Vigor that is challenging

And now for something completely different: "The Origin of the World / The Force of the Source / The Cause of the Vigor," a group show at Samson, celebrates the vagina.

There are plenty of reasons to celebrate the vagina. At the same time, making art about it is inevitably charged with art historical baggage about objectifying women. This show nods to that with art historical references, such as to Gustave Courbet's daring 1866 painting "The Origin of the World," depicting a nude from waist to thighs, legs open. Since the 1970s, feminist artists such as Carollee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke have tackled the subject; both have pieces here.

There's some very smart, if deeply provocative, new work here. "July 8, 2009," by Daniel Gordon, echoes Courbet's painting, but it's a photograph of a nude Gordon ingeniously constructed, mostly from cut paper. For Rohan Weleas's "Brides Maids," the artist painted the bodies of two women and stacked them to photograph one vagina above the next, each painted concentrically in bright tones. Weleas's stacking, cropping, and coloring makes a totemic abstraction.

The feminist in me bristled — both these artists are men. But let's face it, the feminist in me can be a reactionary crank. The art critic in me lit up, because the work is sharp, original, and challenging.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at cate@cate@cate@gmail.com.