

When Annie Sprinkle learned she had breast cancer, she turned it into art

By **Tony Bravo**, Arts & Culture Columnist

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Annie Sprinkle, left, and Beth Stephens host the opening of their art show “Bazoombas in Love,” which features artwork exploring the beauty, meaning and humor behind breasts, at Cushion Works in San Francisco.

When [Annie Sprinkle](#) learned this summer her breast cancer returned, she knew she had to make art.

The result: “Bazoombas in Love,” a new exhibition at the Cushion Works gallery in the Mission.



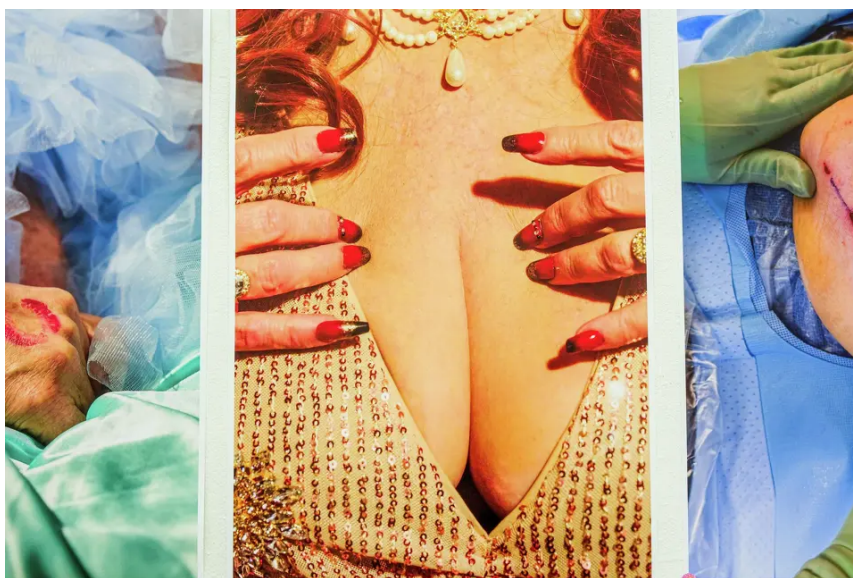
Annie Sprinkle, left, and Beth Stephens, center, host the opening of their art show “Bazoombas in Love,” which features artwork themed after breasts, at Cushion Works in San Francisco in October.

Camille Cohen/For the S.F. Chronicle

Curated with her wife and creative partner Beth Stephens, the show is a celebration of — you guessed it — the beauty, the social meaning and the power of breasts.

“Everyone wants to send their boob art, it’s been amazing,” Sprinkle, 71, told me during a visit to the couple’s Bernal Heights home a few weeks before the exhibition’s debut last month. “There’s going to be new pieces, things from our own collection, a lightbox with some of my old pin-ups.

“The entire thing is going to be boobalicious.”



Photographs of Annie Sprinkle displayed alongside images from Sprinkle’s breast cancer surgeries, at their art show “Bazoombas in Love.”
Camille Cohen/For the S.F. Chronicle

When I went to the show’s opening night on Oct. 23, every corner of the gallery was filled with ... well, here’s a few of the words for them that I overheard that night: boobies, tits, bazoombas and knockers. But, you know, uttered with gleeful empowerment.

There are sculpted breasts hanging on walls. Vintage photos are given the absurdist treatment by Sprinkle and Stephens, with photos of breasts collaged over them. Many paintings feature images of bare chests. There’s even fashion, including a tuxedo jacket adorned with rubber areolas and nipples, and white laboratory jackets with showgirl-style tasseled pasties.

More personally, there are bronze castings of Sprinkles and Stephens chests. Psychedelic imagery and cultural ephemera mix in an unpretentious curatorial perspective.

Other artists in the show include Madison Young, Guillermo Gómez Peña, Carol Queen, Sarah Thornton, Dorian Katz and Charles Gatewood.

“Our relationship is all centered on boobs,” Stephens quipped. “I had a big crush on her in the ’90s because of her boobs. But everyone had a crush on her because of her boobs.”



