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The Humorous Feminists

For this trio, protest means glamour, glitz and giggles

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Santa Cruz

Local legend has it that feminism arrived on motorcycles in Santa Cruz two decades ago with a group of mountain women who, during a party to celebrate their womanhood, got into a chain-saw fight in a seedy downtown bar.

A few years later, a university art student by the name of Nikki Craft protested pornography by roaming from convenience store to convenience store with a 15-inch golden dildo, spraying *Hustler* magazines with a slurry of mush and buttermilk.

But it wasn't until this summer, when a young platinum blonde parading as Miss Santa Cruz pulled a protest banner from her bosom at the Miss California Pageant, that the town's local protests hit middle America.

A National Audience

From chain saws to dildos to Miss California, Santa Cruz always has been a hotbed of feminist activism. It is this last breed of media-savvy protesters, however, that is putting a new face on feminism. Some, as beauty queens themselves with a sharp sense of the ridiculous, have become figures heard nationwide. Critics cannot dismiss these women as sullen, men-hating, fat girls who can't get a date.

"It's been known a long time people always listen more carefully to women when they're attractive," said Craft, a feminist who admits to 47 arrests for "47 carefully thought-out acts of civil disobedience."

Craft's protests with her group, the Preying Mantis Women's Brigade — like her effort to get *Hustler* banned from local stores — always have been witty and well-conceived, but national attention eluded her until she teamed up with former model Ann Simonton.

It was a photo of Simonton modeling bologna during a 1985 Miss California protest that sailed across news wires around the country. And while Craft, 37, is not unattractive herself, she doesn't have the beauty star credentials of Simonton or the dethroned Miss Santa Cruz, 21-year-old Michelle Anderson, that play so well on national television.

Together, Craft and Simonton became the dynamic duo.

Simonton, 36, now a community studies student at the University of California at Santa Cruz, is a veteran of the Eileen Ford modeling agency and endless magazine covers that include a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. She said her emerging political self "was inspired by Nikki's work and wild ideas."

Craft's experiences with the media's fascination with glitz could make her cynical. Instead it



THE FEMINIST CRUSADERS

Nikki Craft (above) protests the 1982 Miss California pageant with a float made of Barbie dolls. Michelle Anderson (below) wins the Miss Santa Cruz Pageant this year but was later stripped of the title when she sabotaged the state pageant. Ann Simonton (right) dons an outfit made of meat to protest the 1985 state pageant.



has made her shrewd. Hers and Simonton's protege, the photogenic and svelte Anderson, who spent two years and \$5,000 in her sabotage of the Miss California contest, has garnered tremendous national attention.

Moments after Anderson's June protest, requests for interviews came pouring in. She has appeared on "Geraldo," "People Are Talking," "CBS Nightwatch" and numerous other talk shows. She has been the subject of features in *Ms.*, *People*, *Glamour* and *Savvy* magazines, as well as in countless newspapers here and abroad.

Rethinking Beauty

The media attention given Anderson confirms public interest in who and what is beauty. But this same attention also revealed much about the myths and stereotypes still attached to beauty and rebellion.

One San Francisco radio station introduced Anderson like this: "Here's a little girl who staged a little protest at the Miss America beauty pageant." People magazine wanted Anderson to

pose in swimsuit, high heels, banner and tiara.

The fallout from Anderson's protest has been alarmingly predictable, Anderson said, with pageant people wondering how a "lesbian" could have infiltrated their ranks.

"I'm still getting outraged letters from all over the country. Last week I got one from a guy in Alabama who said I had truck driver hands and must be a dyke," said Anderson, who lived in secret with her boyfriend while prepping for the beauty contest.

"Michelle was removed from the pageant for her ideas. Isn't this un-American?" said Craft, who calls a beauty pageant for educational scholarships "the most absurd thing I've ever heard. Michelle is as valid a representative of women as anyone else."

A Laughing Matter

All of Craft's protests, like her topless marches through town in an attempt to desexualize women's breasts and challenge laws prohibiting toplessness, have incorporated a little tongue-in-cheek humor.

"Humor is a way of coping with a lot of serious problems," she says. "It drops people's defenses, allowing them to hear things they normally wouldn't. Part of the struggle is to entertain people in a way they can't ignore the political message."

So far in Santa Cruz, such local education has not been particularly difficult. Whether Santa Cruz is the feminist utopia *Ms.* magazine claims it is, Anderson, Simonton and Craft all describe it as a politically astute and supportive community.

To lead feminist protests in this town of political radicals can be like preaching to the converted. Craft now has moved to the heartland — first to Oshkosh, Wis., and now to East Lansing, Mich. — to seek a wider audience for her political work. Meanwhile, Anderson remains in Santa Cruz to write a behind-the-scenes exposé of beauty pageants, and Simonton travels the lecture circuit talking about violence in media images of women.

As Simonton once said, "Maybe I'm still being used as an image, but at least it is one I believe in."