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Visions of a Fractured Self: THEM at Schinkel Pavillon

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Alina Szapocznikow, Alisa Baremboym, Aleksandra Domanovic, Sarah Lucas, Katja Novitskova, Carolee Schneemann and Anicka Yi. Exhibition view, Schinkel Pavillon 2015. Photo: Timo Oehler

“The old idea of skin as a sacred cloak with two main jobs – to seal off the vulnerable organs inside us and define our individuality – has given way to a sense of how mingling, malleable, and porous the body really is. At a cellular level, we’re stunningly mutable, not just in our lifestyles, which we always knew, but in our bits and pieces.” – Diane Ackerman, “The Human Age”.

The group show “THEM” parses together signature works by Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow with works by six other female artists who also deal with a fractured vision of self. Identification of the ‘self’, in this case, is understood in relation to the female body. However, the body in this case is a terrorised body, dissolved, dismembered, mechanised, constrained and isolated.

For the exhibition, curator Nina Pohl selectively chose recent works by four dynamic post-digital artists including Alisa Baremboym, Aleksandra Domanovic, Katja Novitskova and Anicka Yi along with video documentation of Carolee Schneemann’s seminal and orgiastic performance “Meat Joy” (1964) and the sculpture “Bunny Gets Snookered #3” (1997) by the wry and bawdy artist Sarah Lucas. Pohl’s venture to update and invoke the prophetic significance of Szapocznikow’s work in contemporary art history elegantly succeeds on many levels. Concise threads of association read clearly throughout the exhibition – voicing strong female positions, presenting innovative use of material and aesthetic form, and translating the biomorphic elements of the works into the viewers experience through exhibition design.

At the entryway, you are greeted with Novitskova's "Approximation (Snail)" (2014). It is a freestanding blown up photograph mounted on aluminium of a woman's hand with shiny lacquered nails. The hand holds the hard, spiraled shell as the tentacles extend into the air and the snail's muscular feet droop freely like the flesh of a woman's labia. The sculpture sits at the edge of a yellow floor-path, leading the way into the womb of the exhibition. Dismembered body parts are scattered throughout with an assertion of human presence. Veins of electricity coarse through Szapocznikow's gravity defying lamp sculptures like "Lampe-Bouche" (1966) or "Sculpture-Lampe" (1970) with floating mouths and disambiguated breasts lifted up by the tip of a fleshy pink phallus. On an adjacent wall, Szapocznikow's "Photosculptures" (1971-2007) are mounted, balancing out the literal staging with a formal meditation on the profound basics of giving life to sculptural form.

Sickness, disease and distortion are indicated with Szapocznikow's surrealistic "Cendrier de célibataire" (1972), a double-sided decapitated head with faint ivory skin and pale pink lips, filled to the brim with cigarette butts and ashes. In this petite sculpture, only the lower half of the face is visible as if the mind has been consumed and burned away. The work resonates deeply with Anicka Yi's "235,681K of Digital Spit", (2010), across the room – a clear plastic Longchamp purse half-way filled with the gnarled flesh of chopped up tripe, suspended in the bubbling muck of transparent hair gel. Consumer aspirations are reflected in the symbol of the pristine vessel, however the contents reveal an unstable and volatile rot.



Anicka Yi, 235,681K of Digital Spit, 2010. PVC and leather bag, hair gel, tripe. Unique, Courtesy 47 Canal. Exhibition view, THEM, Schinkel Pavillon, 2015. Photo: Timo Oehler

Recurring industrial elements with subtle undertones of violence and aggression express a continuing struggle against power structures. Lucas' anthropomorphic body of stuffed tan tights is held captive by a steel C-clamp, binding it in place to the red office chair on which it sits. Domanovic's disturbing carbon-fibre mechanical arms reach out from the wall, frozen in action between violent self-affliction and questionable self-care. At the center of the exhibition stand two cylindrical towers on which Alisa Barenboym's "Grapeshot" (2015) sculptures are held high. Blatant ovarian references with the stacks of spheres are subdued by the fact that these ceramic and resin works are modeled after an early design for

close range shrapnel used in naval warfare. Air bubbles and printed silk float within the transparent resin base at which lays an exposed ceramic nut. At the center of the sculpture, the long bolt meant to hold the "grapeshot" together hovers just an inch above. Insertion, completion, security in the form is unfulfilled suggesting the violent potential to collapse or explode at any moment. The power inherent in this combination of works leaves little else to be desired.

It is a relevant and timely exhibition to see considering the growing discourse around imbalance of female participation and recognition in the art world. It is a feminist exhibition. It is sensual, sexual and visceral. It is a hip exhibition of rising art stars. The highly aestheticized presentation platforms built to model an amoeba that 'carries and encloses the sculptures' seems like something you might rather find at a design fair. However, don't be misled by such superficial and encapsulating boundaries of judgment. The sincere strength in the exhibition lies in its adherence to historical positioning. Szapocznikow was a Polish Holocaust survivor. She lived through the Pabianice and Lodz ghettos, through Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. She bore first hand witness to an unrivalled experience of barbarism, finding solace in art as a creative outlet, dying prematurely of cancer at the age of forty seven. After World War I and World War II, the Dadaists, the Surrealists and the Expressionists reflected on the brutality of their social environments and the shattering of humanity with deconstructed, disembodied and afflicted forms.

While the profundity of terror that Szapocznikow lived through cannot be compared to what we face in the modern Western world, there are some interesting parallels that may be drawn between the post-war fragmentation and understanding of "self" with the sense of violence and battle for "self" that we are facing in a post-digital society. As we race at an exponentially accelerating pace towards the 'Singularity' – merging human intelligence with machine intelligence, an effusive terror looms of the imminent fall and destruction of mankind. A fractured, alienated and compartmentalized vision of humanity subsumes our understanding of stability in wholeness. What both haunts and holds this exhibition together are the artists' sensitive and foretelling responses to social rupture. The self does not exist in isolation. We are "them" who create and manifest the world around us as actors and receivers. "THEM – that's them, that's us".

Text by Arielle Bier

THEM is on show at Schinkel Pavillon from 13 June – 26 July 2015