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Review: Smyth, C. (1996) *Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists*. London and New York: Cassell

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In the *Introduction to Damn Fine Art*, Cherry Smyth skillfully signposts the development of her project which began as a critique of 'queer' art defined initially as "confrontational, anti-assimilationist, provocative", and which evolved into a more complex reading of what might constitute 'queer' art by lesbian artists.

Her introductory discussion maps her engagement with 1970s lesbian feminist work which might be termed 'essentialist', through encounters with the traditions of white, male fine art practice, via the deconstructivist debates of the 1980s, and with reference to 'lesbian chic' and 'lesbian token visibility'. Smyth constructs a multiplicitous lesbian/queer identity typified by a range of selected works rejecting fixed notions of a unified sexuality and drawing from a variety of references, styles and ideas of personal identity politics. This acknowledgement of the unruly dimensions of 'lesbian art practice' avoids 'essentialising' that very practice, and interestingly permits an interrogation of the incoherence, the internal dissonance, and the constitutive exclusions of the 'genre'. Confronted with work of staggering and refreshing diversity, Smyth critically frames it into sections for easier digestion. Any classification is problematic, and many of the works actively resist or traverse the boundaries of their assigned categories. This is more indicative of the energy of the works than critical of their organisation.

Smyth discusses the problems associated with solely sexual definitions of lesbian identity and the selected work is reflective of a much greater range of concerns. Many of the works are, however, engaged with questioning and exploring the construction, articulation and perception of desire, and Smyth's pacy writing and stylish use of language seems particularly appropriate to this analysis.

In *Vulva Goes to School and Discovers She Doesn't Exist*, an examination of lesbian 'cunt art' connects contemporary imagery directly to 1970s 'central core' vaginal iconography, and allows discussion of the diversity of lesbian/female expressions of desire. Via critiques of Patricia Hurl and Judie Bamber's vulval oil paintings, Della Grace and E.G. Crichton's erotic and intimate photography, and Birgitta Hosea's witty and subversive *Fierce Pussy Chair* (1993), female/lesbian eroticism is celebrated as encompassing a variety of desires and hybrid identities, robustly refuting anti-pleasure rhetorics. Interrogation of sexual choice, including the transgressive and problematic, and a politicisation of difference, is allowed in the powerful sadistic/masochistic and fetishistic references in Christina Berry's *Dead Pets* (1995) and Linda Dement's *Fur Gash* (1993).

Smyth intelligently juxtaposes that political expression of desire with documentation and analysis of lesbian art such as that of *Dyke Action Machine* concerned with demand for political change. Connected to the dissection of lesbian desire, Smyth positions lesbian artists such as Tessa Boffin, Lola Flash and Linda Matalon who have worked around grief, loss and action particularly in response to AIDS. Such placement has important resonance, and indicates Cherry

Smyth's measured consideration of the classification, layout and content of *Damn Fine Art*. This publication provides an important contribution to discussion of sexual politics, lesbian art practices, and 'queer' theories.

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