

Extraordinarily erotic art

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Art is supposed to appeal to the brain and pornography to the nether regions.

So, where does that leave the latest exhibition of sexually explicit paintings by Juan Carlos Noria, an Ottawa artist living in Spain? Noria's Chupa/New Work opens tomorrow at La Petite Mort Gallery in the Byward Market. (Chupa is a Spanish word for "suck.")

Well, it leaves Noria with many other more famous artists, including James Whistler, Pablo Picasso and Gustav Klimt, who, along with their tamer masterpieces, also created extraordinarily erotic art that, for their times, was probably more daring and pornographic than what Noria has sent us from his new home in Barcelona.

Whistler, for example, loved to paint nude girls, barely into their teens and with a certain come-hither look. Any artist trying that today would probably be arrested for creating child porn. But because Whistler is famous and long-dead, the National Gallery had no qualms about showing these paintings in 1998 even though they were, most likely, created for gentlemen's private viewing, to put things euphemistically.

Noria has used gritty, porno-like photographs by bad-boy American photographer Terry Richardson as inspiration for many of his paintings. Richardson's photos tend to reveal very ordinary -- dare one say, not terribly appealing? -- people engaged in raunchy activities. The photographs have a certain charm, if you are into high realism and loathe the artificiality of too-perfect people.

Richardson's photos lose their seedy qualities once turned into candy-coloured pop art paintings by Noria. The scenes of people copulating in various ways appear joyful, even innocent, if depictions of erection, penetration and ejaculation can ever be considered innocent.

There is also a strong element of humour in the works. Don't take this too seriously, the paintings seem to say.

Consider He He He (an English translation from the Spanish might be Ha Ha Ha). We see two men dressed as Batman and Robin. They are surprised in a hug. Their tights are around their ankles, showing us more of the caped crusaders than we ever saw in the comic books.

A small child in the bottom right-hand corner of the canvas bursts into laughter at the scene. So do we, the viewer, as we catch the heroes in a very vulnerable, embarrassing moment.

Along with the 15 paintings planned for Chupa, there will be six drawings and collages inspired by images from a catalogue meant to teach chiropractors their trade.

These figures keep their privates covered although internal organs, such as hearts and stomachs, are revealed.

"I've been dreaming of painting a show with explicit content for many years," Noria says in an artist's statement accompanying the exhibition, which runs until June 1. "As an artist in school, an artist in my art infancy, I was focused on the structure of the human form. Measures and form were everything. In present day, I find myself exploring the subtleties of the human form. Such things as how a hairline grows and the sparkle of wet skin."

The paintings are also a form of protest against the establishment, the war in Iraq and big business, Noria says.

"This show is my chop on the tree of discontent. It's my one action to bring down that tall tree. Shocked I want them to be."

In an e-mail exchange, Noria was asked how he defines pornography.

"For me, when I was a kid, the Sears catalogue was a double-penetration smut mag," he replied. "Now, I don't consider it as that."

Location is also important in defining pornography, he added.

"In Europe, in general, people react more favourably to imagery of breasts and a penis. Censorship is not heightened like it is in the U.S. and Canada.

"At this stage, I don't care what any one says. I know and you know that beauty is beauty, no matter what it is.

"If a painting is good and it has the right ingredients to be a beautiful painting, it's a welcomed treat for the eye."



CREDIT: Rod MacIvor, The Ottawa Citizen

Guy Berube, owner of La Petite Mort Gallery, hangs a painting in preparation for the Chupa/New Work exhibition.