

The Shape Left by The Body

Alisa Baremboym, Alice Channer, Piotr Łakomy, Gillian Lowndes, Alina Szapocznikow

Co-curated with Dorota Michalska

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“My gesture is addressed to the human body,” said Alina Szapocznikow in 1972, “that complete erogenous zone.” Fundamental in terms of experimentation with materials, Szapocznikow’s mode of address was primarily tactile, a feeling kind of thinking. Touch has often been taken to be the most adaptable and augmentable of the senses, we speak of touching and being touched on emotional, physical, visual, and sexual planes of experience, and so touch has no exclusive definition beyond the sense of two or more things being in contact with each other. The exhibition *The Shape Left by the Body* investigates this tactile conundrum by providing opportunities to experience various kinds of bodies: bodies of space, bodies in contact, bodies defying gravity, bodies succumbing to their inherent heaviness. The exhibition is, in this sense, corporeal, echoing an experience of the body as a medium, surface, zone of communication, but also as a boundary to be overcome.

In a time where the physical is often mediated by the technological, it is vital to attend to ways that the tactile is being transformed. The artworks at *The Sunday Painter* at once envelop and corner us with their presence. The dimension of touch comes to the fore in the way each of these works has been made – encrusted, manipulated, built and transmuted – in ways that weigh upon our sensory reception of them. Upstairs an imaginary dialogue is staged between the Polish artists Alina Szapocznikow and Piotr Łakomy from different artistic generations who share an interest in materiality and the way it is articulated across different mediums: not only sculpture but photography and painting as well. Szapocznikow’s *Photosculptures* (1971) and Łakomy’s recent drawings both seek new models for the human body, either in the shape of masticated chewing gum or reconfigured architectural drawings. Downstairs other sculptural works by Łakomy are juxtaposed to Baremboym, Channer and Lowndes, exemplifying an experimental topography that uses materials to link different sculptural objects. Throughout we find a tight visual rhythm that makes these works coexist in ways that are palpable and embodied.

During the sixties and seventies Szapocznikow researched industrial materials, notably transparent plastics such as polyester resin and polyurethane foam. Among her works from this period is the sculpture *L’Appesanteur (Hommage to Komarow)* (1967). Vladimir Komarow was a Russian astronaut killed when his Soyuz module crashed due to a parachute failure. The sculpture is a tall, slim human form wrapped in layers of gauzy plastic; instead of a head, an amorphous shape protrudes with a photo of Komarow’s face. A series of photographs taken in Szapocznikow’s presence documents moving the sculpture out of the studio, into her car, to a landscape; carrying it herself, carrying it with friends, handling the embalmed, mummy-like body. Szapocznikow’s work seems to share with space travellers a will to overcome the pull of earthy mass and defy the laws that bound bodies to the ground. *L’Appesanteur* means ‘heaviness’, evoking an emotional as well as gravitational force that both humans and sculpture have to reckon with.

Piotr Łakomy’s works engage with notions of the human body as a model undergoing architectural, spatial and temporal transmutations. Łakomy’s two Sarcophagi pieces created for the show hang high on the gallery walls in such way that destabilizes the sense of encounter with the object. Not only is its position disruptive but the use of materials adds to a sense of unravelling: wire, fabric, honeycomb aluminium and Rimowa suitcases. The latter take the role of vehicles/containers echoing the mummified bodies present within Alina’s oeuvre. The suitcases perceived as sarcophagi and space shuttles at once encompass and contain the contemporary identity. Another material used by the Polish artist is honeycomb, frequently employed in aeronautical engineering, which gives Łakomy’s work its ‘skin’ – a rigid mimetic substance that imitates natural structures. Again, explicit and thus bounded intimations of skinliness make the tactile a simultaneously certain and disconcerting experience.

Łakomy's sculptures are in visual dialogue with Gillian Lowndes' *Untitled (Tongue)*, (2008) where the materials are absorbed into one another. Latex, sand and aluminium are squeezed and fused into a gigantic grotesque and hairy tongue. A playful/painful linguistic and surrealist detour, the piece itself looks like an overgrown insect about to descend upon the body. By confusing the animal, the human and the imaginary, Lowndes shows her unusual trajectory as an artist trained as a ceramist throughout the sixties and seventies, who lived in Nigeria and then rural Essex. She forged a practice that is at once complex and intriguing. Defined both as sensual and repelling, her work is also deeply interested in the vulnerability of materials and to that moment where they are held in states of becoming, flux and transition. Her sculpture – nailed to the gallery's wall – is at once immobilized and opened up for scrutiny.

The tactile permeates Alisa Baremboym's wall pieces (from 2016 and 2017). These have a dual nature, a tenderness linked to the soft rubbery pink of the ceramics' natural, unglazed, rough and porous surface, and a synthetic slickness reflected in the use of transparent vinyl, acrylic, and gels. The material paradoxes are directly layered on top of each other, coexisting within each object. Baremboym's forms feel corporeal and at times suggest more erogenous bodily parts, such as nipples or elbows. The research that leads to these objects is based on the transformative process of materials that our bodies interact with on a daily basis, both inorganic and organic, grounded in industrialization processes of the 21 century. From the human to the post-human, Baremboym's work is inscribed into a poetics of touch, confusing what looks natural and what looks artificial, and alludes to the ominous substances that permeate our porous existence.

The fascination with gravity as a defining force for both human bodies and sculptures is present in Alice Channer's vaguely menacing work. Three metal tracks from which hang a series of index fingers dipped in a vivid vermilion; luscious colour continues into a red cord hanging loosely on the floor. Channer has worked with a Birmingham factory, Plastic Coatings Ltd, to achieve the repetitive, precise, resistant and replicated record of coating. Channer's process involved casting and stretching one of her own index fingers then 3-D printing and multiplying them, without privileging a particular origin over another yet maintaining some of the life lines of her own skin into each digit. Through the tracks all the fingers are simultaneously dipped into the red PVC. The scale of the sculpture is such that the visitor can walk underneath it, a daunting and appealing experience. The bodies of viewers are encouraged to go underneath and to be tempted to touch: fingers touching fingers, elongated and fragile. The title of work *Mechanoreceptor, Icicles (red, red) (double spring, single strip)* (2018), refers both to the mechanical pressure of the machine and also to a specific part of the human skin: the one that is more receptive. Touching and untouching, dipping and dripping, cold and hot, are dualities that coexist in this piece, and Channer draws attention to the erotics of the process of making and viewing this work, the points of attractions and friction that infuse the rigid metal rack with the bodily experience of it.

Gravity and heaviness bound sculptures and bodies to earth and gallery floors. The indisputability of this general physical law generates a wish to overcome it, to outsmart the limitations imposed on the very conditions of materiality. Artists and space travellers launch their works/bodies into space hoping for moments of weightlessness.

Text by Ilaria Puri Purini