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The Body and Its Beautiful Damage



Evan Penny is not a storyteller. Over the last 35 years the Toronto-based sculptor has established an international reputation for making portraits of compelling variety and virtuosity. He has rendered, stretched and phased the human body in ways that were both appealing and discomfiting. The result of his combined observation and invention is a bewildering range of images that showed what our bodies looked like and what they could be made to look like. The portraits were both extremely specific and strangely generic; in the “Backs” he pushed the figure as far into abstraction as he could while still retaining the look of the human, and in the “No One – In Particular” series he created a collection of people who were complete fabrications. They were remarkably effective physiognomies that displayed little affect. When he turned to living subjects, as he did in *Murray*, *Aerial #2* and in a number of self-portraits he has produced intermittently over his career, he realized exacting figures of indeterminate function. What he uncompromisingly avoided was narrative. He wanted his portraits to exist as objects and not as subjects engaged in living a life.

Now Penny has consolidated what he knows about sculpture to become a storyteller. In “Ask Your Body,” an exhibition of six sculptures and two photographs, curated by Michael Short, that will run concurrently

with this year’s Venice Biennale, he has fashioned a narrative about sacrifice and the broken body. What connects this recent work with his earlier production is the body itself, a subject that has functioned from the beginning as both a psychic catalyst and a material talisman. Through his hands he has shaped and touched into being a sculptural world of unusual intensity.

The conversation in which he is engaged is with himself and art history. Four of the sculptures in the exhibition have been generated out of work by other artists; his *Marsyas* references a Roman copy of a Greek sculpture from the third century BCE; *Hanging Torso* is a response to a first- or second-century Roman fragment of a centaur in the Met; the *Homage to Holbein* adds an attenuated third dimension to the 16th-century German artist’s painting of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, and *Self-Portrait After Géricault’s ‘Fragments Anatomiques’* is modelled on the small paintings of dissected limbs that were studies for *The Raft of the Medusa*.

An awareness of the pictorial achievements of the past is not new for Penny, but what is unprecedented is his use of his own body to cast the dissected limbs for the Géricault floor sculpture. It’s in that sense that his sculpture is a self-portrait, and it explains the inclusion in the exhibition of the

1 & 3. Evan Penny, *Homage to Holbein*, 2015, silicone, hair, polychromed wood, 424 x 31 x 15 cm. All images courtesy the artist and Trépanier Baer Gallery, Calgary.

2. *Hanging Torso*, 2016, silicone, pigment, hair, steel, 65 x 40 x 30 inches.

4 & 5. *Marsyas*, 2016, silicone, pigment, hair, aluminum, wood, 126 x 13.5 x 16 inches.

6. *Young Self, Variation #4*, 2011, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, aluminum, 34 x 30 x 24 inches.

7. *Old Self, Variation #4*, 2011, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, aluminum, 34 x 30 x 24 inches.



two self-portraits from 2011. (There is also a pair of black and white photographs that correspond to the sculptures). *Old Self* and *Young Self* are themselves enigmas of self-representation; the former is titled "Portrait of the Artist as He Will (Not) Be," and the latter "Portrait of the Artist as He Was (Not)." The parenthetical words in the naming are equivocal abdications; he gets to be and not be, in different ways, at the same time.

The exhibition has been carefully chosen and has taken on the character of an installation. Each of the pieces will be apprehended at different levels in the church (we will look up 10 feet to see the *Marsyas* and down to the floor to see the assorted arms and legs that comprise the "Fragments Anatomiques"); each will have its own particular lighting, from dramatic to atmospheric; and their collective arrangement will emphasize the body and the beautiful damage it undergoes. The church of San Samuele is the ideal site for Penny's delicate embodiments; built in 1008, it

burned down and has been reconstructed twice, with the last addition occurring in 1952.

As goes the building, so has the body gone. *Marsyas* is haunting and in the church his pagan lineage weaves into a Christian narrative web. Penny's iteration of the figure is exquisite; his slightly elongated form is both a balm to the eye and a blow to the soul. *Hanging Torso* enters our consciousness doubly as well; we admire its mass and texture and recoil from its cicatriced brutality. The title of the exhibition, "Ask Your Body," is both a declaration and a question. It tells us where to concentrate our attention and when we arrive, it presents us with an inescapable tension. ■

"Evan Penny: Ask Your Body" will be on exhibition at the Chiesa di San Samuele from May 10 through to November 26 during the 2017 Venice Biennale. It has been organized by Trépanier Baer, Calgary. The exhibition will be accompanied by a French and English catalogue published by Skira Editore.