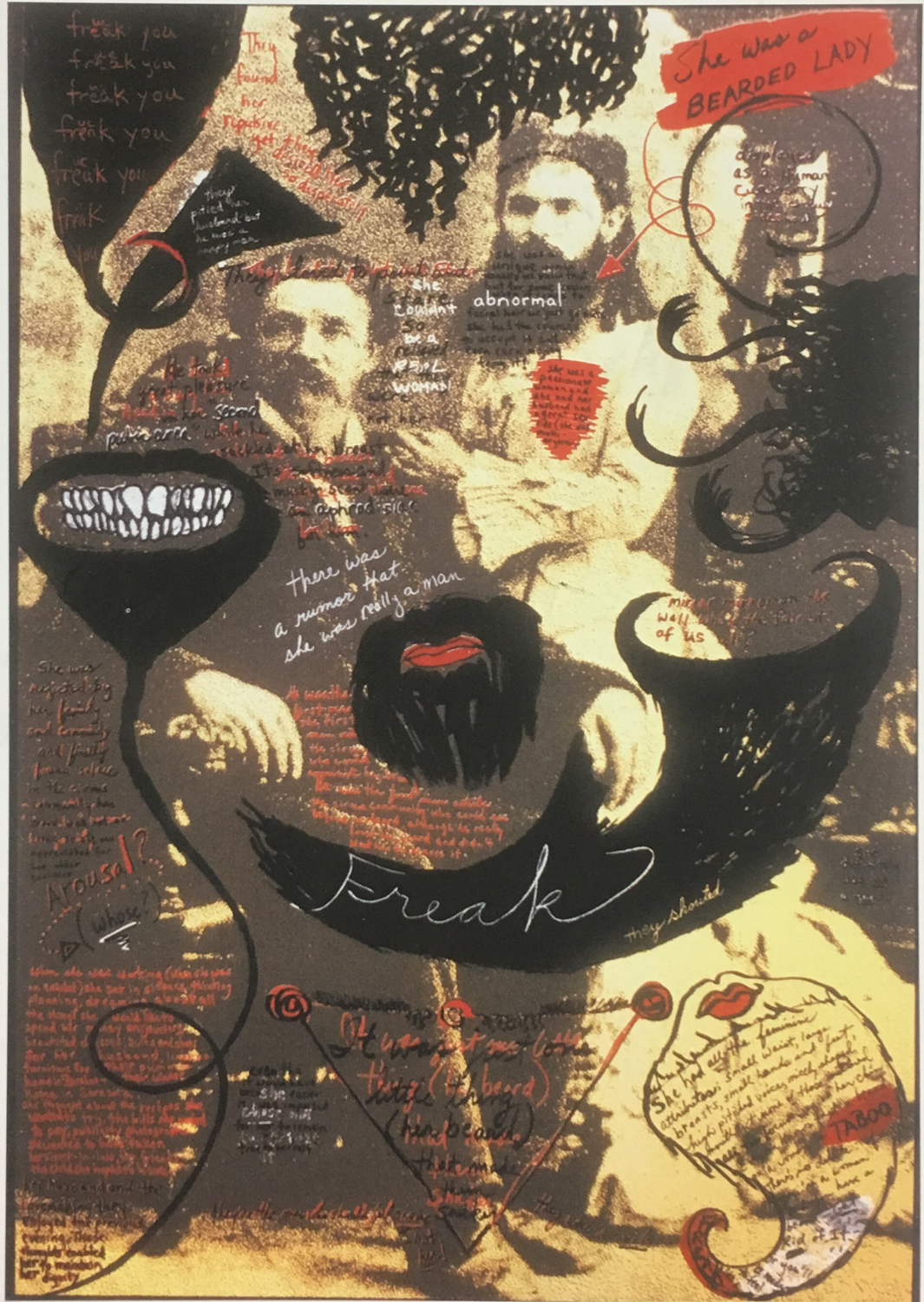
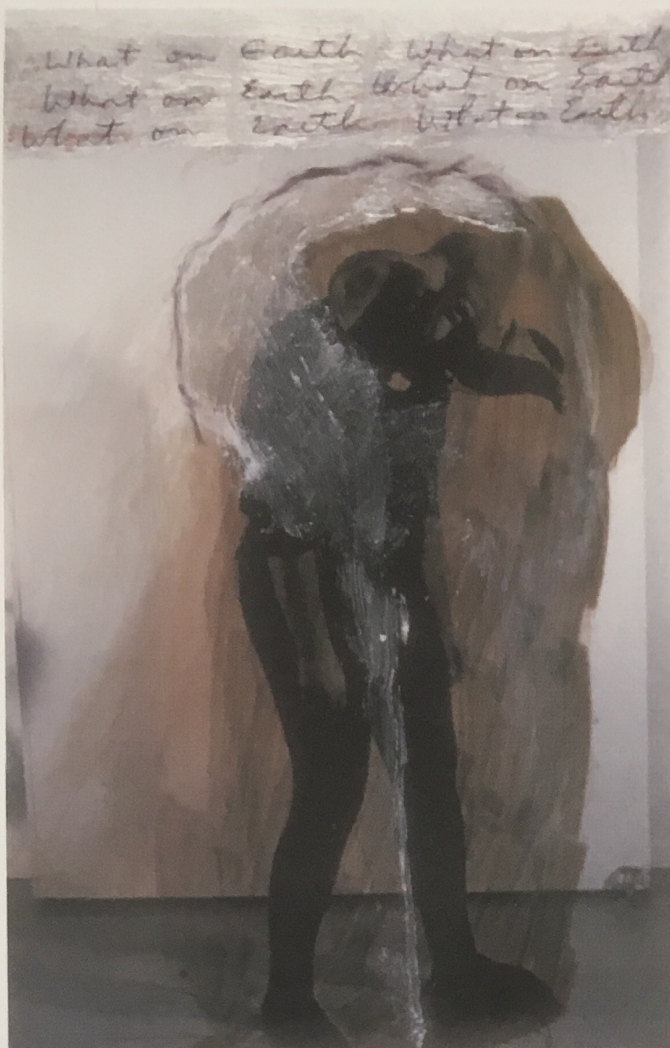


