

VISUAL ARTS

by Wes LaFortune

A new way to sell soap

Dove-sponsored touring photography exhibition focuses on inner beauty

Review

BEYOND COMPARE: WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS ON BEAUTY

Dove

Runs until April 8

Bay Court, Chinook Centre

A cross-Canada photography exhibition that mixes marketing with a message about female self-image is currently on display at Chinook Centre.

Beyond Compare: Women Photographers on Beauty features 67 images by women photographers and is touring to raise money (by donation) for the National Eating Disorder Information Centre based in Toronto.

Dove (as in soap) is sponsoring the show, which includes photographs of women of all ages, body sizes and ethnicities by such photographers as Annie Leibovitz, who became a kind of celebrity-by-association for photographing famous singers and actors for Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair.

Dove is taking a page right out of the advertising manual of Kellogg's. In 1996 that company initiated an ad campaign called "look good on your own terms" to sell more Special K. It used a series of three ads to attack conventional ideas of beauty. By using ironic humour to deflate those stereotypes, Kellogg's became known as a company that understands women. The campaign was so successful that its message was eventually broadened to include men and Special K sales continue to make it one of the hottest brands of cereal in the world.

So what does all of this have to do with a photo exhibit? The mall-cum-photo exhibition experience demands that the consumers-cum-viewers know what they are getting before going home and ending up in a frothy lather, which is presumably what Dove's ultimate goal is all about.

Notwithstanding the lure of photo-superstars such as Leibovitz, Beyond Compare focuses its attention on portraits of women taken by photographers that the average viewer will likely be unfamiliar with.

New York City-bred photographer Katie Murray provides a captivating portrait of Dixie Evans, an entertainer during the 1950s who was once billed as "the Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque." It's probably not the kind of information Dove is eager to get out, but it contributes to the thesis of the

exhibition: beauty is (ultimately) not skin deep. That maxim applies even to the former burlesque star who today runs Exotic World: Burlesque Museum in Helendale, California, which is described on its website as being "halfway between the glamour of Los Angeles and glitter of Las Vegas."

Shown in a silk nightgown standing in a desolate field, Evans is now an old woman who looks back over her shoulder at the photographer, perhaps pondering where all the time went. Honest and unblinking, the image shows us a kind of beauty that transcends age.

Equally striking is a photograph by May Truong, a Canadian photographer based in Montreal. Her colour portrait of two women, entitled Andrea and Dang, is her attempt to contradict the typical view of Asian women in fashion magazines.

Sitting together on a blue velour sofa that has been placed in front of some tacky floral wallpaper, Andrea and Dang stare blankly out from their straitened circumstances. They seem to be confronting the photographer and, by extension, all of the viewers who would prefer to see their fine features on a catwalk in Paris or Milan rather than in a makeshift rumpus room.

In the end, Beyond Compare contains a selection of strong images by some talented photographers. And if I didn't feel like I was being manipulated, I might even have gone out and bought a fresh bar of Dove afterwards.