

= Vanitas : Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic =

" Vanitas : Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic " (1987) is an artwork created by Canadian Jana Sterbak , first displayed at Montreal 's Galerie Rene Blouin . Its most famous showing was at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa , where it attracted national controversy . The work was composed of 50 pounds of raw flank steaks sewn together , and hung on a hanger . According to the artist , the work is a contrast between vanity and bodily decomposition . The artwork is in the collections of Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and of Centre Pompidou in Paris (edition of 2 + artist copy) .

= = Description = =

The artwork consists of a " Flesh Dress " , constructed of slabs of beef sewn together , hung on a tailor 's dummy . On a nearby wall is a framed photograph of a model posing in the dress . The dress is stitch together from 50 @-@ 60 pounds of raw flank steak and must be constructed anew each time it is shown . The work included either \$ 260 or \$ 300 worth of meat , as of its 1991 showing .

As suggested by the title , the work is considered within the genre of " vanitas " , a category of art showing death and decay . The work includes non @-@ traditional materials , a trend in 20th @-@ century art . It " stands in the Surrealist tradition of the uncanny , of the informe , disturbing the distinctions , by which we categorize experience " .

There were some earlier instances of meat being used as clothing in art . Seafood outfits , including a lobster bikini , were featured at Salvador Dalí 's The Dream of Venus pavilion at the 1939 World 's Fair . The cover of the November 1983 The Undertones compilation album , All Wrapped Up showed a female model wearing cuts of meat held in place with plastic wrap . The clothes are mostly bacon , with a sausage necklace . In 2010 , singer Lady Gaga attended an awards show wearing a meat dress similar to Sterbak 's in style .

= = Exhibition = =

Montreal gallery Galerie Rene Blouin exhibited the " Flesh Dress " in 1987 . The exhibit received " scant " attention .

At age 36 , Sterbak was given a retrospective show at the National Gallery of Canada called " States of Being " , reviewing the past decade of her works . Scheduled from 8 March to 21 May 1991 , the exhibit included works like " Cone on Hand " (1979) . The exhibit was relatively well @-@ attended , compared to other shows , due in part to the controversy , and was discussed in the catalog Jana Sterbak : States of Being = corps à corps .

When the meat was shriveling , flaking , and falling off , one anonymous donor gave the gallery \$ 260 for replacement meat . (This number was of some debate , with \$ 350 worth of meat listed in one vegetarian magazine .) Because of the negative publicity the work had received , gallery staff pretended to be caterers when finding a butcher in the Ottawa area to provide replacement meat .

In 1993 , the T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund purchased a copy of the work for the Walker Art Center , in Minnesota . It was reconstructed by a small team in 2011 , for the show " Midnight Party " .

The work later was exhibited at the Tate Modern in London , for the exhibition " Rites of Passage " . When the small retrospective of her work was taken to Antoni Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona , the show was " edited down to an arid minimum " by the artist herself , which included editing out the dress . In 2011 , the work was presented at " Tous Cannibales " at la Maison Rouge [1] and in 2010 at Elles @ Centre Pompidou , Paris Jana Sterbak / Couture sanglante .

= = Controversy = =

The work was one in a series of controversies surrounding the National Gallery of Canada in the 1980s and 1990s , including the acquisition of Barnett Newman 's " Voice of Fire " (1967) , less

than a year before . The show drew criticism from Members of Parliament , and the organizers of food banks and soup kitchens . It was considered an insult , given the early 1990s recession .

Progressive Conservative MP Felix Holtmann , a pig farmer from Manitoba commented : " I call it a jerky dress . There are a lot of people who hold food sacred in this land , and they are appalled by the use of food for this thing . " In response , one newspaper editorial called him a " meat head " . Holtmann was chair of the House of Commons Communications and Culture Committee , which oversees the NGC funding ; the committee itself was split on the issue . The artist called Holtmann a " self @-@ proclaimed Philistine [who is] not even successful as a hog farmer . " Art critic Christopher Hume commented that the Committee 's concept " was based on the notion that the National Gallery is somehow accountable for poverty and hunger in Canada . Surely the irony of their desperate position is that they are members of the group that created the mess the country is now in . "

Ottawa alderman Mark Maloney called health inspectors , who found that there the work presented no health hazards . Inspected on 1 April , Dr. Edward Ellis of the Ottawa @-@ Carlton Health Department issued a statement that the dress presented " no health hazard to the public at this time " , so long as no one touches or eats it . The inspector also suggested the dress was out of their jurisdiction , being on a federal property ; the department asked Health and Welfare Canada to follow up .

The Toronto Sun and sister paper Ottawa Sun printed a cartoon featuring " a curvy , spaghetti @-@ strapped slip " made of the same materials as the meat dress . The editorial cartoon suggested readers cut out the image , smear it with foodstuffs , and mail it to [show curator Diana] Nemiroff ; her address was included with the image . A writer for Canadian Art noted how the cartoonist suggested respondents use the most repulsive material possible , as " Diana will like that , " was an emphasis of the curator 's gender , with subtly sexual suggestions . The mailroom opened mail with gloves for weeks after the cartoon ; one was covered in feces . A sexually @-@ threatening letter was sent to the NGC communications officer , who had been quoted in articles about the work . The writer for Canadian Art suggested reaction would have been different if the genders of the artist and curator were different , that the work would have likely been deemed sexist , for starters . In all , 200 people mailed food scraps to the National Gallery of Canada within a week .

Contemporary Canadian art curator Diana Nemiroff suggested the controversy was largely due to the work being taken out of the larger context of the show . " There 's no doubt that the dress is a provocative object and it 's meant to be a provocative object , but the cry that it 's a waste of food is misplaced . " She noted that other exhibits have used grains , breads , and potatoes were used as part of previous exhibits , but the flesh was likely source of the controversy . Said Nemiroff : " It 's kind of double cross because clothing is supposed to be second skin and cover us up . And this one reverses the process and reveals what we don 't want to confront : our mortality . "

The film *The Silence of the Lambs* , about a man who butchers women , was released around the same time , a coincidence noted by a writer for Canadian Art magazine .

In various critical reviews , the work of German Joseph Beuys was referenced ; a 1996 work by Sterbak portrayed her as a moth , eating up the clothes in his closet . New York Times writer Ann Wilson Lloyd noted in 1998 that Sterbak 's work " has inspired reams of humorless , abstruse theoretical writing that leaves none of her layered metaphors unturned . Yet Ms. Sterbak 's work ? seductive , intensely physical and edged with dark absurdity ? delivers a mind @-@ body frisson unknowable by intellect alone . "