
Amanda Brownridge

“The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons us and ends up engulfing us.”¹

I have argued that representing a fragmented view of the body allows for an analysis of the individual within the whole; a sort of microcosmic analysis with macrocosmic intent, and a way of situating the self within an incredibly complex world. Fragmentation as a method of artistic representation thus functions like scientific dissection, although obviously the procedure and outcome is not the same.² Rather, it can be understood that dissection is for science what fragmentation is for art. Both depend on a separation of parts; however one is achieved through the physical act of cutting up, and the other through visual representation.

The Vesalian model of anatomy focuses on fragmentation through dissection as a way of discovering new truths about the body and thus mankind. It is fitting to use the term “mankind” as the female body was often placed in a position of inferiority and largely ignored or misrepresented in Renaissance medical treatises.³ By breaking the body down into individual parts, a more nuanced understanding of the functioning of the whole may be achieved, not only physically, but socially and politically as well.

Pam Hall (1951- ) and Jana Sterbak (1955- ) both incorporate fragmented views of the female body into their work. It is interesting to consider that as female artists they are challenging the
very “truths” established by Renaissance thinkers such as Vesalius and are doing so by appropriating a similar fragmentary approach. By choosing a fragmented view of the body, these women artists create a space where contemporary images of female corporeality can challenge the traditional position of female inferiority and the inaccurate representations of a woman's body. As viewers, we are forced to question what it is that we are seeing in these anatomical depictions. We are encouraged into a more critical state of mind; to question and challenge preconceived notions of “truth.”

A tension exists within the pieces presented in this exhibition, between what we assume to be true, what we know to be true, and what we are unsure of. This push and pull can be best understood in what the philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls abjection. In a work of art abjection is a reaction to imagery that disgusts, repulses, shocks or destabilizes the viewer. As Kristeva writes in her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” An artist can induce criticality in a viewer through abjection. In the case of Pam Hall and Jana Sterbak, the uncanny, strange or monstrous nature of their works draws us in, and despite some level of repulsion, we linger. It is at this moment that we begin to question what it is that we are seeing, and thus may begin to reformulate our understanding of the female body. This exhibition will explore how dissection, fragmentation and abjection enable a re-framing of the female body through the works of two women artists.
Pam Hall

*Selected Gestures in Female Reproductive Development, The Maternal, From Fragments from a Re-Constructed Gynaeopedia, 1996*

Hand coloured, multi-plate etchings and engravings, drawing, and original text

76.2 cm x 111.76 cm

Pam Hall’s work, *Fragments from a Re-Constructed Gynaeopedia*, is a series of 28 panels grouped into pairs or triptychs, forming 11 pieces dealing with the female body and the reproductive system. These panels are made up of engravings, etchings, the artist's drawings, and her original text. *Fragments from a Re-Constructed Gynaeopedia* mimics the format of a medical encyclopedia in subject matter as well as materiality. Each grouping of panels deals visually and textually with an element of female corporeality, such as sexual response, reproductive development, and the changes that occur in the female body over time.

The grouping selected for this virtual exhibition are the two panels from *Selected Gestures of Female Reproductive Development, The Maternal* (1996). These images examine the extent to which a woman gives her whole self to her child during the nine months she carries the fetus in her womb, the changes that occur in her body, and the sacrifices she makes on a corporeal and psychological level during pregnancy and childbirth. On the left and right of these two panels, Hall presents a side view of a female figure. The figure to the left depicts the way the skeletal system and organs of the female body shift to accommodate the space taken up by the infant throughout the gestation period. This figure’s arm extends out towards the centre of the panel, directing our attention to various images such as a cross section diagram of two female breasts, a uterus and a sketch of chromosomes. The text helps to define the form and movement of the pregnant woman with phrases such as “she extends her arms to throw herself out.” The figure on the opposite side reaches towards the centre of the panel as well, holding forth an egg. The two figures seem to reach towards each other, one offering chromosomes, the other an egg, symbolically an expression of the female's significant actions in conceiving a child.
These two panels are detailed representations of the female body and the changes that occur throughout pregnancy. The female Hall represents is what Kristeva calls "abject" because she is an uncanny being with powers beyond what we normally assume for the pregnant female. Pam Hall challenges misrepresentations of the female body by offering a multitude of strange and yet accurate images, that combined with emotional elements, such as her poems, provide a more complete view of female corporeality.
Pam Hall

