

REVIEWS

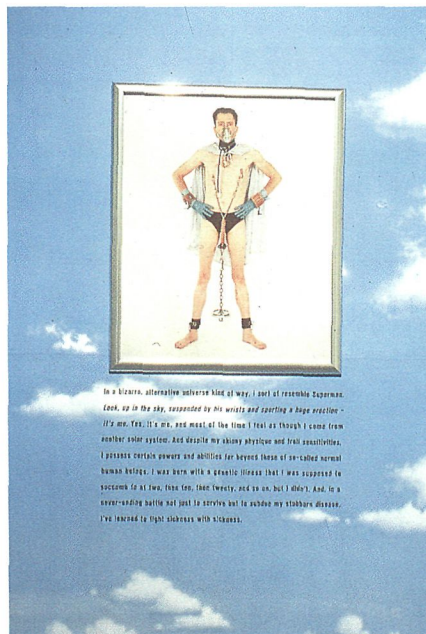
Bob Flanagan initially became known as a poet and performance artist in Los Angeles, but in recent years his work has branched out to include complex installations. Afflicted since childhood with cystic fibrosis, a terminal genetic disease, Flanagan is also a preeminent masochist: taking these twin identities as a jumping off point, his multi-media art works are at once unsettling, poetic, humorous and singularly moving. As with "Visiting Hours," his recent hospital-like installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, these pieces chronicle his precarious survival and probe the roots of his masochistic desires. At the same time they push viewers to reflect on how their own *bodily awareness is shaped by* everything from fashion photos that inspire inadequacy to a medical establishment that encourages passivity and ignorance.

Sheree Rose, who regularly collaborates with Flanagan, is a photographer and video artist whose own body of work documents California's S&M and piercing communities. Rose's *photographs of altered genitals and bodies in bondage* cling to your mind's eye like a sticky fluid. Going beyond pervasive S&M clichés, they question our social norms by pointing to the immense possibilities for desiring in the world.

At the heart of their work together lies an engagement with the inherent drama of the human body, both its frailty, its amazing resilience and its transformative

BOB FLANAGAN AND SHEREE ROSE INTERVIEW

BY RALPH RUGOFF



Visiting Hours, 1992, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Sheree Rose portrait of Bob as *Sick Superman*. Photo Credit: David Familian.

capacities. While extremely personal, their art disinters repressed areas of our cultural life that belong to us all.

RR: Your work is filled with images that upset people: images of pain, physical mutilation and illness. Yet it's clear your goal isn't to shock, but to look at things that make us uncomfortable, to reexamine our conceptions of what is

"normal," and what is "healthy."

BF: We did this video called "Bob Flanagan Sick" that looks at all the ways people call each other sick. I'm always told that I'm sick in two ways - because I'm masochist and because I've got Cystic Fibrosis, which is a terminal disease.

All my life I've heard I was going to die. When I was eight, they told me I wouldn't live past age of ten. When I was ten, they said I wouldn't live past twelve. That has an effect on a person when you realize you're still alive. To do these things I do to my body, and then to survive them, offers a kind of spiritual gratification. It's sexual, too - I don't want to hype it up into something transcendental. But ultimately my work is about the fact that I have a terminal illness. The sexuality, our relationship - in life and in art - are offshoots of that.

SR: In the West we've generated a whole *machinery to get away from that* experience, and from the experience of pain. Instead, we're addicted to painkillers. Everytime you feel anything, you're supposed to take an aspirin. A lot of *non-western cultures, on the other* hand, regard the body as a tool for acquiring knowledge, and pain is seen as simply a powerful stimulus, another way of altering consciousness.

BF: In doing these violent things to my own body, I'm taking control of a situation, and there's also this amazing relief when it's over because you've survived. You start to laugh and it becomes a life-affirming thing.

RR: Besides challenging our ideas about pain and pleasure, your work blurs the distinction between personal experience and art, which confuses people who like to keep these categories distinct.

SR - The thing about art is that it makes it new every time, because it leads you to look at what you're doing in different ways. All these things I do to my body were at first ways to reach orgasm or gave an intense sensation - the first time I put a nail through my penis it was an incredible feeling, the second time I did it, ten years later, it was for a video and its meaning changed.

A lot of people think it's enough just to tie yourself up or hang upside down, but I was never satisfied with that. Early on I thought it was important to give the work some kind of context, a vein of seriousness, that's why I started adding text as much as possible, so it had some kind of backbone, and also to give it some humor.

