HOW ART IS RECONSTRUCTING THE MAN IN THE ERA OF THE SHATTERED MASCULINE IDENTITY

ESSAY — Hili Perlson
Today, the male body is being presented to us in all its fragmented glory in the public sphere. It started cautiously at first, with six-packs and plump pecs busting the confinements of textile, like the sculptured harbingers of the masculine ideal-physique-cum-advertising-tool. Then, round gluttei muscles soon started appearing on oversized billboards, as did the more risqué exposing of the gentle skin of the lower abs, leading to the groin. If objectification is a notion central to feminist theory, it is by no means exclusive to it anymore. Several mechanisms occur in the realm of sexual objectification, and fragmenta-
tion, the instrument-
mental showing of separate body parts, is one of the most ef-
f ective ways to achieve the com-
plete denial of autonomy, agen-
cy and subjec-
tivity that go into making the body an inter-
changeable object. And while a quick survey of billboards around the city will show that wide-eyed, open-mouthed female models are still the de-
fault, you might also spot, in your peripheral vision, a teen-
ager toting shopping bags printed with ripped male torsos – a strange manifestation of egalitarianism.

And what if you were to take stock in the art world? Browsing at art fairs – presuming one would consider the art fair to provide a snapshot of a contemporary moment in art making – female bodies abound in all media and far outnumber the males. But increas-
ingly shows have focused on the male nude of late, and the image of the male body that has been explored in them deserves some attention. Objectification aside, it’s important to be reminded that the male body’s art historical lineage is problematic, and one that perhaps needed to be broken with...
A blockbuster show entitled “Masculin/Masculin” currently on view at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris reiterates that men and their bodies have long been a fine art motif: the male nude was a compulsory exercise for art students throughout the Nineteenth Century, a fact that explains some of the bare buttocks that pop up in the show where you least expect them to. But in the Twentieth Century, the male nude underwent a neoclassicist rendition, a mode of representation that was eventually utilised to project fascist, Stalinist and Nazi ideologies in the figures of the athlete, the worker and the soldier. Contemporary artists have been chipping away at the inherent violence that the male nude is burdened with; fragmentation, one could argue, is one tool among many which artists use to probe possible means of rehabilitation – an “image update” that, in order to recast the male body, first had to sever, amputate and decapitate. Or simply ridicule. A row of wide-eyed, open-mouthed inflatable male sex dolls, chest hair painted on, stared blankly out of the windows of London’s Serpentine Gallery in Elaine Sturtevant’s show this summer (according to Sturtevant, you can’t get inflatable female dolls any more). Completely disarmed, the male body is substituted with a pumped-up heap of helpless golems. The work of Sturtevant always plays with the notion of simulacra, mostly by means of authoring confounding remakes of famous works of other artists. But her use of squeaky, peach-coloured sex dolls provides a strange if hilarious footnote to the Deleuzian postulation. Here, the simulacrum of the male of the species is summed up in a helmet of dark hair, a chest strewn with curls, and a gaping mouth and anus. Which seems to be leaving out something important.

