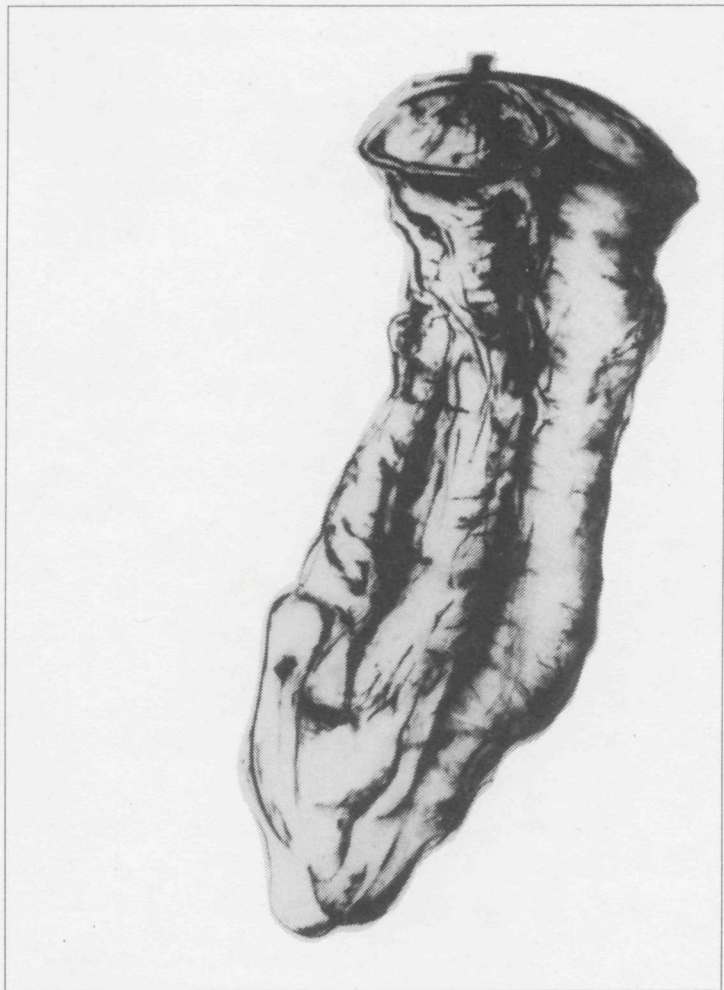


FIONA MOWAT



THE CONDOM SERIES

April 27 - May 15, 1993

grunt gallery

Vancouver

Fiona Mowat
The Condom Series

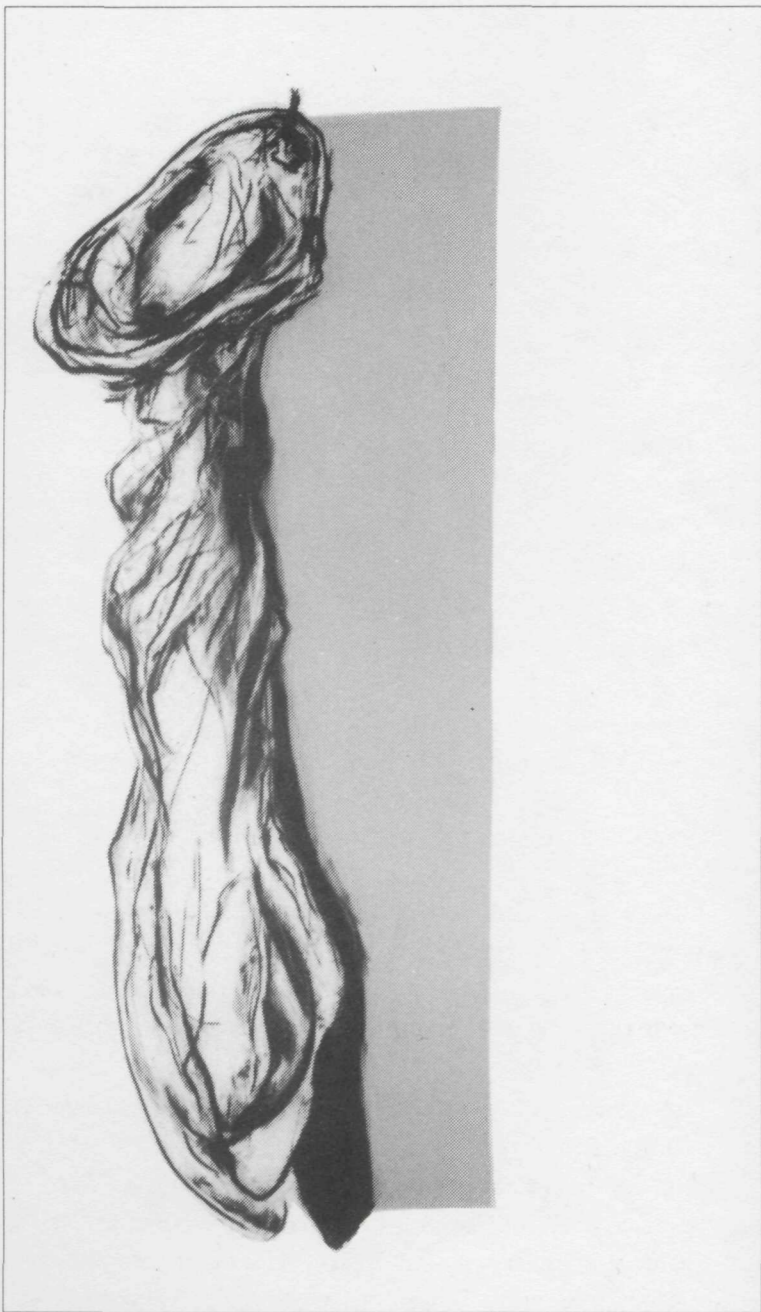
They're everywhere. We get them as party favours and buy them in twelve packs. They sit in drawers by our bed, in kit bags and make up cases. Handbags and wallets, Medicine cabinets and sock drawers. Liz Taylor holds one on the cover of Vanity Fair.

