

SPURS GALLERY

Surfacing Bodies

Text/Yuan Fu

1

In the Zoom dialogue box, the painter says, “Now, when I look back at my work prior to 2016, it really looks perverse .”

She’s referring to a shift in the subjects of her paintings and the realities surrounding them. Prior to that time, the painter was fascinated with the sinister side to the apparent joy and sensuousness of Rococo painting. Rococo skies and colors are often seen as feminine, so are not always considered “high art.”

In her highly saturated paintings, rendered primarily in pink and red, the women’s breasts are cropped out and, through intensely controlled brushwork, their bodies appear androgynous. Heavy, voluminous cloth envelops these bodies, and the backgrounds have been covered over in black paint, removing them from their original contexts. Because the backdrops appear to have been edited out with software, these bodies look like surfaces that have been dug out of the backgrounds.

In the paintings, the bodies and clothing are painted and treated in a completely impartial way, representing the Mannerist revision of the body to near distortion; the cropped bodies become embodiments of individual and collective emotions in the present moment.

2

We didn’t have an image of the painter in the Zoom meeting; we could only hear her voice, but she sounded very lively, and she spoke quickly, even urgently.

She writes poetry, and many of her paintings are versions of her poems. She graduated around the time of the economic downturn, and she gave a Columbia MFA classmate the name of her Los Angeles gallery: Night.

The painter lived in New York for 20 years, and only moved to Los Angeles during the pandemic. These changes in geography and mindset are manifested in the bright colors and spatial relationships of her fresh, vivid paintings. The abundantly empathetic forms are almost too polite in making room for one another. They are endlessly superimposed, as if created in a prism, generating a series of visions of a cosmological body.

Here, the world is like a body with infinite layers and multiple surfaces. Sometimes, this body layers people, birds, stars, and fires to awaken new visions, or it may be a bird’s-eye-view of torsos, snakes, and other bodies and life forms; they are distorted and interwoven in compressed time and extended space, creating an infinite beginning.

3

The artist paints bodies in a studio full of musical instruments. These bodies are coded devices of desire that have the capacity for intimate feeling and are not generated by the history of sexuality. They have perfectly artificial

qualities, including the smooth, luminous skin, mechanical jointed connections, and perfect physical proportions of an impenetrable vision of the future.

Donna Haraway once wrote, “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”¹ Even if this hybridity is ontological, it points to a concern for social realities and relationships in political structures.

Looking back to the painter’s career-defining *This Is My Life* (2005-2006), we see the individual amidst the urbanization of pre-Olympics Beijing: sexy young women, embracing lovers, or female singers on stage in underground music venues. This visual diary, which records the passage of time, points to the artist’s later considerations of the physical conditions of human bodies.

4

After Trump was elected, the painter found it difficult to overlook the influence of reality.

She started to research the fascination with themes of violence in the Baroque tradition, particularly violence against women. Most of her paintings contain biblical or mythological allusions, as in the two works depicting the abductions of Deianeira and Europa respectively. In the dramatic paintings of Guido Reni, Anthony van Dyck, Guercino, and other Baroque painters, the body is a place where violence manifests. Usually, women’s bodies are the focal points of that violence: slashed breasts, suspended bodies, torn clothing, and despairing expressions (or expressions that hover between ecstasy and helplessness).

“How much pressure can the body take?” the painter asked.

If every historical image related to the body was layered, we would discover that the body is intensely adaptable, but precisely because of this, the body is also very fragile.

5

The body has always been in the cut, and as the images are constantly regenerated, the body is continually approaching the edges, then being merged and reassembled, as in pornography. Images of the body do not exist in isolation; they occur within the contexts of transmission and perception. Different visual mediums, such as screens, canvases, walls, and prints, play a key role in the interactions between images and bodies.

The painter’s research into classical paintings was majorly based on reproductions that were then transferred into works of art. These images of bodies are refracted, disseminated, and transmuted, which leads us to observe the missing links and prevents us from misunderstanding the images as real bodies, or simply as lifeless machines. These bodies on the edges of the painting panels connect to the spaces outside the panels, rediscovering spatial order and narrative possibility.

