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'Cheeky' art work shows Brisbane, Calif., officials in new light



Dave Getzschman / For The Times

Beth Grossman's "Seats of Power" was presented at an opening Wednesday in the Brisbane, Calif., City Hall. The work features 10 upholstered chair seats bearing the imprints of the posteriors of city officials.

Artist and activist Beth Grossman photographed the tushes of officials in the Bay Area city, and turned the images into art.

By Richard C. Paddock
March 20, 2009

Reporting from Brisbane, Calif. -- The artist calls them the "Seats of Power." The 10 upholstered chair seats hang on the walls of City Hall and bear the personal imprints of city officials: their rear ends.

The mayor, City Council members, fire chief, a police commander and others agreed to let local artist and activist Beth Grossman photograph their posteriors -- with clothes -- and turn the images into art.



'Seats of Power'

"I appreciate the exposure," said Mayor Sepi Richardson, whose bright red skirt is depicted on her chair seat. "I had thought about what my legacy would be, but I had never thought it would be my butt."

Brisbane, with a population of about 3,800, is on the edge of San Francisco Bay just south of San Francisco. By day, its population swells to 19,000 as workers commute from other cities to its industrial parks, but the community retains its small-town feel.

Grossman, who has lived in Brisbane for 12 years, said she created the seats in the hope of humanizing city officials and encouraging public involvement in city affairs. She praised city leaders for "putting their keisters on the line for art and civic participation."

The "Seats of Power" exhibit opened Wednesday evening with a reception where the models and the public came to admire the images. None of the seats were identified by name, but each had a small sign with a quote from its contributor:

"It's the Hot Seat," said one.

"This is one view I don't often get," said another.

"You have to start at the bottom and work your way up," said a third.

Dozens of people crowded into the small City Hall conference room where the seats were hung at eye level.

At times, the jokes were unrelenting. "He's trying not to be cheeky," said one visitor. "But," said another, and then paused.

Will the city be known as "Brisbun?" someone asked. Or "Buttbane?"

"This helps show that people on the council are just like everyone else," said Councilman Michael Barnes as he checked out the image of his seat. "This is an analogy: Opinions are like rear ends. Everyone's got one."

Grossman, who has sometimes battled with city officials over land-use decisions and open space preservation, got the idea for the project when she was sitting at a council meeting and thought: if only the chairs could talk.

Her original plan was to use a copier machine, but after considering the risk of crushing a copier, she decided to photograph her subjects bending over and holding a plexiglass sheet behind them to create the impression of being seated.

She then transferred the images to fabric and upholstered 10 seats she had found at the San Francisco dump.

The mayor and City Council members said they were startled at first by Grossman's proposal. But after she assured them that they would keep their clothes on, all five council members and various top officials agreed.

"I don't mind being the butt of jokes," Richardson said. "I thought it would help us loosen up."

Councilman Clarke Conway, standing next to his seat, said he laughed when Grossman first called. "The way she posed it I didn't think I had a choice," he said. "Show me now or show me later."

One of Grossman's goals is to divert the dialogue from the question of "who are the buttheads" at City Hall to empowering the public to take more of a role in the political process.

"It's not us against them," she said. "We're all in it together. The City Council is doing it because they love our town."

Grossman, who is also a performance artist, likes to work with ordinary materials and once made a series of portraits out of laundry lint. She also has done projects on climate change in Germany, a polluted river in China and Jewish women in Russia.

She and Richardson hope to spread the "seats of power" idea to other officials and are talking about how to collect famous rear ends in politics, perhaps House Speaker Nancy Pelosi from San Francisco, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger or, the Holy Grail of posterior art, President Obama.

"I know I am going to be known as the butt artist for a while," Grossman said. "But the power of art and humor are great ways to reach people. I want to make the point that civic engagement is fun."

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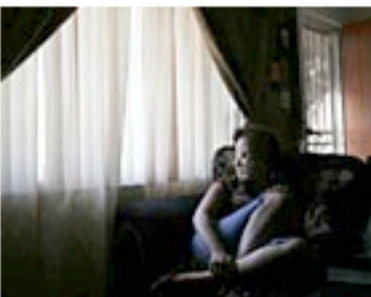
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