

REVIEWS

BEAUTIFUL BEAST

Wilkinson Gallery, New York
Academy of Art
Curated by Peter Drake

By Keren Moscovitch



Barry X Ball, *Envy / Purity*, 2008-2012, *Envy*: Pakistani onyx, stainless steel (23" x 17-1/4" x 9-1/2.") / *Purity*: Mexican onyx, stainless steel (24" x 16-1/2" x 11-1/4.".) Collection of Michael de Paola. Courtesy Wilkinson Gallery, New York Academy of Art.

“Beautiful Beast” at the Wilkinson Gallery of the New York Academy is a dense and dynamic group exhibition of sixteen contemporary artists working in inter-media sculpture that deploys the figure to explore the intersections of the beautiful and the grotesque, the natural and the man-made, and the evolution of human consciousness. The show features the work of Barry X Ball, Monica Cook, Gehard Demetz, Lesley Dill, Richard Dupont, Eric Fischl, Judy Fox, Folkert de Jong, Elizabeth King, Mark Mennin, Evan Penny, Patricia Piccinini, Rona Pondick, Jeanne Silverthorne, Kiki Smith and Robert Taplin.

The strength of this exhibition lies in its ricocheting play between traditional and new media to construct a non-linear narrative about the development of the human spirit through the medium of the body. Curator Peter Drake brings attention to an important quality of figuration, which is the relationship of the Self to the Self. An emphasis on the symbiosis between fear and beauty as aspects of the sublime coheres the works aesthetically and conceptually.

One of the more intriguing artists in the show is Barry X Ball who re-creates sculptural masterpieces in non-traditional, diaphanous stone that allows for subtle reinterpretations of details and gestures of the originals, ushering the work into contemporary discourse. Inspired by Giusto Le Court’s Baroque marble bust *La Invidia*, *Envy* is a dramatic depiction of vice in the form of a woman whose hair has transformed into a crest of snakes. Ball then reimagines Antonio Corradini’s angelic portrayal of *Purity* as a corroded ghostly phantom, material seemingly rotting away in places where it was once pristine. As *Envy* looks in horror at *Purity*, and *Purity* seems to deteriorate under the gaze of *Envy*, a dialogue emerges between these two allegories, both saturated with historical, religious and philosophical context. Ball’s treatment adds a new chapter to the lives of these items, activating them and condensing the psychologically fraught tensions between the Self and Other into a single physical manifestation.

Elizabeth King’s *Unreliable Narrative* is a three-channel video installation that functions as a surreal surrogate for the artist herself. An animated wooden hand, eyeball and head interact on three television screens in a quasi-futuristic, but somehow still nostalgic, high-tech sculptural construction. The movements are quiet and deliberate—the hand playfully waving at the eye, the head looking melancholy at moments and confounded at others. Fragmented aspects of the artist’s consciousness seemingly question each other, bringing

to the surface a line of inquiry about the nature of existence and purpose, and the essential futility of attempting to answer such weighty ontological conundrums.

Recurring throughout “Beautiful Beast” is an emphasis on genitalia and orifices, recasting them as primary sites of conflict and resolution in our bodies. Judy Fox’s *Worms* are striking in their anatomical specificity. A triad of giant snail-like creatures display their rumps proudly in the air, showing off uncannily human vaginal structures, and slither at the base of *Mermaid*, a female figure reminiscent of Botticelli’s *Venus*. The tableau references a process of creation that links the body to the earth and the earth to time, with its allusions to fecundity and primitive life forms. Monica Cook’s seated figure *Snowsuit* casually spreads her legs to direct the eyes toward a zippered slit, gaping open as if split by tension. This gesture calls attention to an uneasy commingling of surface and interior. Eric Fischl’s *Tumbling Woman II* relies on a translucent materiality to simultaneously present and seal off the body’s openings, thereby deflecting the viewer’s intrusive gaze.

The Achilles heel of “Beautiful Beast” is that the hybrid form of man-animal-machine repeats itself so frequently that it threatens to limit interpretations of the grotesque, at the exclusion of a more poetic approach to the comic distortion that characterizes the genre. One must pay close attention to the subtlety of Kiki Smith’s *Mary Magdalene* or Jeanne Silverthorne’s *Phosphorescent Betty* for their psychological undertones and ability to represent existential crisis without the drama of physical metamorphosis.

Overall, “Beautiful Beast” is an engaging and challenging exhibition with a solid curatorial vision. By positioning these works in relationship to one another, Drake confronts the viewer with uncomfortable truths about the human psyche, complicated visions of the body and unanswerable questions on the nature of self. To walk away from this show peering inward is to understand its most penetrating message. ■

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Keren Moscovitch is an interdisciplinary artist exploring the intersection of the sexual and the spiritual. She is based in New York City where she teaches at the School of Visual Arts. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions in the US and abroad, and reviewed in publications such as The Huffington Post, Playboy, Policy Mic and New York Magazine.