

Sex

Progressive Touch, by Michael Portnoy



Joyful ... Progressive Touch on show at Vleeshal Center for Contemporary Art, Middelburg, Photograph: Gunnar Meier

Oiled up, iridescent and alive with shimmering blue highlights on a glowing altar, a woman eagerly semaphores her partner's entry. Her fluttering fingers mark the spot. Approaching the woman on her raised altar, her naked beau does a manly mince, all pelvic thrusts and menacing Māori grimaces to a booming beat, his gravity-defying erection cantilevering in the dark. And they're off! Accompanied by arcade video-game explosions, thuddy bangs and gabbling shivers, this is 21st-century sex - on multiple screens. American artist Michael Portnoy's *Progressive Touch* is a brilliant, banging new video performed by two real-life couples and two girls who are just good friends.

Currently on show at Vleeshal in Middelburg in the Netherlands, *Progressive Touch* spares us almost nothing in the genital and oral departments, the universal mime of body parts, extrusions and insertions. Brilliantly choreographed, stage-lit and soundtracked, Portnoy (could ever an artist have been better named for this work?) has the dream that young lovers might use these hilarious, sexy and joyful vignettes as instructional videos.

How about ripped-muscle anguish to a heavy prog beat, angular math-metal guitar rhythms and drumming discord, pompadour hair, boggle-eyed implorings, the gladiatorial torque of male torsos and the hydraulics and pneumatics of an oral encounter against shiny black curtains and a dangling cage. "I love physical comedy," says the artist. "And you could almost see these as cartoons, like if Mr Bean was ripped and hot, had a dick in his mouth and studied dance in Brussels."

The boy-on-boy action gives way to two pale young women, coming together with chirruping "Ooohs" and a cha-cha score, its exotica pace underscored by xylophones and primary-school percussion rhythms on a big pink grope-banquette. After a lot of tongue-twisting dabbling they sprawl amazed at the quantities of sci-fi goo dripping from their arms. They've been at it, up to their elbows.

"Why should a tongue go directly to a clitoris? Can't it travel through the room in complicated, swooping baroque patterns until it gets there?" Portnoy asks. Foreplay can be all free jazz, he told interviewer Haley Mellin, "but to get off we need a good ole 4/4. As a progressive rock fiend, and someone who works with choreography, music, and comedy the question is naturally going to arise: what is progressive sex? By that I mean, bodies connecting in all sorts of strange meters, tempo shifts, stops and starts, changes in dynamics, unpredictable flourishes and permutations."

What's love got to do with all this? Everyone needs to up their game now and again, to introduce the unexpected to the rumba, to remember humour and variety as well as duty. The girls collapse in laughter, the straight couple wind down, lit by a porno-blue strobe, while the boys, I'm sure, are at it again. Me? I'm off to the osteopath. **Adrian Searle**