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PIN-UP GRRRLS: FEMINISM, SEXUALITY, POPULAR CULTURE

By Maria Elena Buszek

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A local boutique near my house displays a pink T-shirt in its window that's both cute and infuriating. It shows an illustration of a '50s-era woman curled up on a scoop chair looking seductively

at people passing by with the caption below her reading, "Ignore me and I'll love you for it."

Fortunately, something else in the same window saved the day. It was a lunch box showing an illustration of a sexy cowgirl leaning against a wooden fence with the caption "Come and git it" written within the loop of her lasso, and a label above her head reading, "Boss Lady."

Although these pop-culture pin-ups were similar in their cartoon aesthetic, their messages were subtly, but significantly, different. While I can't identify with the woman in the first image, proclaiming to adore neglect from what can be assumed is her cad of a boyfriend, I am heartened by the cowgirl's empowering attitude.

Like them or not, these images represent, on some level, women and the state of feminism today. They're also preceded by a long history of feminist pin-ups, whose rich past no one had examined with a scholarly eye until recently.

In her first book, Buszek tracks the pin-up from its earliest appearance during the burlesque era in the mid-20th century to its appropriation by the feminist punk-rock Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s and its current use by contemporary artists.

She demonstrates how the pin-up is inex-

tricably tied to feminism in its many and evolving forms and how it came to symbolize the very expression of female sexuality. (As a book focused on visual imagery, it's appropriate that its pages include 103 archival pin-up photographs.)

Buszek takes the reader through a detailed history of Western pop culture as it existed through the suffrage movement, two World Wars, the Depression and a recession. Throughout history, you'll learn, the pin-up has served as a representation of women's lives, either indirectly as fanzine photographs, or directly, as homemade portraits made by women during World War II to send to soldiers overseas. Even illustrator Alberto Vargas' pin-ups for *Esquire* magazine were reflective of the confident and independent sexy girls the artist found himself surrounded by in 1940s America. These images were accessible to and admired by men and women alike.

But at the end of this World War, and the one before it, women expected to go back to their prewar domestic lives. Not surprisingly, protests at the time against pin-ups succeeded in removing images of the sexualized woman from public view. Thereafter, women had less control over the images that were supposed to represent them, which resulted in oversimplified and uniform images, such as the Playmates presented by *Playboy*.

Through its use of such examples, Buszek's book shows that if women were part of the production of pin-ups, the images were more reflective of real women. However, if only men were involved, the images lost their complex subjectivity and became simple objects with the sole purpose of pleasing their male viewer.

As the women's movement marched on and women started to publicly express their sexuality again, the genre was reclaimed by women's groups as a promotional vehicle for their causes, and by feminist artists exploring female sexuality. These recent developments are set against a thorough summary of arguments brought forth by critics who believed that this imagery, however appropriated, was

degrading to women.

However, Buszek shows that pin-ups form a visual history of the women's movement, in terms of the pin-up's content, acceptance, and appropriation by women. Also, she suggests that their visibility in popular culture makes feminism a constant presence – a presence that, unlike the purring kitten in the scoop chair, refuses to be ignored.

REVIEWED BY SUSAN BUSTOS