¹ Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

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These lusterless bodies are cut apart by panels, which also dramatically sever the sources of light themselves. Unlike in the oil painting tradition, where light is always emphasized, we see an even, controlled, indistinguishable, screen-like digital light.

6

The painter and a few independent musicians share a three-story studio. Amidst the piles of musical instruments, works of art, and other objects, there are several portraits of women in different sizes. Their semi-transparent bodies are like dappled light projected on the walls.

If we look more closely, the surfaces of their bodies become luminescent objects, the edges of which are covered in a semi-transparent textile or suffused with splashed ink. The details of the body, especially its cracks, joints, and links, have been carefully rendered, and they collectively form a textured surface. Through the seemingly transparent surface of the skin, what remains is a lingering discomfort.

The transparency of the body is penetrating; it seems to transform our vision into a painterly one. During the Renaissance, a painter's basic anatomical knowledge came from an understanding and analysis of the muscles. Twentieth-century science envisioned an improved ability to glimpse the inner workings of the body; in *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann emphasized the power of the X-ray. And with the mass dissemination of medical images, transparent, idealized pictures became physical embodiments of collective desires and fantasies.

In contrast to the penetrating vision of classical painters, the painter is providing a protective transparent surface for these bodies.

7

“One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surface is instructive: in the feeling of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can't see the ‘stitches’ between bodies.”²

In comfort, body ends, and the world folds up. In contrast, discomfort can be understood as a physical disorientation: anxiety, unease, uncertainty, and distress return the attention to the surface of the body.

Discomfort in the body always accompanies the generation of images. When the Virgin Mary looks up to heaven in search of help, or hands and faces are thick with tension in Baroque painting, or bodies are bound and suspended in Japanese photographs, this discomfort is always present, serving as the generative mechanism for images of bodies.

² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 148.

This “implicit prism” absorbs and refracts light, which is constantly spreading, shedding, and overflowing as blocks of color are created. “I see the Earth as the new subject,” the painter said.

In this exploratory path of proliferating imagination, the world is constantly multiplying.

Perhaps, we can recover the *techne* of the body. Or, we abandon the discourse of the body completely, we abandon bodies that cater to power and emphasize taste, and recollect a materialism of the body.

As a living medium, the body can perceive dimension, warmth, pressure, humidity, and light. Any form of energy must engage with the surface of the body, and invariably be consumed and transformed.

We can even return to nurturing the breath, as a path to alternative understanding. Breath creates boundaries: mothers give birth by breathing and children separate from their mothers by breathing. Relative to the intense consideration of the West, the recovery of phenomenology, and keen observation, “the cultivation of breath [...] bridges the gap between body and consciousness, active and passive, immanent and transcendent.”³ Breath permeates the fragmented whole, loosening everything fixed.

The body was once simply an amalgamation of sensory organs. Lacan said that, when we perceive ourselves from inside our bodies, we can only imagine our bodies as fragments or accumulations of other bodies.

The perceptions of the body were necessary preconditions for the invention of images. We have always wanted to communicate through images, and we even accept that images can replace bodies. It is our bodily experiences that make us aware of the ownership of images. Images in our bodies and our dreams wait to be awakened.

Here, the materiality of the body is not a sudden, random, and unconventional nature; it is an active space of connection and separation, continually building new relationships with the present moment.

As a medium, bodies are constantly absorbed and projected like old paintings, becoming the final point of convergence for a material medium that encompasses everything. The body can be a medium for empathy, continually reconstructing interpretations and judgments of one’s own feelings. The body seems to be a projection of desire, but it is also an interface for image production. The body is a hybrid of medical and technological aesthetics, but it is also the final battlefield of social relations.

When the conversation was reaching its end, the painter said, “I try not to directly confront ‘reality,’ which is like a slow-motion car crash.”

³ Johanna Oksala, “From Sexual Difference to the Way of Breath: Toward a Feminist Ontology of Ourselves,” in *Sex, Breath and Force: Sexual Difference in a Post-Feminist Era*, ed. Ellen Mortensen (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006), 44.

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Perhaps, we can start streaming images of bodies in time-lapse.

Then, the bodies surface.