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# ARTNEWS

## The Skin We're In: Exhibitions Around New York Explore Changing Notions of the Human Body

BY Alex Greenberger POSTED 03/12/18 3:05 PM



Last year began with historic women's marches around the United States, staged in protest of a newly elected president who once said of women, "You can grab 'em by the pussy," and ended with a cascade of sexual assault and harassment allegations against men in media, entertainment, and politics in the wake of September's revelations about film producer Harvey Weinstein. The boundaries that people—both gender-conforming and not—are drawing around their bodies was the "it" topic as 2017 came to a close. As though on cue, a group of shows in New York this past winter explored changing notions of the human body.

The New Museum turned over much of its space to "Trigger: Gender As a Tool and a Weapon." The preopening hype was intense: following in the footsteps of the museum's landmark exhibitions "Homo Video" and "Bad Girls," "Trigger," curated by Johanna Burton with Natalie Bell and Sara O'Keeffe, was a master class in today's art about identity, with a focus on how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and disability. Messy, confounding, and plagued by unduly academic wall text, the final result only partly lived up to expectations.

Nevertheless, the show brought together remarkable, cutting-edge work by 42 artists, mostly emerging ones. A number of them pictured the human body transformed—or edited, you might say—both by digital and analog means. Christina Quarles's energetic semi-figurative paintings feature people who appear to press into one another, their inner organs

fusing as if by way of an athletic sex act, while Paul Mpagi Sepuya accomplishes something similar in his slick photographs that confuse any boundaries between bodies, DSLR cameras, and photoshoot props. And in Tschabalala Self's delightful canvases, black men and women sport two sets of arms and one pair of legs, as though they conflate multiple people. Where the body is concerned, there is no new normal; instead, there's a seemingly endless set of possibilities. No body—and, by extension, nobody—is normal anymore.



Christina Quarles, *We Gunna Live With Water Fer Tha Resta Our Lives*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 50" x 40".

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID CASTILLO GALLERY, COLLECTION JERRY HERSKOWITZ, NEW YORK

Superficial normalcy was the focus of Justin Vivian Bond's installation *My Model | My Self: You Better Sit Down Kids* (2017), which mimicked the look of a quaint suburban living room, complete with comfy armchairs and a floor lamp. But on its walls, instead of the kitschy paintings one might expect, Bond offered tender drawings of the model Karen Graham, whom the artist, as a transgender youngster struggling with lack of acceptance, considered a paragon of femininity. Bond's installation, as well as works by Wu Tsang, House of Ladosha, and Stanya Kahn, assert that, in today's political climate, gender binaries are a thing of the past.

A paranoia about the extent to which big government, big business, and big science might be controlling bodies coursed through much of the work in "Trigger." Candice Lin's assemblages explored how biologists have shaped the concept of femininity, while *Weed Killer* (2017), a video installation by Patrick Staff, ruminated on how medicine alters trans bodies. Then there was Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's video installation *Toxic* (2012), which links together the pharmaceutical and film industries—two systems that can affect people's behavior. In the video, the drag queen Werner Hirsch, donning fake chest hair and a big blond wig, stumbles around a confetti-strewn film set while a punk woman wearing a distressed denim jacket and lots of makeup follows her talking about medicine, antiretroviral HIV drugs, and opiates. At one point, Hirsch and the punk, played by Ginger Brooks Takahashi, reenact an interview Jean Genet once did about rebelling against filmmakers, one that culminates with Hirsch acidly telling the film crew, "Of course I'm afraid of entering the norm!"



Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 1996–97, installation view at the New Museum, New York, 1996. MoMA PS1.

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That there was ever some notion of normalcy where bodies are concerned raises the question: Who was it that decided what constituted "normal"? The short answer—the white patriarchy—was explored at length and in different ways in three retrospectives. Barbara Hammer's long-overdue one at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art spotlighted the experimental filmmaker's vast output, from her films about lesbian intimacy to documentation of her more recent performances, which explore the relationship between viewers' bodies and screens. Hammer is at her strongest when she's deifying the male gaze, in such works as *Multiple Orgasms* (1976), a film that attempts to find a visual language for female pleasure, with moaning faces superimposed over images of caves. Her biggest contribution to art history—one that still hasn't been talked about enough—is to show that everyone's body is always involved in viewing an artwork. With the beautiful installation *Pond and Waterfall* (1982), Hammer offers underwater footage and allows viewers to produce their own soundtrack by holding a stethoscope to their chest.

