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Dirty Laundry

By Elizabeth Hess

The Whole Part:
John Coplans, Rona
Pondick, John Wesley
 21 Mercer Street
 Through May 23

Art

John Coplans, Rona Pondick, and John Wesley all make work about the body politic, yet their objects have little in common. Hanging them together creates a bizarre show about the confines of male and female sexuality. This is not a pleasing event; all three artists have looked better in other contexts. Pondick, especially, is caught between a rock and a hard place, sitting in the center of the gallery between Wesley and Coplans. Nevertheless, there's a tension in the room that is too unbearable to ignore.

Coplans's fans will not want to miss this show. He's known for large, dramatic self-portraits that articulate every hair and wrinkle on his skin, but the photographer has never shown an equally private body of works using a female model. The most dramatic and horrific work in the show, *Self Portrait (with woman head)* shows the artist, his back to the camera and his head out of the frame,

carrying a woman on his shoulders; her upper torso is bent over so that all we see are her buttocks. This portrait of a man wearing a woman's backside as if it were a hat is upsetting, largely because it borders on misogyny.

In another piece, *Peppers*, Coplans has taken himself out of the picture altogether to isolate the female form. Two women are depicted bending over in a huddle; again, the emphasis is on the curves of their buttocks while their faces are hidden. Coplans seems to shoot women in much the same way he takes his own portraits. Yet these works do not have any of the same crude honesty that empowers the best of the autobiographical works. Moreover, he doesn't know how to place his female models to make them reveal anything about women. His women are all inanimate objects.

Wesley's comic nudes, in contrast to Coplans's heavy-handed ones, look so superficial it's difficult to take them seriously. Three acrylic canvases depicting comic-book women having, or about to have, sex with each other, are painted in uniformly monochromatic tones of flesh and baby blue; their exaggerated nipples look like pacifiers. *Handcuffs*, for instance, is a standard male fantasy; the image of a stereotypical, blond nude laying on her back masturbating is repeated twice.

Another piece shows two women about to kiss. It's a kind of lesbian Lichtenstein, but Wesley's canvases are so thin that we don't begin to think critically about Pop Art, sex, or anything. The figures seem intentionally brainless and there's not an erotic moment of communication between them.

One might ask what a nasty girl like Pondick is doing in this company. As usual, she aggressively occupies her own space in the room, yet her conceptual sculptures refuse to engage either of the male artists. All three of Pondick's works are variations on previous pieces. The most sinister, *Swinger*, is a bundle of Pondick's mechanical, grinning teeth, her current signature image, hanging from the ceiling, as if in effigy; a male boot at the top of the mass of cherry-red lips appears to be giving the piece a kick. As usual, the work resounds with readings from various verbal associations with the image, such as "foot in mouth," or "a kick in the teeth." Pondick's papier-mâché balls of teeth continue to look like fetuses swimming upstream. Away from Operation Rescue (sic) workers, perhaps?