

The Figure 8: An Introduction

One can't
have it

both ways
and both

ways is
the only

way I
want it.

—A.R. Ammons

Slippage, flux, and change are the tenets of *The Figure 8*, an exhibition that features three female artists who explore, through a variety of media, the multitude of ways that these principles might be expressed. Most markedly, the artists engage simultaneously the figurative associations of the body and abstraction articulated by line and color. The works' capacity to shift back and forth from the abstract to the physical creates a deeper meditation on the body, on subjectivity, and on how we construct narratives. Like the nominal figure 8, an agreed upon numeral abstraction that also looks similar to a schematic rendering of a person, the works in the exhibition, together with the texts featured in this catalog, present us with a series of symbols and associations, representations of *both ways*.

Amy Pleasant and J. Parker Valentine often employ the half-formed figure. In Pleasant's 2014 exhibition at Whitespace *re/form* she filled the gallery with lumpy un-fired clay heads sitting on wooden pedestals. Ghostly, almost comic in their crude forms, the sculptures reflected the paintings and drawings that surrounded them—slightly unfinished, a flat grey color. Walking through the gallery, I remembered J. Parker Valentine's 2013 residency exhibition *Failure Envelope* at Artpace San Antonio. That show featured large photographs of skeins of sketched lines depicting numerous abstractions which slowly gave way to caricatures, roughed up figures so subtly suggested that they seemed to simply appear, as if created not so much by the artist as by the imagination of the viewer—like finding a face in a cloud. Valentine explained in an interview, "A certain work of mine can be looked at in several ways: maybe as an abstraction, maybe as something figurative (animal or human), maybe as another object that seems recognizable and probably more than one of these things at once."

Lilly Lampe, in her essay, sees a macabre quality in Valentine's delicate silk works featured in this exhibition, comparing them to flayed skin. In *Pleasant's Floor Piece*, Lampe finds a skin-like landscape in which a series of interactions occur via the silhouetted cutout figures. She states that each artist in the exhibition offers qualities of the body without completing the form. Such indeterminacy lends itself to an anxiety of the mind and body.



Amy Pleasant, *Black and Grey Head*, 2015
fired and painted clay, 12" x 7.25" x 9.25"
courtesy of the artist and Jeff Bailey Gallery

Anxiety becomes a fully articulated manifesto of "joyful self-destruction" in Sarah Leher-Graiver's essay *This Body's Undoing*. With a maniacal desire, the narrator begs to be ripped apart, filleted like an ordinary fish as she ponders how the figure persists despite its fragmentation. She argues that the experience of being embodied in "mortal flesh," is "indeed, fundamentally abstract, in flux, and full of doubt—a fluid psychic construction constantly on the verge of unrecognizability."

The ambiguous body is also apparent in Elizabeth Jaeger's two sculptures, an almost pathetic pink leather blob stooped on a museum bench and a series of ombre dyed stretchers. In response to a friend's overdose, feeling acutely helpless in its aftermath, Jaeger created *Stretcher*, handmade forms reminiscent of the kind of apparatus one would use to pull a wounded soldier from a field. The work recalls the impression of a body, yet in its seriality the forms begin to read more as color field abstractions. Line and color trump the corporeality of the stretcher's function, lending this familiar object any number of meanings. Poet Monica Fambrough succinctly describes the stretcher in all its historical and, fundamentally, emotional import. The last lines touching so closely on Jaeger's original trauma: *though when a stretcher is used to transport a body / that is no longer living, it is not generally referred to / as a stretcher but rather as a lie.*

Poetry so often depends on mutability as is evident in Fambrough's use of the word "lie" which could exist as another term for "stretcher," or stand for the false nature of an unjust death, or simply refer to the act of lying down. Brought together, Jaeger, Valentine, and Pleasant present works of art that deny fixed outcomes; the refusal to be only one thing allows for a vast expanse of interpretations and experiences. The show points to the inevitability of *both ways*, and what we might learn from such a flexible position. After all, the figure 8 itself, turned on its side, becomes the very symbol for infinity.

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