RR: The humor in your work separates it from the approach of most artists who've recently drawn on medical and S&M imagery. Nayland Blake's pieces, for instance, tended to emphasize the messiness that allows viewers a more intimate relationship with these subjects.

BF: If you walk into our apartment, you'll see IV pole and enema bags, Whips and chains - things which aren't there for any artistic purposes at all - they're just part of our life. The main thing about making art for me, though, is to make it funny. That's my safe ground. I like combining shocking

images that are real, not just Hollywood special effects, with something that's humorous, to try to move people in a surprising way. At the end of the "Bob Flanagan Sick" video installation, one monitor shows all this blood coming from my penis (which I've just put a nail through), another shows a frozen frame of my face while the soundtrack plays this very gushy, romantic music. I laugh everytime I see it, but I also get misty-eyed because it's all about dying. The

private investigations inevitably open up onto public terrain. Instead of reducing the origin of desire to one's family history, as the psychoanalysts would have it, you show how it plugs into the matrix of pop culture.

BF: What I'm trying to do in my work is to ask myself a lot of questions and track down why I do certain things and why I'm the kind of person that I am. Instead of saying "I shouldn't be doing these things to my body," I try to find



Visiting Hours, 1992, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Alphabet Block Wall, close up. Photo Credit: David Familian.

music is taken from the end of *Pride of the Yankees* where Gary Cooper gives his final speech before he dies. There's something sad and poignant and something silly as well in most of this work, and I love having those things mixed together.

RR: So much autobiographical art seems unbearably myopic, but in your work autobiography isn't the point. Your

out where these impulses come from. In picking this material apart, it's natural that all kinds of cultural references start surfacing, because those were the things I was responding to when I was young. I grew up in Orange County, California, so I wasn't influenced by Native American rituals, but by pictures of Jesus, The Three Stooges, Superman, and Porky Pig cartoons.

RR: *When these references appear in your writing and videos, they're given a completely different context. Suddenly, Mutiny of the Bounty or Houdini or Jesus on the cross appear to be icons of bondage, and the culture as a whole is revealed to have a latent streak of masochism running right through it.*

SR: There are so many old movies with scenes of people getting tied up or spanked, with dominant women wearing boots, and pirates kidnapping people. These were potent images that were part of mainstream culture.

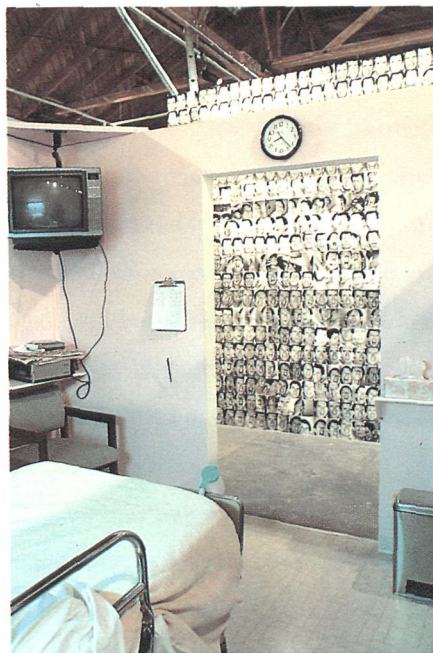
BF: As a kid when I'd see a movie that had someone being submissive, I was excited about wanting to see them tortured because I was sadistic, but I was also identifying with the submissive person at the same time. I think what's so powerful about those images is that they fuse these polar sensibilities.

RR: *In "Visiting Hours" where you recreated a hospital room and lay in bed for the entire six week exhibition, did you see yourself as a performer or as a representation of a patient*

BF: I was a thing, part of the installation rather than a performer. I didn't act like a patient when I talked with people, though I did have to do breathing treatments three or four times a day, and my physical therapist came by a couple of times for regular sessions. The humor for me was that it was like having a regular job. I'd show up every morning, put on my hospital gown and then go home at night. In some ways, the gown was a type of costume, but it

was also necessary so that when I was hoisted out of the bed and suspended by my ankles, which happened on a regular basis, I would be hanging naked.

RR: *Your presence in the gallery also disrupted the voyeuristic anonymity art audiences are accustomed to taking for granted. Suddenly people were confronted by the artist-patient himself. Yet even though you appeared in bed in the guise of a patient, a lot of visitors seemed to treat you as some kind of doctor figure to whom they could confess their troubles.*



Visiting Hours, 1992, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Wall of Pain, as viewed from inside hospital. Photo Credit: David Familian.

