

Arts

JESA DAMORA'S CORNER POCKET ART The belle of the balls

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Back in February, at the opening of a group show at her gallery in Marblehead, Elise Mankes noticed something peculiar about the crowd's reaction to one of the works on display. All the women instantly recognized the huge drawing's subject matter. A few men did, too (and immediately blanched and turned away), but most stood in front of the drawing, puzzled.



"Are you kidding?" Mankes recalls thinking. "They'd make several guesses, which I won't even get into. Then I'd say, 'Try tilting your head to the left ...'" Mankes eventually concluded, "I guess you guys don't get the same view we do."

They were looking at *Seed Pod No. 9*, one in a new series of drawings by Somerville artist Jesa Damora, who, under the pseudonym Belle Wether, has been turning out poster-sized drawings of testicles (scrota, actually) for the past two years. The black-and-white pencil drawings—which are as large as 6 feet by 6 feet—capture every nook, cranny and ridge in stunning photorealistic detail. In fairness to the befuddled men at the gallery, the scale is so disorienting and distorted that, from certain angles, one could be looking at an Ansel Adams outcrop. The effect is awesome, in the original sense of the word. It is like seeing the balls of God.

Until now, oddly enough, Damora was known exclusively for her similarly huge drawings and digital prints of flowers. Fifteen years ago, she began her art career in earnest with somewhat quaint botanical studies of tulips. Her flowers gradually evolved from "objects," as she puts it, to "a landscape that sucks you in," but after spending more than a decade with peonies and sunflowers, she felt she had reached a dead end. One night, over beer at a barbecue joint in Syracuse, NY, she was complaining of her frustration, when her friend Kay interrupted. "Your drawings have been getting really sexual," Kay said, noting the mighty stamens and vulviform petals that had crept into Damora's work. "Why don't you just draw sex?" On a roll, she added, "Why don't you draw men's balls and call it 'Corner Pocket'?"

Everyone laughed and laughed—but Damora "acted on the joke," even keeping the name. She soon realized that she had stumbled onto unexplored but fertile territory. Images of women's nether regions have long been a staple in the art world, she points out, as have images of penises; but to her knowledge, no one has ever tackled balls on such a grand scale. "People have the iconography of pricks all figured out," says Damora. "They don't have it all figured out with balls." By training her ultra-observant eye on something regarded as ugly and taboo, she found herself making a statement about sexual (and artistic) politics and male insecurity, as revealed by men's often uneasy reactions to the work. "This goes right at vulnerability," she explains. "And to see that vulnerability 40 times as large ..."



The first *Corner Pocket* model was Damora's husband, naturally, and several friends and acquaintances have since volunteered their services, submitting to several hours under bright lights while Damora photographs, sketches, or just looks closely. "It's like a portrait," she says, "because everybody is very distinctive." The drawing itself is far more time-intensive, typically requiring over 100 hours for each work. Damora draws exclusively on Mylar, a transparent film used by architects for drafting (as well as by many artists). Using just a No. 2 pencil, she covers an entire sheet in a fine crosshatch of pencil lines then carves out swaths of negative space with a malleable eraser. For fine lines, she uses a rotary electric eraser and more pencil. The

observation and drawing techniques are identical to those she uses for her flower drawings—after all, she says, "They're both seed pods."

Compared to Damora's flower drawings, the *Corner Pocket* series has been something of a crossover hit. Noted art magazines such as *Penthouse* and *Playgirl* have expressed interest in showcasing her work, and individuals—shall we say—outside the traditional art world have responded as well. A few days after handing out brochures at the Fetish Fair Fleamarket in Mansfield, Damora received a call from a man she had briefly met there. He had a question for her: "Do you ever draw really unusual balls?" He explained that he had stretched his out and could, among other tricks, tie them in a knot around his penis. Although she acknowledged his undeniable "achievement," she politely declined his offer to pose. "I didn't really want to bring out the weirdos," she explains.

Damora has evidently hit on a subject that resonates with people. And a market, too. Several people—including a "well-known baseball player"—have expressed interest, and she has already received two commissions.

"From the moment I saw the drawings, I wanted one done," says Rafael, a 55-year-old intuitive counselor, trance medium and interfaith minister who lives in Stamford, CT. "When I saw it, I just went, 'Oh. My. God.'" Rafael, who happens to be gay, said his initial reaction to the work was "magical," not sexual. The first thing that struck him about the drawings, he says, was their technical brilliance. The second thing was the potential for "sexual healing," for confronting the stubborn puritanical streak running through American sexuality. Rafael plans on hanging his drawing in "the single most prominent place" in his home. "It's not about exhibitionism," he says. "It's about waking up. It's a wake-up call."

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