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Exposed

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"Look sassy, make art, and survive." That's the credo that Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens offer up in their funny and irreverent new show at Collective Unconscious, [*Exposed: Experiments in Love, Sex, Death and Art*](#).

Sprinkle, a former porn star and legendary performance artist, and Stephens, a visual artist and professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, first met in 1987. They became lovers years later, and more recently became art collaborators. *Exposed* is part of a seven-year project called the "Love Art Laboratory." As the two women explain in their show, they began the project as a response to the Iraq War, seeing a need to celebrate love. They kicked things off in 2004 with a gay wedding, the first of seven annual marriage ceremonies that they intend to celebrate, one for each of the seven chakras.



Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens in *Exposed*
(© Trish Tunney)

The first act of *Exposed* chronicles how the couple began their relationship, started their artistic collaboration, and attempted to conceive a child via artificial insemination. The mood is light-hearted and jocular, with a few moments of audience interaction. The second act takes a darker turn as it documents Sprinkle's bout with breast cancer. Here, we get an unflinching look at the trials their love has had to endure (complete with a series of photographs that are not for the faint of heart), and the ways the duo rose to the challenge through humor, willpower, and a fierce devotion to one another.

Sprinkle is an extraordinary performer with a casual, improvisatory demeanor that makes you wonder what's actually scripted and what she makes up on the fly. Stephens isn't as natural a stage presence, but makes up for it with an eager earnestness that is quite charming. Together, they're delightful, with a lot of the show's humor resulting from their interactions.



They are joined onstage by a couple of "lab assistants" (at the performance I attended, these roles were filled by Scout Durwood and the show's director, Neon Weiss). They assist with duties such as having audience members participate in a short writing exercise prior to the show that is later incorporated into the actual performance. Durwood also serves as a naked human canvas as Sprinkle and Stephens explain the different chakras. "We love to paint nudes," quips Sprinkle.

Perhaps it goes without saying (at least to those who know Sprinkle's previous work) that *Exposed* is quite sexually explicit. But it's performed with a campy wit that's more likely to have the audience laughing rather than feeling titillated. Moreover, the show delivers a positive affirmation of human sexuality that is unashamed and slyly subversive.

There are occasions where the pair could go further than they do. For example, they spend a great deal of time building up their planned pregnancy. Once the final result of their attempts is disclosed, however, they brush it aside without exploring the emotional consequences that this surely must have had. Mostly, however, the show is a powerful testament to love, art, and the myriad intersections between the two.

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