

# going out

## Wild and woolly

### VISUAL ARTS

Sarah Milroy

As any red-blooded seventies-style feminist will tell you, women's body hair is a political issue, and willed hairlessness a signal of female sexual self-doubt. A visit to Allyson Mitchell's new exhibition, *Lady Sasquatch*, is, thus, the perfect consciousness-raising-du-jour for the woman about town, a show that celebrates the she-beast in all of us with a suite of hand-stitched, fun-fur wall pieces and freestanding sculptures. Her subject is woman-kind, observed through Mitchell's own lesbian-activist lens in works that draw from classic Playboy cartoons and centrefolds, reheated in the oven of feminist theory and served up fuzzy.

Mitchell has been into fur for a while now. For her debut show, in 1996, she followed paint-by-numbers patterns, filling in the various colours with swatches of fabric and faux-fur. A few years later, she turned to the female nude, borrowing her come-hither poses from classic Playboy cartoons of the 1970s — the only celebratory images she could find of the flamboyantly curvaceous, womanly form. (Mitchell was also one of the founders of the collective *Pretty, Porky and Pissed Off*, "a group of fed-up fat chicks ready to take on fat phobia, bad body image, negative fat representations and to reclaim snacking.") "In all of those cartoons," Mitchell says, "the woman is having a good time, all relaxed and lying around in bed naked, but there is always this gross old dude with a cigar crouching in the background, watching her, with all his clothes on. I want to erase him out of the scenario."

In Mitchell's remakes, the women are lounging unobserved, resplendent in their own plush world of pleasure. Making the conceptual leap from Playboy cartoons to Edouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* of 1863, she huffs: "I mean, how unpleasant to be at a picnic when all the women are naked and all the men are wearing their clothes? What is that? I hate that painting!"

In her new show, at Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Mitchell turns the heat up another notch, taking as her source the legend of the Sas-



CAT O'NEIL

quatch, a mythological woodland beast that is always, she notes, gendered male. Why no female Sasquatches? The answer may lie in her artist's statement. "Lady Sasquatch is your dream girl only bigger and hairier," she writes, "and she might eat you if you don't look out."

Mitchell's latest she-creatures are a departure from her earlier fun-fur pinups, sporting snouts and fangs, and baring their multiple teats and fur-rimmed genitalia with daunting (or hilarious, depending on your sensibility) vitality. In one wall hanging, a symphony of reds, a woolly she-creature bays at the moon. In another wall piece, worked up in oranges and golds, a Sasquatch giantess takes a licking from her nude female cohort, who is buried face-first in her lap. "These images were originally made by men for men," she says, referring to her soft-porn sources. "As a straight woman, you are not supposed to see them, and, as a dyke, I'm sure as shit not supposed to see them. I wanted to take those images back, to take the shame away."

As it turns out, the fur-bearing female has a proud ancestry in the history of Western art. After centuries of bewildering hairlessness and/or strategic drapery, she emerges tentatively in Manet's *Olympia* of 1865, which provoked a riot of public outrage at the Paris Salon of that year. First, his *Olympia* was obviously a real woman, a working prostitute, and not a mythological or allegorical figure (Venus, Helen of Troy, and so on). Second, and just as disturbing to the critics of the day, her pose revealed a suggestive *souçon* of armpit hair. The following year, Gustave Courbet followed suit with his much bolder *l'Origine du monde*, an unbridled evocation of the female down-under, revealed spread-eagle in all its hirsute splendour.



Allyson Mitchell has fun with faux-fur and the female form in *Lady Sasquatch*, an exhibition that celebrates hair-bearing womankind.

Since Manet's break with tradition, women in art have become hairier. The Guerrilla Girls artist-activist group in New York takes the position to hysterical extremes, posing in guerrilla costumes as they protest against the gender inequities of the art world.

Mitchell's big mamas must be considered within this trajectory. Her current show boasts two gargantuan specimens, a reprise of her first sculpture, which served as the decorative centrepiece for last year's Canadian Art Gallery Hop dinner gala. She titled that work *Big Trubs*, and deservedly. "That piece has been a real problem to deal with," she says. "She comes apart at the waist, but her ass is too big to fit through a normal doorway." For her new works, the bums have been trimmed to accord with building code, yet they retain their feral magnificence all the same.

On the hair front, Mitchell says enlightenment came with an issue of *Penthouse* back in the eighties, when she was a teen camp counsellor in the Ontario woods. "We were definitely in Sasquatch land, there," she remembers with a laugh. "I remember all the boys drove into town to get the new issue with Madonna in it. ... And I

remember she had armpit hair."

One thing led to another, and Mitchell has gone on to make a career of investigating female power, and the thwarting of it, first completing a BA in English and women's studies at York University, followed by an MA in women's studies and, now, a PhD, which she is partway through. She has co-edited a book of what she calls "third-wave feminist writings" titled *Turbo Chicks*. But her main focus is working with images and giving body to her ideas, exploring what happens when you move between media, and between high and low culture.

"Take this piece here," she says, indicating a wall hanging of a Sasquatch lying on her back in a state of luxurious repose. Musing on the translation from airbrushed magazine photo to faux-fur wall hanging, Mitchell reflects: "Originally, this was a centrefold. The woman was lying back and playing with her pubic hair — I think she was supposed to be getting ready for her man or something. But this makes it look more like she's picking ticks out of her crotch."

*Lady Sasquatch* is at Paul Petro Contemporary Art until Oct. 8, 980 Queen St. W., 416-979-7874.