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Review: The Flesh of the World at UTAC

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Ann Hamilton's Body Object http://fleshoftheworld.ca/works/

Seeing *The Flesh of the World* was a visceral experience. Charged with the difficulties, vulnerabilities and occasional violence of pushing the body's physical boundaries, the artists within the exhibition explore the human capacity for endurance and perseverance. The show's namesake and inspiration, "flesh of the world," is a term by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty which argues for the existence of a common matrix in which sentient and sensorial entities exist and are embodied in an interconnected field.

The exhibition aims to both challenge and respond to normalized notions of the body and its behaviours, and make room for the consideration of an expanded scope of corporeal possibility. The works are multisensory, utilizing sound, video, kinetics, photography, touch and viewer participation in both subtle and striking iterations, while the ideas motivating them embrace multifaceted ways of embodying the world.

Guest curated by San Diego-based Amanda Cachia, *The Flesh of the World* is being exhibited across three University of Toronto campus locations, including the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, University of Toronto Art Centre and Doris McCarthy Gallery at U of T Scarborough. In its large and ambitious scope, 21 well-known contemporary artists such as Ann Hamilton, Stelarc, Bruce Nauman and Louise Bourgeois are brought together in a critical response that draws its inspiration from Toronto's hosting of the 2015 Pan American and Parapan American Games.

Take for instance Helen Dowling's 2008 short, Breaker, a two-channel video projection playing on suspended screens at the entrance of the show. In the video, two figures mirror each other's movements in a kind of playful exercise. Situated in a rehearsal room, the dialectal gestures are only slightly different.









Helen Dowling http://fleshoftheworld.ca/works/

The figures appear as if they could be related, twins even. Each figure emulates the other's movements. One figure is a man—Dowling's brother—who is affected by cerebral palsy, and the other is a professional break dancer performing choreography. As they continue the game of mirroring, their act of emulation becomes an acknowledgment and celebration of movement which has otherwise been excommunicated from normalized social behavior. It is exciting to watch as the expanded field of expression opens, evoked by the upbeat music and the performers' sometimes delightful sense of play.

Other works are quite disarming and difficult to view, like Noëmi Lakmaier's 2012 video, One Morning in May. The artist attempts to cross a one-mile distance to the Gherkin in London, England on her hands and disabled legs all while in a business suit and gloves. What usually would have been a light stroll becomes seven gruelling hours as she becomes increasingly battered, exhausted and susceptible to being photographed by strangers on the street. Her act is interesting in that it makes visible the normalization of public behaviour and how a body does anddoes not move through city streets. This codified type of movement becomes exclusive to certain

types of gesturing, like walking instead of crawling, and is further reinforced by the physical architecture of the city. In Lakmaier's work, crawling across the ground while wearing a suit also brings up complex issues related to wealth, class and disability. It also touches on notions of degradation and social connotations related to the body when it is physically upright or lower on the ground, speaking to a sense of 'higher' or 'lower' status. Her difficult feat can also be read as an attempt to find new pathways for enacting the body in completing an analyses out.

Similar works that push such physical and social boundaries include Stelarc's 2006 act, Ear on Arm Surgery, where the artist surgically attached an ear, grown from his own stem cells, onto his arm. The artist intended to have a fully functional orifice that could, in the future, hold a Bluetooth device and transmit signals to his mouth. In a graphic video, excerpts from his surgery show doctors cutting open the skin of his arm and inserting the artificially-grown ear. This is Stelarc's realization of a hyper-possibility for the body, an act that speaks to the ever-malleable and extendible potential of the body's physical form and the integration of technology into the self.



Alexa Wright http://fleshoftheworld.ca/works/

Other works are quite emotive and express vulnerable aspects of human nature, like British artist Alexa

Wright's 2014 work, Heart of the Matter. Recordings of heart transplant patients are played through speakers wrapped in felt jackets while their stories are intermingled with other recordings from experiences of romantic relationships. The uncomfortable confusion of reconciling with a new heart and the incomprehensible nature of experiencing an emotional 'change of heart' literally and metaphorically speak to the fragile nature of the self in relation to others.

Similarly sensitive is Artur Zmijewski's 2010 video, Blindly, where the artist asked blind individuals to participate in a painting project that generated imaginative imagery of landscapes, self-portraits and animals they had never seen before. The participants paint with touch and the gesture of their whole bodies—their hands, their feet and their sweeping arms—while they work as a whole plays on the knowledge that comes from imaginative 'seeing' and our varied perceptions of the world.

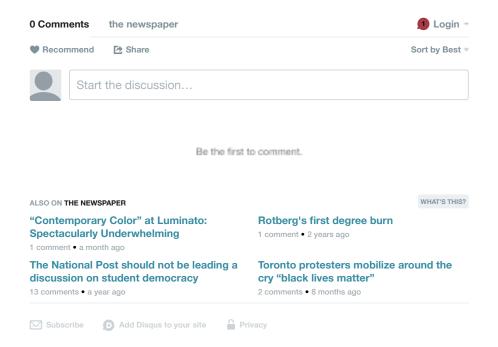
Other works are physically felt, like Wendy Jacob's 2015 Waves and Signs (Basketball), where transducers installed inside a slightly-raised platform allow viewers to feel the sound of basketballs hitting the ground from a corresponding video through their feet. Felt sound, and its sensations of vibration and physical resonance through one's feet, brings the work into an active multi-sensory field that plays on the body's responses to touch and contact and challenges the often ocular-centric leanings of video and performance documentation. Similarly touch-based.

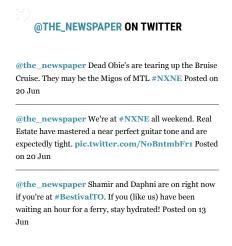


Catherine Richards http://fleshoftheworld.ca/works/

Catherine Richards's 2000 effort, the participatory Shroud Chrysalis I, allows viewers to schedule 20-minute appointments to be wrapped in a sheet of copper taffeta every Tuesday till the end of the show in October. The wrapping material itself acts as a shield for electromagnetic rays, creating a quiet state of introspection for the wearer. One participant wrote in a notebook placed in the room that she imagines "this is the comfort a baby feels when beings swaddled."

Overall, UTAC's iteration of *The Flesh of the World* proposes that there is the possibility for expanded ways of understanding the body through the works' multi-sensory elements. In expanding and challenging dominant perceptions and cultural notions of the body, perceived limitations related to gesture, physical form and behaviour move outwards into the diverse reality of embodiment experienced in the world. The show, while at times over-stimulating and intense, is a fascinating revelation on ways of being within both physical and social experiences of the self. It champions the multifaceted capabilities of the body and generates a deepened understanding of difference through its ethos of perseverance and expression.





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