

MagMag

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Wendy Coburn

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Wendy Coburn: Anatomy of Protest (triptych, 2013). Images courtesy of the artist.

Wendy Coburn

Christina M. Barnicke Gallery

Toronto

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In this exhibition, Wendy Coburn arrives at the intersection of art and activism via a curious path – the making of a documentary film, *Slut Nation: Anatomy of a Protest*, about police provocateurs at the first Slutwalk march, which took place in 2011 in Toronto. The term “provocateur” refers to police officers who pose as extremist activists, and behave in such a way that attracts attention and provokes public outrage against the protesters. The film is accompanied by photographs depicting the eerie recreations of genuine props made by social activists used by these police agents. The topic seems all the more relevant on the University of Toronto campus, where the exhibition takes place – a place where I once heard a young trans-gendered man say to another: “All the girls here are ugly and the ones who aren’t are bitches”, as if a combination of beauty, niceness and availability is something every boy automatically deserves. In response to these kind of attitudes, there has been growing awareness of sexual assaults at university campuses (though, as a recent poll suggests, it is happening slowly), as well as public campaigns aimed at teaching young men that women have the right to dress as they please and *not* be assaulted.

Whether the Slutwalk successfully addressed such issues is hard to tell given the manipulation of the cause by the very authorities who are supposed to uphold progressive standards against sexual violence. This conclusion is one of many drawn from Coburn’s talk alongside speakers Jane Doe, Gary Kinsman and Lesley Wood, and





oderated by Lisa Steele) that accompanied the exhibition. Coburn
oke at length about the frightening nature of provocateurs: no
nger just double agents planted for the purpose of quietly gathering
formation, the new generation of infiltrators are actors scheming to
jack the message by making it look silly, obstructing the cause and
verting the attention of the media towards spectacle.

re film is informative, challenging and outrageous. At first, the
otographs accompanying it seem to self-consciously reproduce the
ltural institutional frameworks that house them. While that may be
omewhat true, their presence does prevent the dissolving of the
bject matter into the broader spectrum of social activism. Anyone
ho attended the panel presentation found themselves wondering
hat the relationship is between authorship and authority. In the
ontext of activism, a prop is a symbolic device. In the hands of the
olice, props become weapons. If we decide the police are using
ese weapons against us, can we fight back by creating superior
rops? In the beginning of the film, Coburn briefly mentions her own
ast attempts at infiltrating a white supremacist group and realizing in
ie process that the group had its own agents within her activist
roup. This proposition creates an awareness of a co-dependent
ynamic of infiltration, renegotiation and a struggle over the
presentation of the active cause through the gaze of the media.

Anatomy of a Protest Slut Nation Slutwalk University of Toronto

Wendy Coburn