

Catalogue Essay by Robin Reisenfeld for "Anatomical Attitudes," Heskin Contemporary" March 2007.

*"Art is always giving back, at a particular moment, what technology is taking away."* Dave Hickey

In the early 1990s' Dave Hickey perceptively coined the term "subversive beauty" to describe the re-introduction of the power of aesthetic pleasure within art making. Each of the seven artists in *Anatomical Attitudes*, David Baskin, Diana Jensen, Jenny Laden, Joan Linder, Caterina Leitao, Leemour Pelli and Martin Wilner respond not only to today's pressing concern with technology but also art's seductive power to persuade through the attention to its visceral and tactile aspects. These artists, in their re-configuration of the human form, celebrate the quirky, imperfect, marginal, peripheral and everyday as an antidote to a quickly encroaching cyborg future. In a hyper-tech and media-saturated culture of celebrity perfection and products that claim to enhance our lives, the artists here turn to traditional processes and mark-making systems to register their resistance. Nevertheless, their visual look does not evoke a nostalgic recovery of the past, as might first be expected. Rather, they introduce nontraditional supports; paper, Mylar, resin and polyurethane to the materials of paint, watercolor and pen and ink. By linking technique and materials to visual idioms that prefer the fragment and metamorphosis to the autonomous whole, these artists call into question media and advertising attitudes towards the body through the application of the very same dissemination terms often found in popular culture.

Diana Jensen's recent *New York Story* (2006) series relies upon found, faded snapshots of holiday events and celebrations taken from 1970's anonymous family albums. The artist uses a cutout format to mount her close-up views of hand gestures and facial expressions. This choice allows the artist to recapture the exchange of cues and conversational signs that once gave resonance to these events. However, Jensen's process destabilizes specific meaning through the use of heavily applied gestural strokes that interrupt the indexical relation between photographic image and the object perceived. She further reminds us of the elusive nature of memory by displaying the fragments in various juxtapositions. Whereas the tactile weight of the paint registers the idea of the event, the additive aspect of the separate pieces points to the intangible nature of conversation. Jensen expressively portrays through her format and the various re-configurations of the human form, whether in the manner of a flirtatious side-ways glance, a studied gaze, or a braceleted arm, the effervescence of these long forgotten moments.

Caterina Leitao's new body of work *The Character, the Objects and the Landscapes* (2007) draws from her earlier series *Survival System, Urban Action Catalogue*, (2003). Similar to Jensen, Leitao constructs an interchangeable vocabulary of visual elements as a means to create an associative, fluid reading of unfolding events. However it is not the celebrations of family occasions within

daily living that interests Leitao, but our contested relation to nature and media's ability to play upon our fears of disaster, natural or otherwise. In her imaginary bleak, black and white dystopia, Leitao gingerly leads us through an ominous natural environment stripped of vegetation and living creatures. She further undermines our firm footing by eradicating a clear figure/ ground relationship within her pictorial composition. Instead, throughout we encounter mechanical detritus from previous cataclysmic events that oddly transform into tubular equipment attached to our safety suits. Leitao imagines these cable-like shapes as both an umbilical cord linking us to the environment and as a security device that protects us from possible surrounding contaminants. Far from the Arcadian landscapes of yesteryear, such as those produced by the Hudson River School painters, nature has been reduced to denuded trees and an amoeba-shaped primordial goo that suspiciously resembles an oil spill. Paradoxically, Leitao observes, in our attempt to control our environment and tame nature, we are more than ever in danger of losing it and left with an airless, artificial world of approximations. Leitao extends this paradox visually by relying upon one of the most early and simple tools of depiction; pen and ink as a means to create her *us versus them*, sci-fi vision.

Revealing stylistic similarities to R. Crumb's graphic line, the works of Martin Wilner and Joan Linder also rely upon the simple tools of pen and ink to render the body. Wilner's *Journal of Evidence Weekly Vol. 133* (2006) records the conversations and interaction of people with whom he rides the subway, in which he makes his daily commute to his day position as a psychiatrist. A stream of continuous dialogue spews across the center of the page while disembodied heads and legs of various shapes and sizes comically protrude towards the top and bottom. In an imaginative compositional manner that visually portrays the space where the private and public realm collide, Wilner conveys with acuity and humor an underground world whose powerful reality competes with the urban life above. The bubbles of text woven together not only visually create a compositional continuity and sense of progression in an otherwise inscrutable world, but also effectively display the cacophonous energy where various socio-economic classes from all generations jam together and are treated equally. Snippets of everyday conversation articulating desire, frustrations voiced of a night-before adventure, solicitation for money, interspersed with the crackling conductor loudspeaker, all jockey for attention with the occasional invectives and our inadvertent bodily utterances.

Alternatively, Linder uses the traditional means of mark-making and printmaking to explore issues of the body as it relates to notions of sexual voyeurism. As an extension of her earlier project that sought to reverse the male gaze through images of the objectified male nude, here Linder mostly turns to looking at herself. She acknowledges that this new work partially stems from the wish to gain a more sympathetic understanding of one's desire to control through looking. In self-bound portraits such as *Trussed, Blue Rope* (2005) she blurs the boundary between one's subjective and objective identity by referencing the

fetishized self through its absence. Pursuing this theme further in *Untitled 1*, *Untitled 2* and *Untitled 4* (2006) Linder approaches it with a sense of scientific inquiry and curiosity. By depicting herself bounded and blindfolded as well as making detail studies of the anatomical limbs and joints where the ropes are tied, Linder approaches her subject with both a psychological as well as a detached interest in the topic.

David Baskin also examines notions of sexuality and voyeurism in his investigation of the intersection between art, commerce and design. With his sculptural work, *Three Cosmetics* (2006) Baskin interrogates how advertising messages persuade us to consume. Taking his forms from consumer design products, *Three Cosmetics* unmasks the phallic forms of personal hygiene bottles used to subliminally communicate sexuality. Cast in pink industrial polyurethane, the product's design stands in for the body organ, in which, as Baskin observes, a displacement occurs. In this case, an erotic meaning emerges and the product becomes a substitute for virility and a commodity fetish.

In a more introspective and individual manner, Leemour Pelli turns to anatomical and skeletal parts as a means to give physical presence to intangible emotional states and allude to the porous border between inner and outer states of reality. In her black and white paintings *Skeleton I* (2005) and *Skeleton II* (2005) she places single figures silhouetted against an empty backdrop with a signature smudged rib cage situated within an undefined space. Whether working in painting, sculpture or the print medium, Pelli's interest is in conveying the tenuous nature of the self's identity. Just as Pelli's work expresses the correspondence between one's psychological interiority and its corporeal embodiment, by contrast, Jenny Laden's waif-like, weightless, faerie creature personifies her alter ego. Upon questioning her sources, Laden acknowledges that *Flouncy* (2006) stems from the imagination and was invented as a break from her larger body of photo-based self-portraiture. Half Japanese mange, half-elfin, *Flouncy* (2006) is comprised of layered sheets of Mylar painted in jewel-like complementary colors. *Flouncy's* elaborate headdress, made up of ribbon-like tendrils and mosaic pieces frame her over-size eyes and long lashes as she coyly gazes out at us. Composed with a complete lack of skeletal armature, this ethereal sylph seems to mock our solid weight and mass that keeps us earthbound.

Whether advancing the social, individual, imaginary or a psycho-sexual persona, the artists exhibited in *Anatomical Attitudes* rely upon intimate means of expression. Through their reconfiguration of the body, they persuade us to look closely again at familiar techniques in order to test our assumptions towards the self.