

# More than skin deep

## New art exhibit opens at women's centre

BY SEAN MCQUAID

"MORE THAN SKIN DEEP", AN ART exhibition devoted primarily to "exploring women's relationships with their bodies," opened at the UPEI Women's Centre on the evening of March 11. Linda Kerr (of the Atlantic Veterinary College) emceed the event, which opened with presentations by Carla Rice and Lesley Anne Bourne.

Rice discussed the artwork on display, referring favourably to her perception of the pieces' presentation of "goddess" images. Bourne read from her *Skinny Girls* collection of poetry, the title poem being a commentary on women's destructive feelings of physical inadequacy. After the speeches and readings, those in attendance mingled and took in the artwork. Women's Centre volunteer Stacy Dunn estimated that about fifty people attended the opening, a number considered excellent given the inclement weather that evening.

The show includes almost forty pieces in a variety of media, constituting a veritable visual smorgasbord. While not all the pieces will appeal to most viewers, there is something for almost every taste: painting, sculpture, quilting, photography, ink and pencil drawings, etchings, aquatint, and more.

Most of the pieces are paintings. Some are simplistic, unremarkable, or simply unattractive (such as Milner's "Mother and Child" and Wigmore's "Untitled"); others are rather inaccessible in terms of their meaning (Curtis's "Sleeping Cat Wakes" is confusing though unique in style and with hints of deeper meaning, but Milner's "The Man Inside" is a seemingly senseless bit of incongruity, featuring a stick figure cast adrift against some admittedly attractive background

mist). There are far more good paintings than bad ones, though: Donna Lynn Wigmore's "Life of a Woman: Healing From the Past" (described by one centre volunteer as a manifestation of women's "collective unconscious") is a hauntingly compelling image of darkness, its savage brushstrokes sculpting dark grey tonalities into abstract forms.

Karen Gallant's "Untitled" painting of a

female nude at a waterfall is an endearingly meditative piece-- its tranquillity and lyric charm recall mythical water nymphs, and the soothing blues and greens of its colour scheme give the picture a pervasive, aquatic atmosphere. The icing on the cake for this piece is an exterior addition to the painting's surface, a piece of material representing the drapery that the woman is casting off; it gives the work an extra three-dimensional hook for the viewer.

Karen Drew's "Hope" and "Power" are goddess-like images of exceptional vitality and power, recalling Celtic manuscript illumination and animal style art in their wildly, organically intricate decorative elements (though Power's goddess figure also resembles an Incan, Mayan, or Aztec figure in its feathered, spectacularly adorned form); these are brilliantly colourful pieces, real eye-catchers that snag and hold viewers with technical sophistication and imagination.

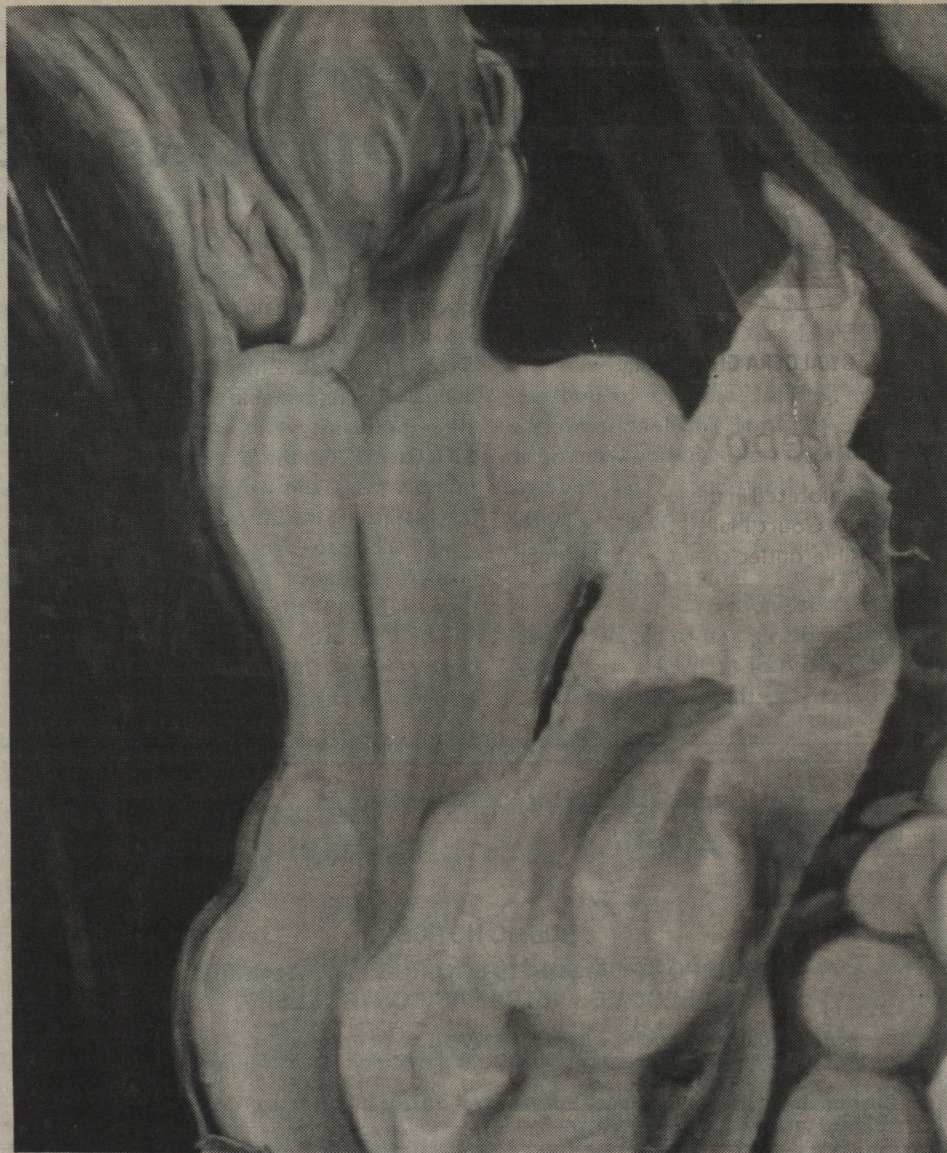
Dale McNevin's "Refugees, again" is a poignant depiction of a mother and child in war-torn Sarajevo; beyond its skilful, concretely realistic technical execution, the piece is noteworthy for its poignant commentary on the sufferings of war, made all the more effective by an image that evokes the centuries-old image of Madonna and Child.

