

Wetterling Gallery

INTERVIEW WITH PINAR YOLAÇAN

By Doug McClemon, 2015

Doug McClemon: The most striking thing for me about the new work is that you successfully merge sculpture, photography and now painting...it is simultaneously all three. How did that come about?

Pinar Yolaçan: I have been thinking about the idea of sculpture since my previous series titled *Mother Goddess* and *Like a Stone*. These series were inspired by pre Neolithic mother goddess deities such as Venus of Willendorf. When I was casting for the project, I was looking for women who had a body type similar to those depicted in these statuettes. I was painting the women's bodies to achieve certain special effects on the camera. I was also playing with the light in the studio and was interested in the idea of dimension in the photograph. The painted bodies themselves looked like 3-D sculptures while the photographs looked 2-D, like photographic reproductions of these sculptures. Almost like postcards (of famous statues) you would find in a museum shop.

And the painted bodies?

As I was experimenting with paint and light, I began to investigate the idea of painting and what it would mean to paint in a photograph. From there, between 2012-2014, I worked on two series titled *Nudes* and *Corpo Mecânico*. I was interested in artists like Lucien Freud, Jenny Saville, Francis Bacon and their treatment of skin and flesh in their paintings. In terms of art history it is just another area I would tap into; the female nude in art history.

Obviously you seek out the models for the existing sculptural qualities of their bodies. Do you consider the work a collaboration with the model?

Exactly. I don't actually direct the model. They usually get the idea. Also, they can see themselves on the computer screen, which helps them get a sense of how the image will appear. Then they begin to have an understanding of how they should be moving and how they look to the camera's eye. It is about abstracting the body and they are often surprised at how they look on camera. They can't recognize their own bodies sometimes. Each session is 350-400 images taken over 4-5 hours. It is a process, like painting an actual painting. And each session is like a short film.

So in a way it's also a performance, in addition to being photography, sculpture and painting....

Yes, it is. I wouldn't say the models themselves are "performing" but part of the process can be a performance.

Are the diptychs and triptychs something new in your practice?

I was thinking about a series at first but I do several photo sessions with several models before I edit everything into a series. In *Nudes* each photo session turned into a small body of work in of itself because of the amount of time it took to paint and shoot the model. Frame-by-frame the movements of the models became very dramatic....and the presentation with the diptychs and triptychs became a way for me to explore stillness while also showing movement and it also helped reveal part of this process. I am really obsessed with this idea of movement in a painting or a photograph. How to capture motion in a still frame? Then as I was researching, I became interested in the futurist idea of speed and how the body in motion was represented in paintings such as Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase* and that's how the *Nudes* series began to evolve into *Corpo Mecânico* series. It is about the transformation of the organic body into the mechanical body.

Is there any connection to your fashion past with the fabrics you use in this new series? I'm intrigued by the fact that the fabrics become the skin, which in turn is echoing the fabric background. Even though the models are nude they appear to be covered.

In the *Mother Goddess* series they are essentially nude. It's not necessarily about fashion. I use fabrics and the costumes I make as part of the visual vocabulary I am trying to create to communicate the concepts I am working with. For example when I was working with *Mother Goddess* and *Like a Stone* series I was very interested in nettings because they reminded me of the surfaces of ancient Egyptian statues. In *Corpo Mecânico* series, the choice of fabrics came from my research into different paintings, from different periods of art history, especially Futurism and Cubism. When I was shooting the project in Sao Paulo, there was this one section of the city filled with fabric manufacturers and stores, especially those who did digital printing onto the fabrics, which is a relatively new technology. They were cotton based fabrics but with all these patterns merging they looked industrial and geometric although most of them were depicting organic forms. So I placed the model in front of these fabrics and painted her to create a sense of mimicry. In some images you can't separate the figure from the background so there is this loss of dimension and of the sense that there is an actual body in the photograph.

The skin, the surface so to speak, was constantly changing for each frame.

Yes, I kept painting and changing the light as I kept shooting. It is also about registering time.

Why are the women headless?

I wanted the bodies to be as abstract as possible. I wasn't interested in eye contact or bringing up the idea of "the gaze,"none of that.

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It seems that you want to eliminate the gaze on several levels. It goes without saying that the male gaze is completely antithetical to the work. And the overall anonymity of the models adds still more distance for contemplation. They are so abstracted, as you said. Sometimes only the fingertips or toes can clue us in that it is a body that we are seeing.

I've been dealing with idea of the gaze in my portraits for some time, such as in *Perishables* and *Maria* series but when you eliminate the face in the picture, you also eliminate the gaze. Of course I still work with people (i am not shooting animals or nature yet) but I am looking at the body as a material to work with, like how bronze or plaster can be a material for some artists, flesh and the body are mine. They are real people but they are also my sculptures and my paintings.

Part of the thing about the headlessness is that she is giving me permission to look inside her armpit and under her breast. There is an implicit permission. The artist and the model together have said "go ahead and look, and see, and learn!"

Yes, it is a surprise even for the model often times, to have their own bodies staged in such a way that it becomes unrecognizable to them as well.

The face obviously is the primary means of expression, but you're taking that out of the equation. The body is doing all the talking. The feet grab my focus in some of them. Maybe that's because feet are average size, more or less, and easily recognizable body parts. But I like that each woman in your work is a colossus. She's a standing sculpture as opposed to a reclining odalisque. Woman were often depicted in repose. You're women are stronger than that...they're erect, if you will.

