

STILL SANE

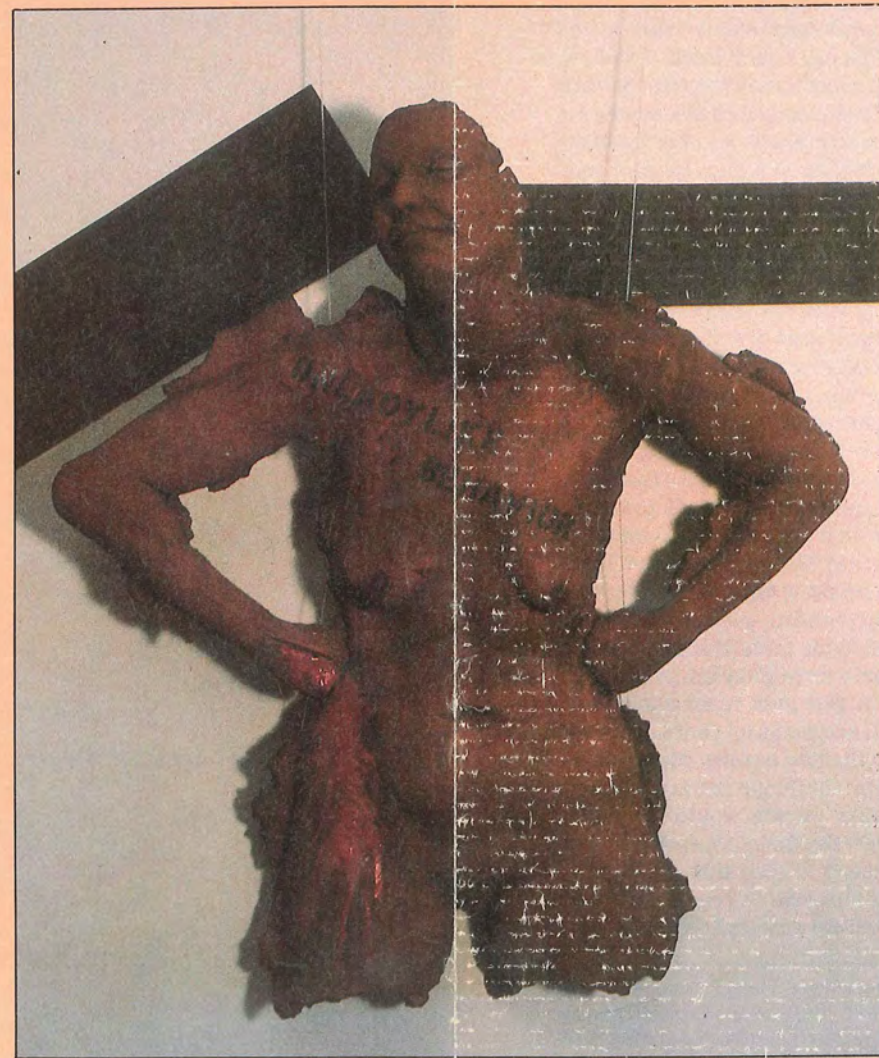
"Of the 60 million Valium prescriptions written in 1975, two thirds were for women...among them a disproportionate number were working class..."
Mind Control (US)

Still Sane is a hard show. It is hard to look at, hard to think about and hard to write about. In twenty-seven pieces of sculpture Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly tell the story of the three years Sheila spent in mental hospitals for being a lesbian. Each of the pieces consists of one or more clay figures taken from three basic body casts of Sheila's body. There are thirty-seven figures taken from these three basic casts and each of them looks different. This diversity is achieved by using different parts of the casts, sometimes only head and upper chest, sometimes only arms or parts of torsos. Also since each piece had to be cut up to be fired in the kiln, the ways they are reassembled has contributed many different planes and

angles to the figures. Colour and texture are created by the use of paint, auto body enamel, melted glass, wire mesh, plastic netting, sheet metal, spring steel, ground carborundum and nails.

The pieces are so powerful and so shocking that they raised many defenses in me as I looked at them. It was in working my way through these defenses that I found the show to be richly rewarding. Some of the questions I threw in the face of the pieces and some of the answers they led me to are in this article for people who may not be able to see and question this show for themselves.

