

SARAH LUCAS
Untitled, 2012
Digitally printed wallpaper
Edition of 6
Copyright the artist
Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



PIECES OF A



HOW ART IS RECONSTRUCTING THE MAN IN THE ERA OF THE SHATTERED MASCULINE IDENTITY

ESSAY — Hili Perlson



STURTEVANT
STURTEVANT: LEAPS, JUMPS AND
BUMPS
(Installation view), 2013
Serpentine Gallery, London
(June 28 – August 26, 2013)
Copyright Jerry Hardman-Jones



Top
MICHELE ABELES
Leaf, Grid, Ladder, Black, White, 2011

Archival pigment print
 26.67 x 35.56 cm

Right
Red, Rock, Cigarettes, Newspaper, Body, Wood, Lycra, Bottle, 2011

Archival pigment print
 76.20 x 101.60 cm

Below
STEWART UOO
Untitled Shopping Bag 4, 2013
 Aluminium, shopping bag, polyurethane resin, epoxy, pigment,
 human and synthetic hair, maggot cocoons, flies, dust and other materials
 36.83 x 22.54 x 16.83 cm
 Photo: Laura Bartlett Gallery, London
 All images courtesy 47 Canal, New York



Today, the male body is being presented to us in all its fragmented glory in the public sphere. It started cautiously at first, with six-packs and plump pecs bursting the confinements of textile, like the sculptured harbingers of the masculine ideal-physique-cum-advertising-tool. Then, round glutei muscles soon started appearing on oversized billboards, as did the more risqué exposing of the gentle skin of the lower abs, leading to the groin. If objectification is a notion central to feminist theory, it is by no means exclusive to it anymore. Several mechanisms

occur in the realm of sexual objectification, and fragmentation, the instrumental showing of separate body parts, is one of the most effective ways to achieve the complete denial of autonomy, agency and subjectivity that go into making the body an interchangeable object. And while a

quick survey of billboards around the city will show that wide-eyed, open-mouthed female models are still the default, you might also spot, in your peripheral vision, a teenager toting shopping bags printed with ripped male torsos – a strange manifestation of egalitarianism.

And what if you were to take stock in the art world? Browsing at art fairs – presuming one would consider the art fair to provide a snapshot of a contemporary moment in art making – female bodies abound in all media and far outnumber the males. But increasingly shows have focused on the male nude of late, and the image of the male body that has been explored in them deserves some attention. Objectification aside, it's important to be reminded that the male body's art historical lineage is problematic, and one that perhaps needed to be broken with





Left
BILL HAYDEN
Tyler's Palm Tree, 2009
 Courtesy the artist



Above
BRIAN J. MORRISON
Untitled, 2013
 From the "RIPPED CHISELED AND ROCK HARD!" series
 Installation view at Platform Arts, Belfast
 Copyright Brian J. Morrison

first. A blockbuster show entitled "Masculin / Masculin" currently on view at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris reiterates that men and their bodies have long been a fine art motif: the male nude was a compulsory exercise for art students throughout the Nineteenth Century, a fact that explains some of the bare buttocks that pop up in the show where you least expect them to. But in the Twentieth Century, the male nude underwent a neo-classicist rendition, a mode of representation that was eventually utilised to project fascist, Stalinist and Nazi ideologies in the figures of the athlete, the worker and the soldier. Contemporary artists have been chipping away at the inherent violence that the male nude is

burdened with; fragmentation, one could argue, is one tool among many which artists use to probe possible means of rehabilitation – an "image update" that, in order to recast the male body, first had to sever, amputate and decapitate.

Or simply ridicule. A row of wide-eyed, open-mouthed inflatable male sex dolls, chest hair painted on, stared blankly out of the windows of London's Serpentine Gallery in Elaine Sturtevant's show this summer (according to Sturtevant, you can't get inflatable female dolls anymore). Completely disarmed, the male body is substituted with a pumped-up heap of helpless golems. The work of Sturtevant always plays with the notion of

simulacra, mostly by means of authoring confounding remakes of famous works of other artists. But her use of squeaky, peach-coloured sex dolls provides a strange if hilarious footnote to the Deleuzian postulation. Here, the simulacrum of the male of the species is summed up in a helmet of dark hair, a chest strewn with curls, and a gaping mouth and anus. Which seems to be leaving out something important.