Omitting the penis, as opposed to concealing it chastely, further disarms the male nude, but by doing so it also reaffirms it’s potential; it broaches an awareness of its intrinsic violence. Perhaps that’s why Brooklyn-based Michele Abeles often casts male nudes within a flattened space populated by generic looking props. She presents the fragmented body as equal to the bland objects listed off in the works’ titles like items in an inventory. It’s through the power of suggestion that the randomly gathered items come to form possible narratives. What the leaf in “Leaf, Grid, Ladder, Black, White” (2011) might allude to is the sex that’s kept hidden by the angle in which the body is shot and the grid it’s overlaid with. Metonymy and metaphor also form a key aspect of Sarah Lucas’ work, where cucumbers, eggs and chickens stand in for male and female genitalia. Subtlety, however, characterises neither her approach nor her aim; when Lucas lays a piece
of raw red meat on a man’s crotch, it’s a pretty straightforward, objectifying commentary on that flaccid “piece of meat”. Countless other works by Lucas focus solely on erect male genitals, leaving the mesy rest out entirely. More about the penis soon, let’s remain on the topic of objectification for the time being. Perhaps the most extreme, meaning potentially harmful, objectification of the male body is evident in the visual language of competitive bodybuilding, a topic young Belfast-based artist Brian J. Morrison tackles in his work “RIPPED CHASED AND ROCK HARD!” (2013). When Canadian bodybuilder Joe Weider rebranded his publication “Muscle and Fitness” between 1980 and 1989, and removes the muscles from their background. Walking around the bodiless, su- Emailedido by the sun-damaged chest of a white male tourist, not quite on par with the tanned chest a travel advertise- The processes of manufac- emasculated. Two ceramic sculp- tures rather than lust after the sculp- tured body. In his series, Morrison enlivenes images from ads featured in “Muscle and Fitness” between 1980 and 1989, and removes the muscles from their background. Walking around the bodiless, su- per-sized cut-outs installed in the exhibition space one can’t help but wonder what goes into the produc- tion of accepted normative (in this case masculine) values. The processes of manufac- turing desire, and the details of "Dickface" aims to empower users with a sleek penetrating form for everyday written communication! Isolating the penis as the element of power and dominance, Dickface provides the aggressive commu- nication skills - or is it simply the assertiveness of a male voice? – to users of all gender. While Hayden’s show demon- strated the mighty influence of Dickface, a more recent show by Nic Guagnini at Lars Friedrich gallery in Berlin, entitled “Heads”, illustrated the danger and horror of abused power. One wall in the small gallery showed some seven "portraits" of Hellenistic statues, noses missing. Guagnini notes that during late antiquity, in the Byzantine conflict between icon- oclasts and iconomachs, most of the statuary of classical antiquity had its noses excised, and statues representing male figures were humoured and a tad juvenile, a dif- ferent impression arises when reading in the press release that "Dickface" is a "worthwhile" tool for sexual projections and helpless teenage cru- shes. Hawkins’ exploration of the sexualised male body also reaches deeper into the treasure trove of male nudes – here, too, classicism offers an abundant source. In a presentation at Berlin’s American Academy, Hawkins discussed how gay artists have historically re- claimed images from a largely heterosexual world by either re-conceptualising them through collages or by fetishising them through scrapbooks. Not without a pinch of humour, Hawkins’s own "Urbis Paganus IV.9.L.1" (2009) also offers a persuasive "Treatise on Postcensorship." The male body as sexualised motif has also been richly explored through a female gaze. Less "strik- er" and maybe more "loving" in approach, American painter Ellen Altfest, acclaimed for her labour- intensive, trompe l’oeil canvases, also captures fragmented views of her female models, but instead of