leesa
Streifler

Peripheries: Reclaiming "Normal" / Périphéries: Requérant «La Normale»



Freakshow Revisited: The Bearded Lady, 2001, screenprint/serigraphie, 119X79 cm



Regarding the Monstrous..., 1993/2002,
altered photograph/photographie altérée

Peripheries: Reclaiming “Normal”

Leesa Streifler

April 28 – June 23, 2002

“Monsters have become so frequent. Rather than wondrous, they reveal to us the common course of nature in our time.”

Sebastian Brant on why he chose not to write on the birth of a two-headed infant, 1496.¹

In mapping the territory of “normal,” that ostensibly familiar land traditionally ruled by convention and conformity, Leesa Streifler repeatedly interrogates both its inhabitants and its borders. This exhibition of altered photographs, prints, and mixed-media installations documents her exploration and reconfiguration of that territory and presents a larger, more amorphous place, one in which the “natives” might be joined by those “abnormal” characters typically banished to the margins of the map. By recuperating those on the periphery, culture’s so-called freaks of nature,

Streifler strives to give them voice. And in celebrating the monstrous and the marvellous, two interconnected tribes among the freaks, she challenges visitors to question the assumptions associated with “normal.”

The giant, the bearded lady, the animal-human.... Historically, these outsized, gender-bending, and hybrid species of otherness which Streifler re-presents among the freaks in the exhibition have functioned variously within mainstream Western culture. Their presence has been understood as a testament to the fragility of societal rules and values, its moral codes, and its notions of decorum. In Christian terms, they have provided tangible evidence of human sin and God’s resulting wrath. They were also read as signs of Nature’s playfulness, her ability to fashion forms of amusement, objects of curiosity, and devices of wonder.² Yet regardless of function, the Other inevitably evoked amazement, sensually expressed (according to Charles Darwin) by raised eyebrows and eyes wide open, a dropped jaw and gaping mouth, or a sharp intake of breath and low whistle among those not marked with the same difference.³ Simultaneously perceived as seductive and repulsive, capable equally of inducing pleasure and horror, the Other compelled the viewer both to *look* and to *look away* in a fascinating, tension-filled game of hide-and-seek.

Today, one might attempt to toy similarly with Streifler’s cast of characters. Indeed, Streifler seems deliberately to nod to the game with such early works as *Regarding the Monstrous...* (1993) in which a disembodied viewer’s voice repeatedly exclaims “what on earth” in response to the appearance of the slouching, belittled elephant-woman. But the game ends differently because the gaze cannot so easily silence the Other as in times past; the hyper-consciousness of postmodernism has made it more difficult to *look down* on otherness, even as it becomes increasingly familiar and thus domesticated. Streifler recognizes and exploits this. She undermines the subjugating power of the viewer’s gaze by bequeathing her more recently constructed freaks with the ability to turn the gaze back on itself through the word. For by “speaking,” they defy two rules which, as Streifler notes in *Freak Show Revisited: The Giant and the Midget* (2001), those working the sideshow are bound to: 1) “Do not interact with audiences.” 2) “Do not show emotion.” In *Homage to the Giant* (2000), the tall man confronts the viewer who dares to peer through the binoculars at him, asking, “You feel sorry for me, don’t you?” Of the *Bearded Lady* who proudly presents herself in *Freak Show Revisited* the viewer learns that “even tho it would have been {she} easier it was important {chose not} for her to remain {to remove} true to herself {it}.” And the bird-woman in *Acts 1-35* (1997) surveys herself in the mirror, that most self-reflexive of surfaces, while squawking ironically with a certain measure of satisfaction, “Pardon me if I like my looks.” By asserting their own authority and independence, these freaks to some extent negate their otherness as they enter a

realm from which they have been customarily excluded. That Streifler allies them with more quotidian "misfits" like the obese, anorexic, or aged female in *Adaptations 1-66* (1997), for example, shortens the distance from centre to periphery and back again, especially when the viewer realizes that the imag(in)ing of these female types begins with Streifler's own body. As a result, the freaks force a reevaluation of their status and the meaning of "normal." Might "normal" now encompass difference? Or is it an altogether more fluid territory in which antithesis is irrelevant?

