



# Tension between attraction and repulsion runs through artist Jana Sterbak's new exhibition

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Manifesto, 2018 by artist Jana Sterbak is on display at Calgary's Esker Foundation.

DENIS LABELLE/COURTESY OF THE AR/SUPPLIED

In a dimly lit room at Calgary's Esker Foundation, a stern metal chaise sits beside a Van der Graaf generator, jolts of current arcing erratically between them. The room ticks with electricity, and a notice on the door warns people with pacemakers and other medical implants not to enter.

But Jana Sterbak's 1986/87 piece, *Seduction Couch*, is aptly named. Viewers are allwed to touch this particular piece of artwork, and there is something that draws

one toward it – even as the temptation to touch it feels dangerous and unsettling. The brave are rewarded with a sharp electric shock.

This tension between attraction and repulsion runs through Sterbak's new exhibition, *Dimensions of Intimacy*, which opened at the contemporary art gallery in September and runs until Dec. 21. It is a sweeping retrospective of the artist's work, and her first major Canadian solo show outside Quebec in three decades.

In *Catacombs*, a realistic human skeleton is composed of chocolate, while the diaphanous white nightdress of *Chemise de Nuit* is off-puttingly embellished with a man's wiry body hair. In *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (The Dress)*, a ghostly metal shroud with its arms outstretched tosses heat from glowing red toaster wire.

And under a spotlight in another dimly lit gallery room, perhaps Canada's most famous – or infamous – artwork, Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*. Or, as it was more popularly known in public, "the meat dress."

Entering the 1990s, Jana Sterbak was, as Ann Duncan wrote then in the *Montreal Gazette*, "about as close as you can get to being a rising star on the Canadian artist front." She was on the cover of *Canadian Art* magazine, had shows in the United States and Europe, and was preparing for a major solo show at the National Gallery of Canada in 1991, *States of Being*.

The show itself reflected her stature. At the time, it was very rare for the National Gallery to feature a major exhibit by a living Canadian artist, and even rarer for the artist to be a woman. At the time, Sterbak was the first female Canadian contemporary artist to have such a show in 20 years.



Jana Sterbak's *Seduction Couch* at *Dimensions of Intimacy* in Calgary.

BLAINE CAMPBELL/ESKER FOUNDATION/SUPPLIED

Created in 1987, *Vanitas* is a dress composed of 50 pounds of hand-stitched and salted flank steak, which continues to dry and evolve as it's displayed. The dress had been shown nationally and internationally a number of times without incident; it was not until it appeared in the hallowed halls of the National Gallery that the broader public took notice.

Politicians derided the piece as decadent and perverse, and a waste of taxpayers' money. One local alderman called on public-health officials to investigate. (The health inspector reported no risk to public health, as long as people didn't touch or eat the dress.)

The dress and the controversy around it became news across the country and beyond, and Sterbak was even invited to wear it on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* – an invitation she declined.

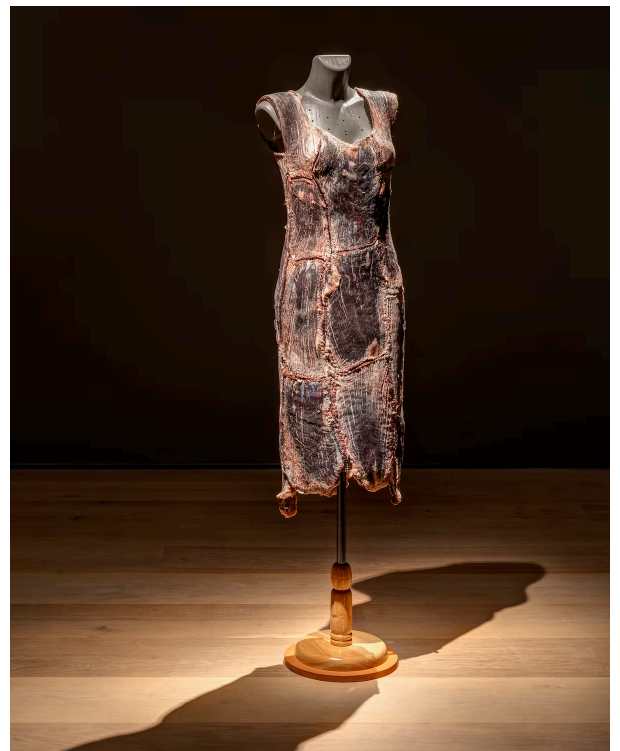
Criticisms focused on whether the artwork was a waste of meat, a waste of money and, more broadly, whether it was even art at all, a conversation that had been roiling in Canada since the National Gallery's controversial acquisition of the austere abstract painting *Voice of Fire* by American artist Barnett Newman the previous year.

