

The Anguish of Embodiment Benjamin Phillips – Intaglio Prints and Sculptures in Bronze

- by Camilla Pickard

In *Sexus* Henry Miller describes the feminine power of sexual attraction as “a ceaseless creation, a ceaseless revolution about a defect ... which causes the whole being to gyrate heavenward.” The “defect” he references might be the gash that’s left when the hymen splits: sexually rooted damage that is retained perpetually at the core of a woman’s being, both source and focus of her psychic energy. Miller’s imagery is vivid, but his idea is not unusual. For generations, both pre- and post-feminist, we’ve been in the habit of understanding women’s sexuality as a crucial flaw; a wound.

But perhaps the experience of fundamental sexual wounding is human, not gendered. Benjamin Phillips’ recent works in bronze, and his intaglio prints *Boys Are Weird* communicate the notion of sexuality both as a wound and as the central point of gravity around which the human personality spins. Yet his works primarily represent male bodies. These figures imply a view of embodiment and sexuality that is entirely unsentimental. They are very open in their exploration of sexuality, but they also admit to a sense of shame about the body, its ugliness, its vulnerability. His intaglio prints feature Grand Guignolesque scenes of autoeroticism and autofellation, in which grimacing faces express the anguish and awkwardness of the sexual. It is deeply conflicted and emotional work, fascinated by the problems – though also by the pleasures – of inhabiting a body, and of experiencing the world through sexuality, through masculinity, and through the processes of aging and decay.

In most of Phillips’ bronzes, the genitals, whether outrageously oversized, or absent (an x marking the spot where they should, but don’t, appear) are the focus. Many communicate an intensified sexuality that overshadows gender. *Clay* is an Aubrey Beardsley figure, neither male nor female, child nor adult: a grotesque torso with a maternally protuberant belly and bowed legs, centred around a tiny, semi-erect penis. Its shape and stance are less human than turnip – it’s a mandrake root, an image of vegetal sexuality that has little to do with mating, masculinity or femininity. Instead, it bespeaks an excited erectile impulse that is essentially ungendered, a pleasure in sensation that is sexual but divorced from sex. Chastity, by contrast, is simultaneously sexualized and desexualized by stylized, x-shaped and triangular holes that mark the places of sexual joining, of egress and entrance. The holes mark an absence, yet are emphatically present as sexual signals. It’s as if it were the body to which Louise Bourgeois’ infamous appendages – the double-headed penis of Janus Fleuri, the carcass of a penis that is Fillette – originally belonged.

Goliath* is a disjointed body from which the gut is missing. Prostrate on the floor, and as if partially submerged in it, we see the head, muscular shoulders and arms, then a space where the back should be. Placed further back on the floor are spread, flattened buttocks, and truncated, telescoping legs with feet jammed into the ends of them. Like the mud-crawling protagonists of *Comment C'est*, Beckett's last novel, this figure appears exhausted. Despite the beautiful musculature of its arms and shoulders, it is barely able to raise itself from the earth. Its buttocks are spread, the anus demarcated as a sexual opening, the forehead bowed to the floor.

The body seems to be in a state of sexual submission, or perhaps of post-coital collapse. The sculpture bespeaks the loss of control that is implied in sexual pleasure; the feminization that male orgasm ironically entails. Virility exists primarily in anticipation, in the hard labour of doing-to, the sweat of plowing. Satisfaction is sudden diminution, is liquescence; the completion of pleasure also represents an immediate return to softness, flaccidity, impotency. Orgasm is a chthonic collapse of the self. Perhaps the pleasure in release is also pleasure in the release from gender. A man can dally in the feminizing experience of being taken by force. He allows himself to be uncertain.

Another interesting implication: we've seen men like this in homoerotic contexts – in Robert Mapplethorpe's work, for example. But the context here is not clearly gay. Phillips is heterosexual. The invisible agent of Goliath's submission is at least as likely to be a woman as a man.

Bronze sculpture, and the male nude of classical tradition, evoke particular aesthetic ideals, idealism about the masculine body. Athleticism, defined musculature, balance, poise. Working in bronze too makes humanistic, individualistic claims: I assert my ego, my artistic genius, in the weighty, monumental, permanent medium of cast bronze. But despite the classical references Phillips makes via both his titles and his medium, this work is a world away from that of a better-known Vancouver artist with a classicizing impulse, Attila Richard Lukacs. This is no (homo)erotic dream of taut, controlled, and beautiful male bodies. Instead, it's as if the vast weight of classical tradition bears down upon the bodies Phillips represents, collapses them. The figures are swollen, distended, lumpy, knock-kneed. Their thighs and bellies sag. Phillips shows a male body under siege by time, destabilized by an anxiety over gender and sexuality that results in physical disintegration.

