

Calendar captures attention

HEALTH | Annual Breast of Canada project offends some, teaches others

BY SHARON KIRKEY

The sepia photograph is agonizingly beautiful: Six young women, their faces turned or hidden from the camera, posing topless. Only these breasts expose bare, jagged scars. Some of the models have had a mastectomy. One woman has no breasts at all.

All six women were diagnosed with breast cancer between ages 25 and 38.

One, Vanessa Turke, was 28 and pregnant when her fingers felt the lump in her left breast. The needle biopsy came back inconclusive; doctors thought the lump was due to pregnancy-related changes in her breast.

When the lump kept growing, and she could feel its hardness whenever she pushed against it, a second biopsy was ordered. Turke was 29 and still breast-feeding when she was told she had to have a mastectomy.

"I felt like I was literally taking milk away from my daughter," Turke says.

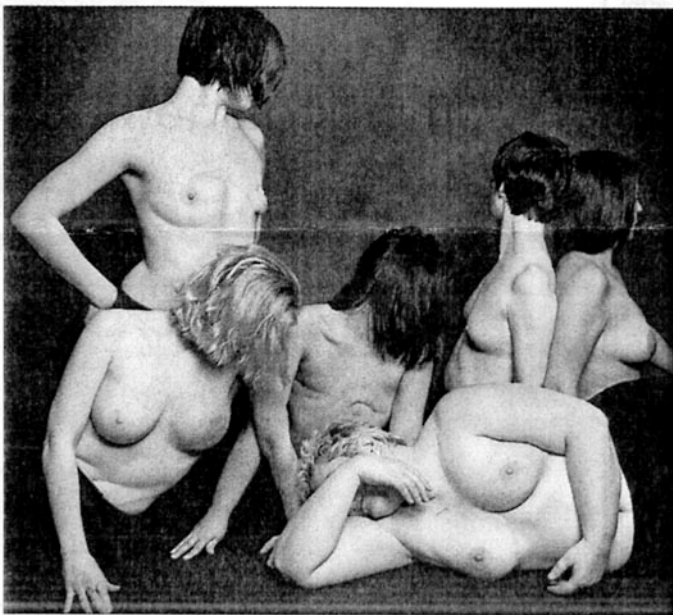
In a remarkable photograph published in the 2005 edition of the *Breast of Canada* calendar, Turke and five other members of the Vancouver-based breast cancer support group, The Young and the Breastless, reveal their scars in the hope of promoting awareness of the unique issues facing young women with breast cancer.

"According to the Canadian Cancer Society, more women under 40 die from breast cancer than any other cancer," reads a caption next to the photo for October 2005 — breast cancer awareness month.

"We are always comparing notes and chests and battle scars in our support group," says Turke. "This was different. We knew it would be immortalized."

The fourth annual *Breast of Canada* calendar features portraits of women with, and without, breast cancer. The goal is to promote awareness of breast health and breast cancer prevention, says publisher Sue Richards, a Guelph, Ont. artist.

Richards says the calendar celebrates breasts "in all shapes and sizes" and is aimed at helping women feel "more comfortable in their skin." In January's photo, a woman lies on her back in the snow, a toque pulled over her eyes, breasts bared



Women bare scars and all in the latest edition of *Breast of Canada* calendar.

as she flaps her arms making snow angels.

The *Breast of Canada* is no "women of Rylstone," Richards says, referring to the movie *Calendar Girls*, based on the true story of a group of older Yorkshire women who produce a fundraising calendar featuring mild nudity.

"This is a thinking calendar."

It features a full page on performing breast self-examinations — using real women, not line drawings — as well as monthly breast self-exam reminders.

Some people find the photographs upsetting. Richards has been told it's pornographic. "But now I understand, breasts can be a very touchy subject."

The photo of the women of the Young and the Breastless "is incredibly strong. It's a bit *Charlie's Angels* to me. These women are not shrinking violets."

According to Turke, women under 50 accounted for 22 per cent of all new breast cancer cases diagnosed in Canada last year. But, most of what's available is aimed at older women, even though young women experience the disease in very different ways.

"Two of us are young moms, just barely into our 30s. Some women are struck

with the diagnosis just as they're starting to think about kids and they have to deal with chemotherapy and the possibility of it making it impossible for them to have children.

Dating is hard enough when you're an "ordinary" person, she says. "But to have to tell someone, 'by the way, I don't have breasts and I've had cancer so it's something we have to be thinking about,' that's really tough. After cancer, your entire life trajectory has changed."

A former flight attendant, Turke, now 30, has not been able to return to work since surgeons removed part of her back muscle to try to recreate a breast.

"For me, it was important to do the calendar, because I still feel young and beautiful. It's important to show that I have not been put down by this experience, and that I feel empowered by the women around me."

The *Breast of Canada* calendar costs \$19.95, plus taxes and shipping. Net proceeds go to the Canadian Breast Cancer Network, a national advocacy and support group. To order online, or get a list of retailers, go to www.breastofcanada.com.

CanWest News Service