



LA CENTRALE  
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Réflexion sur l'art actuel des femmes

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**LA CENTRALE**  
GALERIE POWERHOUSE

## NADINE NORMAN *VENIFICA; AN OTHER GARDEN THEME*

by Claudia Hart

*Love makes of the wisest man a fool,  
and of the most foolish woman – a sage.*  
old Yiddish proverb

In "The First Wives Club", a hot Hollywood comedy, Goldie Hawn, Diane Keaton and Bette Middler are middle-aged ex-wives who've all been dumped by their successful husbands (whose careers they have, of course, absolutely made) for rail-thin younger women. Initially despondent and self-hating, they join forces to form a club whose agenda specifically is to wreak revenge on the betraying *schmucks* to whom they have been married for twenty years.

Their strategy is to pool cash and psychic resources to coerce by either take-over business economics or well-deserved blackmail, more-than-generous checks from their corrupt ex-hubbies, to turn their club into a luxurious "woman's crisis center" open to the public. Seduced by their wives new self-empowerment, two husbands try to return home, while a third wife replaces her hopelessly infantile *ex* with a new gorgeous younger man. The film has successfully entered the mass-market and is even being distributed as a 1996 Christmas movie, indicating a vastly changed public perception of the phallic woman not as *femme fatale* but as a light vehicle of good-humored comedy embraced by the general public. Hawn, Middler, and Keaton are exemplars of the "Venificious" woman - a new cultural paradigm perceived and enunciated by the artist Nadine Norman in her *La Centrale*, Montreal exhibition. One can only hope that the word "venificious," invented for her complex and bitingly humorous installation, *Venifica; an other Garden theme*, may enter general language.

Drawing from Latin the epistemological root of the word "venom," Norman has coined a phrase. A "venificious" woman fights fire with fire. Instead of adopting the traditional role of woman as weakling or worse as victim (a wife dumped in later middle-age by a

husband for whom she has borne and raised children and supported through early lean years for a younger, svelter bride) Venifica is a vengeful witch and spell-caster who explains to young women what precisely they may expect from men. Reversing the ethical judgement of the biblical tale of Eve and Adam, Norman's Venifica offers an apple implanted with a worldly knowledge which is not poison but power: the truth of Eve being that the Knight-in-Shining-Armor she awaits to awaken her from her innocent sleep is more than likely going to be not a prince but a real *schmuck* (the Yiddish word for male genitalia, also an insulting term used in humor for a man who might be a scoundrel and/or - the collision of categories here *must* be noted -



Bobbe Mysah Booth (1996)



a fool). This then is the knowledge that has been suppressed for eons, and for giving the apple of which Eve has herself been given an evil name.

Like the women of "The First Wives Club", Norman enters business as a vehicle of self-empowerment. She has formed a company, Venifica Inc. Productions, its primary activity, to develop and distribute apple-based products, their function being to listen to problems and to give sage advise. In her work, Norman reinterprets homilies and old wives tales - "an apple a day keeps the psychoanalyst away," for only one silly example. *Venifica; an other Garden theme* consists of a series of installations organized along literary lines. The central piece is the "Bobbe Myseh Booth" (*a bobbe myseh* is an old grandmother - one of the "old wives" said to distribute their tales),

a wooden apple cart displaying red and green apples arranged to spell out the word "SCHMUCK." Norman's apple vendors upset the traditional relationship to the cart, not distributing apples but instead collecting stories. On their aprons, the vendors - chosen for their Jewish ethnicity - wear aprons on which are projected an animated video satirizing the Anglo-Saxon old-wives-tale in which young girls throw the skins of freshly peeled apples over their shoulders to decipher in their fallen shapes the first initials of the men they will marry. Norman's apple-peels, however, are specially animated to spell out the word *schmuck*. The vendors request from every gallery visitor a *schmuck* story: from the gentlemen, tales of



*Venifica's Garden and SCHMUCKS (1996)*



*Other view of Venifica; an other Garden Theme (1996)*

*schmuck*-dom and from the ladies, their *schmuck*-encounters. Every story received is then recorded on a receipt pad and stamped with one of seven categories that Norman has enlisted for her archival system. Each of these is, like *schmuck*, a derogatory - albeit humorous - Yiddish term: *Scmendrik* (idiot or victim), *Nednik* (foolish creature), *Pisber* (cry-baby), *Kvetch* (whiner), *Mesbuganer* (crazy person), *Farmisht* (a mess), and *Schvontz* (like the Anglo-Saxon "prick").