Still, by virtue of appearing in the art gallery Streifler's freaks are unquestionably on display which heightens the tension between "normal" and not. Presented within this temple of culture in frames, on stages, or behind curtains, veils, and masks, they remain, in the end, spatially and psychologically isolated from the viewer; they are enlivened only through that very act of voyeurism they apparently rebel against. Nonetheless, their position in this performative context serves to remind the viewer that the collapse of distance and difference into a narrow zone of social, ethical, or physical sameness is not necessarily desirable.⁴ As the hairy, ape-faced woman, Julia Pastrana, allegedly murmured on her deathbed in 1860 after some six years of being displayed undisguised in North America and across Europe by her "normal" manager and husband in exchange for fame and a modicum of wealth, "I die happy. I know I have been loved for myself."⁵ A naïve sentiment under the circumstances, perhaps, but also a liberating one.



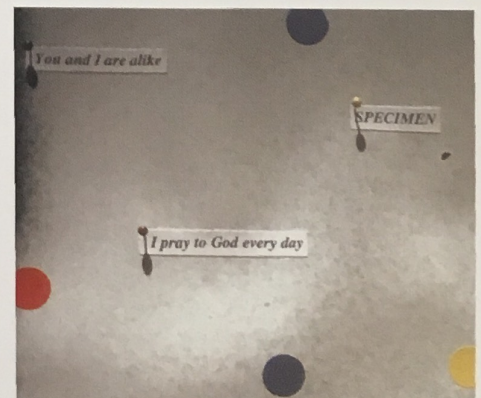
Homage to the Giant, installation, 2000

hyperplasia, extreme congenital hypertrichosis with terminal hair, and gross facial deformities."

Leslie Korrnick, Fine Arts Cultural Studies, York University

1. Unpublished letter of 28 June 1496. *Miscellanea Wenckeri*, Archives de la Ville de Strasbourg, AST 323.1, fol. 596r-v; cited in Dieter Wuttke, "Sebastian Brants Verhältnis zu Wunderdeutung und Astrologie," in *Studien zur deutschen Literatur und Sprache des Mittelalters: Festschrift für Hugo Moser zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Werner Besch, Günther Jungbluth, Gerhard Meissburger, and Eberhard Nellmann (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1974), p. 284. My translation.
2. Developed further in Lorraine Datson and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York: Zone, 2001), pp. 173-214.
3. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: John Murray, 1872), pp. 278-286. Contextualized more broadly in John Onians, "I wonder...A Short History of Amazement," in *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E.H. Gombrich at 85*, ed. John Onians (London: Phaidon, 1994), pp. 11-33.
4. For an insightful perspective on the repercussions of this type of collapse, see "The Tyranny of the Normal," 1984, in Leslie Fiedler, *Tyranny of the Normal: Essays on Bioethics, Theology & Myth* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1996), pp. 147-155.
5. Jan Bondeson, *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 230. Bondeson, p. 243, describes Pastrana's form as the result of "severe gingival

Homage to the Giant, detail/détail





NORMAL: Adaptations, installation, 1997



NORMAL: Adaptations - details: altered photographs/photographies altérées (18X13 cm)

Leesa Streifler is an Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Regina. She holds a B.F.A. Honours from the University of Manitoba and a M.F.A. from Hunter College in New York. Her work has received national recognition in the form of grants and inclusion in public collections, notably The Museum of Canadian Contemporary Photography and The Canada Council Art Bank. Recent exhibitions have been at Dazibao Gallery, Montreal; The Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina; SAW Gallery, Ottawa and Open Studio Gallery, Toronto. She was an artist-in-residence at Toronto's Open Studio in 2001.

Leesa Streifler est professeur associé au Département des Arts Visuels de l'Université de Régina. Elle est titulaire d'un Baccalauréat en arts visuels avec honneur de l'Université du Manitoba et d'une maîtrise en arts visuels du Hunter College, de New-York. Ses travaux lui ont valu une reconnaissance nationale grâce à des bourses et à des acquisitions par des collections publiques dont celles du Musée canadien de la photographie contemporaine et de la Banque d'œuvres d'arts du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Ses plus récentes expositions ont eu lieu à la Galerie Dazibao de Montréal, à la Galerie Dunlop de Regina, à la Galerie SAW d'Ottawa et à la Galerie Open Studio de Toronto où elle fut d'ailleurs invitée comme artiste en résidence en 2001.



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