

Morain, Michael. "Two art shows offer two different takes on sex," *The Des Moines Register*, 8 March 2016.

The Des Moines Register

Two art shows offer two different takes on sex



If you drive east from Des Moines this week, you can visit two art shows about sex.

In the first one, in Grinnell, the artist appointed herself as a "rogue censor" and painted over the no-no bits in old Penthouse and Hustler magazines.

In Iowa City, a different artist created an alphabet series of 26 interactive puppet-

portraits, which you can manipulate – to peek under a dress, for example, or tweak a nipple. The show's title is "Twist and Shout."

So. Now that you're paying attention, let's take a closer look at how the two independent exhibitions pull back the curtains on similar themes of feminism, censorship and sexuality. We'll start with the cover-up, then the exposé.

Beverly Semmes: "Feminist Responsibility Project"

Through March 20 at Grinnell College's Faulconer Gallery. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. The artist leads [a gallery talk](#) at 4 p.m. Tuesday, March 8. Free admission. grinnell.edu/faulconergallery

Semmes was helping a friend move a few years ago when the friend gave her a stack of old porn magazines that had been collecting dust in a closet. The New York artist took them home and stashed them in her own closet for awhile, until she started using them as scratch paper.

At first it was just as a creative exercise – she teaches at the Pratt Institute – but "the idea of editing out the more sexual parts struck me as funny once I realized what I was doing," she said the other day over the phone.

Before long she had a stack of painted photos that revealed only peek-a-boo bits and pieces – a manicured hand, a high-heeled shoe, pair of eyes peering through a blob of color.

Morain, Michael. "Two art shows offer two different takes on sex," *The Des Moines Register*, 8 March 2016.

"We squint closely to see what exactly is happening here. Is that an arm? A hand? The back of a head? What sex act, exactly, is being performed here?" Grinnell assistant professor of gender, women's and sexuality studies Leah Allen explained during a gallery talk last month. "Has Semmes defaced this image so that we can look without injury? Or has she ensured that we will look closer?" Ironically, the covered-up images tease viewers to look harder.

The artist isn't sure herself. She often wonders, she said, how her "inner prudishness" relates to her feminism, a movement that split into two camps during the so-called Sex Wars of the 1980s. One side thought pornography was degrading and dangerous; the other found it liberating. [It's still up for debate.](#)

Even the title Semmes chose for her project, about "feminist responsibility," raises murky questions that male artists – and men, in general – rarely have to answer. Responsibility for what? And to whom?

Semmes has exhibited other artwork over the last 30-some years in museums and galleries from London to Tokyo. Microsoft commissioned her to make something for its corporate headquarters near Seattle.

Examples of her earlier work are on display at Grinnell. Irregular chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Lumpy red ceramic pillars rise from the gallery floor, where a snake-like strip of fabric climbs up the wall to form a little black dress.

But it's the not-so-racy magazine photos that have won Semmes the most recent attention in a world where X-rated images are all over the Internet and the word "feminism" means many different things to many different people.

When Playboy magazine's first issue without photos of naked women hit newsstands a few weeks ago, Semmes and a colleague bought a copy at Barnes & Noble.

"We passed it around and were just shocked at how transformed it was, how slick it was," she said. "It looked super Photoshopped."