

THE RED SEA

William Burleson

My name is April Electro.

Electro's not my birth name. I was born April Hurley. But all my friends call me April Electro.

That is, at least my new friends in the city. My family and my old friends from high school know me as April Hurley. What a boring name! How WASP. So when I decided to move to the city and become an artist, I knew I had to change it. I thought long and hard about what my new name should be. I almost settled on something more ethnic: April Horowitz. But then I thought: what about my solidarity with the Palestinian movement? As cool as it would be to be April Horowitz, I didn't want to give the wrong impression. Then I thought about my support for indigenous rights and considered April Runs-With-Elk. But I decided it wasn't good to appear to usurp Indian culture, however unintentional. Besides, there is no escaping the simple fact that I'm a blond ex-cheerleader from the (ick!) suburbs, and I've never actually met anyone who is Indian.

Long story short: I settled on April Electro.

Like I said, I'm an artist. However, I don't do the usual stale-old usual visual arts thing like painting, photography, or sculpture. I'll leave that to the NYU, atelier set. I am a performance artist. I express my muse through spoken word, movement, raspberry preserves, and power tools. It's all very avant-garde.

My piece is called The Red Sea. It's all about oppression and objectification of women, and about the inherent power of the feminine. But mostly it's about my period.

I've been working for over a year on it. I've applied for grants, but nothing so far. I don't think the mainstream art-world knows what to do with The Red Sea. The old white men in

suits who control everything aren't interested in facing their oppression. But I scrape along, working during the day as a dental assistant and perfecting my craft at night.

My boyfriend, Todd, has a huge garage, and he lets me work there. I really need the right space for this, and my uptown efficiency certainly isn't big enough. Todd, by the way, is very supportive. He encourages me to reach deeper every time I do it, to find the "soul" of the piece, as he puts it. He's given me some real useful feedback too. For example, once he told me I could never bring all the pain out to the stage unless I performed Red Sea in the nude. And he was right! It brought a rawness, a vulnerability, to the work it previously lacked. Todd is an artist at heart, something I wouldn't have expected from a Kinko's counter guy.

When it came time to premier my work, I found it hard to locate the right venue. Most just don't get it. Certainly none of the established performance spaces were willing to take on such a bold, in-your-face work as The Red Sea. But Todd came to the rescue again. He hooked me up with a theater called Sammy's Adult Live Review. It's just outside of downtown, in a great area untouched by gentrification. It was perfect! It's a small theater with a thrust stage, all black interior, and café-style seating for about thirty. The fact that it was usually used for live sex shows only made it more perfect: theater for the people! At first I thought it was a problem that patrons have to walk through the porno store to get to the theater, but then I decided it was a plus: people who came to The Red Sea would see the store as the backdrop to my speaking out in support of the sexual freedom and solidarity with the common man. Really, porn tapes and dildos were the perfect ironic setting to everything The Red Sea stood for. And the owner, Sammy, was great. You wouldn't guess he's an art lover from the looks of him, with his stubby cigar permanently attached to his mouth, and his gray hair in need of a deep conditioning.

The night of the show, Todd and I got to the theater at 6:00, way early for a 10:00 pm performance, but I was too excited to do anything else. It's good I did, because I had to get on Sammy about cleaning up. What a mess! You wouldn't think he's ever put down a broom, from the condition it was in. Cups, liquor bottles, cigarette butts, and used tissues everywhere. And condoms! Gross!

By 10:00 I was ready to go. My barrels were in place, as was the table saw, the mannequin, the autoharp, and the raspberry preserves. The audience trickled in, most one at a time and mostly men. Well, really all men. I had flyer'd the area—telephone poles, coffee house bulletin boards, that sort of thing—but I'm not sure if the flyers were bringing people in or if they were just customers of Sammy's Adult Live Review. For sure my so-called friends didn't come. Go figure.

The show started right on time, even though I realized I had neglected to pick someone to introduce me. But I figured what the hell, and jumped right into it. I leaped on top of a blue barrel and crouched like a wild animal. When I screamed my big primal scream for the first time, I scared the audience half to death! The first row (which was as far as I could see with the lights and all) fled, with the exception of one older man in an overcoat, sleeping. As I leaped from barrel to barrel, tearing at my clothes, I yelled out the opening lines of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*: “For Women, life can seem like a beauty pageant. Throughout every phase of our lives, from childhood to maturity, our appearance is judged and critiqued...” Man, did I have their attention!

After I ripped off all my clothes I picked up the autoharp and played God Bless America, to show the irony of the role of women in the U.S. Next, I picked up the bucket of raspberry preserves and dumped it over my head, symbolizing menstruation as a natural, if sometimes

messy, event. As I rubbed the preserves over my body, I yelled out the first page of *Mrs. Dalloway*: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers for herself. For Lucy had work cut out for her....” Next I went into the finale, taking an unclothed mannequin, detached various limbs, and cutting them into slices with a table saw while screaming from Susan Faludi’s book, *Backlash*: ... The media seemed to be bearing out the women’s plaint by turning a deaf ear to their words....”

This is when things went terribly wrong. Remember the guy in the overcoat? Well, as I was slicing away at the mannequin thigh, raspberry preserves all over the place, he woke up and totally freaked! I guess he must have thought he was seeing a real person cut up. The guy screamed and bolted out of his seat, scaring me to death. He chased me off the stage and up the aisle. No one would help me! In fact, once I was out of the lights I could see that almost everyone had left at some point during my show, and those who hadn’t appeared to be more on the crazy guy’s side than mine. The guy kept chasing me and I kept running, right out of the theater and through the store. All the while he was screaming, and I was screaming; it must have been quite a scene.

Meanwhile, in my panic I had left the table saw running. It appears, at least according to the fire department, the thigh I had been rendering before the maniac attacked wedged between the blade and the safety guard, causing the saw to jam and stop. In the chaos of the screaming and chasing, no one must have noticed the saw smoking. I guess that’s how the mannequin caught on fire.

According to eye witnesses, the flaming mannequin fell on the stage, catching the old, dusty drapes afire. Soon the whole stage was engulfed in flame. The fire quickly spread to the sales floor. Once there, the cheap and apparently highly flammable plywood movie booths

practically exploded. Empty videotape boxes caught on fire and began blowing about in the growing firestorm. Complete pandemonium broke out. People ran for their lives. I guess Sammy was one of the first people out the door. The “Real Live Nude Models” who worked in little rooms behind glass were heroically rescued by a couple sailors. Thank goodness no one was killed!

I didn't see any of the fire though; I was still too busy running for my life from the screaming man. He finally tired after two blocks. Even so, I was completely freaked out and I didn't stop. Naked and covered in raspberry preserves, I ran to the subway, jumped the turnstile, and caught a train all the way home.

That's about it. I should add Todd and I broke up. I'm so pissed he was no where to be found when I needed him. He confessed later he was in a booth watching the live models with the sailors. Turns out he's not as big an art fan as I thought: he told me he wanted to date a “normal” girl, whatever that means.

Needless to say, my career as an artist took a set back. Interestingly, so were several other careers as photographers captured several men who probably shouldn't have been seen coming out of the blazing porno store. That ended the careers of at least one Republican politician, two junior high teachers, and a minor TV celebrity.

Lastly, I have one detail to add: apparently no one cares if you're on the subway naked and covered in raspberry preserves.

Ω