This calming, uplifting show found its opposite in Carolee Schneemann's raucous MoMA PS1 retrospective. Schneemann is better known than Hammer, but her contributions to the feminist art movement are still under-recognized, even if her status is slowly changing, thanks to her lifetime achievement Golden Lion award at last year's Venice Biennale. She is known for her visceral early performances from the 1960s and '70s, like "Meat Joy," which declared aesthetic war on her male colleagues. But, as this show demonstrates, she has continued producing great art in the decades since. Her work is about stimulation, in both the visual and sexual sense. For the 2000 installation *More Wrong Things*, Schneemann filled a room with TV monitors playing graphic images of human carnage and sexuality gleaned from pornography and the media. Cables dangled from the monitors, threatening to ensnare the heads of taller viewers, as though to imply a certain complicity.

In Jimmie Durham's sculptures, shown to magnificent effect in a retrospective at the Whitney Museum, bodies are transformed by racial stereotypes of indigenous peoples. The work remains potent. With his 1986 *Self-Portrait*, Durham asks the viewer to see his body as a series of distorted parts, notably his dandelion-colored penis and his absence of a heart (feathers appear in its place). He tells us a pair of underwear with dyed chicken feathers attached to it is a valuable artifact: Pocahontas's panties. A label affixed to Durham's own bloody handprint in another work assures us it was made with "Real Indian Blood." Over the past four decades, narrow-minded critics have insisted on seeing Durham's work mostly through the lens of his own identity as a Cherokee man (his heritage has been contested). Refreshingly, the Whitney exhibition sought to rectify that by showing how Minimalism, Conceptualism, and institutional critique inspired his pieces.



Installation view of "Kenya (Robinson) and Doreen Garner: White Man on a Pedestal," 2017, at Pioneer Works.

DAN BRADICA

Durham's incisive, darkly funny style has inspired a number of young artists, including Doreen Garner and Kenya (Robinson), who, in a show at Pioneer Works, addressed one of 2017's hot-button issues: how to deal with public monuments of problematic white men. (Robinson's biggest contribution was a 15-foot-tall leaning wall with 10,000 plastic figures of fictitious white businessman Dave Fowler lying tumbled at its base—quite literally a toppling of the patriarchy. Garner's Paul Thek-like sculptures resembled flayed skin and fleshy limbs, some hanging from meat hooks. These disturbing pieces—definitely not for the squeamish—refer to the infamous work of Dr. J. Marion Sims, who, in the mid-19th century, pioneered the field of gynecology by experimenting on black women without anesthesia. (A sculpture of Sims has long stood outside Central Park, and after protests and public outcry, New York City officials finally chose to move it to his gravesite in Brooklyn this past January.)

Zanele Muholi, meanwhile, has been blowing up stereotypes about images of African women for the past few decades. With her forceful black-and-white self-portraits at Yancey Richardson, Muholi riffed on the conventions of colonialist photography, with sly alterations: in post-production, she rendered her skin darker. A close look at the pictures reveals that her clothes are made from makeshift combinations of mundane objects—a web of hair donuts become an ad-hoc afro, for example. This is Muholi working in a Cindy Sherman mode, a welcome departure from her more straightforward portraits of LGBTQI+ African youths.

She wasn't the only artist toying with traditions. At Jack Shainman, Hayv Kahraman debuted a series of paintings that alluded to the mahaffa, a type of fan made of woven palm fronds, and one of the only objects Kahraman's family brought with them when they left Baghdad in the early 1990s. In her attempt to recover lost history, Kahraman looks to art of centuries past, combining the styles of Persian miniatures and Mannerist paintings. She paints women's bodies alongside mahaffa pieces that are woven into the canvas, like scars.



