Julie Berkbuegler’s exhibit and also the inspiration for her color scheme. By taking the paraphernalia she used for pumping breast milk and including it in her artwork, strange as it might seem, the artist is following a tradition of modern art. If anyone is surprised or even shocked by the subject matter, then that has more to do with mainstream cultural norms than with those of traditional approaches to art.

The works in the exhibit are hung on the wall but are three-dimensional mixed media pieces. Berkbuegler, who received her MFA from the University of Oregon, has long been fascinated with fashion. There is one artwork in her exhibit that features images literally ripped from the pages of the fashion world depicting women with their breasts exposed.

It’s not uncommon to see such photographs in fashion magazines. This particular work, though, was the only one singled out and censored. That’s because the *Liquid Gold* exhibit is hung in a gallery adjoined to the café and bar at Barn Light East. The gallery is not entirely separate, which means that art norms bump up against mainstream cultural ones.

When the café hosted a one-year-old’s birthday party, they covered up the artwork featuring the half-naked fashion models.

Another artwork highlights a piece of draped material. It is compositionally simple and elegant. A piece of drapery is framed by a liquid-gold-colored oval, elaborately surrounded by glittered resin. If it wasn’t for the artist’s statement, I’m not sure I would have been able to identify the draped material as a bra, much less one used for pumping milk. I saw it as an appropriate subject for framing, a bit of folded fabric the type you might see in a drapery study or set up in a still life.

Before moving to Eugene, Berkbuegler was a graphic artist working in New York City where she worked for L’Oréal as a graphic designer. She designed packaging and saw to it that the models on the package were picture perfect. Sometimes the job required her to airbrush away imperfections, or what were thought of as imperfections.

This smoothing, or making pretty, can be likened to what she is doing here with *Liquid Gold*. She has made something pretty from objects normally used in private, away from the public eye. She has made us want to look — and by looking, maybe consider the imperfections or inconsistencies in our culture.

*Liquid Gold* is presented by Eugene Contemporary Art and hosted by Barn Light East, 545 E. Eighth Avenue. It runs through April 30.