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Feminism is Not a Bad Word



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by Kelcy Melrose

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Courtney Kenny Porto Speaks

By Shout Weekly Staff

We live in a society where it's acceptable to treat women like pieces of meat; nothing more than a body and a face. The objectification of women runs rampant in advertising campaigns. Basically, it's everywhere you look; magazines, television shows, books, movies, etc. It's endless. Fortunately, there are countless women (and even some men) who realize how utterly wrong this is. Omaha-based artist Courtney Kenny Porto is one woman who understands the meaning of the word "feminism." It's not a bad word. It's not something to shy away from. It represents strength and respect. It's something Porto has embraced and turned into a movement with her intriguing art. As she wraps up her latest exhibit, I Hear She's a Feminist, Porto took some time to talk to Shout about common misconceptions revolving around feminism, media and the illusion of perfection. Porto's art is on display at Connect Gallery until March 28.

Shout Weekly: Your name is Courtney, but you go by Kenny.

Courtney Kenny Porto: I go by Courtney Kenny Porto or Courtney Kenny in the art world. Kenny is my maiden name. Porto is my married name. The decision to take my husband's last name was difficult, but

it was important to him and I ultimately decided that it was the right decision for me. The largest problem with this decision revolved around my art career. Before getting married, I had already begun to market myself and my work as Courtney Kenny. To this day, I still sign my pieces CKenny, so when I changed my last name to Porto I made Kenny my middle name. In other words, my legal name is Courtney Kenny Porto.

What drew you to art as a young kid?

I don't necessarily believe that anything drew me to art, but rather that it has always been a part of me. It is everything from the way I think to the place that I feel most at home. It is an obsession, something that I would not be able to remove from my life even if I wanted to.

What does the word "feminist" mean to you?

For me, feminism is about respect (both from others and from self), pride (of a woman's body, mind, and everything that it is to be a woman), and embracing differences (the unique characteristics that we hold as women). It is not about trying to be a man, but is instead about being proud to be a woman.

Why do you suppose some people have a misconception about what a feminist is?

Unfortunately, every good movement/cause has some people who misrepresent it and create misconceptions of the movement as a whole. We see this repeatedly in religion and Martin Luther King Jr was very concerned with this problem in the civil rights movement. The term feminist means different things to different people. My definition is certainly not more correct than someone else's. However, I believe the foundation of any positive movement should be based around love and respect. Nothing good comes from hatred or malice.

I have a hard time dealing with the fact that women are consistently objectified in the media. What are your thoughts on this? Do you see societal "norms" evolving beyond this rather barbaric tactic to sell things?

I do think the objectification of women both in the media and in society as a whole is a large problem that needs to be tackled. While the media's use of this objectification to sell products undoubtedly exacerbates the problem, I also think we need to look deeper into the root of this issue, the fact that it works. Before we can even begin to think about changing the media, we need to first change our societal belief systems. We as women are often just as guilty of this thought process. We are eager to call other women "slutty" for wearing clothing we find too revealing and compare our own bodies to the bodies of other women whom we don't even know. Men are guilty, as well. The real change needs to begin with how we view ourselves, other women, and how men view us as women.

I noticed that your art often depicts women with "perfect" bodies. Is this a conscious choice? Why or why not?

I would tend to refrain from the use of the term "perfect," because it implies a sort of grading system of bodies, as well as a concept that does not truly exist. I believe that the human form is beautiful, particularly the female form because of its curves, elegance and fluidity. I tend to depict slender bodies more often than plus size women, though this is certainly not always the case, for two reasons. The first reason is practical; I personally have a slender body type and often use myself as a model. Using myself as a model comes in handy because I am free and available at the drop of a hat, whether it's 2 a.m. or 6 p.m. When an idea comes to me, I don't have to wait. The second reason is that most of my work depicts experiences that are close to my own heart. The body type that I often draw/paint is the one with which I most closely identify.

What does your husband think of your work? How does he show his support?

I couldn't ask for a more supportive husband. We are very different in the way that we think, which makes us both able to appreciate each other's unique abilities. My husband is very analytical and mathematical. I am more creative and holistic in my thought processes. He is genuinely awed by my work as I am awed by his many strengths. He shows his support by attending every reception, helping me load and unload pieces to and from exhibits, and talking me through frustrations, as well as sharing in my joys.

What would you like your art to "say" to someone?

Different pieces are meant to communicate different messages. In general, I want people to be able to relate to my work. I want them to take away something personally meaningful to them. C.S Lewis is given credit for the quote "We read to know that we are not alone." I would like my artwork to do that. I want people to view my work and feel that they are not alone in their struggles, pleasures and insecurities.

What are you looking forward to the most at your exhibit reception?

I am looking most forward to watching others view my work and either take away exactly what I had intended, or something completely different than I had ever thought of. I love listening to others' interpretations of my work. I love evoking conversation and I love making people think.

What's next?

It's hard to predict where my work will evolve in the future. That being said, there are certain ideas and concepts that continue to appear in my work over and over, much like a reoccurring dream. One such concept is the juxtaposition of a pop of color amidst a grey-scale majority; another is the comparison of a blooming flower to a young woman. It is also likely that feminism, femininity and women will continue to play a large role in my work. I also plan to continue experimenting with new unusual media.



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