

INTERFACE

Visual art exhibitions and events with a platform for critical writing

Of flesh and blood

By: Viviane Blanchard

Rollo Contemporary Art, London
12 October 2009 - 20 January 2010

For the last five hundreds years, women have had the place of honour as subject of art – stripped off their clothes and re-fashioned, fully fleshed, in the nude by men who thought they knew better. Kenneth Clark's seminal book *The Nude – A Study in Ideal Form*, written in the 50s, spread the idea that Renaissance painters, Rococo artists and Modernist avant-garde all pursued the notion that the nude (in the female flesh) was the highest form of aesthetics and, incredibly, never questioned the double-standards applied to male artists and their models throughout the ages. Clark's definition of the nude – a 'balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed' comes at the end of a century-long debate about what should be allowed in representation and justifies the noble pursuit of contemplating the female body as a pure aesthetic experience. The 1970s shattered the male connoisseur's lofty, wet dreams when feminists demonstrated the subterfuge at last: both the academic nude and the transgressive naked ladies of the avant-garde were pretext to show an exciting female figure and legitimised male fantasies in art. The objectifying male gaze was revealed. It was time for women to reclaim their body. They did, radically so, as part of the counter-culture movement of the late 60s, harnessing the new media of performance and video art to their pressing attempts at representing their true feminine self. What they found, though, is that their subvertive body art forms could turn back and bite them. Showing their attractive body to the world, even when aimed at an art audience and in complete self-awareness, was judged increasingly as just another form of objectification. Foucault and the postmodern consciousness revealed the layers of culture, lies and idealisation that produce the self when subjected to society treatment, desire and pain. The female body as the main sight/site of Western culture thus became the primary instrument with which female artists could divulge the internal structures of Western society controlling the production of experience and identity.



[enlarge]

The Body in Women's Art Now – Part 1 (Embodied) showcase four contemporary women artists whose beautiful and radical work follow onto the steps of these early female pioneers of body art. New issues have arisen as globalisation and cultural diversity have been brought to the contemporary art front. Israeli artist Sigalit Landau's *Barbed Hula* (2000) is a powerful, sensual work that shows the artist's naked body hula hooping with barbed wire on a beach somewhere between Jaffa and Tel Aviv. Grey skies cast shadows on the sand, self-inflicted violence leaves deep imprints on her soft skin which quivers and strengthens as if to show the resilience of the body against our human irrational, destructive impulses. Belly-dancing the line between the surrounding danger and the playful escapism of her daily existence, Landau makes her dance act darkly attractive as she intertwines it with the hovering threat of death. Filmed in slow motion against the sea in an endless loop, waves of sensuality reach out to the viewer's own bodily self who, both attracted and repelled, find her/himself hypnotised by her dangerous erotic game. Regina Rose Galindo's *Recorte por la línea (Cut through the line)* (2005) is performed in Venezuela, the first port of call for cheap aesthetic surgery in Latin America. Like Orlan who, a decade earlier, broadcasted herself on the operating table under local anesthetic, Galindo stands naked on the grass while the country's top surgeon draws on her body in preparation for surgical treatment. However, if the French artist dramatically portrayed society's pressure to conform to Western feminine ideals of beauty, Regina's performance emphasises the power relationships between the sexes, almost unchanged after 40 years of feminism, acted out by her passive, submissive attitude under the dominant, active male's artistry. Looking like a cross between a beef meat cuts diagram and a tattooed aborigine, she also makes an incisive comment on the invading influence of the West, symbolised by neighbouring America, on the cultures of Latin America. Jessica Lagunas also comments on women's obsession with cosmetics in a performance during which she applies make-up for an hour with grotesque consequences. Lydia Maria Julien's photographs of cold, stultified bodies lying on floors and tables have a Schiele-esque aesthetics to be found in the anorexic, pale young girls and boys covering the pages of art and fashion magazines. Reflecting on the apparently superficial and the chronic, internalised violence against the female body, these women artists address the self as a battleground, the place where contemporary social and political issues are raised, debated, and so often ignored. Stripping bare their corpo-reality, the political games, war and day-to-day violence re-surface, again and again, onto the skin as stigma of our man-made, denaturalised culture. Barbara Kruger's cry that *We won't play nature to your culture* hasn't lost any of its urgency today, as evidenced by the persistent, and ever so subtle ways the female artists' body of work negotiates our complex, globalised contemporaneity.

The Body in Women's Art Now – Part 1 (Embodied) is at Rollo Contemporary Art gallery, London, until 20 January 2010

Viviane Blanchard