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'Seats of Power' art exhibit immortalizes Brisbane officials' derrieres

By Christine Morente
San Mateo County Times

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BRISBANE — Artist Beth Grossman is surrounded by tushies.

"That's the heart of Brisbane," Grossman said, pointing to an upholstered seat cushion with an image of a derriere in a red silk skirt belonging to Mayor Sepi Richardson.

Last November, Grossman said, she came up with the "wild and wacky" interactive exhibit called "Seats of Power," which will open from 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesday at 50 Park Place.

It commemorates the opening of the new City Hall, but promotes political involvement and community empowerment.

It's perfect timing, she said, as President Barack Obama is halfway through his first 100 days in office.

"He can't do this without our participation," said Grossman, who also is an activist. "He's made that loud and clear. I think this project completely supports the new direction we need to take."

So City Hall should be a second home.

"A lot of people are reticent to go there," she said. "Civic engagement is actually really fun, especially when you have a lot of people working together."

At the opening reception, people will walk down a red carpet to the conference room.

Inside, they can sit on a throne where they can contemplate and speak on what it's like to be on a chair that holds great responsibility.

Filmmaker David L. Brown will tape the experience for a future documentary on Grossman's project.

The 61-year-old Brown said it should bring some interesting responses, lots

of laughter and some meaningful thoughts.

"This project will empower the community to feel like they can make a difference," he said. "They can get involved in local and regional government."

Grossman, a 12-year Brisbane resident, chose to have the exhibit in the conference room because that is where decisions take place.

The 50-year-old said she had this theory that the chairs have "heard" it all, and then wondered what the views from the chairs would be.

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To get the effect, her first inclination was for 10 city officials to hop up on a photo copy machine — fully clothed, of course. But she devised a better to get a "squished" behind.

"I had them bend over on Plexiglas," Grossman said.

Then she photographed them and sent the images to [photothrow.com](#), a New Jersey-based company that scans images and transfers them onto throw blankets.

Grossman put them on salvaged seat cushions found at the San Francisco dump.

Richardson said the project was the best way to bridge civic engagement and art.

However, she was relieved when she learned she wasn't going to be the only one doing it.

Councilmen Steve Waldo and Michael Barnes joined as well.

"There's safety in numbers," Richardson said Thursday. "My buns are not my assets. Generally, when people see me, they look at my face "... what we don't do for our citizens."

Regardless, Richardson is not afraid to be the "butt of jokes," only if it creates a conversation between residents and city officials.

"My take on civic engagement is, don't sit and ask why something isn't happening," she said. "If something isn't happening, help make it happen."

Brisbane Police Commander Lisa Macias also posed for the exhibit in her uniform. Her duty belt can be seen at the edge of the seat cushion.

"Everyone is in the seat of power and we can all make a difference," the 43-year-old said. "Brisbane has always been community-oriented. It's important for all of us to sit together and make it a safe place to live and work."

Sitting comfortably, Grossman smiled at the thought of approaching San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and even Obama for the project.

However, a slight frown touched her lips when she wondered if people might misunderstand her show.

"With art, you can't control it, and I don't want to," Grossman said.

"I want to put out good intensions, and hope people will look beyond whose butt it is, and have a real dialogue."

For more information on Beth Grossman, visit [www.bethgrossman.com](#).

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