

REVIEWS SAN FRANCISCO

Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle

Cushion Works

By Nickolas Calabrese



View of “Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle: Bazoombas in Love,” 2025–26.

The title of Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle’s exhibition at Cushion Works in San Francisco, “Bazoombas in Love,” made explicit that this, their closest thing yet to a career retrospective, was a love story. And like most love stories, it was bookended by the thrill of nascent romance on one side and a piercing tragedy on the other. The couple have been working together across performance, photography, video, sculpture, collage, and painting since roughly 1991, when Stephens included one of Sprinkle’s “Tit Prints,” 1989–, in an exhibition on queer visual art that she was curating at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where Stephens was earning an MFA in studio art. Sprinkle’s bazoombas, which prompted their first meeting, are also the subject of an ongoing collaborative project.

But whence the tragedy? In 2005, Sprinkle was diagnosed with, and successfully treated for, breast cancer. Stephens and Sprinkle have been blurring the boundary of their lives and their art since they first collaborated, so they seized the opportunity to document this traumatic event, investing work derived from Sprinkle’s cancer treatments with the pair’s characteristic sense of chance and play. *Breast Cancer Ballet #A* and *Breast Cancer Ballet #B*, both 2005, were two of the stronger works in the show. The pieces presented Sprinkle’s treatment as performance art, documenting it in a series of collages that combine archival images of a scantily clad Sprinkle, medical scans of her breasts, photos of a head-shaving make-out session between Sprinkle and Stephens, and candid photos of the immediate aftermath of Sprinkle’s surgery. These works’ emotional candor combines with the abstract and formal strangeness of procedural imaging to illustrate the body in its voluptuous and fragile splendor. In early 2025 that same cancer recurred, prompting yet another lumpectomy.

The artists’ sense of chance and play is derived directly from their interest in Fluxus. In their 2021 book, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position*, they recount their respective connections to the experimental movement: At Rutgers, Stephens studied with and later collaborated with late Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, an eccentric obsessed with painting the sky and its clouds. Meanwhile, Sprinkle was in a romantic and creative partnership with Dutch artist and early Fluxus cofounder Willem de Ridder throughout the 1980s. The duo continued to collaborate until his death in 2022. Where Stephens and Sprinkle deviate from their predecessors is that they capitalize upon Fluxus’s campiness, an often-overlooked element of its more scholarly historicization.

Stephens and Sprinkle are working in a more terrestrial realm they call “ecosexualism,” which they have developed as a philosophy, a framework within which to conceptualize their art, and to encourage communing (and orgasming) with nature. The result is a natural combination of their past sex work with their present artwork. On display was the aforementioned book, as well as other objects that charted the development of ecosexualism, including a vitrine with ecosexual ephemera from performances in which they conducted erotic tours of urban and rural landscapes, fornicated with dirt, and pledged amorous allegiance to strip-mined mountains in Appalachia, among other actions.

Essential to their ecosexual practice is an ongoing performance of symbolic weddings, each to a different organic element. In the exhibition these were represented through ephemera from some of these events, including typical wedding souvenirs such as newlywed photos and little mementos from the day, but also less conventional materials such as woolen nipple pasties and charts demonstrating attendees’ sexual preferences for earth, fire, water, or air. The couple has been wed to the moon, to the Adriatic Sea, to coal, to snow, and many others. The weddings are ad hoc performance marathons undertaken by a cadre of old and new friends, most of whom are erotic performers, and, as you might expect, they’re wild events. But they are also joyously theatrical in the way most normie weddings are, even with a secular Eucharist performed at each one. Through a blunt metaphor, they offer up an optimistic proposition—that everyone should be able to marry whom- or whatever they want.

The final gallery in the exhibition was dedicated to everyone else’s boobs. Works from the artists’ own personal collection—culled from strangers on social media, from friends, and from lovers—were densely hung salon style in this small room. What we got was a fairly democratic (random?) assortment of photographs, drawings, paintings, collages, and small sculptures that depicted nude bodies in some form or another, and with varying degrees of quality. But the collection acted as a coda that highlights the pair’s community, whose members they have relied upon over the years as collaborators. The result was a goofy mix of serious art and zany bacchanalia, uneven in all the best ways, honest and necessary, crude and loving.



Cy Twombly, Staten Island beach, New York, ca. 1951. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

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