

Targeting women—and missing the mark

I was driving through York, Pa., earlier this month when I was startled by a billboard advertising a gun show. Towering above the highway was a scantily clad woman holding two bull's eyes provocatively placed to cover salient portions of her anatomy.

I will refrain from cheap shots on the morality/mentality of gun traffickers, although I did wonder how Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin might defend this. These gun show promoters are, of course, not the first group to degrade and objectify women for commercial purposes.

For thoughtful—and thought-provoking—insights on the subject, I defer to Richard Zakia '56 (imaging science), professor emeritus, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences. He's been writing about suggestive ads in his new "Ad Hoc" feature at Digital Giraffe.

"Digital Giraffe is quite a sophisticated Web site that reaches an international audience and it is hosted by an artist friend of mine, Corinne Whitaker," Zakia says. "She and I have been concerned with how advertisements target women and how covert they can be in their visual 'massage' (a word Marshall McLuhan used to talk about ads)."

Zakia's columns are eye-opening. They'll make you to look at advertising in a whole new light.

Meanwhile, back at our own Alumni News Web page, let me direct your attention to the "Alumni in the News" section for a story that highlights a woman for her amazing accomplishments.

I was particularly pleased to see this story—actually a blog post—about Sarah Brownell '98 (mechanical engineering). I met Sarah just before she graduated and was impressed by her determination to leverage her engineering knowledge to help humanity. The story, by Michael Cinquanti, appeared in the April 6 edition of the Gloversville, N.Y., Leader-Herald.

Calling Brownell a hero (I agree!), Cinquanti relates her numerous good works, which include efforts to develop water treatment, solar power, and ecological sanitation projects in Haiti. When she's not in Haiti, Sarah and her husband, Kevin Foos, are live-in volunteers at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, a homeless shelter in Rochester. She has been an active member of the Engineers for a Sustainable World (ESW) group at UC Berkeley (where she got a master's degree). And she's co-founder of the non-profit organization Sustainable Organic Integrated Livelihoods, which recently caught the attention of The New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof. (Read his story here.)

Just imagine a world where Sarah Brownell was the role model for young women—not Tyra Banks.

Anyway—for the rest of Brownell's story and many others about the accomplishments of RIT grads—take a quick trip to the Alumni News Web page.