

Invisible Corporeal: Sophie Kahn's 'The Waxen and the Fleshy'

By Jeff Khan



In our hypermediated, visually-fixated present moment, the body is manifested in multifarious ways. Whilst hypersexualised imagery of (surgically-enhanced, photoshop-augmented) bodies - both male and female - persists in popular culture to an extreme which renders their implicit gender politics dangerously banal and ubiquitous, a simultaneous obsession with the corporeal body's inner workings and anatomy continues to surface. The persistence of medical TV dramas, and their Reality TV counterparts, is one such manifestation. Concurrently, German professor Gunther von Hagens' controversial *Body Worlds* exhibitions, which have toured internationally and feature plastinated, partially-dissected human cadavers; and his *Anatomy for Beginners* television series, made for

BBC TV in the UK and recently screened in Australia on SBS, dissect and expose the body's physical contents for the scrutiny (and entertainment) of the home viewer.

Von Hagens' efforts to bring anatomy into the public arena echo the historical phenomenon of the *theatrum anatomicum* – the arena in which human and animal cadavers were publicly dissected for 'educative' purposes – albeit on a mass scale and in a globally-syndicated marketplace. This is but one example of how the practices and obsessions which historically circulate around the body can persist, morph and mutate to inform our present understandings and assumptions. But what kind of information are we receiving about ourselves through these forums, and to what end?

In contrast with such spectacularised, impersonal representations of the body, Sophie Kahn's digital prints and sculptural works mobilise the intersection of technology and the body to enact anxieties around the limits of our knowledge and perception, especially with regards to the less visible aspects of our corporeity. Kahn's ongoing experiments in self-portraiture via post-photographic imaging technologies utilise 3D laser-scanning equipment designed to image and model architectural surfaces. The instability of the body, its continually fluctuating surfaces and internal processes, both conscious and unconscious – its *life* – is something which this soft- and hardware is not designed to 'read'. The resulting representations appear incomplete, pixelated and fragmented: sealed in a state of becoming - or decay. They seem to have partially materialised and are suspended in a void of negative space. Printed into two- and three-dimensional forms, the prone, vulnerable, monochromatic state of Kahn's body-portraits recalls a phalanx of image references, from death masks and funerary portraiture, to medical imaging technologies, to ancient ruins. These implications – of illness, mortality, mourning and temporality – connect with emotional, psychological and cultural states which manifest through the body yet are not so easily reconciled with the sensationalised body-images we receive through popular culture.

How much of the body's inner state can be known, let alone communicated? What of our vulnerabilities, and the connections and slippages between body, psyche, and culture? Kahn's elaborate and elusive portraits are borne of technological advancement, yet question the use of such technologies in fixing and defining our own embodiment and selfhood. In a culture in which every aspect of the material and corporeal world – including our own physicality – is increasingly visible, quantified and commodified, Kahn's work poetically yet powerfully insists on the body as a site of flux and change: of transgression and fragility which elides as much as depends upon the technologies which sustain it and deliver it into the present cultural moment.

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