

## Antonia Marsh's Show Explores The Fragmented, Decaying Body

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY - FEATURE

**The curator's most ambitious show to date explores attraction and repulsion, truth and lies, the artificial and the natural, with works from Harley Weir, Alba Hodsoll, and Faye Wei Wei**

4th September 2017

Text Thea Richard



Artwork by Faye Wei Wei

“The body is like a sentence that invites us to rearrange it.” This is German artist Hans Bellmer’s anagrammatic theory, which alludes to the idea that bodies can be pulled apart and reassembled in ways to suit ourselves. It’s also a running theme in curator Antonia Marsh’s latest show, which opens at London’s Cob Gallery tomorrow. The exhibition name itself – *The Belly and the Members* – is borrowed from a 6th century BC Aesop fable of the same name. Within the text, members of the body go on strike against the belly – believing it to be taking all the food for itself – before themselves weakening and being forced to realise that they must work together to survive.

This idea that “all must work together or the body will go to pieces” mirrors how we perceive our bodies as a sum of their fragmented parts, and also plays into how artworks placed within a gallery interact with one another. Looking at the jumble of ears, eyes and abstract appendages, we see bodies growing, changing, decaying, and communicating with one another. Curating within the context of a post-truth world in which we’re surrounded by dubious images and

information, Marsh asks how parts of the body can open up new, radical possibilities for sexuality, identity, and our environment, that otherwise, whole bodies might struggle to provide. Featuring works from a mix of UK and US artists, including Faye Wei Wei, Chase Hall, and Harley Weir, we ask Marsh to break down six of the artworks in the show ahead of its opening. “Thinking about

## ALBA HODSOLL



Artwork by Alba Hodsoll

Hans Bellmer's idea of a body made out of disparate parts, Alba's is a great example of that. Her work is a piece of pink leather that has a screen print on it, of what she calls the 'ideal woman' – a satirical take on our concept of what the ideal woman is, what beauty is. It's actually really disjointed – all of the body parts are taken from different bodies, from different angles, blown up in different sizes so it actually isn't ideal at all, it's really uncomfortable. There's this idea of the uncanny that we relate to it and it almost feels life-like but we still feel repulsed, it's not quite right. Also the fact that it's leather, a material with dual associations; it's both sexual and comes from something that was once alive. Again, here's this attraction/revulsion response, and I think the fact that it's happening to both material and content at the same time is interesting.

When I was doing my 'Girls Only' project, she was in residence in the space New York. I did Alba's first ever studio visit when she was still doing her undergrad – it was in her kitchen and it was incredible, like discovering a diamond in the rough. She's such an enigma, her practice is razor-sharp. It's amazing for someone whose work is so overtly sexual for someone to be so private – that adds a quality that's intense and it comes through in her work."

## HARLEY WEIR

"Harley has just come out with this amazing book of photographs of walls, called Paintings, so by doing that, she's already opening up these photographs to interpretation. I approached her and said that I see these as bodily, I see these textures and I think of micro and macro binaries. There's that repeated idea in the show where we think of an architectural space or a building as a body because it has a facade – or a skin. It's susceptible to outside or exterior forces; traumas; experience; the passing of time; and so I think that that goes through in her work and we can look at the body as a building in that way. The photos are really emblematic and remind me of the delicacy and changeability of surface and, in terms of their forms, they almost seem abstract. In abstraction, we look for human forms, for recognisable forms that might be human, so I think we can contemplate something anatomical in them in that way."

## NICK VAN WOERT

“I went to his show in NYC and, honestly, it was the best show I’ve seen in so long. I’ve never had that visceral reaction to a show – I couldn’t get enough of it. I had to say something to him so I slid into his DMs, we got chatting and became friends. He’s quite an impressive, established artist and I felt like I was punching above my weight by asking him to be in the show, and I wanted to be respectful.

