

Laughing Pictures

I was invited to a party. It was in a little semi-detached house on the fringes of Chinatown. These houses are a Toronto oddity, with their bisected faces, and their two parallel staircases hanging off two narrow front porches like dogs' tongues. Inside, the staircase carried on straight up to the second floor, tilting as if it were detaching itself from the wall.

I stayed on the main floor.

It had been made into one room, with a decent mantel, a stenciled ceiling, and a low sink in the linoleum counter. Charming, if insanely awkward. People must have been six inches shorter a hundred years ago.

The room was full. The host was 55 and engaged to a 30-year-old called Brittany. This party brought their friends together; her pals in tiny skirts and bare shoulders, his pals with grey tufts and crinkly eyes – a math prof, a used-to-be, half-famous actress. I chatted with the ex-wife of a big time lawyer I'd come across in another life and then headed for the kitchen.

The bridegroom-to-be was at the stove, stirring a pot of chili. A bespectacled man stood alongside. This was Blair Dawson, a terrific illustrator.

"What are you doing these days?" he said.

I told him.

"Oh, Hokusai, my favourite artist," he said.

I said I was interested in his daughter. For once it wasn't, "I didn't know he had a daughter".

It was, "You know he painted her vulva."

Oh.

"Actually, I didn't know." I stared at the chili. I seemed to be blushing but it may have been the wine.

"Painted her vulva?" Could I have missed that?

This happens. You haunt libraries; you flog all over the map. You ask the experts and think you've got it covered. Then you go to a party and an old

acquaintance drops a piece of key, arcane knowledge – that may or may not be true.

“I think I even have the image,” Blair said, a little primly.

“She’s rumoured to have contributed to his *shunga* but...”

“No, he painted her. I used to have a lot of notebooks. I’ll look it up.”

It was an unseasonably hot October day when I went to see Blair. He lives at the end of a street that meets the wide sand beach of Lake Ontario. A couple of dogs were running under autumnal trees. He answered my knock instantly, as if he’d been waiting behind the door.

He hadn’t found the notebook. But he pulled out some Japanese erotica and went to make chai. I leafed. Yeah, yeah, seen it before: the grappling under willows, wrestling with feet curled skyward, spying maids behind the screen.

He brought the chai and we leafed together. I felt a bit uncomfortable, the way one does sitting with a guy in his house looking at pictures of inventive sexual congress. I aimed for detachment but the magnified bits put me to the test. I wondered if I was getting a little too close to my character.

The question of *shunga*: a few decades ago Westerners – men, exclusively – could not stay off the subject. Now the ‘laughing pictures’ are studiously ignored. They may be shocking to us, but they were common and practical in days of enforced celibacy. We turn more pages. It’s a mix of fantasy and realism. There’s a creature with an anatomically correct penis for a head, and another with labia between her ears. “So you think these artists used models?”

Not officially. There were no professional models in Edo and no sketches of artists working with them. So, we read, Utamaro used his sister as research. Hokusai used his daughter.

“Where did it happen?” I wondered. But the answer was obvious – in that same small room where everything happened, in one of the 93 temporary lodgings where Hokusai and daughter slept, ate and worked together. In the North Star Studio.