



Anna Peach, *Schwarzwald/Black Forest*, 2006, lichen collect from the Black Forest of Germany, cut and reassembled using glue, 5" x 4" x 2". Photo courtesy Max Gessler.



Carolyn Kallenborn, *Yes or NO*, 2006, X-acto blades, beads, sequins, bells velvet, ribbon, found objects, stitching, construction, disperse dye, 12" x 2.5" x 8". Photo courtesy Jeff Bruce.

Let Them Wear Merkins!

An Interview With Curator Linda Gass

*What is a merkin and what is a group of them doing in Kansas City's Crossroads Arts District? Guest Editor Amelia Ishmael had a chance to discuss these questions with Californian artist and curator Linda Gass, whose *Intimate Apparel Exhibition* will be on view at the Pi Gallery throughout June.*

Amelia Ishmael: Could you describe what a merkin is, in the context of your exhibition?

Linda Gass: The best way I can describe what a merkin is in the context of this exhibition is that it's the format for the artwork. When I invited the artists to participate in the exhibition, I let them interpret what a merkin was in any way they liked. I did give them some background information on what a merkin is and I gave them a size constraint because I wanted the merkins to be somewhat realistic in terms of size.

Most people don't know what a merkin is though and that's part of the fun of this exhibition. Dictionaries vary

on the definition but most agree that it's a pubic wig. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "an artificial covering of hair for the female pubic region; a pubic wig for women."

AI: Does the artwork in this exhibition take, primarily, a female perspective?

LG: Yes, the artwork is most definitely from a female perspective. All of the invited artists are female and the subject of the exhibition, the merkin, is historically about a female part of the body. Many of the artists' interpretations are very intimate, and reflect a wide range of the female experience. The artists have really

tapped into important female experiences that cover the complete emotional spectrum from joy and ecstasy to fear and protection.

AI: How did you arrive at the idea for this exhibition?

LG: The idea for this exhibit came up during a late night conversation with my hotel roommates at the last Surface Design Conference, two years ago. A few days before I left for the conference, a friend sent me a link to a satirical website made to look like an online store for must-have gear for Burning Man (the week-long communal camping and art event that takes place in the Nevada Desert every year around Labor Day). One of the items on the



Wendy Huhn, *Safety 1st*, 2006, cotton thread, silk flowers, beads, cotton fabric, tintex as batting, hand embroidery, stitching, xylene transfers, beading, 7.5" x 6" x 1/8". Photo courtesy the artist.



Susan Friedland, *Worn*, 2006, burnt linen, hemp twine, hand quilted french knots, 5.5" x 5.5" x 1/4". Photo courtesy the Hansine Pederson Goran.

website was a "Flashlight Merkin" complete with a photo of a woman's torso modeling this pink fur patch with an LED headlamp attached to it. Any woman who has gone to Burning Man can appreciate what a useful hands free item this would be for the porta-potties at night but, when I shared the joke with my hotel roommates, they didn't know what a merkin was and didn't believe me when I told them it was a real thing. I had heard of a merkin before but I had to admit that I didn't really know how and why it came into being.

The next day I did a little bit of research on the internet and learned that the merkin goes back many centuries to a time when pubic lice were a common problem and women would have to shave their pubic hair to relieve the itching and eradicate the lice. Merkins were then invented to replace the shaved hair, so the women wouldn't feel bare. Then, prostitutes got hip to the fact that merkins could be used to cover up the marks of syphilis and genital warts and they could appear to be disease-free and therefore, still employable. My roommates were amazed to learn this and were still a little skeptical so we started discretely asking other conference attendees if they knew what a merkin was. We got some very interesting answers and only one other person actually

knew what a merkin really was. One of the most hilarious answers came from the British husband of one of my roommates. My roommate was sure that her husband would know what a merkin was, since she thought it sounded like a British word, kind of Shakespearean. She called him on her cell phone late at night after we had gone out to dinner and unintentionally woke him up. She asked if he knew what a merkin was and being the good humored sort of man that he is, rather than hanging up the phone in disgust, he said "it's what President Bush calls the people who live in this country."

Once all of this talk of merkins started, we really couldn't stop, and because we're all artists, we started coming up with wild ideas of what could be a merkin. Then we found out that the theme for the next conference was going to be "Mind and Body" and that's when the idea of creating an exhibit of merkins really solidified.

AI: What sorts of issues do the artists you have selected for this exhibition approach in their works?