The first thing that's hard about this show is that it smashes the illusion that only crazy people end up in crazy bins.



Hospital: unladylike behaviour. Photo: Marsha Arbour

Nora D. Randall

"Consistently the poor are drugged with major tranquilizers at a rate more than double that of the general population."
Health Application Systems and Medi-Cal Data (US)

We walk around in comfort born of the illusion that we control what happens to us by our actions. That myth is shattered. Sheila was not crazy when she went to see the psychiatrist. She was 19 years old, and involved with her first woman lover. She was excited about it, and knew it was what she wanted. Her lover told her that homosexuals went to see psychiatrists either to be cured or to help them deal with any problems of guilt they might experience by going against their heterosexual socialisation. So Sheila went off to the student health service and confidently announced to the shrink that she would like help adjusting to being gay. She happened to see a shrink who classified lesbianism as a psychotic illness. She put Sheila on

drugs and into the hospital. It was an accident. Sheila sometimes says that she wonders what would have happened if she had gone to the Tuesday and Thursday shrink and not the Monday and Wednesday one. She knows another woman who went to a psychiatrist in the same year, at the same age with the same "problem" and was told not to worry and so she didn't.

It was an act of random institutional violence. Once caught, lesbians are subjected to "therapeutic programs" aimed at destroying their sexuality. There are some protections against this happening now but only for women who realise that they need protection from institutions. For women who go to institutions for help, their fate is a matter of luck.

That a casual choice can plunge a woman into years of suffering and victimisation is both diminishing and liberating. One of the hardest things to deal with for those of use who have been victims is "How could such a terrible thing happen to me. I must have done something to cause it." But really terrible things do just happen to people. If we can face our terrible vulnerability we can give up our guilt. Sometimes guilt can be a protection against our vulnerability. This show has none of it. Sheila is vulnerable. Period.

The second thing that's hard about this show is that it is the story of a young woman with a great deal of common sense who innocently seeks answers in the wrong place, and has her self-confidence shattered. This is not a story

about a woman who spent three weeks in a mental hospital on valium. This is the story of a woman who was in and out of mental hospitals for three years, on chlorpromazine* for two, who received 19 shock treatments, who stuck her head through windows because she thought it would be kind of a neat trick, who slashed herself with razor blades, took every pill in her medicine cabinet and was finally shipped off to the provincial hospital for hopeless and long term cases. The story is horrifying. Once in its own right and doubly because it is so clearly not a "descent into madness" but a descent into the mental illness system.

In one of the early stories Sheila talks about her friend, Rose Ann.

So she was sitting on her bed crying. And I had my arm around her, comforting her. She was my friend. But then the nurse came in and saw us and started yelling about how she was afraid that this was where our friendship would lead and did Rose Ann know that I was a lesbian and how could I take advantage of her. It wasn't like that. And Rose Ann knew it too.

This particular piece is the one for me where it is clearest that a normal

woman is being taught to be crazy. That accusing voice in our head saying, "How stupid to have acted naturally. There is something wrong with my nature. I do not know how to act."

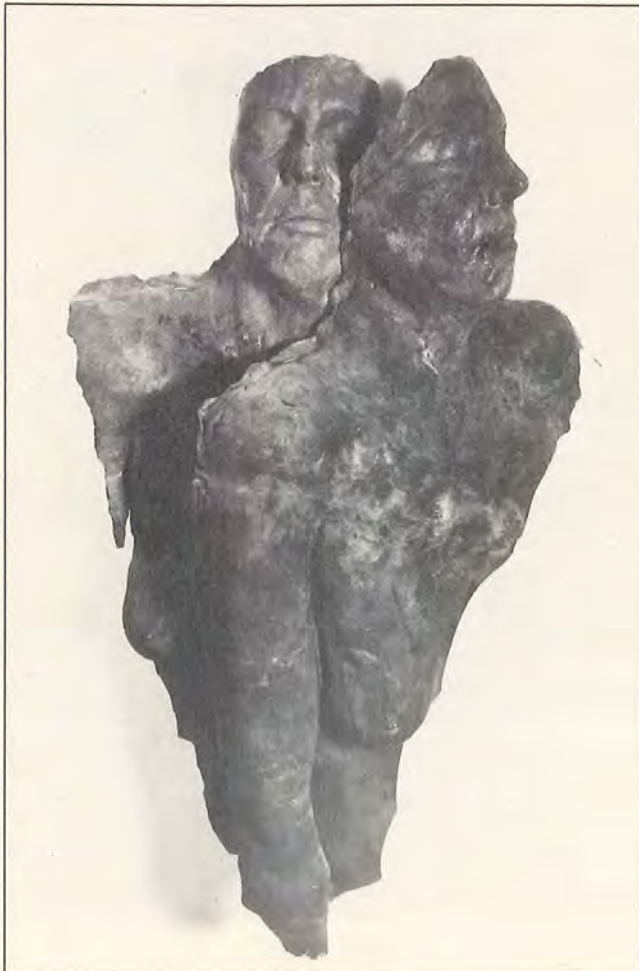
Undermining Sheila's confidence in her ability to choose right action was only the first turn of the screw, however. With drugs it was possible to remove her from knowledge of what she was doing.