Yes that's when you realize there is a human being behind the "surface". And there is a play of scale.

That's it I think. The scale is intriguing. The hands change less even as the body grows and changes shape. I'm also taken with the celebration of the woman as emotional humans. They're unabashed and completely content to have someone photograph them. I imagine that some of them were flattered to be asked.

Actually, yes. I get a lot of mixed responses from people. Body image is discussed by nearly everyone, because of fashion and cosmetics as part of consumer culture. It's part of a huge kind of machine. In certain parts of Manhattan you see only skinny ladies with expensive bags and shoes and garments. Even though it looks mainstream a very small percentage of the world actually lives and looks like that. So these ladies don't think about themselves negatively. They understand that people like real women and like the way they look. I think they're quite happy. Of course it's impossible for me to know exactly what is going through their minds, but again, if they were uncomfortable I wouldn't be able to do the shoot.

How did you approach the women to pose for you?

The *Corpo Mecânico* series was shot in Sao Paulo, Brazil. I was initially doing a residency there and I was doing research on the representation of the female body in funk and samba communities, which were very closed. I started going to Samba schools during their rehearsals leading up to the Carnival and asked to do interviews with the dancers and women who were involved with the schools. One of the ladies I met in one of the schools, was interested in pushing body acceptance so she was organizing a plus size contest. Then from those ladies who were involved with the contest, I met others. That is how I made my initial contacts in finding models. I think the reason why the models in the photographs were moving so well in front of the camera, was because they danced and they had an appreciation for music and art as well as social awareness. A lot of the models I worked with believed in the black movement in Brazil, they were activists and educated young black women who worked for their communities. It was interesting for me to work with them and exchange ideas and also learn about their culture. Some of the discussions we had were about how The Carnival and Samba schools are now very commercial and less about the communities in which they were formed. A lot of the dancers in the schools, like the muses and the lead dancers, "Rainha de bateria" are now chosen from celebrities and not from the girls from the communities. There are racial and social divisions. Also, there is a lot of plastic surgery and muscular training so the silhouette of the contemporary samba dancer has completely changed. There is now this weird distorted idea of beauty in Carnival. The female body is very central to the whole spectacle but it is very masculine now.

Fascinating that you use the word "distorted" because which is the distortion? It's all relative. I mean, these bodies are exclusively, inevitably female. No male body can change in such a fecund way. It's amazing that a human body can do that, can change in such a way. The buttocks being higher and the breasts more pendulous and the back of the knees being inscrutable. Your women are convex and concave in other places. They're powerfully unpredictable. Like mountain ranges.

I love that analogy. According to the fashion and beauty industries, the female body is not allowed to age. Any kind of trace of time on a woman's body is considered grotesque.

It is divorced not only from the idea of the traditional gaze but also divorced from sexuality....it's anthropology, really. That is one of the exciting aspects of the work.

You are looking at the nude female human body but you can't even find the body in the picture sometimes. You have to keep looking as the body reveals itself.

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You're attracted to the profiles. Most of the images are profiles or ¾ twist. Not many full frontal images in this body of work. Was that a choice to move away from the portraits you've done before or is that because the profile can emphasize the sculptural aspects of the body?

It's mainly because I kept shooting as the model, then I choose the images that didn't look so still. Even though it's a still shot, I was interested in this idea of capturing movement. I think I wanted the body to be in motion. When it's frontal it's quiet and still. I wanted to capture the idea that there is movement here that is being depicted, even though it's not a moving picture.

True, they are like film stills. Like the work of Muybridge: his horse in motion. Man running. And of course we know that Francis Bacon famously was obsessed with Muybridge's photographic experiments.

Exactly...the Futurists too.

It had a lot to do with the invention of photography.

And the industrial revolution overall. We might be going through a technological revolution at the moment, I don't know. Certainly no artistic revolutions are happening at the moment. If you think about the new forms of technology, though. All the "wearable technology." Not just the Apple watch but these devices that you can put on your body that respond to you. And how we build relationships with machines. The first thing people do when they wake up in the morning is look for their phone. I feel as if technology....maybe it's a movement in time that it's relevant to the idea of movement and speed. That is why the series is titled *Corpo Mecânico*, mechanical body. There is flesh and it is a human body. It's very real. And as you know I'm not working with gymnasts. I shoot very voluptuous ladies. Yet, they look very abstracted.

Guess I should add to my initial observation, the work is painting sculpture, photography, performance and film all in one.

Probably. I was fascinated by the medium. I'm shooting digital now and every time you click on the camera it records on the computer. It is like breathing almost...you can record every second of everything. In the days of analog film you had to stop, load, wait...etc. My process now is more urgent. It's about a moving female nude and how I turn that into a little film or triptych.

Breathing is appropriate metaphor for what's going on here. Sometimes the women are holding their breath. At others it seem as if they're in the act of inhaling and you snap. The triptych really accentuates this impression. It's like: this is what the body does...it's living in this moment and then the middle moment and then the next...it seems to me, they breathe. In a way, any good sculpture breathes in a way. You want a sculpture to breathe.

When I'm shooting it is very quiet...

So you can hear their breath?

It is very tense, in a way. Me and the model...no big crew of light assistants. It is intimate, I work in a small setting with a lot of concentration. It makes them pay attention. There is only the sound of the camera and whatever sounds the two of us make.

It's like a dance.

Yes, and at the end of the day we're both exhausted.