LG: There is such a wide range of issues covered — which I'll tell you about in a second — but first, I want to say that I didn't ask the artists for statements about

their merkins and like all good art, the works speak for themselves, and everyone may view them differently. That said, I see many issues being addressed such as fertility, shame, power struggles and domination, flirtation and seduction, voyeurism, and pleasure. Many of the pieces use humor to address their issues — some are very direct in their humor through use of illustrative graphics. Others are more subtly humorous through their choice of materials or the title they have given to their piece. Some of the works look at the stages of our lives and the impact that has on our sexuality and sense of womanliness — whether it's being young, attractive and seductive or growing old with a life full of experiences or being in the circumstance of a long distance relationship. Two of the works are representations of fig leaves — making the Biblical connection of merkin as cover-up and all of the issues that go with covering something up: shame, self-esteem, modesty, vulnerability. It's interesting for me to observe that many of the works have a "dangerous" quality to them — mostly through their choice of materials but sometimes through their imagery. We're clearly dealing with a "dangerous" part of the body here and those artists addressed that straight on. Many of the works have a messenger quality to them — they communicate a specific message to an intended viewer



Hollie Heller, *So to Speak*, 2006, Collage with gloss medium, text, painted paper fiber, stitching, 6" x 7" x 1". Photo courtesy the James Dee.

— some are literally instructive, and some indicate mood or receptiveness.

AI: What types of material and processes are used in the pieces on exhibit?

LG: The range of materials is wildly diverse. In addition to fabrics such as velvet, silk, cotton and lace, the artists have used beads, sequins, human hair, X-acto blades, silicone fishing bait, bobby pins, pine cone scales, chrysanthemum stamens, lichen collected from the Black Forest, seaweed, glass eyes, fish skin, vintage keys, match sticks, mirrors, aluminum, copper wire, rusted metal washers, and plastic and glass fruit.

The techniques used are equally diverse and include weaving, embroidery, crochet, quilting, fusing, felting, basketry, silkscreening, monoprinting, marbling, beading, sewing, bookmaking, painting, casting, burning, and mixed-media assemblage.

One of the merkins will literally come to life during the exhibit; it's made of moss and seeds and visitors to the gallery will be able to interact with the merkin by



Robin Cowley, *Bait*, 2006, purple silicone fishing worms, industrial black plastic screening, canvas, 6" x 10" x 3". Photo courtesy the Don Tuttle.

spraying water on it to help it grow during the duration of the exhibit.

AI: In your research did you come across any companies seriously producing merkins as a commodity?

LG: Before I approached any of the artists to invite them to participate, I put together an informational website about the exhibit including information about merkins. Some of the early artists I invited wanted to see photos of actual merkins and so I found some on the internet. I actually did find a company that sells wigs that offers merkins that are made to look like real pubic hair. There are also a couple of websites out of the UK that sell decorative merkins — ones that look like dyed fur in different designs such as rainbows, bulls-eyes and happy faces.

AI: Have any of the artists who were invited to create pieces for this exhibition worked with this subject matter previously?

LG: Yes, two of the artists have made merkins before. In fact, one of the merkins in the exhibit was made seven years ago. Most of the artists I invited had never heard

of a merkin before I invited them to participate but a few were already familiar with what it was. In fact, one of the artists told me that she's been looking for a specimen of a real merkin in museum collections around the world for the past ten years and she has yet to find one. From the very beginning, it's been so much fun to work with the invited artists on this exhibit. I invited some artists who I knew personally or had some prior contact with but half of the artists were people who I basically cold-called to invite. Their responses to my invitation were so enthusiastic and oftentimes they had funny stories to share around the topic, especially once they learned what this was. I was amazed to learn that some of them had already made a merkin (one made a quilted merkin for a friend who had a hysterectomy and she didn't want her to catch cold after they shaved her for the surgery).

AI: The exhibition's title, *Intimate Apparel*, implies that the merkin is worn. Did the artists involved work with how their works could be attached to the body?

LG: I agree that the title does sound like we might have created wearable art, however that wasn't a requirement of the exhibition, and it was never implied that the artists had to make merkins that could be worn. Some of the artists have created pieces that could actually be worn but most did not. The exhibition was really more about the concept and interpretation of a merkin rather than creating a real piece of wearable art. As a result of not making this wearable constraint, I think it's a very strong exhibit — I mean, some of these merkins would be downright scary to wear yet their message is extremely powerful because of this. Just in case you're wondering how real merkins are attached to the body, they are done in the same way as false mustaches, with spirit gum.

AI: Could you tell us about one of your personal favorite works in the show?

LG: I'd be happy to tell you about all 37 of my personal favorite works in the show. Seriously, I find it impossible to choose a favorite because the artists have exceeded my expectations in terms of what they have created. Each time photographs from an artist arrived in my mailbox, I was blown away by what they had done — it was like receiving the most incredible gifts for weeks on end. And I think the artists themselves are really pleased with what they've created within this theme. Originally I asked each artist to only make one merkin but I later gave them the option to make more than one in the event that there was space in the gallery. Some of the artists made three or four merkins — I was just astounded by the response and creativity I was getting. ●