Phillips models his figures from sheets of 3/16 inch-thick wax, coats them with ceramic shell, fills the shells with melted bronze in the traditional manner. It is technically demanding work that is especially difficult in a small studio. The accidents of process result in surface scarring, exaggerating the deterioration of the flesh, and push some of the torsos toward structural collapse. Segments of

the bodies must be joined together with welds, sometimes suggesting armour, an insect carapace rather than a human form. The classical ideals of permanency and integrity of form are disrupted. So are the masculine ideals of physical strength and solidity, which bronze ought to embody. The structure of the body shifts, its cohesion no longer guaranteed. Its total vulnerability is made apparent. It is as soft as wax, as brittle, as easily crumbled, as malleable. Its limbs can be truncated or the body torn entirely asunder in a mad rite. But if the physical results of the lost-wax process are partially beyond the maker's control, the effects they generate are not: they are, instead, integral to the impact of the finished work. Phillips wants to be able to be uncertain – in bronze, and as a man.

This interest in uncertainty is apparent in the way gender signals are mixed, in different ways, in virtually all of Phillips' sculptures. Phillips' *Sisyphus* is, at first glance, a torso of indeterminate gender. It represents an unshapely, overfed, and aged body; its softness and fatness form small sagging breasts and a rippled belly. Viewed from the rear, its gender becomes clear, as does the meaning of the title: the boulder Sisyphus rolled ceaselessly up the hill is represented as a massive pair of taut, shiny testicles. They are round as balloons, fit to burst: the most vital part of the sculpture. But they are hidden from view, tucked virtually inside the body cavity. Is it sexuality or masculinity that is the exhausting burden? Is the erasure of gender that comes with bodily aging an embarrassment or a relief?

The greatest surprise in Phillips' works are the flowers that blossom in the interiors of many of the torsos. The exterior of *Omega*, for example, represents the thighs, grotesquely sagging beer gut, and gigantic dangling penis of an old man. Equal parts potency and pathos, this body is decidedly anti-heroic. The penis dangles limply; its exaggerated length and size suggest monstrosity as well as virility, the peculiar and alien fascination of adult genitalia from the point of view of a child. But in the interior of the sculpture, rising from the root of the penis is a single flower on a curving stem as delicate as a telephone wire. The unexpected flower is complexly evocative. It approximates a fallopian tube and ovary in its size and location, a register of concealed femininity that is starkly opposed to the body's hypermasculine exterior. It also suggests an internal sensation of sexual pleasure that is quite different from what the external body projects: not dominion, not the force of the phallus, but an interior awareness of bliss that unfolds with tremendous fragility. And it goes beyond eroticism to signify emotion, a blossoming of feeling that is both protected and hidden by the exterior bodily shell. Henry Miller's woman is "a monster in the process of becoming a flower"; so is Benjamin Phillips' man.

It seems as if it shouldn't be such a surprise to see the male body as generative, if craggy, earth, in which a flower can take root – if precariously. It shouldn't be

such a surprise to see works that communicate the interiority of the masculine, and envision the masculine as partially feminine.

Phillips shows the male body as a set of sagging skins, subject to aging that renders both gender and sexual potency invisible. But he also reveals it as a mask, as a site of emotive responses and sensory pleasures that the physical form gives no hint of. His works initially communicate the anguish of embodiment. After a long look, though, the bodies become caverns, imbued with all the mystery that word implies. There's some terror in losing the sense of solidity in our being. But the collapse of gender identity and physical integrity that Phillips' works describe is a generative one that creates a space in which other, unexpected things can grow.

*N.B. The bronze sculpture Goliath's composition has since been modified in the middle and buttocks section. This document describes its original design.

Benjamin Phillips is an emerging Vancouver-based artist whose work has been shown provincially in British Columbia as well as in the United States of America. Recently he has exhibited selections of bronze sculpture at the Elliot Louis Gallery and Access Artist Run Centre in Vancouver. Benjamin received an honours degree in art at the University of Victoria and a bachelor's degree in Comparative Religions from Acadia University.

Camilla Pickard is a Vancouver writer and teacher. She works in the Critical and Cultural Studies department at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

Her poetry has appeared in various Canadian journals including West Coast Line and The Capilano Review. Recent publications include the catalogue essay "Finding Herself: New Works by Carrie Walker" for Kristi Engle Gallery in LA, and articles on Wreck Beach and classical and experimental music for the new Time Out city guide to Vancouver.