Omitting the penis, as opposed to concealing it chastely, further disarms the male nude, but by doing so it also reaffirms its potential; it broaches an awareness of its intrinsic violence. Perhaps that's why Brooklyn-based Michele Abeles often casts male nudes

within a flattened space populated by generic looking props. She presents the fragmented body as equal to the bland objects listed off in the works' titles like items in an inventory. It's through the power of suggestion that the randomly gathered items come to form possible narratives. What the leaf in "Leaf, Grid, Ladder, Black, White" (2011) might allude to is the sex that's kept hidden by the angle in which the body is shot and the grid it's overlaid with. Metonymy and metaphor also form a key aspect of Sarah Lucas' work, where cucumbers, eggs and chickens stand in for male and female genitalia. Subtlety, however, characterises neither her approach nor her aim; when Lucas lays a piece



Top
BILL HAYDEN & NIC GUAGNINI
Dickface, 2013

Installation view Bill Hayden at Société, Berlin
Courtesy the artist and Société, Berlin

of raw red meat on a man's crotch, it's a pretty straightforward, objectifying commentary on that flaccid "piece of meat". Countless other works by Lucas focus solely on erect male genitals, leaving the messy rest out entirely.

More about the penis soon, let's remain on the topic of objectification for the time being. Perhaps the most extreme, meaning potentially harmful, objectification of the male body is evident in the visual language of competitive bodybuilding, a topic young Belfast-based artist Brian J. Morrison tackles in his work "RIPPED CHISELED AND ROCK HARD!" (2013). When Canadian bodybuilder Joe Weider rebranded his publication "Muscle Builder" as "Muscle and Fitness" in 1980, he was responding to a "cultural shift" he claimed to have sensed. The extreme muscularity of the male bodies was suddenly being shown in ads in ways which made apparent use of classic



visual signifiers of objectification like isolation of specific body parts, decapitation and removal of an identity – visual tropes that had until then been more commonly associated with the sexualisation of the female body. This form of objectification of the male was not quite sexualised, as the viewer was meant to admire the bulging muscles rather than lust after the sculptured body. In his series, Morrison

enlarges images from ads featured in "Muscle and Fitness" between 1980 and 1989, and removes the muscles from their background. Walking around the bodiless, super-sized cut-outs installed in the exhibition space one can't help but wonder what goes into the production of accepted normative (in this case masculine) values.

