

JULIA ROSE SUTHERLAND

Flesh Economics

Launches Sat, Aug 1st, 2020

Exhibition: Aug 1 to Aug 29, 2020

Viewable from the street nightly during the month of August



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Deeply
Loved
Flesh

Julia Rose Sutherland: *Flesh Economics*, Vancouver: WAAP, Summer 2020

There was a time when neon signs formed an integral part of Vancouver's cityscape. Historic photographs of the Granville strip show bright neon signs, in oranges, greens blues, and reds, featuring the names of theatres-turned-music-venues like the Orpheum and the Vogue. Other photographs show the many neon signs populating the Hastings strip, including icons like the Save-on-Meats rotating pig and The Only Seafoods seahorse that are still standing. While only a few now remain, in the 1950s, the height of this neon era, there were 19,000 neon signs in the city.¹ The neon sign from the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret on Hastings was featured in a 2009 display at the Vancouver Museum, preserved in their collection as an artifact of a time when city-dwellers would bask in the sleazy glow of neon light as they walked home from the bar.

Harkening back to this era of the city's past, and invoking a just vision for the future, Julia Rose Sutherland's *Flesh Economics* is on display in the window of Wil Aballe Art Projects on East Hastings near the corner of Glen Drive. Three words, potent and thoughtfully placed in relation to the other, stand in a text-trip-tych stack, gorgeously rendered as cursive script in red neon: *Deeply Loved Flesh*.

In using the material of neon as an art medium, the artist revives what was once a core part of streets like East Hastings—the incidental public art of lit-up, neon signs.

Grounded in the language of advertising and in the iconography of "the red light district," Sutherland's *Flesh Economics* has clear ties to sex work as well as to the practice and labours of art-making in Vancouver. Throughout history, many of Vancouver's sign-makers were also art school graduates,² and the long-standing tradition of artists-as-sign-painters is re-inscribed here through conceptual art and neon. While Sutherland's work is grounded materially and visually in this language of advertising and prostitution, the work also extends to a present-day, more radical and sex-positive politic of sex work and an intersectional feminist vision for a more just and livable future for women who work as sex workers—a world of advocacy and activism that involves decriminalization, and then self-determination and legal rights, as a first step.

I've spent a lot of time in this neighbourhood, as a pedestrian, walking along East Hastings and back, sometimes dipping south into Strathcona and walking through the park, past Chinese communities practicing their morning Tai Chi, and other times heading north toward the water and weaving through the streets of the "DTES" proper, where I'd walk past people on the street, some of whom I recognized from working as a social worker in this neighborhood. There were other times, too, when I'd just walk up Powell, past the old sugar refinery that is still standing, and cars speeding past along this highway-like street. I'd smoke cigarettes as I walked to and from work, and one time when I paused near a corner, digging through my purse to get my lighter and check for bus fare, a man walked past me and asked under his breath, *are you working?* A spectre-like whisper that took me aback—even as I'd consider sex work at different points in my life. I was standing closer to the corner than I'd realized, the orientation of my body on that part of the block highlighting myself as being *for sale*, in a different way than my body was already for sale under neoliberal capitalism, and I just as quietly said *no*, kept walking.

I wasn't working but I was on my way to work, at a space called the Living Room down on Powell street just east of Oppenheimer Park. I worked as a frontline mental health and harm reduction worker there. One of my colleagues referred to it as "glorified sex work," as we handed out dinner and accepted various comments about our appearances, and while she was referring to the palpable gendered dynamics of the space—many young women staff who 'wait on' middle-aged and older men, sitting with them in conversation for hours each day—I was in a very different power position than the sex workers who worked the street. "We're like girlfriend figures to them," my friend noted, about these men in need, and while it was a dark comment to make it was also quite true, experientially. As I walked back to the industrial-feeling kitchen, one man told me I could really look like Sophia Loren if I lost some weight. Another man asked me if I was pregnant. Back then I had put on some beer weight, drinking heavily and chain-smoking to get through what was very challenging work, in a challenging time in my own life, navigating C-PTSD and sex-related trauma. I didn't have the money for psychotherapy, then, nor the adequate healthcare through my work, so I was self-medicating, taking care of myself as best as I could.