Elizabeth Milner's "More Than Just Skin Deep" is an arresting work, a polychromatic abstraction of the female figure. The Rubenesque form is fascinatingly anonymous (its face obscured in a fog of colour), and hence universal. The painting is awash in sensually stimulating blues, purples, and other colours, and the swirling hues combine with the generous proportions of the figure to suggest a fullness of life, perhaps a Gaea-figure.

Lorraine Quinn's "Distorted Vision" evokes one of the show's major themes with its disturbing image of a woman staring unhappily into a mirror reflection that is, at least in her eyes, much darker and much less attractive than she actually is.

Less obvious but even more fascinating is Andrea Redmond's "Lamentation", an impressionistic painting depicting a woman

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playing a harp before a backdrop of Stonehenge-like rock formations on a dark, mysterious, rolling landscape, while a fox and raven look on. It's a compellingly enigmatic piece, with something of the otherworldly tone of di Chirico and the dreamlike quality of Fuseli (particularly in the fiery-eyed fox). The flowing brushstrokes merge into an impressionist dream-vision of shadowy atmosphere and colour.

Sculpture is also well-represented, with such pieces as Janet Norman-Bain's unique sculpted leather mask, "Heather Rhymster"; Sandy Kowalik's "Particle Perception" is a fascinating piece comprised of a black plaster mask with a fragmented, mirrored interior (the reflected soul?); Jan Mollison's "Icons of Inner Thought" tries to literally display the contents of a woman's mind through the symbols and objects inside an open-topped, sculpted cranium; and Tina Davis's "More Than Skin Deep" wooden carving of a face emerging from a piece of driftwood is simply beautiful in both its appearance and its sentiment, marking it as one of the most eloquent and effective expressions of the show's themes, and of the ideal of beauty for that matter.

Photography is in evidence as well, with such pieces as Marion Copleston's "Boot Dance" (a quaint depiction of the jubilant freedom of childhood) and "Micheline" (an

enigmatic forest scene that resembles a concrete realization of a Rousseau painting, and particularly Cheryl Nicholson's "Circle of Strength", an ambitious symbolic composition in a stark, massive metal frame.

Many of the show's pieces are in unusual media. Anne Mazer's cotton quilt are whimsical figure studies, almost Rubenesque relief sculptures in cloth. Strangest still is Shelley Limbert's "The Rainbow Within" which consists of an abstract painting of a woman (with portions of her anatomy represented as vibrant, multi-coloured shapes) partially enshrouded by copper wire which is bound by copper wire (which entwines a clay doll) and inscribed with a poem describing how women are compelled to "enshroud" their bodies but learn to unlock them (unlock "the rainbow") as they mature. It's certainly a visually and conceptually imaginative piece, if not one of the most attractive ones.

Thematic or issue-oriented art is subverted to its cause, with no value beyond its own propaganda; that is not the case for most part with the new Women's Centre exhibit, which has pieces that are worth looking at as art in and of themselves. Though it is geared towards women, this art show, like the one before it, is not only for women. The exhibition runs until April 9, and art lovers of all genders should feel free to check it out.