I had to take chlorpromazine for over two years and I hated it. It felt like my body was full of wet cement. The last year, they started upping my dosage, and I was very confused and had blurred vision and stuff started happening like I would forget where my room was and go into someone else's room and that got all the other patients down on me. This one time I was changing my clothes, but it was this guy's room and he came in and made it this big sexual thing. I told my shrink I thought it was because my meds were too strong and I was disoriented but my shrink said it was because I wanted to get fucked by this guy. He said complaining about my meds was paranoid behaviour and he upped my dosage. . .

What is at stake here and has been since the beginning of this story is the question of who has the power to interpret reality. It is only within the context of the struggle for social control over the interpretation of our reality that the hardest part of the show can be understood. The pieces about slashing are shocking. The one entitled *Slashing* is the head, arms and torso of a woman painted with a blue oil base, with white latex covering. The piece has been blasted with a propane torch and string steel blades surrounded with red glaze are embedded in the arms. It and *Unladylike Behaviour*, a terra cotta coloured figure sporting a two inch razor slash from which red acrylic paint flows down the torso, are the two hardest pieces in the show. They challenge my faith. Surely only a crazy person would do this to themselves. But the pieces provide a rational answer to even this.

The first time I did it I cried. I remember I was on Valium then and never cried, but

“Most studies indicate that at least half of those who take anti-depressants or antipsychotics suffer from one or more drug induced problems.”
Mind Control (US)



The Royal Hospital: Rose Ann
Photo: Paula Levine

*chlorpromazine: is a major tranquilizer and anti-psychotic drug used to control mental patients. It has many harmful side effects. In their publication, *Dr. Caligari's Psychiatric Drugs*, Network Against Psychiatric Assault quotes from Peter Sterling, Ph.D., "Psychiatry's Drug Addiction," *The New Republic*, December 8, 1979. "The blunting of conscious motivation, and the ability to solve problems under the influence of chlorpromazine (Thorazine) resembles nothing so much as the effects of frontal lobotomy."

The Royal Hospital: signing myself in
Photo: Paula Levine

pieces of the show Sheila's figure is with a group of her friends, each of whom has a small story similar to Sheila's. In another piece her scars are done in gold leaf and she wears them like decorations and in the final piece Sheila's full figure stands alone in layers of bright colour with a triumphant grin and the golden legend STILL SANE.

It is an incredibly rich and inspiring story, only some of which I have been able to talk about here. The show also includes a wealth of impressions about friends and nurses, as well as facts and statistics about the mental illness industry today. It is thought provoking, it's painful, ultimately it's beautiful. It has many gifts to give women who have been victims.

It is an attempt to project into the culture an image of the victim's reality that is stronger than the attacker's reality, so that the attacker will be ostracised and not the victim. It pushes the edge of social reality. It is successful because Sheila's story is much more real and understandable than the psychiatric profession's response to her. It's a useful story for women to know in our fight to define ourselves and our experiences. It may even be a great story.

