

# SHOWTIME

• A DAILY GUIDE TO WHAT'S NEW IN ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT •



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Artist Dorit Cypis challenges cultural assumptions about the female body in her provocative exhibit of photographs and sculpture at the College of St. Catherine. She stands before a group of photos called "My Father's Nudes."

## The Naked Truth

*A new exhibit by Dorit Cypis explores female sexuality through photographs and sculpture.*

BY DIANE HELLEKSON

■ **WHAT:** Dorit Cypis photographs and sculpture

■ **WHERE:** Catherine G. Murphy Gallery, Art Building, College of St. Catherine, 2004 Randolph Ave., St. Paul

■ **WHEN:** Opening reception 6-9 p.m. today; show runs through Nov. 8.

■ **ADMISSION:** free; 690-6636

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he nude in art is nothing new, but in recent years, the genre has been getting a bit sticky.

Artists, in using the naked body to investigate what was once the province of bedrooms and

porn shops, have pushed some public panic buttons.

The national debate about decency is bound to intensify this month, when Madonna releases a dubious book of flesh-and-leather pictures called "Sex." The work of Minneapolis artist Dorit Cypis, on view at a somewhat surprising venue — the College of St. Catherine — could either fuel or quench the fire.

On the one hand, Cypis' performances, photographs and installation sculptures are a confrontational shock to a culture that casts women as boy toys or asexual aunts. Like Madonna, Cypis uses her own body, in addition to material from pornography and ancient history, to prod cultural assumptions about female sexuality.

"Pornography isn't just in the magazine," she says. "We carry it inside us."

Yet Cypis' art also possesses a gentle sensuality that helps soften the roaring debate. In uncovering and juxtaposing varied images of women — an ancient fertility goddess, an angry temptress, a sensual pregnant mother — she suggests a female identity that is neither virgin nor whore, but something thoroughly original. Madonna could learn a lot from Cypis' sensitive provocations.

Cypis, 41, was born in Tel Aviv and grew up in Canada. She has lived in the United States since 1975, when she attended the California Institute of the Arts. In the last decade, her work has been performed and exhibited from Amsterdam to Los Angeles.

At the College of St. Catherine, as part of its "Women in the Arts" series, Cypis has assembled a coherent retrospective of her work over the past two years.

In the east gallery, viewers are greeted by small nude photographs of the artist; she commissioned the pictures from four other female photographers in an attempt to "see how women looked at other women" — a switch from the familiar male gaze in art and porn.

Farther into the gallery are 18 large, grainy prints of Cypis again, this time,

tight details culled from an earlier work. Showing her breast, her eye, her hand on her abdomen, the pictures are by turns sweet and sexy. Yet it's more complicated than that, for printed over each photo is a question: "Where lies desire?" "How do I experience pleasure?" "How can you see me as I really am?"

"I'm trying to imply this is a thinking, feeling body," says Cypis, "not just a sensual object for your pleasure."

In the rear of the west gallery, things get tougher. The installation looks rather elegant: a red sofa, images in gilded frames, a silky pillow that seems to be speaking softly. But get closer: A tape recorder inside the pillow issues a litany of pejorative terms for women, many of them obscene.

"I've lived my life hearing those words," says Cypis.

"For a woman to state them herself is for her to own them, and to begin to defuse their power."

The framed pictures are culled from a performance at Walker Art Center in which Cypis' sister, Johanna, portrayed the protagonist in the infamous porn movie "The Devil in Miss Jones," defending herself against a judgmental public. The piece was conceived after Cypis was a defense witness during an obscenity trial of the film.

Oddly, one crotch shot from the movie bears a striking resemblance to Gustave Courbet's beautiful 19th century painting "The Origin of the World."

Art history and personal history also enter into "My Father's Nudes," a piece that came about in a most unusual way.

Several years ago, after Cypis began appearing nude in her art, her father silently began to express his disapproval. While visiting him after he'd returned from a European vacation, something happened that Cypis still delights in recounting: "He handed me a handful of snapshots of nude figures from the 17th and 18th century. He said in his thick Polish accent, 'So, you think you have a monopoly on being naked?'"

The opportunity was too perfect: Cypis accepted these pictures from her father — images of women created by men — and made them her own. She photographed details from some of them, framed them all, and eventually set them where they belong: on a pedestal at a Catholic women's college, surrounded by nude images of herself.