

Sonja Ahlers: Classification Crisis
Described Tour Script by danielle wensley

Richmond Art Gallery presents *Classification Crisis*; an exhibition of works by Victoria-based artist Sonja Ahlers, curated by Godfre Leung.

Classification Crisis is open to the public until November 5, 2023. The gallery is open every day, from Monday to Friday, from 10 am to 6 pm, and on the weekends from 12 noon to 5 pm.

My name is danielle and you are listening to the described tour of the exhibition. I am a sighted artist, and these descriptions are an interpretation of the work from my perspective. This tour is offered to provide non-visual access to the exhibition and was written with blind, partially-sighted and non-visual visitors in mind.

If you are visiting the exhibition in person, feel free to move through the gallery as you listen and to pause the recording as needed. There are also QR codes throughout the gallery linked to audio recordings of the work's extended labels. If you would like support with accessing these, please visit the gallery's host desk at the front entrance.

Classification Crisis is a major survey of Sonja Ahlers's career from the mid 1990s to present day. The exhibition includes Ahlers' Riot Grrrl zines of the nineties, one-of-a-kind chapbooks spanning thirty years, a decade of unseen work after she "quit art" in the wake of the Vancouver art boom, and other artworks and ephemera from a career of collecting images and scraps of language. Ahlers works across many mediums including collage, painting, drawing, assemblage and installation. She has historically used DIY publishing as a means to distribute her work, especially as she experienced barriers breaking into the art world and accessing grants to support her art practice. A mix of collage and text, her pocket-sized zines from the 90s show her early interest in feminist politics, punk rock aesthetics, and pithy turns of phrase. Much of her work is vulnerable and intimate, like reading someone's personal journals. Her candor is alive with sparks of anger, humor, and self-scrutiny as she navigates themes of sexuality, oppression, suicide, and women's rights.

Ahlers's affinity for the archive is at the heart of the exhibition, and we are invited to explore her most personal collections. Multiples and repetition are through lines, showing the artist's persistent engagement with certain themes, motifs, and objects such as penmanship, pointe shoes, rabbits, Princess Diana, birds of prey, Victorian-era fashion, and feminist sentiment.

We begin the tour with the exhibition's title, *Sonja Ahlers: Classification Crisis*, which is announced in pink vinyl lettering on the white wall behind the Gallery's greeting desk. To access the exhibition from the gallery's entrance, there is a ramp on the left and a short set of stairs on the right.

The Gallery has an unconventional shape, unlike the traditional quadrilateral white cube that one might expect. On entering the Gallery, we are welcomed into an expansive room. The floor

is gray concrete with a semigloss finish. Ceiling lights in the gallery are directed towards the art works. The walls of the first part of the exhibition are painted white, then soft pink near the back of the gallery, which leads to an octagonal room with white walls again. The octagonal room features floor to ceiling windows that let natural light in and show a view of Minoru Boulevard, where construction is taking place.

Descending into the gallery, either by stairs or ramp, we first encounter a long row of 155 worn in pink satin pointe shoes nailed to the wall to the left. This work is titled *Toe Shoes*. These shoes were sourced through thrifting or collected from Canada's National Ballet School. The pointe shoes are nestled together, side by side, in an alternating pattern of toes pointing to the ceiling and toes pointing to floor. Some of them are signed with the names of dancers, blue ink on pink satin. And near the center of the row, one shoe is stuffed with fluffy brown and gray animal fur. Pink ribbons, which wrap around the ankles of dancers when the shoes are worn, are tied into bows or stuffed into the shoes. The line of shoes follows the downward slope of the ramp, directing our attention toward the rest of the exhibition.

Pointe shoes like these are worn by technically skilled ballerinas who waltz, spin, and skim the floor gracefully on their toes. From an audience perspective, ballet might appear to be effortless; however, these shoes can be extremely painful to wear - resulting in severe blistering, calluses, and foot pain or injury. The artist became interested in collecting these shoes, as symbols of dominant ideals of beauty and femininity, to which women and femme-identifying people have been confronted with the pressure to conform under White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchal culture. While it might seem easy and satisfying to adhere to and perform these beauty ideals, the result can be often painful, detrimental, and even traumatizing. Another analogy is also suggested here, namely between ballet culture, arts culture, and culture at large, and the ubiquity of widespread abuse of artists and exploitation of their labour.

To the right of this work stands a partial wall. Against the wall, and facing the gallery's entrance, is a neatly organized group of around 50 medium-sized brown cardboard filing boxes with lids. This work is titled *The Archive* (2014 - 2023). It is a recreation of the artist's at-home archival system. The original archive is situated in her home in Victoria, BC, where she currently lives.

The boxes are organized in rows and stacks of seven. Each box is labeled either with pink, white or yellow Post-it notes, or with black ink directly on the cardboard surface. Some examples of labels include:

- *Swan Song backdrop*
- *Temper. Temper*
- *Tapes*
- *Yoga crap*
- *Sweet Dreams*
- *Slides and Negatives*
- *Yukon*
- *Letters to L S*

Ahlers moved in with her terminally ill mother in 2014 and cared for her during the last moments of her life. To the right of this installation is a smaller stack of similar boxes, one labeled as “Letters to/from mother.” It appears that the artist and her mother had a very close and tender relationship, as the box is full of birthday cards, postcards from travel, and other meaningful scraps with loving sentiments written on them. Viewers can peek into the box, but there is a sign here asking visitors not to sift through its contents.

