

## Provocative performance artists 'shocked into silence, which is unusual for us,' by \$30K art prize



Manitoba Arts Council honours Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan on their 30th year of making art

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Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey, seen in front of a photo of their 'Lesbian Park Rangers' alter egos, began working together as a performance art duo in 1989. (Lyza Sale/ CBC)

In their 30th year of creating art together, Winnipeg's Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan are still driven by social justice — and the work they've created based on that has earned them a major arts award.

"It would be great if our work wasn't still sort of on-point somehow, that we felt dated, but I think some of the concerns are so present still," said Millan.

The duo has received international accolades for their performance art, which is largely presented through a feminist and lesbian lens — with a sense of humour.

Now, they've received a major honour at home in a \$30,000 prize from the Manitoba Arts Council.

- [Writer Roger Léveillé honoured with Manitoba Arts Council Award of Distinction](#)
- [From the archives: The Lesbian National Parks and Services welcomes you!](#)

"We couldn't believe it at first — just sort of stunned," said Dempsey. "Shocked into silence, which is unusual for us."



Lesbian National Parks and Services was first performed in July 1997 in Banff National Park. (Submitted by Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan )

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The Manitoba Arts Award of Distinction is handed out every two years to recognize the impact of an artist's work.

Dempsey and Millan were nominated by Winnipeg artist Alexis Kinloch, who wrote in her nomination letter she put their names forward because of their commitment to risk-taking through art.

“That was incredibly controversial then and continues to be because women's bodies are in many ways still a battle ground.”

- Shawna Dempsey on the duo's performance art piece  
*We're Talking Vulva*

Among their best known work is [We're Talking Vulva](#), which started as a live performance and was turned into a 1990 music video in which Dempsey donned a vulva costume and rapped about female genitalia.

"That was incredibly controversial then and continues to be because women's bodies are in many ways still a battle ground," she said.

The duo have also travelled across Canada, and to Australia and the U.S., with [Lesbian National Parks and Services](#).

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan are this years winners of the Manitoba Arts Council Award of Distinction.  
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In the performance art piece, the duo, "in full uniform as Lesbian Rangers," travelled to various locales, including festivals and parks, to "challenge the general public's ideas of tourism, recreation, and the 'natural' environment," according to the duo's website.

Armed with "informative brochures and well-researched knowledge," the Lesbian Rangers create "a visible homosexual presence in spaces where concepts of history and biology exclude all but a very few."

Previous winners of the Manitoba Arts Award of Distinction include visual artists [Diana Thorneycroft](#) and [Aganetha Dyck](#), filmmaker [Guy Maddin](#) and [Manitoba Theatre for Young People founder Leslee Silverman](#).

In 1998 Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan spoke about their art and activism. 7:29

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