

GRIFFITHS, SANKEY, VOYCE HOUR, JANUARY 29, 1998

LIVES OF GIRLS

ARTS Exploring
what girls
are made of


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Once asked an older friend if, given the opportunity to revisit any time of her life, what age would she choose. "Seventeen," she replied instantly. Recalling my own angst-ridden teenage years, I questioned her choice. "At seventeen," she retorted, "I knew everything and my body was perfect."

My friend's sentiment aptly sums up the content of Eliza

Griffith's large paintings of teenage and young women titled *Stories of Girls*. Griffith's work is joined by that of Julie Voyce and Gretchen Sankey, each showing in a room of her own at the Saidye Bronfman. Although each artist approaches her subject matter in a manner formally different from the others, their works collectively comment on contemporary female consciousness.

Like those by Voyce and Sankey, Griffith's paintings are both illustrative and narrative. The wide-eyed faces of the female characters in her boldly painted melodramas seem innocent, yet their bodies emanate enough hormonal heat to melt asphalt. They wear tight, bright clothing that reveals perky breasts, and Madonna-inspired (not the virginal one) inspired makeup and jewellery. Vampirish sucker bites provide proof of passion on some necks while Griffith also shows the anguish of growing pains by giving her characters acne scars and braces.

 In another room are Voyce's many small-scale watercolours; paintings inspired by dreams and personal experiences. These cartoony, dream-like paintings look like children's book illustrations gone awry. *Beyond Credit* shows a pastel-pink bedroom scene. Here, a woman with flushed cheeks and dark circles under her eyes sits in bed beside a smiling creature with a wolf's head and claws and a man's torso. In this fairy tale it's evident that Little Red Riding Hood isn't afraid of the big, bad wolf.

In Sankey's series of eight paintings titled *The Bible According to Barbie*, a young girl recreates Bible stories using Barbie, Ken and GI Joe dolls. In *Washing Christ's Feet*, a naked Ken doll is perched on the rim of a pastel green tub while a half submerged Barbie gently touches his plastic foot. Barbie's trademark blond ponytail remains dry. In another piece, GI Joe, with gleaming dogtags dangling from his neck, plays



Gretchen Sankey's *S&M Clown*

the part of Lazarus as he emerges from under a bed to be reborn into a world inhabited by pink bunny slippers.

In Sankey's paintings, which recall Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, religious iconography drips with prepubescent sexuality. Sankey's other work, *Within the World Without*, consists of tight drawings that deliver more mystery than the Barbie paintings. This series combines images drawn from popular culture – such as Dumbo – and everyday household objects. While the objects are seemingly unrelated, these works prompt free association and viewer speculation.

As a group, these three exhibitions provide humour as well as discomfort. A common thread running through these paintings is the fact that violence is too often coupled with female sexuality. Beneath the fictitious surface of these girls' stories lies the truth that, despite all the progress, women continue to be vulnerable in today's society. ■

At the Saidye Bronfman
till Feb. 15