

MUST-SEES



The Body's Freedom in Restriction

Doris McCarthy Gallery, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery/University of Toronto Art Centre, Toronto,
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Catherine Richards, *Shroud Chrysalis I* (installation view at the University of Toronto Art Centre), 2000. Photo: Jessie Lai

I took my shoes off while two attendants unfolded the copper-taffeta blanket that had been sitting in the centre of a glass table raised 30 centimetres from the ground. They spread the blanket, which smelled metallic, like blood, and put towels down for my head

and lower back. I sat on the table and, slowly, as if I understood what kind of ritual this was, lay down.

With the blanket clinging to my face upon every inhale, I performed in [Catherine Richards's](#) project, *Shroud Chrysalis I*, at the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery's](#) exhibition "The Flesh of the World" (also on view at the [Doris McCarthy Gallery](#) and [University of Toronto Art Centre](#)), which examined the body as machine and in relation to machines. It considered the body in terms of its available and unavailable functions, amassing work that seems both troubled by the entrapment of our physical form and curious about its potential.

Copper taffeta is an electromagnetic-shielding fabric typically used as an insulator in heavy-duty machinery. In this performance, Richards imagined it as a temporary refuge for the body from electromagnetic waves. Where this work postures a hiding place, other works in the show actually force relationships between body and machine, and machines are programmed to respond in a certain way to viewers. Also notable: several works that look at physical conditions of the body that rarely appear in art spaces.

As someone with a brother who has a visible disability, I'm on high alert when the representation and performance of so-called disabled or alternately abled people comes up. *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2015), a film by Swedish director [Roy Andersson](#), presents a feature-length series of bleak vignettes in which the characters appear as blue as choke victims. One scene shows a banal show-and-tell being presented by and for a number of children with Down syndrome. A girl gets on stage, and when the teacher, acting as emcee, asks about the nature of her presentation, she says she'll be reciting a poem. Starting by asking what the poem is about, the teacher goes on to effectively extract the entire thing out of the student through a barrage of questions, destroying the poem by forcing her to speak the facts, naked of their artistic structure. Watching this, I feel implicated in the teacher's crime as this disabled student willfully or, rather, *involuntarily* participates in her own obliteration.

This bystander effect is a troubling potential inherent in viewing work that represents or is created by oppressed groups. It often feels like the creators could do something more to handle (as in to hold), care for and protect against that potential for exploitation, tokenism, spectacle. In this show, portraits of amputees ([Alexa Wright's](#) *After Image* [1997]) are depicted alongside people with chronic, afflicting skin conditions (Wright's *Skin* [2000]). A video work by [Lindsay Fisher](#) shows the hands of two different

women, described only as “bodies of difference,” demonstrating “*How to paint your nails perfectly*”; their voices are overlaid on the image, delineating the steps of the task. Both their hands and voices make clear the difficulty of this task that is so closely associated with a certain kind of able-bodied femininity.

Sometimes, and particularly with works that evoke struggle and trauma, it was difficult to distinguish whether my discomfort pertained to the representation of the individuals or to direct empathy with the pain itself. Where events like the [Paralympic Games](#) and [Parapan Am Games](#) are chronically given space just slightly left of the spotlight, this show aims to shed light on a different hierarchy. In a catalogue foreword about one of guest curator [Amanda Cachia](#)'s previous projects, Kristin Lindgren and Debora Sherman write, “Access involves more than checking off a list of practical accommodations. It is a way of thinking about the world that challenges us to imagine how another body, another self, experiences it.”
