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LIFE & STYLE

A Public Forum for a Private Horror

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The paradox of offensive public art is a rich one.

You put up a provocative sculpture—say, the figure of a woman who has apparently just been raped with the two rapists suspended eerily above her, dangling by the offending parts of their anatomies—then sit back and hope it causes a ruckus.

You want people *not* to want it. You want them to demonstrate, to demand it be removed, to scream and yell that it might belong in a museum, but it certainly doesn't belong *here*.

And you want people to *want* it. You want them to counterdemonstrate, to scream and yell that if we are to address the issues raised by the piece—say, the vile nature of the crime of rape—then we must not hide from the ugliness of the act.

Then, I guess, you sit back and see how many reporters and TV news cameras show up.

It's rather like baiting a trap.

Which is why Peg Yorkin, of the Feminist Majority Foundation, and the money behind this particular piece

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of public art, sounded anything but upset on Friday, the day after a crowd of about 60 turned out at the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and 15th Street in Santa Monica to debate the work.

"Listen," Yorkin said. "I'm glad. The whole purpose was to start a discussion about rape."

Mission accomplished.

□

I stood on the corner last week, listening to some of the debate. No one was defending rape. Most of the acrimony centered on whether the sculpture, "Morality/Mortality," by artist Ed Massey, belonged on a public corner, visible to any passersby, including children. There is a middle school a block away, but this is hardly a corner

where children play.

Those who defended the presence of the sculpture seemed inclined to discuss the impact of rape on women and the importance of imparting this message to boys. Some women who identified themselves as rape survivors had taped moving handwritten messages to the plate glass.

Those who opposed it suggested that it would be more appropriately placed in a museum or gallery, away from the inquisitive gazes of children.

And where almost no one, I dare say, would see it.

It seems to me that the sculpture offers parents—particularly the parents of older boys—something valuable. Sex is an awkward subject, especially for adolescents, and for that reason, sex educators often tell parents to be alert for "teachable moments," times when the issue can be broached in a natural, non-threatening way.

A child's reaction—horror, disgust, fright or mere curiosity—can be turned into a rational discussion of a particularly terrifying and prevalent crime.

The sculpture and discussions of sexual violence are obviously not appropriate for small children, but the smaller ones will surely not be wandering down Wilshire by themselves. Adults with tykes in tow can hurry them past or cross the street. A moment's exposure will not produce a trauma.

As Yorkin points out: "This cannot be more violent than what kids see on television. And what they see in movies is far worse than this." Not to mention violence-drenched video games.

There's a lesson here for older children, no matter how unpalatable. It's up to parents, though, to take advantage of it.

Show me something similarly redeeming in the horror films so loved by middle school kids. And

I'll show you "Freddy Krueger's Enchanted April."

□

I wonder about parents who turn out in droves to protest a brutally honest piece of art about rape, while barely blinking at the barrage of messages—in ads, in music videos, in movies—that impart to children the notion that women are good for only one thing.

Drive along Sunset Boulevard, and you can't miss the huge billboards of a certain clothing company featuring women in various states of undress and sexual readiness.

Open any fashion magazine and see the extraordinarily sexual content of most of the ads. The March issue of Vogue features a photo of a nude woman on a pedestal. Her eyes are closed, one hand covers her groin, the other holds a purse. It's a handbag ad. On another page, a sneaker ad shows a boy kissing

the shoe of a young woman this caption: "He tried for her but she suggested he go a lower."

Wanton female sexuality perverts the culture. Most of it imaginary, of course, but a flipping though a fashion magazine may have a struggle separate fantasy notions of womanhood from reality. How do we count act this message for both boys and girls?

I respect parents who want to protect their children from terrible things that happen around us every day, and I don't think they are prudes for not wanting to expose their children to this culture.

But the fact is, it's there. Unlike rape, though, it's going away soon.

■ Robin Abcarian's column published Wednesdays and Fridays.