*The Body Boxes (Anxiety, Ambivalence, Desire)*, 2001-3

Mixed media

Cabinets, 44" x 20" x 10" each

Pam Hall’s, *The Body Boxes* (2001-3), consists of three wooden cabinets containing plaster casts and composites of body parts as well as found objects. Each cabinet has a glass door, etched with the words “anxiety”, “ambivalence” and “desire” respectively. The objects are meant to be displayed differently at each showing, as no item is specifically constrained to one cabinet or theme. The artifacts are casts of the artist's own hands, erect penises, baby doll heads and breasts. Cast from actual bodies these fragmented objects in perverse combinations draw upon Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. The strangeness created by these objects engages the viewer in a way that on the one hand, entices you to see behind the glass, while simultaneously pushing you away, repulsed by this unusual window display of anatomical curiosities.
Jana Sterbak

*Golem: Objects as Sensations*, 1979-82

Eight lead hearts, bronze spleen painted red, lead throat, bronze stomach, rubber stomach, lead hand, bronze tongue, lead penis, bronze ear and three framed gelatin silver prints.

Installation dimensions variable

National Gallery of Canada

Jana Sterbak’s *Golem: Objects as Sensations*, is a series made up of eight lead hearts, a bronze spleen painted red, a lead throat, a bronze stomach, a rubber stomach, a lead hand, a bronze tongue, a lead penis, a bronze ear and three framed gelatin silver prints. The cast body parts form a line on the gallery floor, while the prints are displayed on the gallery wall. The three gelatin silver prints depict a stomach, a penis and a heart, and include information such as weight, size and materiality. The title of the piece draws upon the “medieval Jewish legend of the golem, an artificially created man and one of a long line of automata who have given expression to the human desire to discover the essence of life and duplicate the divine act of creation.” As such this work explores the idea that Frankenstein-like experiments are doomed to fail, along with the notion of human behaviour shaped by the dominance of one or more “humours” of the body. This piece, like Pam Hall’s *The Body Boxes*, is a depiction of the ways a fragmented view of the body can elicit a critical response from the viewer as a result of its abject nature.
Jana Sterbak

*Catacombs*, 1992

Solid chocolate

Installation dimensions variable

Musée d’Art Moderne Saint-Etienne

http://www.janasterbak.com/imagesofworks/catacombs/catacombs.jpg.php
Jana Sterbak’s work, *Catacombs*, consists of a partially complete human skeleton made out of solid chocolate, laid out either on a table or the floor of the gallery space. Upon first glance, the viewer may question whether or not these are actual human remains, as the texture of the chocolate is reminiscent of what one imagines to be bones, perhaps still with rotting flesh, that have been recently dug out of the earth. The remains are even more unsettling because this incomplete skeleton is just a heap of bones strewn about rather than laid out in a manner representative of scientific observation. The unceremonious placement and ambiguous nature of the bones (are they real or not?) causes a certain level of anxiety in the viewer, and thus triggers a certain amount of curiosity. Again, some level of critical curiosity is born out of the presence of abjection. This is intensified upon discovering that the work is made of solid chocolate, a substance that most viewers will feel attracted to, while simultaneously being repulsed by the subject matter. Sterbak thus stimulates the two critical elements of abjection within the viewer, attraction and repulsion, leading to a state of mind where curiosity and criticality on the part of the viewer will allow for a re-framing of the subject.
NOTES

4 Kristeva, 4.
7 “Golem: Objects as Sensations, 1979-1982.”