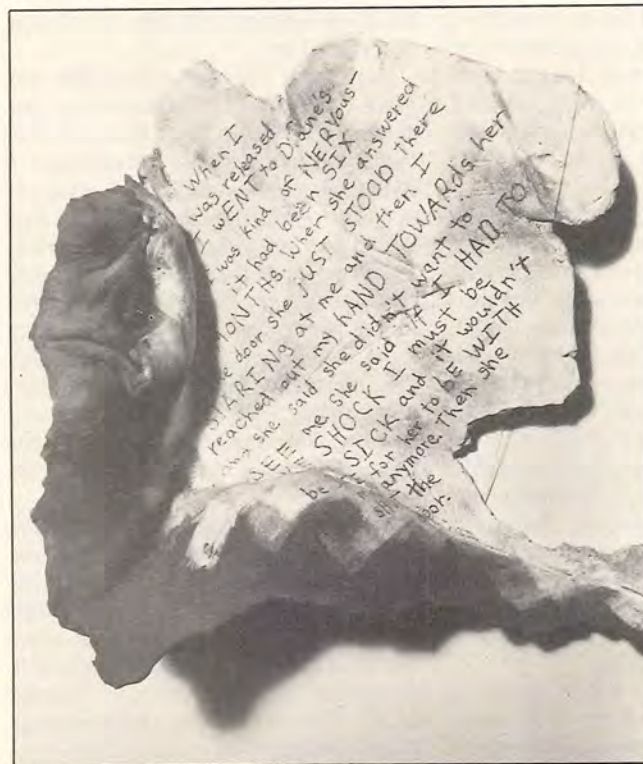
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The ceramics sculpture exhibition "Still Sane" was displayed from September 20 to October 20 as part of the 10th Anniversary Celebration of the Vancouver Women in Focus and Media Centre.

Ultimately there is Strackville, the provincial hospital that mental patients are threatened with at other hospitals. "Shape up or you'll be sent to Strackville." At Strackville she is at the mercy of the male attendants. She reports their abuse but is met once again by denials at the wall of a social reality which systematically excludes her perceptions. By now she realises that she has become socialised in the world into which she wandered and no matter what happens to her she knows enough to keep quiet. This is how she finally escapes.

I decided I had to get out of Strackville. I decided it didn't matter if I was some kind of crazy person who needed their protection to keep from flipping into some kind of total blackout. I was scared of flipping out but I was more scared of Strackville. Some people spent their lives there. Some people died there. Me, I was going to pass for normal and get out.

So there I was, trying to pass for normal, all drugged up in this place that stinks of shit and lysol and every day is endlessly boring except for occasional flashes of violence and I'm powerless to protect myself and I'm normal. Normal women don't talk about being a lesbian and they're always cheerful. I was always good and smiling, never complaining or bothering the staff, keeping my mouth shut and smiling, always obedient and quiet and nice and smiling, in the middle of this hellhole, smiling and smiling. And I did it. After three months of it I got out.

For three years after getting out of Strackville Sheila kept a low profile and lived with another woman "in shame" which is pretty much where she figured she belonged by then. Then one day at a night school she met a lesbian feminist, a woman who was proud to be a lesbian. Through her Sheila met lots of women who were proud to be lesbians and her life began to change. In the final

Strackville: getting out
Photo: Paula Levine

there I was slashing and crying and bleeding and I guess that's why I did it.

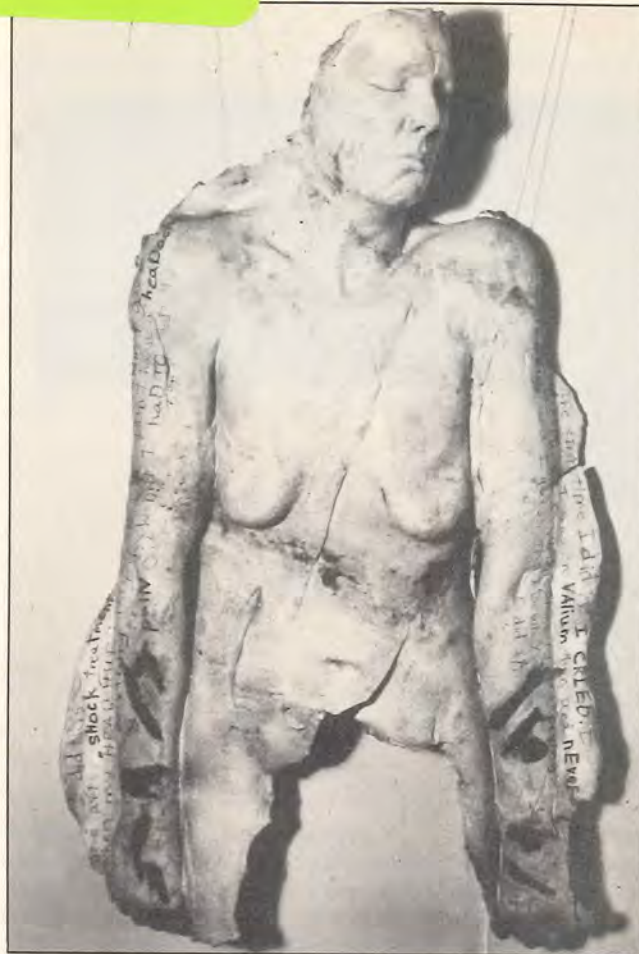
I did this one after I had shock treatment and my head hurt but they wouldn't give me anything for it. They said I couldn't have a headache from shock, but the blood kept pounding away in my head trying to get out, so I let it out.