Sterbak, for her part, didn't engage with the controversy, saying in a statement at the time that meat was no more wasteful than any other artistic medium, "and what is lacking is not food but a political and social desire to



*I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*, features a metal shroud entwined with glowing red toaster wire.

ROBERT KEZIERE/NATIONAL GALLERY/SUPPLIED



distribute the necessary economic means for everybody to purchase it.” She said politicians should “redirect their efforts away from aesthetic discourse, territory clearly unfamiliar to them, and instead direct it toward their own proclaimed field, the building of genuinely helpful social policies.”

Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic is a dress composed of 50 pounds of hand-stitched and salted flank steak.

BLAINE CAMPBELL/ESKER FOUNDATION/SUPPLIED

As with *Voice of Fire*, the brouhaha brought people flooding into the gallery, curious to see exactly how offended they would be.

The Esker show brings together about 50 of Sterbak's works from the past 46 years, including a collection of sketches and plans from her notebooks, and items from her studio that haven't been exhibited before. Despite winning a Governor-General's Award and representing Canada at the Venice Biennale in 2003, she has not shown prominently in the country since her National Gallery exhibit.

While the lingering “meat dress” controversy may have played a part in that (it still gets mentioned regularly), the complications involved in installing and, in some cases, recreating, Sterbak's work are a significant challenge for galleries.

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To create a version of *Bread Bed*, the gallery had to find metalworkers willing to create a bed frame and bed-frame-sized baking pan, then bakers and an oven big enough to accommodate a mattress-sized loaf of bread.

*Vanitas*, the meat dress, is made fresh every time it's shown, in this case sourced from a Calgary butcher, the meat then sewed by hand and salted by gallery volunteers based on Sterbak's pattern.

“The work is very alive. It demands attention, not just from viewers, but it needs to be tended to, paid attention to, monitored,” the show's curator, Naomi Potter, noted to Sterbak, in conversation before a crowd after the show's opening in September. “You've really built a whole second layer of difficulty from a technical and a conservation point of view.”

Amid the crowd of the packed opening, the coils in *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do (The Dress)* continued to be plagued by the overheating issues that have haunted it since it first showed in 1980s. The Van der Graaf generator in *Seduction Couch* needs to be regularly fine-tuned and maintained to keep running.

The age of each work is important, demonstrating both the timelessness of Sterbak's expressions of humanity, the body and power, and her prescience in observing them.

*Generic Man*, a large photograph of a man with a shaved head and a barcode on the back of his neck, dates back to 1987, long before the tattoo became ubiquitous with a certain counterculture crowd.



Perspiration: Olifactory Portrait, 1995, by Jana Sterbak.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST/SUPPLIED





Sisyphus II, 1991, by Jana Sterbak.

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY/SUPPLIED

In *Attitudes*, an inviting bed is dressed with crisp lux white linens, pillows and cushions embroidered with words such as Reputation, Virtue, Disease and Greed. It was created in 1987, long before profane embroidery and subversive needlepoint became a craft show staple.

*Vanitas* is sometimes credited as being the inspiration for the raw flank-steak dress Lady Gaga wore to the MTV Video Music Awards in 2010. That dress, made by artist Franc Fernandez, is regularly referred to as “the dress that shocked the world.”

Nearly 35 years later after its creation, it remains to be seen whether Sterbak's original, infamous meat dress – like *Seduction Couch* – still has the same capacity.

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