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ART; Grappling With Feminism and Femininity

ONE show by female artists does not necessarily deserve another, but two may merit comparison. A current example is "My/Self: Your/Other" and "Female Body Parts: From Geography to Fetish." The first is on view at the Castle Gallery at the College of New Rochelle; the second is at Longwood Arts Gallery in the Bronx. Though both address the issue of woman as victim, the first is more genteel than the second -- as indicated by the titles.

Susan Canning, the curator of "My/Self: Your/Other" and an associate professor of art history at the college, concedes in an essay that women have made progress but that they must still remember "who makes the rules." Nevertheless, Dr. Canning says the 15 artists she has selected "offer a diverse vision of identity inspired by personal experience and conviction rather than by the outdated formulas and tired conventions that the dominant culture continues to sustain."

Aside from tedium, the trouble with this tired rhetoric is that it presupposes a limitless reserve of compassion in a general audience that is daily battered with news of "abuses" visited on individuals, groups -- whole nations. It is therefore fortunate that Dr. Canning, though she takes the party line as a writer, more than compensates with her eye for esthetic values.

Naturally, there are works in which politics are uppermost. These include Nancy Spero's paper frieze in which the same print of a female nude cavorting like a body builder is combined with the figure of a woman in tailored clothes and one impression of Marlene Dietrich in a pants suit; Emma Amos's take on the upside-down figures of the German painter Georg Baselitz (whom she calls George Baseless), imperialism in Africa and other evils that are combined in the same unstretched canvas, and the chain belt by Ava Gerber, from which dangle items like paper money, a dead rose and a wad of cigarette butts. But on the whole, politics and esthetics are held in equilibrium, and there are even humorous moments, as in Ms. Gerber's floor piece consisting of 17 panty girdles stuffed with pillows.

One of the best works is Joyce Scott's "Big Mama," a small nude made of black beads that is posed on a mound of beaded flowers and apparently is about nothing but its own ingratiating self. Ms. Scott is also responsible for the tiny beaded lovers, one black and the other white, caught in a spiral of wire netting and larger gold beads.



"Decision Cubes," above, by Katherine Bradford

Another good-looking contribution is Katherine Bradford's comment on monotony by way of cubes painted different bright colors and inscribed on each face with a word like "Read," "Walk," "Home" and "Bed."

Alison Saar is represented by a sizable relief of a nude in beaten copper, which is pocked with what looks like bullet holes and stands among rocks that could be made of lead. More impressive, however, are the artist's small relief heads, particularly "La Rosa Negra." This is a silhouette of a woman cut out of metal, laid against a pink background and a house-shape frame.

With a black-and-white photograph of a cookie jar in the shape of Aunt Jemima, Carrie Mae Weems takes aim at racist cliches. But with all the will in the world, unreconstructed viewers may find it hard to take offense at a toy ceramic modeled with such taste and delicacy. Other works by Ms. Weems include the large black-and-white of a woman initiating a child into the art of making up her face.

According to its title, Candida Alvarez's "Swollen Belly Series" is a comment on the trials of pregnancy. But in appearance, these pretty crayon drawings are abstractions that occasionally allude to the human figure. Although it is refreshing to see Elizabeth Taylor replacing Marilyn Monroe as a female St. Sebastian, Kathe Burkhart's large heads of the star with her violet eyes and blue eye shadow are not very good imitations of Andy Warhol.

The largest, most mystifying work is Ida Appelbroog's cluster of canvases titled "Rainbow Caverns," the meaning of which is anybody's guess. Small images drawn in the artist's familiar deadpan style run along the top and down one side, and three of them feature a man and young girl locked in an embrace. But the better part of the work is given over to three paintings, one of an old woman seated knitting in a chair, surrounded by birds and what appears to be corncocks, a second of a woman eating spaghetti and a third of a big nude in a bodybuilder pose.

The show includes video films, one about Frida Kahlo, scheduled today, Wednesday, Friday and next Sunday.

"Female Body Parts," curated by Betti-Sue Hertz, is by 10 artists questioning, as the release says, "who and what women are, in the material sense." It is also a show that may "free us from inhibitions and fears about our most intimate images, parts of ourselves." Given some of the alternatives offered, many of us may prefer to stay inhibited.

Works reviewable in a family newspaper include Tatyana Gubash's intimations of pink breasts floating on crusty white panels; the wall assemblage by Michele Blondel, consisting of two circular, nipples in white porcelain, a large pink glass globe and a metal box containing a rosary; two nudes modeled in brown ceramic by Gloria Nixon, and Sharon Gilbert's torso-shape shards of paper, white and colored, imprinted with names of places and products.

Lisa Titus transfers to a panel photomechanical images of herself, seated nude, except for a mask, which add up to a checkerboard of pink, silver and gold squares. The ubiquitous Lynne Yamamoto is present with one of her falls of black hair, identified as "artificial air," measuring about 15 feet, together with an organic shape in brown glass titled "My Other Ear." Jeannette Louie presents an installation involving a type of box reportedly used in China to transport a bride to her nuptials, six impressions of feet in plaster and a mirror on which is painted a hand holding out a white chrysanthemum.

That Adam Licht's tiny black-and- white prints of nails hang by themselves in an adjoining space at Longwood Arts Gallery does not prevent the viewer from wondering what the photographer is doing in such company. Still, the subject -- clusters of nails hammered in randomly and mostly lighted from the left -- and the professionalism of the installation make the room a place in which to come down from the orgy of narcissism next door.

"My/Self: Your/Other" is on view at the Castle Gallery until next Sunday. The number to call for more information is 654-5423.

"Female Body Parts" and the "Bent Nail Series" remain on view through April 24. Longwood Arts Gallery, on the second floor of Public School 39 at 963 Longwood Avenue, is open Thursday through Friday from noon to 5 P.M., Saturdays from noon to 4 P.M. The number to call for more information is (718) 842-5659.