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Performance artists make sharp points with wit, style

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PERFORMANCE ART REVIEW
PATRICK SCULLY/ HEIDI ARNESON

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Defectors from white, middle-class American cultures often choose shrill bursts of artistic expression to announce their better, more diverse and open-minded lives.

One of the reasons the works of Heidi Arneson and Patrick Scully, presented this weekend at the Cleveland Performance Art Festival, feel so fresh is that they're never shrill. While both seem to have abandoned the status quo in their own way, they retain enough mainstream language to position their art effectively. They're accessible and witty.

Arneson, a thirtysomething woman of medium build, medium-brown hair and nondescript features, twisted, manipulated and maximized her own generic quality to convey that wit Friday night.

Her territory is the development of female heterosexuality, and her medium is humor; all the best images in her show work as punchlines that are too good to give away in print (and the show repeats tomorrow).

Arneson assumes an autobiographical framework, taking the stage in black unitard as Heidi the toddler and quickly jumping into a phantom bathtub to discover pink tile, pink tub and pink parts-unknown of her body.

She moves through early childhood by depicting play-doctor scenes between herself and neighbor children, on into high school experiences and then liaisons as a young woman.

Vivid characters people each vignette, and Arneson uses only gestures and mannerisms to indicate when she is her freckled female friend, the crusty-nosed little brother and the Kenyan man to whom she loses her virginity. The gestures become motifs, and Arneson truly knows what's funny.

What's not so funny, because it isn't meant to be, is the self-consciousness and wrongness that Heidi-the-girl, then Heidi-the-woman convey about her sexual self-esteem. This culminates in a series of sight gags about graceless sexual experiences with men after which the woman dutifully responds, "I feel honored." Herein lies the most profound, but secret, gender bias of American culture, the piece suggests. But it stops short of equivocating.

Scully's milieu is the plight of the gay community, although "plight" is a far more loaded word than he would use.

He presents his piece, titled "Queer Thinking" as the monologues of three gay men who talk about the issues: What about homosexuals makes people uncomfortable; what he is most uncomfortable revealing about himself; and "secrets" of homosexuality. The men are a drag queen, an HIV-positive gay man (as Scully is in life) and a "radical fairy" who spills the secrets of how homosexuals retaliate against bigotry.

The lanky Scully strips naked, dons a micromini and padded cape, then pulls his long blond hair into a high pony tail for the first bit. He employs the metaphor of complete nudity in talking about living with the human immunodeficiency virus.

A simple T-shirt and jeans do for his confessions of militantism, a bit that shocked an unshockable audience when he recalled how, early in "the epidemic," he and other friends talked of how straight men would have to be purposefully infected so that the disease would be taken seriously.

But shock generally isn't the method of choice for either Scully or Arneson. Most of the time, they'd rather be playful, smart and entertaining. They are.