

## ***Sixth Prose: These Art Lovers Are Strange (A Parable)***

The Art Lover didn't like Art. He believed Art was little more than a conspiracy to dupe the innocent out of their hard-earned money. He could see no point to it. He was one of those people who—if someone made the mistake of mentioning abstract expressionism—would insist that a monkey could paint as well as most modern artists. Every time he expressed this opinion in front of his wife she would roll her eyes and shrug as if to say: “Can I help it? My husband is a philistine!”

No, the Art Lover didn't like Art, and he would have never gone to the Blue Angel Gallery that fateful night had not his wife dragged him there. She always took him with her to Cultural Events—even though he often embarrassed her. His wife had social ambitions and wasn't satisfied just sitting home watching TV. The Art Lover made a tidy sum with his contracting business, and since he and his wife were childless, she felt they should “do something with their lives”. He translated that as doing “something with their money”, but he was a fundamentally agreeable man and anxious to please his wife. He figured her enthusiasm for Art galleries would eventually fade, as did most of her enthusiasms, and he was willing to play along for a while.

The Blue Angel Gallery was located on 32nd Street; it was one of the newer galleries but already quite well known. The exhibit was of the work of a European super-realist (or magic-realist as they're sometimes called) and the Art Lover was quite surprised—quite pleasantly surprised.

This stuff was quite the opposite of all those sloppy canvases with paint running every which way, what he called “monkey droppings”. No, this stuff was different. Hell, the pictures actually looked like things; in fact, they looked more real than even Norman Rockwell's pictures. Some of the paintings looked almost three-dimensional. Ah, but what really fascinated him were the pieces of sculpture scattered about the centre of the main room. Unlike the paintings, which dealt mostly with buildings and animals, almost all of the sculptures were of human figures, females—young females, very attractive young females—completely nude. He heard one woman, dressed in what looked like a sheet, comment that they were “rather common”, but the Art Lover did not agree with that judgement. Monkey droppings were common; these pieces of sculpture were most unusual.

The Art Lover's wife wasn't overly impressed with the show (or with the other people milling about) so after an hour she went in search of her husband. A nice dinner at Romeo's would pleasantly enough fill the remainder of the evening. She was stunned to find her husband in the gallery proprietor's office calmly writing a cheque. She was even more stunned when, leaning over his shoulder, she saw the figure on the cheque. But she didn't say anything. Then.

When they were safely out of the gallery, she began to question him about his purchase, but he refused to tell her which piece he'd bought.

“Look, dear, you keep telling me I should support The Arts,” he told her as they got into their car. “Well, that's what I'm doing.”

He could be a very stubborn man, so she let the matter drop. They went to Romeo's for dinner and had the five course *table d'hôte*.

It was exactly two weeks later that the sculpture was finally delivered. The Art Lover had the deliveryman take the crate into the living room and unpack it. It was a startlingly life-like figure of a nude, young woman. The deliveryman hurt his hand on the crate when he saw it. The Art Lover got him a Band-Aid and sent him on his way. The figure was the one the Art Lover had judged to be the most realistic of all the pieces he'd seen that night. No matter how close one stood to it, one couldn't help thinking it was a real woman somehow miraculously immobilized. The flesh appeared to be as soft and yielding as a woman's flesh really is. The piece of sculpture was in her early twenties; she had small, high breasts and long shapely legs; her eyes had an innocence verging on vacuity. The Art Lover's wife was forty-nine with sagging breasts and lumpy legs; her eyes were not innocent; her skin was wrinkled. And so needless-to-say, when the Art Lover's wife arrived home from shopping and saw the piece of sculpture, she was not pleased.

She wanted him to return it. It was tasteless. There was no place to put it. It cost too much. She listed nearly a dozen reasons they should send it back. She did not, however, include in that list the criticism that it was ugly.

The Art Lover listened patiently to her arguments, but he was adamant: it would stay. "I'm putting our money where your mouth is," he finally said to his wife rather rudely. She was angry. But he was immovable. While a fundamentally agreeable man anxious to please his wife, he also could be very stubborn. The deliveryman had placed the Work Of Art in a prominent corner of the living room, and there it stayed.