The Living Room was a space for 'members'—those with concurrent disorder, or the co-existence of mental health issues with substance abuse or addiction issues—to spend their mornings, afternoons, into the early evenings, drinking coffee and visiting, playing games like Scrabble and Jenga, napping (though they were not supposed to *nod off*, and it was on us to try to regulate the members' *using* in the space), going for field-trips (we'd gone hiking a few times, and I'd take a group regularly to shows at the Vancouver Art Gallery). We served one hot meal a day, at dinner, and had pastries and salads and whatever else had been donated to us for use put out throughout the day (industrial-sized bags of loaves of bread from Cobbs, congealed pastries from Starbucks, and 7-11 sandwiches, which were their own elevated form of currency amongst our members, even when expired).

I remember noticing there were many more men that made use of the space than women, commenting on that. Many of us frontline workers were young women, with some form of university education, waiting on middle-aged to older men with mental health and addiction issues. The other staff speculated that there were more men in the space because the women were out there working. While the neighborhood was characterized by a shared sense of struggle, navigating the cycle of poverty and homelessness, there were still those with more 'leisure time' than others. The women of the neighborhood *had to work*, ostensibly *working the street*, while the men in the space could survive, relatively speaking, on their welfare cheques and whatever other forms of income they could muster from bottle-collecting and pan-handling. I didn't know the details. To me, a relative outsider to the street-based way of life, the men seemed more laid-back about survival than the women, who were absent from this space of downtime until dinner, when they'd show briefly to get some food and then head back into the night.

While the neon signs are now preserved as vintage pieces of visual culture from Vancouver's civic history, these objects of a quaintly compelling aesthetic value, we cannot forget how these signs served the utilitarian function of *lighting up the streets*. In their absence, the streets are darkened and less safe—especially for women, and Indigenous women, who spend time there throughout the nights.

There is risk in this work. In *How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir* (2013), Amber Dawn writes of her time as a sex worker in the DTES. After its publication, she conceded that "Disclosing to working street-level sex work still feels risky to me. Apart from *Runaway* by Evelyn Lau (1989), I have yet to read a first-person memoir about street work. More of these stories must be out there—perhaps I just haven't found them yet."ⁱⁱⁱ Recently, Dawn co-edited *Hustling*

Verse (2019) with Justin Ducharme, an anthology of poetry by sex workers, and especially by queer folx who have worked, or are working, as sex workers. I write here as an ally, alongside sex work rather than *about* it, writing as someone who has not technically exchanged money for sex but who has come close, who has sex workers as part of my closest friend-chosen-family group, who has heard their stories.

To speak of economics is to speak of exchange, circulation, currency, energy. An economy is the 'space' where these exchanges can take place. Free market ideology sees the economy as an idol of sorts, something sanctified and beyond questioning. Sutherland's work makes the flesh sanctified, sacred. The body being circulated is something deeply loved, not only in a sexual, carnal sense of *making love* or *fucking* or *being fucked*, but also in a sense of being cared for, respected and revered. It is a utopic call for sex workers to be recognized in all their humanity, to be treated accordingly. It is a clarion call against a history that has seen the opposite, a shameful history where this deeply loved flesh is violated, harmed, destroyed, without justice, without agency to control their own bodies as best their circumstance allows.^{iv}

I imagine the warmth of the Sutherland's work, the humming glow of red neon, like electrical blushing, greeting those who pass by the window of East Hastings. I imagine it might bring a sense of feeling seen. The warmth of red, for passion, anger, tenderness, pain, and the barely-audible buzzing of a current to light the way.