Zanele Muholi, *Namhla I, Cassilhaus, North Carolina*, 2016, gelatin silver print. Yancey Richardson.

©ZANELE MUHOLI/COURTESY THE ARTIST, YANCEY RICHARDSON, NEW YORK, AND STEVENSON, CAPE TOWN AND JOHANNESBURG

All the technology in the world can't keep bodies from disappearing. The artist Sable Elyse Smith, whose father has been imprisoned for almost two decades, has been thinking about erasures longer than most. In a rigorous show at the Queens Museum, Smith meditated on the cruel effects of America's mass-incarceration system, which impacts the lives of both prisoners and their loved ones. In the text piece *Visiting* (2017), she explores how even prison visitors' bodies are poked and prodded: *SHOES OFF / DICKS GRABBED / BREAST FONDLLED*, it begins. Meanwhile, in her essayistic videos, images of her father get lost in a sea of appropriated footage; despite the fact that he is constantly under surveillance, she cannot hold on to a clear picture of him. In the video *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* (2017), a slowed-down Solange song plays against the backdrop of Smith's dense montage. One lyric can just barely be made out: "Gonna look for my body."



Installation view of "Sable Elyse Smith: Ordinary Violence," 2018 at the Queens Museum. HAI ZHANG/COURTESY QUEENS MUSEUM

But violence against bodies comes in myriad forms. Troy Michie's exhibition at Company Gallery alluded to the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943, when white servicemen in Los Angeles beat and stripped Californians of color, primarily Mexican-Americans, for the mere fact of the clothes they chose to wear. Michie's collages featured fragments of ties, belts, suit jackets, and shirts alongside photographs of people with their faces cut out. (Michie, like Smith, was also included in "Trigger.") At Gladstone Gallery, Thomas Hirschhorn explored "de-pixelation," or the removal of blurs and pixels that typically obscure graphic images in the media, drawing a line between fake news, modernist abstraction, fashion advertising, and war photography. Entire walls were filled with blown-up images of wounded bodies, the bloodier bits concealed by colorful blurry squares. These were bodies mangled first by bombs and bullets and then by photo editing. At Miguel Abreu, Jean-Luc Moulène displayed the imperfections that result when body parts are 3-D printed. Lumpy blue ceramics looked like crosses between tree stumps and human torsos.

The relationship between humans and industry was also explored in "To a Body," an alluring group show at Shoot the Lobster. In two of Mary Beth Edelson's photographs from the 1970s, the artist appears in the nude, curled up inside a ring of electric lights. Meanwhile, in Kandis Williams's new "Fetish Plants" sculptures, pornographic images are printed directly onto the leaves of fake greenery. The boundaries between man and machine are growing thinner.

A three-person exhibition at Magenta Plains called "Skip Zone," featuring Kah Bee Chow, Tiril Hasselknippe, and Sandra Mujinga, was an examination of how bodies might change in the digital age. Mujinga's 2017 video *Catching Up* showed three women leaning against one another before something like a green screen. Digital effects distorted their images occasionally as they gazed out at the viewer, speaking platitudes like "You really seem to know who you are" and "You are very, very intelligent." Is it possible that, as technology and its users evolve, we will see one another's bodies in a more appreciative, more inclusive way? If so, long live the new flesh.



Antoine Catala, *I am here for you (plastic bag)*, 2017, silicone rubber, resin coated foam, and electronics, 18" x 24" x 12". 47 Canal.

Then there is the case of digital technology, which makes those boundaries even blurrier. In a cryptic display at 47 Canal, Antoine Catala showed how digital technology can mess with our emotions. Two video monitors across the room from one another featured avatars set in front of stock photographs, their iMessage conversation shown on-screen. At first, their interactions seemed friendly, but it soon became clear that, in most cases, one of them was lying about its identity. These videos would cut off abruptly, giving way to loud music that accompanied the inflation of silicone versions of a sock, a plastic bag, and a shirt, all with faces drawn on them. They looked as though they were breathing, and perhaps they were stand-ins for phones, tablets, and computers—inanimate objects that sometimes seem more alive than their users.