

# Exhibit explores the male nude

## *Simon Glass photographic study blends sexuality, religion, nudity*

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Toronto artist Simon Glass manages to plow right through several taboos at once with his photographic show at the Floating Gallery. New Work combines sexuality, religion, and nudity — not the ubiquitous female type that pervades our visual culture, but the full frontal male nude, still unfamiliar enough to bring most viewers up short.

Naked women are a staple of Western art history. We take it for granted that an unclothed woman can stand in for Truth, or The French Republic, or a classical goddess. And in popular culture, the nude or semi-nude woman is used to conjure up desire, to create an aura of glamor, tend to sell anything from cars to chewing gum to beer.

For a lot of social and political reasons, the male nude is different. Just try to imagine a sultry blond man, half-dressed, draped over a red sports car. Even in historical art, the naked male is

### REVIEW

Simon Glass: New Work, The Floating Gallery, Oct. 8 to Nov. 2.

comparatively rare, represented primarily in classical sculpture. And these works tend to emphasize the heroic and de-emphasize the sexual, generally reducing the genitals to an understated, stylized package.

Glass's attempt to investigate the male nude, to find some way of dealing directly with masculine sexuality as it is expressed through the male body, is laudable. And the very human detail and realism that his camera brings to his self-portraits is unusual.

His attempt to connect up the male nude with notions of the spiritual and the Divine is problematic, though.

In these terms, Self-Portrait: Fall from Grace is the most successful. It uses six nude male torsos to give a new slant to the Genesis story — from the temptation, signified by an

apple, to gradual sexual self-discovery, to the ambivalence and guilt of the fig leaf. For Glass the fall from grace is the psychological moment when being and body become divided.

In The Seventy-Two Names of God, 72 20-by-26 centimetre black-and-white pictures hang tightly packed in four rows. The photos depict a male and female torso — always shot between neck and thigh — in several repeating poses.

72 Hebrew names for God are written in gold paint, generally right over the genitals of the nudes. Taken from the Cabala, a repository of mystical Jewish thought, these untranslatable works for God are used for meditation.

For most viewers, the Hebrew writing will be unreadable, though mysterious and formally very beautiful. But the connection between these religious references and the nudes may be fuzzy.

Probably the most controversial piece will be Shaddai: Almighty, a

large color photograph depicting a nude male torso wrapped in phylacteries, bands of leather traditionally used by pious Jewish men in their morning prayers. The resemblance of these sacred artifacts to the very profane paraphernalia of bondage is disturbing.

Glass's visual collision of sex and God is provocative, of course. But whether it's grounded in any real intellectual or emotional tension is unclear. Glass advances the now pretty conventional notion that western religion has been stomping down sexual joy for centuries, and he hopes that his work will bring about some kind of reintegration of spirit and flesh.

But the connections between the nudes and the Hebrew writing seem a bit one-dimensional and forced. The uncharted territory of the male body, and its ties to sexuality and identity, seems enough ground to cover, without this fairly perfunctory excursion into religion.