On the behaviour mod ward they had this system where they gave us tokens for doing what they wanted, and took them away for being bad. You had to pay tokens for anything you wanted to do, even taking a bath. I remember I had this green plaid skirt and matching sweater I used to get tokens for wearing cause they were trying to change me into their idea of a proper woman. So this one morning I decided to put on my exalted outfit and net a few tokens. I appeared at breakfast all tarted up and this nurse said "Oh! You look very nice!" in this real phony voice she always used for the patients. Then she told me I'd look better if I shaved my legs. I remember feeling all embarrassed and stupid even though I'd decided long before that shaved legs were silly. After breakfast I signed out the razor and went off to the bath. I think at this point I was planning to shave my fucking legs.

I remember the rush of blood as I slashed as hard as I could sort of not looking and then looking, seeing the skin all white and puffy like, splitting and then the blood welled up and I sat there and let it run in the bath. After a while someone knocked on the door to use the bath so I got up. I went to the desk and slapped the razor down in front of the nurse with my bloody hand and said, "I'm finished with the razor." She looked at me real angry like and said, "You'll be sorry for that." They stitched me up without anesthetic and I remember it hurt like hell but I pretended it didn't.

What is happening here is that Sheila has lost the power to make her pain a socially communicable reality. She cannot touch her pain on valium, she cannot make her headache a reality to anyone else and she is powerless to express what is wrong with getting dressed up and shaving her legs. In fact it would be dangerous for her to do so. Bleeding on the other hand is a socially acceptable pain. She thinks she is bleeding, the nurses think she is bleeding. They treat her as though she is bleeding. They dress the wound. In this one act she has managed despite her powerlessness to make the medical profession respond appropriately to her pain.

Though *Unladylike Behaviour* is a pivotal piece in the show, it is by no means the pit. After *Slashing* the show



The Royal Hospital: slashing
Photo: Marsha Arbour

goes on to tell us the story of the 19 shock treatments Sheila underwent to cure her lesbianism. They failed, or she triumphed, depending on your social reality. In another piece she deals with the seemingly contradictory act of signing herself in.

Sometimes I signed myself into that place. Maybe you think that means I had some kind of choice, that I wanted to be locked up, but it wasn't a real choice. It always started out with me leaving the hospital against medical advice. That would be a day long ordeal with shrinks telling me I was crazy and nurses saying that I'd never last a week and my parents brought in to plead with me. But if I stuck it out they let me go, with a bag of pills and a certificate for welfare saying that I was unfit for work. I'd live in some cheap rooming house and take my pills and worry that I really was too crazy to be out on my own.

I never saw anyone cause I was pretty weird from drugs and shock treatment. People were afraid of me. I just sat in my room and listened to the radio. It would get so that I couldn't stand to be so bored and pointless and goddamn lonely and I'd go back and sign myself into the hospital again. They were always kind of smug. I hated giving them that.

“The Social Security Administration (USA) estimated that the pharmaceutical industry spent roughly \$1 billion, in 1971 alone, to promote drugs, an average of \$5,000.00 per physician.”
Mind Control (US)



The Royal Hospital: unladylike behaviour
Photo: Marsha Arbour