The processes of manufacturing desire, and the details of

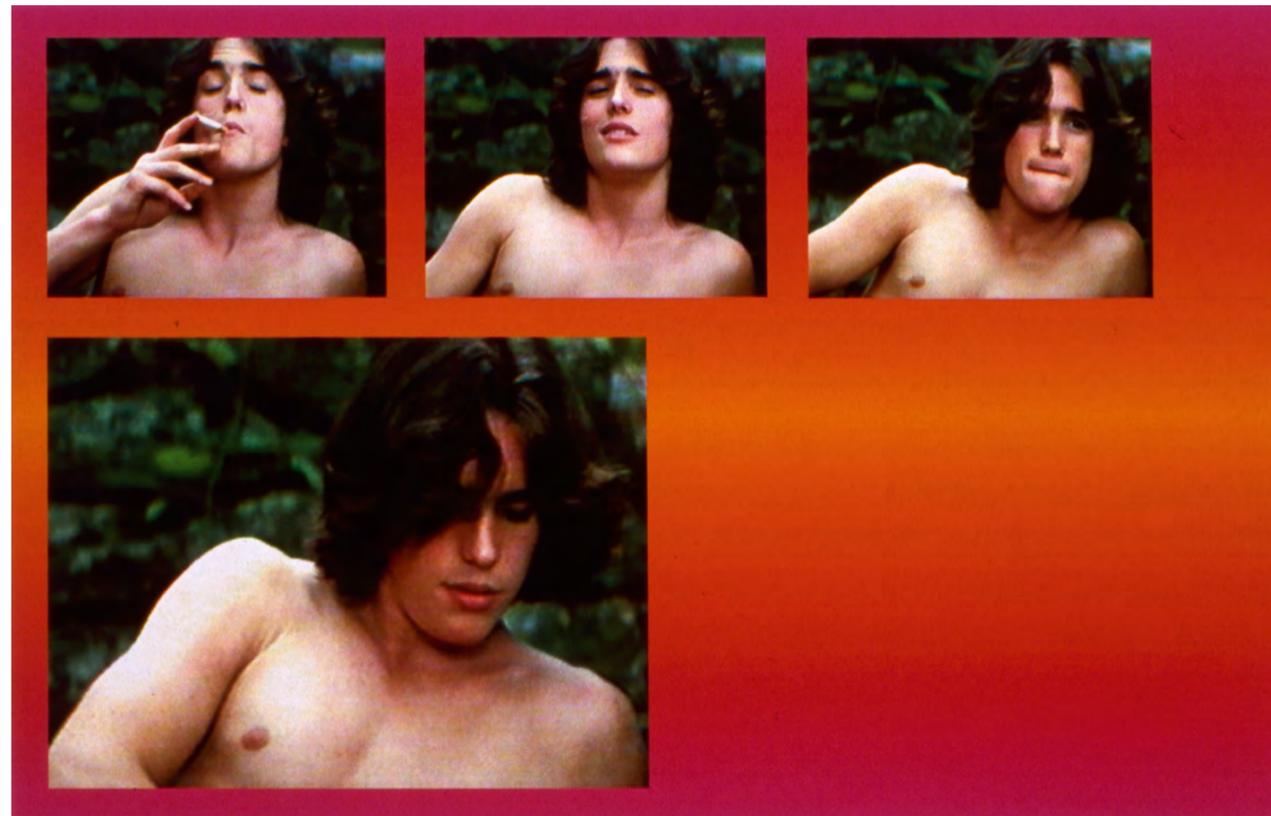
constructing phantasmagoria, which become mainstream, commercial and thus normative along the way, are pithily expressed in Bill Hayden's "Pretty Palm Tree" (2010). It's part of a work series themed "Coconuts", where Hayden highlighted the debris of the realistic, always falling short of the idealised commercial image, like the sun-damaged chest of a white male tourist, not quite on par with the tanned chest a travel advertisement might have opted for. Together with artist Nic Guagnini, Hayden also developed Dickface, a typeface for "a variety of computing platforms", available for purchase online at www.dickface.me. In the spring of 2013, Hayden covered the walls of Berlin's Société gallery with letterings in the typeface for his solo show. If the gesture of designing a typeface made entirely of penises seems humorous and a tad juvenile, a different impression arises when reading in the press release that

Left
NIC GUAGNINI
Blake's Paranoia, 2013

Ceramic on pedestal
24 x 16 x 16 cm (ceramic)

In the background
Heads, 2013

Prints
46 x 34 cm
Courtesy the artist and Lars Friedrich, Berlin
Photo: Simon Vögel



RICHARD HAWKINS
med.pink.matt.graveyard, 1995

Unique iris inkjet print
35.6 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy Richard Telles Fine Art,
Los Angeles

"Dickface aims to empower users with a sleek penetrating form for everyday written communication". Isolating the penis as the element of power and dominance, Dickface provides the aggressive communication skills – or is it simply the assertiveness of a male voice? – to users of all gender.

While Hayden's show demonstrated the mighty influence of Dickface, a more recent show by Nic Guagnini at Lars Friedrich gallery in Berlin, entitled "Heads", illustrated the danger and horror of abused power. One wall in the small gallery showed some seven "portraits" of Hellenistic statues, noses missing. Guagnini notes that during late antiquity, in the Byzantine conflict between iconoclasts and iconodules, most of the statuary of classical antiquity had its noses excised, and statues representing male figures were emasculated. Two ceramic sculptures placed on high plinths communicated with the photographic

prints in the show, their organic shapes entirely made up of entangled noses, ears and penises. These are the organs usually severed or mutilated as means of punishment and torture, and if the show left any room for doubt as to its linking of the male body back to the horrors of war – making a detour via classicism – a print-out in the aforementioned Dickface font entitled "Notes on Dickface" offered a collection of thoughts on fetish, war, corpses, colonialism, mass graves, torture, and death.

