

# Artwork celebrates ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves’ at 50

By Rita Walton Aug 11, 2023 0



“Ovens” by Zahava Rozman

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The groundbreaking book “Our Bodies, Ourselves” was published 50 years ago, and this milestone in the evolution of women’s health and feminism is being celebrated with an art exhibit at the Upstream Gallery in Hastings.

Running through Aug. 20, the exhibit showcases the work of 41 artists and includes paintings, photographs, prints, and drawings.

To organize the show, Upstream invited artists to submit work related to the social, sexual, and political issues that affect people’s lives and that speak to the themes of individual autonomy in health and sexuality.

The show was juried by Wendy Simonds, who is an artist as well as a professor of gerontology and sociology at Georgia State University and a content expert for Our Bodies, Ourselves Today, the website that is the current platform for researching topics related to the original book.

“This show is one of the most amazing things I’ve had a chance to do,” Simonds said. “It’s a beautiful show, and I hope a lot of people get to see it. I think everything in the show is so beautiful and looks so good together.”

Simonds flew in from Georgia for the opening reception on July 30.

“I spoke at the gallery and asked who had read ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves’ when they were younger, and I think every woman raised her hand,” Simonds told the Enterprise. “That book was amazing. I remember I was in graduate school, and I took a class called ‘Women in Health Care Institutions,’ thinking it would be uninteresting. But we read this book, and it changed my life. Everything I have done has had to do with women’s health.”

In 1969, a group of women met during a “female liberation conference” at Emmanuel College in Boston. They decided to work together to write about their bodies, their lives, their health concerns, and their sexuality.

In 1970, they worked with the New England Free Press to publish a 193-page manuscript, mimeographed and stapled together, titled “Women and Their Bodies.” The book, which cost 75 cents, was revolutionary for its open discussion of sexuality, and in particular abortion, which was then illegal.

In 1971, the title was changed to “Our Bodies, Ourselves” to emphasize a woman’s physical and emotional autonomy. The book became an underground success, selling 225,000 copies at 30 cents each.

In 1972, the founding authors formed the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective and then, in 1973, published the first commercial edition of “Our Bodies, Ourselves” with Simon & Schuster.

Today, the website [ourbodiesourselfvestoday.org](http://ourbodiesourselfvestoday.org) is home to information and resources from the book, retaining the subject sections like “Growing Older” and “Pregnancy & Childbirth.”

The idea for an exhibit to celebrate “Our Bodies, Ourselves” was suggested by Daniel van Benthuyzen, a member of Upstream and a resident of Huntington, Long Island.

“I was in my 20s in the 1970s,” van Benthuyzen recalled in an interview. “It seemed that all the cool, smart women that I knew had a copy of ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves’ on their bookshelves. I remember feeling a little envious of them, that they had this information about their bodies and sex. Over the years, it just seemed that women were better informed and it gave them confidence.

“I also used to work for newspapers,” he added, “and anniversaries are something that you think about there. So with the social changes happening, I realized that ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves’ was turning 50 — my wife has it on the shelf still.”

Amy Agigian, a faculty member at Suffolk University in Boston, is the executive director of Our Bodies, Ourselves Today, a nonprofit initiative of the Center for Women’s Health and Human Rights at Suffolk University. Agigian said she was honored when Upstream Gallery reached out to coordinate an art show around the book’s 50th anniversary.

“A lot of the founders are in their 70s, 80s, and 90s, and they’re still active and this was a wonderful idea,” Agigian said. “And it’s a bit of a fundraiser. We still have a mission and an ethos, dedicated to the feminist politics. The personal is political. We’re free and available to the public as a public interest. We’re not selling or monetizing anything. Our website is more accessible than the book. We’re committed to trans and nonbinary people.

“This is a labor of love,” she added. “We have been published in 34 translations. Women’s groups, reproductive rights and sexuality activists around the world reach out to us to coordinate publications.”

The artwork in the exhibit reflects a variety of viewpoints. Included are portraits, embroidered works with unexpected messages, and photographs of women’s marches from the 1970s.

On the back wall of the gallery are four paintings depicting more recent women activists by Elizabeth de Bethune of Yonkers.

“I was moved by the idea of this exhibit because when I was a young woman in the 1970s this book was one of the first tools for women,” de Bethune said. “I’ve considered it a touchstone of how to be a woman and feel comfortable in your body — or at least it’s an invitation to do so. It’s hard to do in this culture.”

De Bethune attended several reproductive rights rallies in the past few years.

“At these rallies, the signs struck me,” she explained. “The many human faces in the march and then the words in the middle of that. I’ve loved that visually. Then the women who speak at the protests — it’s very gutsy to tell personal stories — they’re speaking up for their rights. I created these paintings for the exhibit to show women protesting — their words and actions should be amplified. So I’m a figurative painter, and this is the story I have to tell.”

Carol Raymond of Hastings, who visited the exhibit on Aug. 5, praised the book and the art celebrating it.

“The show is wonderful,” Raymond said. “I have the original book still. In the 1970s, I was an early feminist. It’s also interesting the timing of the anniversary and this exhibition with the ‘Barbie’ movie. So there are a lot of thoughts out there about feminism.”

Half the artwork submission fees will be donated to support Our Bodies Ourselves Today.

The gallery is open Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays from 12:30-5:30 p.m.; and Saturdays from 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

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