“The Grotesque and the Figure: Sculpting Deviant Forms”

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Abstract

The grotesque and the abject body has become a popular form of representing or interpreting the human form in contemporary figurative art. I have chosen to join in on this dialogue by engaging the grotesque through a more literary sense and explore the possibilities of a different kind or perhaps more subtle grotesquery. My sculptures are a dialogue between formal issues of mass, gravity and the figure as well as a study and response to artists like Jenny Saville, Lucien Freud and Yossi Loloi. As my study of the figure has progressed, deviances in the human form have taken precedence over the more traditional study of anatomical proportions. Thus studying what happens to the body when it is out of our control allowed me to explore these interests in deviance. I have isolated aging and obesity as two modes of interpreting these anomalies. Through the project I alternated between large scale sketches and drawings and medium-small scale ceramic sculptures. The final product is a body of work that explores the formal limitations of ceramic, the challenges gravity poses both in modeling clay and in the body as well as traditional notions of beauty, idealism and the grotesque.
In contemporary fiction literature, the grotesque has been observed as the moment where “the familiar world is never wholly absent, but always on notice of dismissal” (Geoffrey Harpham The Grotesque: First Principles 1976). Discomfort arises when one is made aware of incongruities that signify the liminal space between sanity and insanity, the beautiful and the ugly, control and the loss thereof. The grotesque marks territory that is neither here nor there. It is significant that the grotesque is not an unchanging aesthetic, but is defined alongside the changing definitions of beauty within cultures. We are disgusted by fat and age because they represent the decay of the body, greed, waste; the capability of the body (our bodies) to be repulsive. The body in the state of nature, stripped of clothes and tight management, seems somehow vulnerable.

Like Jenny Saville’s large paintings of obese women, I want to explore and display bodies that are rarely appreciated in contemporary culture, bodies that are difficult to look at because of their deviance from an implied social norm. In my sculptures, I aim to engage the grotesque by calling attention to the body not as something ideal but as a kind of physical history of everything we’ve ever consumed. Rather than demoralizing or rendering the body unrecognizably disgusting, I have chosen to approach the subject of the grotesque in Harpham’s terms. That is, rather than simply trying to ‘gross out’ the viewer, I aim to challenge the act of viewing. This challenge lies in our inherent discomfort when bodies are familiar but are somehow out of control or on the brink of dismissing a societal norm. I am interested in the moments when the body itself is on the brink of un-recognizability. I have chosen to focus on mostly women’s bodies in this way after considering the work of artists like Jenny Saville’s large paintings of women, Lucien Freud’s paintings of obese women and DeKooning’s clam digger
sculptures. While the topic of women’s bodies and societal pressures to be ‘beautiful’ via body modification borders on cliché, I have chosen this topic to examine what happens when we enhance rather than excise the features we find unattractive. I also believe that there is a difference between cliché and universal. Aging and losing control of our body with weight gain is a universal fear. That said, the motive behind my work is to engage viewers by appropriating “classical” sculptural practice to make figures that are visibly afflicted with age and girth. My goal is not to force viewers to settle on a conclusion, i.e. big/age is beautiful, but to be aware of the conflict that may arise in viewing figures that on one level are situated in fine arts practice and may be viewed as aesthetically accomplished, yet on another level are ultimately real people or composites of real people.

This study has evolved from my previous work with anatomy and the female figure from Fall 2011-Spring 2012 and my summer study at the Art Students League. I will be using the anatomy intensive studies I have done in the past to help inform my current work. Each figure explores a particular aspect of deviant anatomy and the grotesquery of those slight or exaggerated deviations. Ultimately, I want to use these deviations to evoke pathos. In an increasingly visual culture, and especially considering the growing influence of social networking and the internet, surrounding ourselves with things we like to see and cutting away what we don’t has become ‘normal.’ Rather than being told what is acceptable, we judge our standards of acceptable bodies based on what visual cues we are given in advertisements, television etc. We tailor our Facebook pages to create our ideal persona, our advertisements are targeted toward our interests, and a host of photo-editing software has been made available to the general public. Anyone with a mouse and remedial hand-eye coordination can adjust an image to fit whatever bodily ideal is deemed acceptable. By sculpting, I find that I am reaching backward
to a medium that seems somehow archaic. Furthermore, by adding protrusions of fat and extra hanging skin, I am working against the desire to remove parts of the body to create a pleasing form.