The sex-worker, and the 'street-walker', is a different kind of flâneur—an anti-flâneur. They walk the city, or parts of the city, but instead of idling they are hustling, instead of lounging they are working, instead of walking the street for the 'detached' purpose of observation (for observation's sake) they are working the street, while observing (for their livelihood's sake, or for their survival's sake, or for aesthetic sake too, if they have the time to take in the beauty of a sunset, or a public work of art, like anyone else).

Many of the women in this neighbourhood, and many women who are Indigenous, have been described as "survival sex-workers," meaning their sense of *choosing* this work is differentially more urgent, perhaps, from other forms of sex work, like those who work from their own homes as escorts. We differentiate within these economies with language like "survival," versus "high-class," each worker falling somewhere along that spectrum of 'need'. Where one finds them self comes down to that web of race, class, colonialism, gender, sexuality. This word *flesh*, with its ties to meat, often upsets me. I've read writers describe humans in that hyper-materialist, somewhat cynical sense of "meat sac," and I find it disturbing, because we aren't really *just* meat sacs. I think flesh is sacred. And when I wrote "sacred" there, it autocorrected as "scared."

Sex work is work. Sex workers should not only be respected and protected, but also seen as sacred. To love someone deeply, push your face into them. Open your mouth, your legs, go as deep as you can. When the chemistry is there, you know how to take each other in. An economics of flesh, an economics between a body and another body, but it is never really just *a* body in a singular sense, all flesh being the home of microbes, the traces of those others who have loved them too. Another reason why we might take good care, treat the flesh well.

When you photograph someone you're photographing every person that person has ever photographed, the artist Lee Henderson, my former lover and partner for many years, told me. He wrote this line in a conceptual art work, a static video of black text on white background displayed on a lit-up digital billboard in Saskatoon.* The work was curated as part of a series of billboard works by Chickasaw curator John G. Hampton. Formally, the work harkened back to sexual health public service announcements from the 1980s-1990s. There this fact is presented as risk, in relation to STIs. I wonder if it is the same with love, too, in a more philosophical sense. When you love someone are you loving every person that person has ever loved, and every person who has loved that person? Maybe this could be reimagined, like Henderson's work with imaging, now with Sutherland's work around the flesh: a rallying cry for a culture of care, a more radical understanding of loving-as-real-care within and outside the bounds of capitalist economics and exchange, something predicated on love, with an awareness of the risks.

Heating up the glass, bending it, writing heavy-duty industrial materials into something like a hand might, delicate curled script text, bold in its proclamation, standing behind the *product it is selling*, visual poetry that reclaims the so-called sleaze, seediness, framed within the gallery's street-facing window-walls.

It's a confession, a new kind of vision. Something like *refuge*.

Girls
Girls
Girls

Nude Girls
Nude Girls
Nude Girls

New Girls
New Girls
New Girls

Live Nudes
Live Nudes
Live Nudes

And then, an alternative:

Deeply
Loved
Flesh

For all of the women in this neighbourhood, and all of the Indigenous women and Two-Spirit folks and everyone else walking along and working these streets: you are precious and deeply loved.

By Lauren Fournier

Notes

¹John Mackie, "Bright lights, old city: Remembering Vancouver's neon glory," *Vancouver Sun*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.vancouversun.com/Bright+lights+city+Remembering+Vancouver+neon+glory/2221273/story.html>

²John Atkin, quoted in Mackie, 2009.

³Amber Dawn, quote, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2809249.Amber_Dawn

⁴Métis-Dene playwright Marie Clements' *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* (2005) follows the stories of Indigenous women in Vancouver's downtown eastside neighborhood in relation to the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada. That crisis that has a very dark history in this Vancouver neighbourhood, and the neighborhood has also, in turn, been a site of activist uprising and advocacy, including moves like distributing cards for women who are street-entrenched and working in sex-workers to know their rights when interacting with police.

⁵Lee Henderson, *Untitled* ("When you photograph someone..."), 2013, video, black and white, silent, 0:10s. Commissioned by John G. Hampton for Neutral Ground and AKA Gallery, <http://noattainment.com/flesh/when-you-photograph>

