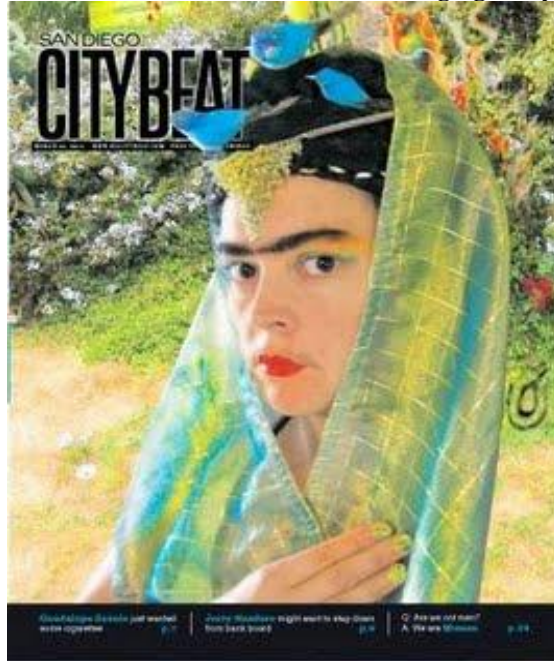


Leah Stella Stephens: Men of the House

Promotional artist statement for San Diego gallery show



Men of the House, a collection of mixed-media collages, began thirteen years ago as a response to the feminist dialogue on pornography and developed a language of its own.

A political perspective critiquing the female gaze and the aftereffects of childhood sexual abuse became complicated by idiosyncratic fantasy, the debate between what is perverse and natural, and the way whimsical promiscuities editorialize our interior erotic landscape.

The process is part cut-and-paste subconscious frenzy with an eventual analytical edit to find the narrative thread in each piece. Neatly knit borders and lace-trimmed frames evoke feminine campfire crafts. Sex-saturated suburban sets and decadent desserts boarder exposed men and their clothed female counterparts. The voyeurism expressed is both sensual and naive. One senses the longing of certain figures while others are somewhat passive or charming in their obliviousness. There is a sense two elderly women are as excited to showcase their baby-blue portrait cozy as they are to share space with a male nude and his frothy cotton-candy hair.

Nature is both intrinsic and opposed to sexual expression. A fish replaces a phallus, a baboon head mopes atop a lounging nude, and even the delicate hummingbirds of so much Southwestern iconography pierce the chest. Surrounded by spiny sea urchins, a young urchin emerges from his closet frightened by his primal drives, but only so much as they are judged by the primly dressed women who play bridge.

M.O.T.H. contends with the natural inception of sexual desire, the manifestations and mutations of fantasy, and the lurking shame that develops a clear, stern voice colonizing our sensual history.

The man of the house is neither father, brother, lover nor friend. Much like his female pornographic counterpart, he is the gauzy figure of fantasy and the physical manifestation of lust, subject to the delicate beauty and bestial whims of the natural world.

Neither moth nor butterfly, he is that indefinable moment of transformation where urge takes shape and becomes electrically charged. It is the instance before he is finally categorized with a push-pin and made a specimen. The thought is fleeting and when she (*she* is the proper woman, the desiring woman, and the sexual ghost in her stifling hot haunted manor) tries to explain who the man of the house could be, she finds herself drawn to lace-making, knitting, and creating neat borders around him. He rides bareback and spread-legged on the synapse of a woman's mind without mounting or dismounting.