

It's Nice That

Inside curator Antonia Marsh's body centric group show (NSFW)



Artwork by Will Spratley

Fresh back from New York, curator Antonia Marsh is marking her return to London with an ambitious new show, which opens at Camden's *Cob Gallery* tomorrow. *The Belly and the Members*, as its title suggests, asks if the human body is more than a sum of its parts, and looks at the artist's need to dissect the body. Here, Antonia Marsh gives *It's Nice That* a behind-the-scenes look into *The Belly and the Members*, unravelling her relationship with the 20 artists and telling us a bit more about what we can expect from the exhibition.

I've been working on *The Belly and the Members* solidly for a number of months now, which is probably the longest I've worked on one show. This longer process suits the content, because it felt really organic. You could probably trace where I've been and who I've met in the last few months through the work. They're all at really different stages of their careers, which is really important to me – group shows provide a great opportunity to break down art world hierarchies in this way. There's no reason why a sculpture by an artist whose work is in

museum collections can't sit in a show with a work by a student who's shown a handful of times, the benefits are mutual.

A few of the artists – London-based painters Alba Hodson and Faye Wei Wei, Danish photographer Matilde Soes Rasmussen and NYC artist Chase Hall – I've worked with before, so it feels familiar to develop and extend that relationship further. Harley Weir rented a room off me before we'd even met and we got to know each other as friends before I thought to ask her if she'd like to be in the show.

I bought two sculptures Claire Barrow made and met her when I went to collect them and we had a chat about art in her kitchen. Many of the connections for this show were born out of studio visits I'd done with artists for the first time, either geared towards this exhibition purposefully, or just because I admire their work and wanted to meet them and see it in person. As one example, I saw Nick van Woert's recent solo exhibition in New York and became so enamoured by his work that I slid into his DMs and we became friends. The same happened with London-based artists Hamish

Pearch, Sid Charity, Will Spratley... quite often I can't get artworks I see in shows out of my head and I have to go and meet the artist to talk about it.

Olu Ogunnaike and I met at another exhibition opening and immediately got on, so we scheduled a studio visit, but then I peeked his work online and seeing how relevant it could be, invited him to the space and within a few days he was confirmed to be in the show. A few of the artists from the US including Chase, Jack Greer and Emma Thomas are coming to London for the opening so it actually feels like a special event rather than just an art establishment construct.

Olu Ogunnaike's charcoal monoprints trace the structure and the surface of the gallery. Ogunnaike sees his drawings as part of the building, raising the issue of how site-specificity relates to the body. An ephemeral response to the space, through these drawings, the gallery converses with its parts, resulting in fragmented portraits of a building.

Elsewhere, a trail of matryoshka or Russian dolls made from fragments of wood line up in the gallery. Almost every doll simultaneously constitutes both a vulnerable interior and a protective exterior. These sculptures combine various species and origins of material to ask what the process of layering proposes. Shifting purpose from kitschy souvenir to artwork, Ogunnaike adorns these miniature figures with a new reading, simply by changing materials and proximity to the context of an art gallery and its audience. Like many of the artists in *The Belly and the Members*, placing matter in a new place signifies an oscillation between a bodily representation and material in real time and space. This oscillation provokes an uncomfortable sense of uncertainty, therefore proposing fragmentation as a source for individual and collective self-reflection. Fragmentation is radical: usually associated with instability, to fragment is to ignore conventions, completion and linearity.



Artwork by Emma Thomas

Similarly revealing in its concealment, Claire Barrow's plaster bust seems to imagine an armour for a surreal heroine. By accentuating its wearer's nipples, Liv's Bust playfully confronts censorship of the female nude. Almost morbidly flesh-like in its sallow consistency, Barrow covers her sculpture in sketches of mystical creatures as if plucked straight from either dreamlike nightmares or nightmarish dreams. Even while humorously echoing the forms beneath it, the work generates a barrier with a world where the skin functions as analogous to social guardedness, clothing and other modes of concealment.

With Barrow as just one example, *The Belly and the Members* mirrors Hans Bellmer's interpretation of the body as an anagram of interconnecting parts that can be endlessly reconfigured to explore or expose desire and other unconscious impulses.

Bodily binaries continually abound across the exhibition, as works investigate the wider implications of interior versus exterior, hard versus soft and wet versus dry. Will Spratley's *Pose* juts out of the wall like a chunk of flesh, its wax constitution marrying hard and soft and harbouring the potential to completely modify its state subject to a simple change in temperature or pressure. Neither protruding ready for insertion nor reductively removed from something larger, much of the gravitas of this work lies in its abstraction, its resistance to subject itself to signs or external signifiers. This unsettling deviation from a "normal" interaction with an object or image permeates the gallery space as disrupted bodies, breached skin and accentuated orifices engulf the viewer. Trapped between perception and expectation, we perform an unavoidable and uneasy double-take.

Countering the persistent trend in *The Belly and the Members* for artists to express a self-conscious detachment with their bodies, Sid Charity's *Untitled* represents an attempt to establish his body's relationship with its surroundings. Almost cage-like, Charity presents a life-size metal structure that while occupied with the actual body of the artist, encases him in space: at once imprisoned and free. Standing nude within this structure at intervals throughout the exhibition, Charity addresses "the materiality of the body, as well as a physical manifestation of surfacing subconscious psychology." While the work occupies a space between performance and sculpture, it remains able to simultaneously propose a subjective perspective of space in relation to the non-physical. By exposing his body, Charity renders it susceptible to the vicissitudes of the exterior world thereby challenging a society desensitised by mediated imagery.

Rayvenn Shaleigha D'Clark's prosthetic foot *My Head Hurts, My Feet Stink and I Don't Love Jesus* canvasses the uniqueness of the copy. Cropping and abstracting human anatomy in "a new form of hybrid realism," the sculpture at once edges towards a realistic depiction and professes its deceit. Reminiscent of Hollywood robotics, D'Clark's work boasts an impressive presence, as if this sculpted extremity could function autonomously from a body. In its realness, D'Clark's sculpture evokes the uncanny valley – a hypothesis that human replicas which appear almost like actual human beings elicit feelings of eeriness and revulsion among some observers – igniting recent discourses surrounding cybernetics and the 'post-human.' The latter, an optimistic theory that if evolution were to enter a synthetic rather than a biological phase, a symbiotic relationship between the human body and technology – between the natural and the artificial – would commence. Echoing this symbiosis, D'Clark examines sculpture's inextricable relation to space and notions surrounding presence, which fuel a discussion of the disproportionate position of black artists in a white-washed art world.

In the interest of engendering an expanded awareness of what constitutes a representation of the body, *The Belly and the Members* includes works in which human forms are asserted simply through specific characteristics or behavioural tendencies, and even implied precisely in their absence. Having learned from the traditional Japanese bondage technique of Kinbaku, Emma Thomas ties her models up in rope and casts their binds into soft silicone or hardened resin. Her deeply intimate process relies on a relationship of trust and reliance between artist and sitter. While a connective and sensually sexual practice, when cast and absent of their formative figures, these "portraits" feel emptied of their ghostlike sources. Anatomical in their own right, they become bodies themselves that once no longer unwindable, resemble life-size toys. Despite this playfulness, with the physical presence of their human context removed from within, we easily succumb to implicating ourselves into the interior of the rope-like forms, instantly sexualising but equally suffocating. As a result, for Thomas space appears not to negate presence, but instead alludes to it.