The figures I am interested in are figures that are lived in, figures that have let nature act on them. I want the viewer gain awareness of their own bodies as they view subjects that may challenge their conceptions of what constitutes a body. I want the viewer to recognize that their abjection to out-of-control bodies is not just a desire for beauty, but a conditioned response. Kristeva defines abjection as “an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic...a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside” (Kristeva 1988, 135). Thus, our discomfort with deviant bodies, especially the obese and aged, arises when we recognize that ALL bodies are moving toward decomposition. I do recognize that with mentioning abjection, the grotesque or the visceral, there is an implication that art that engages these topics might be overtly gutsy, gross, shitty etc. however, I think that this mode of thinking about abject bodies might be outdated. That is, images that demoralize the body are no longer shocking and to a degree bores the viewer. There is a point where othering the body is detrimental to understanding what the art is trying to accomplish by using the grotesque.

While obesity and age do not go hand-in-hand, what happens to the body when gravity acts on it in age and weight gain is ultimately similar. As a formal project, I am interested in using gravity, often a sculptor’s enemy, to my advantage. In this way, I was also able to understand how gravity changed the figure. In order to gain a better understanding of what is happening to the body, I used anatomy texts, medical files I came across online and plastic
surgery documents. I also studied fat deposits and bone displacements that occur when the body bears too much weight or is no longer strong enough to maintain its posture. The most fruitful resources were often medical and plastic surgery websites due to the less formal, vulnerable quality of the photos taken of the patients. Rather than using one particular person and creating a likeness, I chose to use composites of images and apply what I learned about the anatomy of the obese or aged body to each sculpture. Later in the semester, I came across a project by photographer Yossi Loloi, who photographed morbidly obese models (often former erotic artists and porn models) in their homes. Because I had started the project studying Lucien Freuds portraits of Sue Tilley I thought it would be appropriate to create a kind of dialogue with a contemporary artist doing the same kind of work with large models. I created about four sculptures in response to her work and feel that these as well as the Sue Tilley sketches are most like what I envisioned the project to be.

As far as the work that went into the project, Professor Pettibon and I worked out a tentative schedule of one new sculpture per week. Often I would have one sculpture about 50% done and would start the next in order to keep my hands moving, ideas flowing, and ultimately refrain from overworking the sculptures. In the fall I had aimed to create life-size and larger than life sized figures but quickly realized that with limited space, time and resources scaling down was imperative. To negotiate the scale shift, I chose to make large scale drawings for the senior capstone that responded to the maquettes/sculptures. The drawing allowed me to work out issues of form, line, space and movement in the same ways the larger sculptures from the fall had. I feel that doing the drawings alongside these smaller sculptures helped my understanding much better than doing the reverse (large sculptures, small drawings). Why exactly, I am still trying to figure out.
Technically speaking, I often started with large blocks of wedged clay and either reductively roughed out a form and gesture then worked out the details as the clay dried to leather hard. Hollowing out the forms was often the second to last step in this process with the final stage being the drying process before firing. For the larger sculptures, I often built an armature around which I would create a newspaper core that would burn out during firing or could easily be removed after the clay had dried. After firing, I stained each piece with shoe polish. I chose a dark brown because I think it brings out the surface texture of the clay in a way that a glaze or paint cannot. I also really like the look of the clay when it is wet and has a dark burnt sienna tint to it. I think there’s an earthiness to the clay in that stage that compliments the earthiness of the figures as well. Displaying them, I chose not to put them on a base/pedestal other than the display pedestals because I wanted them to be viewed as individual pieces rather than an installation.

In reflection, I think that the spring semester was the most successful in so much as producing a body of work that helped me understand, work out and engage the subject I became obsessed with in the Fall. I think that this year of work has proven fruitful and I do think that I can see technical and conceptual improvement in my work. Pieces like the busts and the studies of Yossi Loloï’s women I believe are the most successful and I wish I had taken the same kinds of chances I had with these later pieces earlier on. The first two torsos and the seated woman are sculptures that I think are very much representative of my early method of working and are examples of the unwillingness to risk or approach the figure in its entirety. My initial fear was that full small figures would read as figurines and border on ‘cute’ but I think that with the later sculptures I was able to work out of that frame of thinking and achieve more of the vision I had from the outset.
Bibliography


Images


Yossi Loloi *Full Beauty Project*, 2011

Yossi Loloi *Full Beauty Project*, 2011
Yossi Loloi *Full Beauty Project*, 2011

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