Wooden breast by Shine Louise Houston at “Bazoombas in Love,” which features artwork themed after breasts, at Cushion Works.
Camille Cohen/For the S.F. Chronicle

In Sprinkle’s estimate, she’s been making art about breasts for 52 years “in one form or another.”

Sprinkle was a pioneering porn performer and creator beginning in the 1970s in magazines and in the blockbuster 1981 mainstream adult film “Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle.” Her breasts are even on display in the famed 1982 portrait of Sprinkle by famed painter Alice Neel.

Her boobs, she joked, have been her currency. She even credits them for her relationship with Stephens. Although the couple first met at a party in Manhattan in 1989, Stephens curated an exhibition of Sprinkle’s “Tit Prints,” painting impressions created with her breasts (some of which are on display in “Bazoombas in Love”), in the early 1990s before they encountered one another again in 2002 and became a couple.

Stephens is an interdisciplinary artist, activist and professor at UC Santa Cruz whose work explores environmental and social practice art. Together, they are also well known for their ecosexual philosophy, which informs their art.



Fashion on view at Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens’ art show “Bazoombas in Love.” Friends, fans, and artists attended the opening, which was curated in light of Sprinkle’s breast cancer diagnosis.
Camille Cohen/For the S.F. Chronicle

The couple previously collaborated on a series of collages, operating room portraits, a touring two-woman theater piece and chemo fashion show when Sprinkle was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005. Again, many of those pieces are featured in this current exhibition.

“Bazoombas in Love” has an extensive programming schedule, including exhibition and neighborhood walking tours and a “Tits, Tarts & Crafts” holiday party Dec. 6.

“Boobs is nourishment. Boobs is sexy. Boobs is political,” said Stephens. “They can be anything you can think of metaphorically or otherwise.”

A show with Stephens and Sprinkle had already been in the works, said Cushion Works gallerist Jordan Stein, but when Sprinkle was diagnosed, it changed the work the couple wanted to present. “There’s no one like Annie and Beth,” said Stein, noting “it’s just like them” to turn a health issue into an art event featuring so much work from the community.”



Beth Stephens, left, and Annie Sprinkle pose during their art show “Bazoombas in Love.”
Camille Cohen/For the S.F. Chronicle

The mix of sexuality, humor, social commentary and environmental awareness in the show is a signature Stephens and Sprinkle. The show can go from hippie trippy to bodacious cartoon imagery like only they can.

Artist Shine Louise Houston, a filmmaker and founder of Pink and White Productions, created a series of hanging wooden breasts she was oiling for presentation.

“I think it’s wonderful they’re celebrating a life hurdle,” said Houston.

Young, who calls Stephens and Sprinkle her chosen mothers, said the pair “have made love a practice” in their life and art, “so of course they’d want to do a show before a challenging time. This is a vortex of love; they’ll be holding that as they go forward.”

For Sprinkle’s part, she said she felt the love in the room.

Resplendent in a lowcut, red gown accessorized with black pasties and a feather boa, Sprinkle looked like our Lady of the Madonna Inn. Armored in sequins, she stood tall like a statue of liberation, Stephens in a red brocade frockcoat at her side.

The following day, Sprinkle would start radiation treatment. As of publication, she had completed her course.

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ARTS AND CULTURE COLUMNIST



Tony Bravo is the San Francisco Chronicle’s Arts & Culture columnist. He primarily covers visual arts, the LGBTQ community and pop culture. His column appears in print every Monday in Datebook. Bravo joined the Chronicle staff in 2015 as a reporter for the Style section and also wrote the relationship column “Connectivity.” He is the host of the live interview series “Show & Tell” every month at Four One Nine and created the VoiceMap Chronicle LGBTQ audio tour “Over the Rainbow in the Castro” available for download on the app. Bravo is also an adjunct instructor at the City College of San Francisco Fashion Department, where he teaches journalism.

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More Information

“Bazoombas in Love”: Photography, sculpture, mixed media. Noon-5 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Through Jan. 24. Cushion Works, 3320 18th St., S.F. 415-793-3406. www.cushionworks.info