This sculpture, ‘Untitled (David)’, is a plastic statue of Michelangelo’s ‘David’, but Nick uses a lot of chemical processes – called electroformed copper – so the charges collect all over this statue and grow in these very organic, weird, formations and then he paints it in nickel, so it really fucks with your perception. It’s like those Christmas trees where you dip them in water and they grow crystals – that’s so delicate but this is so hard, when you touch the nickel it’s completely cold and there’s this contradiction between natural and artificial. It really reminds me of how we understand our existence today – we’re constantly trying to decide whether something is real or fake. None of our news sources seem to be reliable anymore, we can’t tell the difference between fact and fiction.

This work talks about the body, too, because, what is natural? There’s so much artificiality in terms of our own self-image. Also, it talks about masculine beauty, which is important too, because so much of what we discuss is the female form but actually I think it’s important to have a dialogue about the male in there, too.”

## BENNET SCHLESINGER



Artwork by Bennet Schlesinger

“Bennet makes installations that I would describe as sculptural paintings, and when I was researching his work before I met up with him, I found these ears. It’s almost like they just dropped off a gigantic statue or they’ve been dug up from the ground, or they’re bizarre alien fossils from the future. He made them initially as a love letter to his ex-girlfriend – he hadn’t met her yet, just admired her from afar and her ears are her defining characteristic. They feel like archaeological finds – as opposed to being this souvenir copy, they’re totally unique. It has this idea of permanence around it, all these very monumentalist connotations and I think, for him, there was something quite cathartic and performative in carving them out because it’s such a long process. Again, it’s got this tension



between real and fake. We look at bodies as fragmented so much, we immediately develop our own narratives around them. We're presented with a little teaser so we just make up the rest of the song. With these ears, your mind is allowed to create its own history for this particular object."

## FAYE WEI WEI

"The show wouldn't be what it is without her painting. Faye describes her figures as faceless, genderless and stand for everyone. Here, two red serpents' tongues come out of their mouths, whispering to one another. I'm looking at fragmentation as a radical idea – how it's associated with instability, to ignore conventions, and maybe that's what she's doing, she's creating these surreal forms on the surface of the canvas. It's the only time you really see figures in the show, but at the same time, these are not human tongues, so there's a kind of anthropomorphic dance backwards and forwards. It's the only time you really see figures in the show, but at the same time it's a serpent's tongue, not a human's, so it does that dance backwards and forwards.

In the show, there's this idea of the gap between expectation and perception where you expect something, but your perception twists it, where you do a double take with an artwork. I think you do that a lot with bodily fragments because you expect it to be of a body but it's taken completely out of its context and maybe there's something about it that you're unsure of, you perform a double-take – and I think this painting does that to the viewer."

## HAMISH PEARCH

"The inevitability of our own demise, in marrying of artificial and natural in one site allows for organic, bodily interruptions to become more pronounced. As a result, the use of 'common' or 'non-art' materials that might be mutable, perishable and sensitive to manipulation, function as pivotal reminders of our inevitable decay and degeneration. Beheaded and lying dismissed without its nose, Hamish Pearch's 'Everyday' suggests a violent iconoclasm and immediately pre-empts the search for a host body. However, made from oats instead of stone, marble or another material that presupposes an idea of permanence, Pearch's choice of decay-able material rehumanises this fallen head. This acknowledging of fragility calls into question our obsession with outward appearances. Conversely, in 'Blocker', Pearch encased thousands of sesame seeds in an impenetrable clear resin, suspending both their decay and their regeneration and immortalising nature's life-givers. These cell-like fragments, inlaid with the shape of a section of fencing, question our acceptance of boundaries and borders, and choreograph a dance between binaries – whether micro and macro, soft and hard or artificial and natural."

The Belly and the Members opens Tuesday 5 September 2017 at Cob Gallery and runs until 23 September 2017

Full list of artists include: Claire Barrow, Sid Charity, Rayvonn Shaleigha D'Clark, Iggy Fulmine, Michael Genovese, Jack Greer, Chase Hall, Alba Hodson, Louis Morlet, Olu Ogunnaike, Hamish Pearch, Photocopy Club, Matilde Soes Rasmussen, Bennet Schlesinger, Will Spratley, Emma Thomas, Laura Watters, Faye Wei Wei, Harley Weir, Nick van Woert