The *La Centrale* installation also includes "Venifica's Garden," a piece consisting of 2,600 apples supported on 9,000 horse-hoof nails. As the apples dry, they fall from their mounts, to be recycled as the heads of Venifica dolls - another product of Venifica Inc. Productions. These dried apple dolls were offered as prizes at "Venifica's apple bobbing inauguration festival," the opening-night spectacle in which visitors were encouraged to stick their heads in a barrel of water to bob up an apple of "knowledge." In addition to having the opportunity to legitimately behave like a bunch of *mesbuganers*, bobbers could win for their labors a dried apple doll, neatly encased in a wrapper explaining the Venifica myth. Further parodying the traditionally acculturated female desire for a future husband-prince, the final piece in Norman's assemblage is a video installation in which a television, encased in one of many piled-up apple crates, re-interprets a bit of ancient Yiddish *bobbe-myseb* lore. In this, women of all ages turn apple stems, at the same time chanting letters of the alphabet. When the stem finally breaks on a certain letter, the woman has found the first initial of the name of her future husband. According to Norman's version of the myth, women may also enact a ritual of revenge on this future *schmuck* in their lives, by attempting to pierce their apple's hearts with their newly-plucked stems. In order



The Garden (1996)



to find the first letter of his last name, they chant alphabet letters, systematically stabbing at the apple skins, the letter at which they ultimately pierce being his.

"Jews are so often jesting philosophers," Nathan Ausubel has written in his book of Jewish humor. "A hard life has made them realists - without illusions... by laughing at the absurdities and cruelties of life, they draw much of the sting from them." This laughter is ironic because in Jewish humor, comedy and tragedy are joined. "Laughter through tears" is what it is called in Jewish folk lore. You laugh in order to give yourself the courage not to grieve, because when it is distilled with pathos, laughter may achieve the balance necessary to maintain sanity. And like so much of Hollywood comedy, it is to the tradition of Jewish humor that Nadine Norman's *Venifica: an other Garden theme* must be annexed.■

*Love is sweet  
but it's tastier with bread*  
old Yiddish proverb

Claudia Hart met l'humour de Nadine Norman à l'honneur en soulignant son esprit d'invention. L'artiste a imaginé une série d'installations avec des pommes, renversant l'histoire biblique d'Adam et Ève pour donner aux pommes un nouveau rôle. Elle fonde d'abord une compagnie, Venifica Inc. Productions, pour développer et distribuer des produits à base de pommes. Cette *Venifica* est une sorcière qui cherche à venger ses histoires malheureuses avec les hommes en prenant la parole à sa manière, dans les œuvres de Norman. Dans l'installation *Bobbe Myseh Booth* (*bobbe myseh* est un terme yiddish signifiant vieille grand-mère), une vendeuse de pommes derrière sa charette collectionne auprès des visiteurs des histoires de *schmuck* (mot yiddish pour organes génitaux mâles, signifiant aussi crapule). Chaque histoire est transcrite sur un reçu et catégorisée par des termes yiddish : du *schmuck* au *farmisht*, du couillon à la victime idiote. Les autres installations font référence à certaines traditions juives, reliées à la recherche du futur époux-prince charmant : un mur couvert de pommes pelées et un vidéo montrant des vieilles femmes épluchant des pommes. Claudia Hart met en rapport l'histoire de *Venifica* et le sens de l'humour typiquement juif de Nadine Norman avec le film *The First Wives Club*. Une comédie où des femmes abandonnées par leurs maris décident de se venger. Des femmes *venificous*, pour utiliser le paradigme de Norman, qui ont du caractère. Et beaucoup d'humour.