Condoms. Buying them used to be a social embarrassment and by the sixties they were considered an archaic form of birth control. But the 1980s and A.I.D.S. changed all that. Suddenly condoms were back with a vengeance. And we all have them even if few of us have sex anymore. They represent possibilities which seldom occur; something which could happen but doesn't.

Somebody is using them. One has only to look in the street to see lots of them actually make it out of their packages. Those gruesome skin like sheaths pepper the streets and alleys of the downtown. They are finished, useless; of no recyclable value. They rot in the street eventually, leaving the ring of rubber from the unrolled portion lying dirt-covered in the gutter. One conjectures as to where they came from. Nocturnal couplings that are finished and forgotten? The only tangible remains of clandestine intercourses.

Fiona Mowat's large charcoal drawings of used condoms don't look disgusting. Instead there is a quiet sadness about them. Each hangs from a point as if being held by a thumb and forefinger. Distended and flaccid. They suggest loss and despair and speak to the sexual habits and mores of our time. These condoms have been exquisitely rendered. Human-sized, they suggest body bags; the anthropomorphic shapes locked inside latex skin bags. The marks define the shapes; there bulbous, here slack. The texturous charcoal lines form sacs which at once look human and totally alien.

Much A.I.D.S. related work in North America dwells on memory and the memorial; and while Mowat's drawings suggest loss it is the loss of the living, not the mourning for the dead. A sinister presence lurking beneath the works intensifies this sadness and loss. The roulettes of life and love.



Used condoms are the detritus of lovemaking. Awkward moments between new lovers and sad remembrances of old. They are the remains of expectations, once engorged and now slack. What does one do with it? Leave it on the night table or the floor? Do either of you want to look at it the next day? Why would you?

But here they are in Fiona Mowat's charcoal sketches. The simplicity of the series is offset by her strong technical ability. The sensuousness of the charcoal marks succeeds in investing the spent condoms with a sense of dignity and potency. They become a metaphor for our time. After years of an orgy of waste there's little left of any use. The 1990s, on the heels of the excesses of the 80s, is a sobering decade and these drawings speak to that aftermath. Ideas of sexual liberalism in the 60s and 70s have opened the door to A.I.D.S., sexual abuse and sexual harassment issues.

Sexuality is an interesting game in our modern society. The sexual repression of the fifties gave way to the 60's sexual revolution through the singles bars and gay clubs of the seventies leading to the A.I.D.S. 80s and the P.C. 90s. The repression has come full circle. Throughout these periods our real attitudes about our sexualities have changed little. 40 years later our views are no more realistic.

These drawings speak from that dark place in each of us where our sexuality lurks. That dark damp place of desire we neither care to admit to and make little effort to understand. To look at these works is to focus on that desire after it is spent. What is the nature of that desire and from where did it issue? The bodies in these works are each of us locked inside of that desire, blind and helpless and unable to break free.

This isn't the cocktail hour desire we couch in the definable terms of sexual identity. The single, straight, gay, lesbian, bi identities we have contracted and concocted. These drawings question a basic understanding we never doubt. They speak of sexuality without the glossary of labels we use to render it palatable. They lead us to a place few of us would willingly go.

Which brings us to the sadness and loss in these pictures. The sadness is in seeing ourselves in these works and the loss is our own. In Mowatt's work there is an urging to stop projecting our cocktail lingo sexuality on our desire and start the journey down to that dark place. There is an awareness and an urgency in these honest pictures.

Glenn Alteen

Credits

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all works untitled, 50"x 84"

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