Behind the wall where *The Archive* is situated, is an installation of collages, paintings and assembled works that are featured in Ahlers’s new book titled *Rabbit-Hole*. The book was a direct result of revisiting decades of her own work, and she has described it as “a story of her career told in reverse, in the hindsight of #MeToo and through the amassing and deciphering of archival documents that she came to treat as “clues.”

The installation comprises a horizontal row of various collages and other two-dimensional multimedia works, some framed and others not. Images of Princess Diana, rabbits, lambs, birds of prey are featured, intermingled with soft washes of watercolour paint.

Following her mother’s death, Ahlers began to paint circles in watercolour, and some of these are featured here as well. These circular blooms on paper emit a benevolent resonance. These are a gentle contrast to the figurative and more pointedly symbolic works such as the collage of two hawks feasting on dead mallards or the blown-up image of the demon-possessed character Regan from the horror movie *The Exorcist*, floating horizontally near the ceiling.

The experience of consuming all of these images, colours, shapes, and symbols evokes the sensation of falling down a “rabbit-hole,” of following one thread to another, and getting lost in the folds and tangles of meaning.

Moving further through the gallery, we are invited to participate more actively in the process of digging, or deep diving into the “rabbit hole” of the artist’s practice.

To the left of the *Rabbit-Hole* installation, a row of four plinths stands, each one with a large binder on top. Each binder has plastic-pocket pages that are filled with paper scraps, cut-out magazine images and fragments of Ahlers’ writing, organized into thematic sections. These pages demonstrate the artist’s playful and poetic interest in language, turns of phrase, and playing with words.

For example, one page in Ahlers’s handwriting reads:

Death is my deadline.

Surrender.

What am I surrendering to?

For what it is worth:

This is what you get.

That's enough death for now.

The scraps found in the binder pages function like temporary, textual collages, which Ahlers likes to rearrange from time to time or reuse in other works. At the exhibition opening, she spoke about sometimes feeling resistant to gluing pieces together into permanent collages. Echoing the title of the exhibition, *Classification Crisis*, these collected fragments remain in flux and evade permanent categorization. As we flip through the pages of these binders, we are invited to behold ephemeral webs of language that will eventually be pulled apart and rewoven into new configurations.

Behind the row of plinths is the work titled *Fatal Distraction*. Dozens of pages from the editing process of the *Rabbit-Hole* manuscript have been crumpled and discarded into a pile on the gallery floor.

Continuing the tour and nearing the back of the gallery, where the walls are painted pink: here, four of the artist's *Fierce Bunnies* series are displayed in a Plexiglas case. The doll-sized felted bunnies were handmade from salvaged angora sweaters. Ahlers has been making *Fierce Bunnies* for 3 decades, and the progression in her technique is noticeable in this display. A *Fierce Bunny* body is similar to a rag doll's; with a narrow torso the shape of a small kiwi fruit and long slender tubes as legs and arms. The ears flop down on either side of the round head, and the facial features are sewn in with black thread: an X-shaped mouth and two short dashes for eyes. The two oldest bunnies from the 1990s have twisted bodies that are riddled with stitches resembling sutures. The more recent bunnies have smooth and refined bodies that highlight the soft quality of angora rabbit wool.

The final part of the exhibition includes a display of more binders in the center of the octagonal room, pocket-sized zines from the mid-90s displayed on slender white shelves on the walls and a sofa near the back windows. Across from the sofa is a cassette tape deck positioned on a pink plinth the size and height of a coffee table. Visitors are welcome to flip through the binders, or to sit on the sofa and listen to the audio work titled *Men Explained Things to Me*—a collaborative project between Ahlers and the curator. As noted in the extended label, this work is “a facsimile of four mixtapes made for Sonja in the nineties by a very famous musician, and the power dynamics underlying those gifts. The music on those mixtapes was taped over with recordings by women and nonbinary artists, many of which touch on themes of marginalization, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, and abuse in art and music scenes.” The music on these tapes plays on a loop through the speakers of the tape deck. The sounds of the singers' voices echo through the gallery.

In order to exit the Gallery, we must move through the exhibition in reverse. As we move away from the sounds of the mixtapes, we cross paths again with the *Fierce Bunnies*, the pile of crumpled pages, the collages from the book titled *Rabbit-Hole*, 155 pointe shoes, and the organized stack of brown cardboard filing boxes.

Thank you for listening to the described tour of *Classification Crisis*: an exhibition of works by Sonja Ahlers. A reminder that the extended labels are available as audio files and can be accessed by a QR code in the gallery. If you would like assistance with listening to these, please visit the gallery's host desk near the entrance.

Visit: www.richmondartgallery.org/upcoming-events to learn about upcoming public programming related to this exhibition.

The Richmond Art Gallery invites you to share your experience of the exhibition with the Gallery attendants, or via email to galleries@richmond.ca