The Art Lover's wife was embarrassed every time they had guests, although she pretended to like the piece of sculpture. The reaction of her guests did not help matters, for although they all praised the work extravagantly, when they didn't think she was looking the men leered at it and the women wagged their heads. As time went on the Art Lover's wife began to get involved in Charity Work and her interest in The Arts waned. The Art Lover became less anxious to please his wife and refused to be dragged along to Charity Functions, and the couple began to see less and less of each other.

More and more frequently the Art Lover refused to come to bed when his wife was ready to retire, saying that he wanted to watch the late show. However, if she crept down later she found his eyes resting not on the television, but on the Work Of Art. Then one night she came stealthily down the stairs, and, peering around the corner into the living room, saw her husband, there, standing very close to the piece of sculpture, his hand on the sculpture's right breast. She gasped.

He heard her and turned around, without removing his hand, and said: "Beautiful, isn't—*she*?" He said this without apparent embarrassment. She ran back up the stairs and lay awake most of the night. The Art Lover slept downstairs that night and every so often thereafter.

When the Art Lover did share his wife's bed, he often dreamt about making love to the piece of sculpture. He greatly enjoyed these dreams. His wife suspected what he was dreaming. She was incensed. It was like having The Other

Woman living with her, always home, there, in the corner of their living room. Arrogant bitch, she thought, I'll get you.

She decided that she would destroy this damned Work Of Art, this unchanging, omnipresent intruder. But she wasn't quite sure how to go about this act of destruction, for she wasn't even sure of what it was constructed. She'd never actually touched it. She dusted it with a feather duster and found the thought of touching it extremely repulsive—even frightening. She'd dreamt about touching it one night, and in her dream it was *warm*.

Still, she thought in the cold light of day, it was probably some kind of plastic, for they could do amazing things with plastic these days. And if it was plastic, why then heat would almost certainly be a very effective way to wreck it. She could use her old iron, which was in the basement somewhere, for although it didn't work properly anymore, it still generated enough heat to melt something like plastic. She'd get the iron heated up to maximum and then press it against the damn thing's face and breasts and legs and belly. She'd disfigure it so completely her husband would have to throw it out. Oh God, he would be angry! But he'd get over it.

She bided her time. Then one Tuesday, while her husband was at work, she went over to the Work of Art determined to touch it, to determine if it was plastic. Maybe she'd destroy it that very afternoon. Her husband wasn't due home for several hours. The time was ripe.

As she approached it she noticed for the first time a certain roundness to the Other Woman's belly. There had been other times when she thought she'd detected slight changes in the piece of sculpture, but never anything definite, never anything she could pin down. This roundness, however, was really quite distinct. She moved closer and crouched to stare at the belly of this Work of Art.

It moved. Really. There was no doubt of it. Something moved inside that belly, something kicked, stretching it out briefly.

"Oh my God, it's pregnant!" the Art Lover's wife exclaimed, backing off in horror. Then, telling herself she was being ridiculous, she turned and went into the kitchen: She went to the cabinet where she'd placed the iron, removed it, and setting it on the kitchen table, plugged it in.

When the iron was thoroughly heated up, the Art Lover's wife returned to the living room wielding the hot iron like a deadly weapon. But even from across the room, she could see it again: a movement, brief but definite, there in the belly of the Pregnant Work Of Art. And she knew immediately that she couldn't do it. She'd never been able to have children, and pregnancy had always seemed to her a very sacred thing. Besides, she simply couldn't disfigure a truly Living Work Of Art.

The Art Lover's wife packed a few things that afternoon and flew to Vancouver to stay with her mother for awhile. Her mother was very old and would not ask any questions.

When the Art Lover arrived home he hardly noticed his wife's absence, for his mind was elsewhere. Only when dinnertime came around did he find the brief note she had left. He read it quickly and then threw it away. They had not been like husband and wife for some time, and it really was all for the best that she'd

finally departed.

The Art Lover spent the evening moving the piece of sculpture up into the bedroom. And that night the Art Lover was very, very happy. He believed that the Work of Art was also happy. And if one truly believes in the verity of Art, one might even believe that they lived happily ever after.

**Ken Stange (from *These Proses A Problem Or Two*\*)**

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