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The processes of manufacturing desire, and the details of constructing phantasmagoria, which become mainstream, commercial and thus normative along the way, are pitifully expressed in Bill Hayden’s “Pretty Palm Trees” (2010). It’s part of a work series themed “Coconuts”, where Hayden highlighted the debris of the realistic, always falling short of the idealised commercial image, like the sun-damaged chest of a white male tourist, not quite on par with the tanned chest a travel advertisement might have opted for. Together with artist Nic Guagnini, Hayden also developed Dickface, a typeface for “a variety of computing platforms”, available for purchase online at www.dickface.me. In the spring of 2013, Hayden covered the walls of Berlin’s Société gallery with letterings in the typeface for his solo show. If the gesture of designing a typeface made entirely of penises seems humorous and a tad juvenile, a different impression arises when reading in the press release that “Dickface" aims to empower users with a sleek penetrating form for everyday written communication! Isolating the penis as the element of power and dominance, Dickface provides the aggressive communication skills - or is it simply the assertiveness of a male voice? – to users of all gender. While Hayden’s show demonstrated the mighty influence of Dickface, a more recent show by Nic Guagnini at Lars Friedrich gallery in Berlin, entitled “Heads”, illustrated the danger and horror of abused power. One wall in the small gallery showed some seven "portraits" of Hellenistic statues, noses missing. Guagnini notes that during late antiquity, in the Byzantine conflict between iconoclasts and iconomachs, most of the statuary of classical antiquity had its noses excised, and statues representing male figures were humasculated. Two ceramic sculptures placed on high plinths communicate with the photographic prints in the show, their organic shapes entirely made up of entangled noses, ears and penises. Those are the organs usually sev- ered or mutilated as means of punishment and torture, and if the show left any room for doubt as to its linking of the male body back to the horrors of war - making a detour via classicism - a print-out in the aforementioned Dickface font entitled “Notes on DickFace” offered a collection of thoughts on fetish, war, corpses, colonialism, mass graves, torture, and death. Perhaps the answer to rehabilitat- ing the male body is through its sexualisation. Casting an eroticised gaze on the male nude as a fine art motif could constitute a certain form of objectification that philosopher Martha Nussbaum refers to as “Positive Objectification” or a “necessary negative phenomenon” that can be immensely pleasurable. The work of American artist Richard Hawkins is a good example of this re-casting of the male body. Hawkins, whose survey of paintings, sculptures, assem- blages and writing is currently on view at Le Consortium, Dijon, constructs a complex and sophis- ticated, overtly homosexual uni- verse made of distortions, cuttings, dissections, decapitations and panties epiphantes. Here, collage is not merely a technical but rather a modus operandi used to carve a space for the unrepresentable, the transient, the ephemeral and the unstable. More specifically, his work is haunted by an inherent voyeur, a homo cruiser with a clear preference for youth. Desire and indulgence are two fascinations Hawkins’ viewer is confronted with, and the pop-cultural refer- ences in his work explore the hot- young-stud-consuming public eye: the beauty of “Outside” or Matt Dillon, the prissily unattainabili- ty of ”My Own Private Idaho”-era Keanu Reeves, male types made for sexual projections and helpless teenage cru- shes. Hawkins’ exploration of the sexualised male body also reaches deeper into the treasure trove of male nudes - here, too, classicism offers an abundant source. In a presentation at Berlin’s American Academy, Hawkins discussed how gay artists have historically re- claimed images from a largely heterosexual world by either re-conceptualising them through collages or by fetishising them through scrapbooks. Not without a pinch of humour, Hawkins’s own “Urbis Paganus IV.9.L.1” (2009) also offers a persuasive “Treatise on Postcensorship.” The male body as sexualised motif has also been richly explored through a female gaze. 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Top: ELLEN ALTFEST  
Green Gourd, 2007  
Oil on linen  
30.5 x 30.5 cm  
Copyright Ellen Altfest  
Courtesy White Cube, London  
Photo: Bill Orcutt, New York

Left: Head and Plant, 2009–2010  
Oil on canvas  
27.9 x 25.4 cm  
Copyright Ellen Altfest  
Courtesy White Cube, London  
Photo: Todd-White Art

Opposite page: RICHARD HAWKINS  
Crupuscle 1, 1994  
Mixed media  
71.1 x 61 x 61 cm  
Copyright Richard Hawkins  
Fine Art, Los Angeles
fragmentation for the sake of objectification, her gaze is one of intensified focus: on a male armpit, body hair, stretch marks, and sex. She uses classic still life motifs such as fruit and plants alongside the body, gently placing obvious signifiers of genitals in her scenes, like the upstanding of a cactus, or the tip of a pumpkin recalling the skin of a rectum.

Subject to all sorts of representations, the male nude has been quite literally taken apart, and is reassembled in a contemporary world imbued with multiplicity. In a solo presentation at Art Basel Statements this summer, Swiss-American artist Greg Parma Smith presented a clever, elegant solution to the conundrum of showing male bodies in art. In his work, Smith often subverts elements perceived as decorative or commonplace. His oil on canvas series “Poseurs” (2013) showed models from profiles, or in poses recalling forms of presentation recognisable from classicism – poses which allowed the artists of Antiquity to portray the body’s perfection.

Smith’s bodies, however, are beautiful chimeras where each limb and section is of a different race and gender. “We are all objects,” these creatures seem to calmly express. Our bodies are constantly sexualised, in almost every aspect of life, and multiplicity is the only reasonable way to counteract the negative effects of objectification on society.