

Chronicles of a Disappearance, DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montréal, January 19 – May 13, 2012

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Alice Channer, *Out of Body*, South London Gallery, London, 2012.
photo: Andy Keate, courtesy of the artist and South London Gallery, London

Alice Channer: Out of Body

South London Gallery, London, March 2–May 13, 2012

To describe *Out of Body* as a smattering of limbs and organs would be both accurate and unsatisfactory. Indeed, the works might be titled *Eyes*, *Arms*, *Thighs* and *Lungs* but they exist as a whole from which no one element could be severed. There is a curatorial unity to the exhibition—orchestrated by the artist—which lends it the cohesive character of an installation, a body of work as well as a metaphorical human body.

Yet this human body is not represented in any kind of figurative manner. There is, rather, an absence of the body, a suggestion of the incarnated presence of the artist, as the work bears the trace of her own physicality and its relationship to materials. “The work is me,” Channer says, “breathing, feeling and thinking with, through, and as part of, the processes and materials that make up the industrial world that I live in and that constitute my work.”

Cold Metal Body, a large distorted digital print of stone-carved drapery, illustrates this indivisibility. The stone rendition of fabric, itself printed on heavy crêpe de chine strung from the ceiling, is so manipulated as to be abstract, leaving the interpretation open to the viewer. Engaging with *Cold Metal Body* requires a certain movement of the body, a stretching up and stepping back that assigns to the viewer the responsibility to perform part of the work. The more one moves around the hanging structure, the more it reveals itself: at the back of the piece is the black imprint of a ghostly arm. Reasserting this synergy between body and work with a touch of humour, Channer peppered her sculptures with such traces of herself—almost signatures.

The artist’s masterful permutation of materials is also present in *Amphibians* and *Reptiles*, two structures of mirror-polished stainless steel, cast aluminium, marble and... tights. The reflective semi-circular shapes of these works undulate off the floor, as if arrested mid-slither. They first appear to be machined into hard, shiny perfection, but uncanny elements soon emerge to disrupt the smoothness: hand-carved irregularities in the marble columns and aluminium casts of tights curved as if they were crawling, their deflated shape evoking the human presence that activates the machine of industrial production, vulnerable yet essential.

At times, Channer’s work is reminiscent of that of Eva Hesse or Barbara Hepworth, yet she creates a tension that is both compelling and unique. The play between the figurative and the abstract, between personal experience and cultural references and between the handcrafted and the manufactured is at the heart of *Out of Body*. It makes a potent case for the body redefining the world beyond the reach of the human mind.

[Martine Rouleau]



Omer Fast, *5000 Feet is the Best*, 2011 (video still).
photo: Yon Thomas, courtesy of gb agency, Paris and Arratia Beer, Berlin

Chronicles of a Disappearance

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For this group exhibition, curator John Zeppetelli seems to have posed himself an impossible challenge: to bring together artworks that make disappearance visually representable and absence physically palpable. *Chronicles of a Disappearance* is a quiet but unnerving overview of five artists’ strategies for depicting the distant and invisible nature of violence in contemporary politics.

Texts, and their translations, serve to explicate the social context of many of the projects, but also underscore the incommensurable distance (physical, historical, and cultural) between the artworks’ absented subjects and their present viewers. In Taryn Simon’s 2007 series, *An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar*, large-scale colour photographs offer glimpses of concealed locations in the American landscape, from the banal (such as the abstract art collection that hangs in the lobby of the CIA’s headquarters) to the shocking (like the ungainly pile of all the items confiscated from passengers over a 24-hour period at New York’s John F. Kennedy airport). Though the photographs are surreal records of places viewers could not otherwise imagine, it is Simon’s dry descriptions of what takes place in these scenes—printed in tiny type on the wall next to each image—that give the work its political force, raising questions about why these activities remain unseen in an age of ubiquitous photo documentation.

Omer Fast’s film installation, *5000 Feet is the Best* (2011), also employs translation to comment on secretive forms of international surveillance, and professional actors to recreate military missions in Pakistan and Afghanistan conducted by a drone operator in the United States. Drawing on the tropes of action films and video games, Fast uses subtitles and a voice-over to describe the attacks, but sets the film in the desert landscape around Las Vegas, applying his unique talent for layering multiple cinematic narratives to confuse fact and fiction, literally bringing home the human cost of these acts of overseas violence.

In the most disturbing work in the exhibition, text bridges the extremes of abstraction and figuration wrought by death. At first glance, Teresa Margolles’s *Plancha* (2010) resembles a Carl Andre-inspired minimalist sculpture, a series of steel plates in a line along the gallery floor. Occasional drips of water from the ceiling activate the object, however, hissing as they hit the heated plates and are transformed into steam. Zeppetelli’s didactic text reveals that the water is in fact taken from a morgue in Mexico City after it is used to wash corpses, charging this otherwise simple material transformation with metaphysical implications. Seen alongside video projects by Philippe Parreno and José Toirac that memorialize political figures, these works imbue the act of disappearance with an aspect of the sublime, questioning the very limits of visual representation.

[Gabrielle Moser]