Perhaps the answer to rehabilitating the male body is through its sexualisation. Casting an eroticised gaze on the male nude as a fine art motif could constitute a certain form of objectification that philosopher Martha Nussbaum refers to as "Positive Objectification" or a "necessary negative phenomenon" that can be immensely pleasurable. The work of American

artist Richard Hawkins is a good example of this re-casting of the male body. Hawkins, whose survey of paintings, sculptures, assemblages and writing is currently on view at Le Consortium, Dijon, constructs a complex and sophisticated, overtly homosexual universe made of distortions, cuttings, dissections, decapitations and painterly epiphanies. Here, collage is not merely a technique but rather a modus operandi used to carve a space for the unrealisable, the transient, the ephemeral and the unstable. More specifically, his work is haunted by an inherent voyeur, a horny cruiser with a clear preference for youth. Desire and indulgence are two fascinations Hawkins' viewer is confronted with, and the pop-cultural references in his work explore the hot-young-stud-consuming public eye: the beauty of "Outsiders"-era Matt Dillon, the princely unattainability of "My Own Private Idaho"-era Keanu Reeves, male types made

for sexual projections and helpless teenage crushes.

Hawkins' exploration of the sexualised male body also reaches deeper into the treasure trove of male nudes – here, too, classicism offers an abundant source. In a presentation at Berlin's American Academy, Hawkins discussed how gay artists have historically reclaimed images from a largely heterosexual world by either re-contextualising them through collages or by fetishising them through scrapbooks. Not without a pinch of humour, Hawkins' own "Urbis Paganus IV.9.I." (2009) also offers a persuasive "Treatise on Posteriority".

The male body as sexualised motif has also been richly explored through a female gaze. Less "stalker" and maybe more "lover" in approach, American painter Ellen Altfest, acclaimed for her labour-intensive, *trompe l'oeil* canvases, also captures fragmented views of her male models, but instead of



Top
 ELLEN ALTFEST
Green Gourd, 2007

30.5 x 30.5 cm
 Copyright Ellen Altfest
 Courtesy White Cube, London
 Photo: Bill Orcutt, New York

Left
Head and Plant, 2009–2010

Oil on canvas
 27.9 x 25.4 cm
 Copyright Ellen Altfest
 Courtesy White Cube, London
 Photo: Todd-White Art

Opposite page
 RICHARD HAWKINS
Crepuscle I, 1994

Mixed media
 71.1 x 61 x 61 cm
 Courtesy Richard Telles
 Fine Art, Los Angeles





Above
GREG PARMA SMITH
Poseurs 6, 2013

Oil and gesso on canvas
127 x 106.68 cm

Right
GREG PARMA SMITH
Poseurs 7, 2013

Oil and gesso on canvas
106.68 x 152.4 cm
All images courtesy the artist.

fragmentation for the sake of objectification, her gaze is one of intensified focus: on a male armpit, body hair, stretch marks, and sex. She uses classic still life motifs such as fruit and plants alongside the body, gently placing obvious signifiers of genitals in her scenes, like the upstanding of a cactus, or the tip of a pumpkin recalling the skin of a rectum.

Subject to all sorts of representations, the male nude has been quite literally taken apart, and is reassembled in a contemporary world imbued with multiplicity. In a solo presentation at Art Basel Statements this summer, Swiss-American artist Greg Parma Smith presented a clever, elegant solution to the conundrum of showing

male bodies in art. In his work, Smith often subverts elements perceived as decorative or commonplace. His oil on canvas series "Poseurs" (2013) showed models from profiles, or in poses recalling forms of presentation recognisable from classicism – poses which allowed the artists of Antiquity to portray the body's perfection. Smith's bodies, however, are beautiful chimeras where each limb and section is of a different race and gender. "We are all objects," these creatures seem to calmly express. Our bodies are constantly sexualised, in almost every aspect of life, and multiplicity is the only reasonable way to counteract the negative effects of objectification on society.

GREG PARMA SMITH WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE GROUP SHOW "BAD CONSCIENCE" AT METRO PICTURES GALLERY, NYC, JANUARY 16 – FEBRUARY 22, 2014
RICHARD HAWKINS, "GLIMMER" AT LE CONSORTIUM, DIJON, RUNS UNTIL JANUARY 26, 2014
RICHARD HAWKINS AND BENNETT SIMPSON CURATED AN EXHIBITION BY BOB MIZER AND TOM OF FINLAND, ON VIEW AT MOCA, LOS ANGELES, UNTIL JANUARY 26, 2014
HAWKINS' FIRST COLLECTION OF FICTION, "FRAGILE LITTLE FLOWERS", HAS JUST BEEN RELEASED BY LES PRESSES DU RÉEL
SARAH LUCAS, "SITUATION ABSOLUTE BEACH MAN RUBBLE" AT WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON, RUNS UNTIL DECEMBER 15, 2013