BF: The serious part of that show was how people responded as if they were in a real hospital. They'd cry real tears about people they knew who were sick, and they'd talk about their own time in the hospital, their terrible accidents or horrible surgery. It would have been

monstrous of me to have tried to plan that out, but the fact that it happened gave the show more depth than I ever thought it would have.

RR: *One of the characteristics of our culture is the difficulty we have in distinguishing the line separating representation and the real. People walked into your exhibit and responded as if it was the thing it represented, a type of clinic, instead of an art piece.*

S.R.: I think that confusion has to do with our puritanical roots -anything artificial or theatrical is suspect.

R.R.: *It's also part of our religious heritage that there's no line between fantasy and reality. "If thy eye offend thee, pluck it out".*

B.F.: I was raised as a Catholic and I remember the day a nun told me that to think a sin was just as bad as committing a sin. I thought that was absolutely absurd, and decided that day that being Catholic was stupid. I remember afterwards feeling I had this wonderful freedom to think what ever I wanted.

R.R.: *There are many instances when labeling some transgressive activity as "art" seems to be a way of neutralizing its power, of making it socially acceptable and harmless. The flip side of this situation, though, is when the "art" label allows people to get near something that normally they would never let themselves approach too closely.*

B.F.: That's how we think about it. I'm exploring things in my own personal life that people are afraid of -like my own

death, for example. It's not a question of taking it nonchalantly, but of looking at it matter-of-factly, breaking it down and not being afraid of it.

R.R.: In putting your body on display over and over again, you also highlight the exhibitionistic drive in art-making, which is also a wish to create one's own memorial.

S.R.: I'm not as much of an exhibitionist as Bob is, but I'm a very explicit voyeur, which is the other side of the coin. From very early on in my involvement with the S&M scene, I found that 'I loved photographing naked bodies, but not in classical terms -I like to photograph them doing things that I'd never seen before. The taboo element was definitely alluring, the fact that I was a woman looking at things that weren't allowed. When I first started showing slides of these activities, I was interested in their capacity to shock people -it seemed a man would always faint at every show. Now I'm more interested in other aspects, including the humor of it. The piece I've been working on lately documents asses that've been bruised from spanking.

R.R.: Why did you get interested in rear ends?

S.R.: Everybody gets spanked in the S&M scene, and I was attracted to the aesthetic quality of the bruises. I also like the fact that the ass is anonymous on one level, which helps because people are sensitive about having their faces photographed, and yet at the same time it can be as individual as someone's

face. I've done other series on altered genitals and breasts, though I'm interested in any body part that people transform.

R.R.: A lot of the pictures, despite their harshness, are beautiful to look at. But now that S&M trappings have been appropriated by Madonna and Hollywood movies, do you find audiences look at your work differently?

S.R.: It's changed even within the S&M world. We have a friend who complains that the rise of S&M social clubs has made the whole scene too genteel. He wants it to be raw and dark, but it's not that way anymore.

R.R.: That's what people used to say about art world. In the early sixties, Duchamp would moan about how institutionalized the art world had become. Our culture seems to extinguish anything that's dark and raw by shining a bright on it, and creating a bureaucracy around it.

B.F.: I think this whole S&M trend is going to fade away. My own work, anyway, is already moving in a different direction. It has to, because I've changed physically. As I'm getting closer to dying or having a lung transplant to stay alive, it makes the kind of S&M relationship we used to have impossible. I don't have the strength.

Visiting Hours drew more on the medical world than the S&M world, because that's what I'm dealing with now. Already, I'm thinking about doing something with my lungs if I get the transplant. I could see putting them in a

jar and trying to build something around that.

R.R.: This could be the beginning of new genre. Lutz Bacher made a piece called "Huge Uterus" using a video tape of her six hour hysterectomy.

S.R.: I think the fear of going into surgery, of having the body cut up, makes these events very powerful acts. When Bob goes in for his lung transplant, I'll be right there by his side with my video camera. I don't see this kind of interested as morbid, but as a curiosity about what's going on inside us. I think that's also behind the fascination with cutting in the S&M world.

RR: Given your S&M relationship, how do you collaborate on art projects? Does your collaboration mirror your personal relationship?

SR: The thing about our collaboration is that it's marked by constant fighting and arguing. In our original relationship, I was the dominant one and he was the submissive, and of course that was basically a sexual relationship, but we sort of tried to get it out of the bedroom and into the rest of our life. But when we started working on art projects I discovered I couldn't dominate him anymore. Everything became a real battle.

BF: It ruined our sex life. I'd rather be submissive, but if I'm going to do the art, I have an idea about how it should be done and I can't just go along with whatever she tells me. If I had my way, I'd just as soon be a maid at home.