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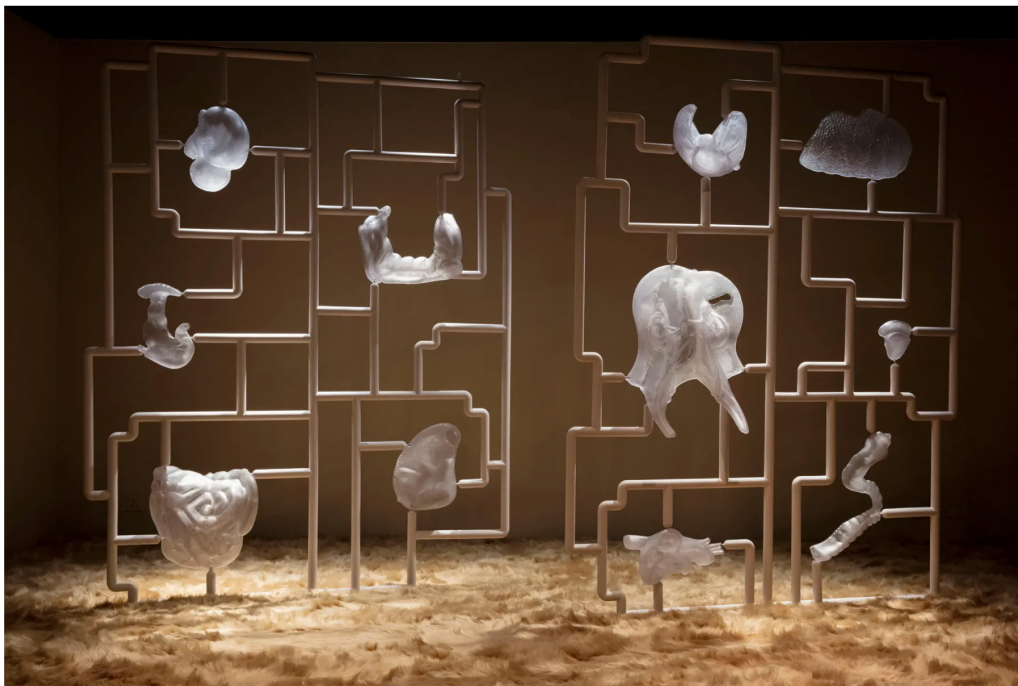
Zoë Lescaze, "The Artists Finding New Ways to Depict the Human Body," *T Magazine*,
February 21, 2025.

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ARTS AND LETTERS

The Artists Finding New Ways to Depict the Human Body

At a time of increasing anxiety about physical anatomy, figurative sculptors are breathing new life into one of the world's oldest media.



Jes Fan's 2018 sculpture "Visible Woman," which includes 3-D-printed resin casts, is a nonliteral depiction of the human body. Courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

By Zoë Lescaze

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520 W 25th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212 680 9467 Fax 212 680 9473 info@petzel.com www.petzel.com

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IT'S A CONFUSING time to have a body. On the one hand, we have more ways to modify flesh than ever before. We regulate hormones and heartbeats, restore lost hearing, replace faulty livers and reconstruct faces. And yet the body feels increasingly vulnerable. Between deepfakes and the distortions of social media, appearances are subject to scrutiny and doubt. Covid-19 revealed how even slight physical differences can be fatal. Subject to changing laws and environmental crises beyond our control, few of us have much authority over our corporeal selves.

Amid this uncertainty, artists are depicting the body with fresh urgency. "The idea of the body as material and not as something necessarily coherent is something that I see artists taking up in really compelling new ways," said the curator Lanka Tattersall, who organized the recent exhibition "Vital Signs: Artists and the Body" at New York's Museum of Modern Art. In their work, she continued, the body reveals itself as "matter that can be molded and looked at, made pliable and shifted."

"Did you know the word 'norm' came from a carpenter's tool?" asked the Canadian-born artist Jes Fan, 34, who was raised in Hong Kong and lives in New York City. In his studio, an industrial loft in the Brooklyn Army Terminal, supposedly normal bodies were nowhere in sight. We stood surrounded by cascading piles of partial casts of friends' torsos, an undulating resin form derived from a CT scan of Fan's pelvis and a metal armature draped in crinkled folds of yuba, the rubbery skin that forms on the surface of heated soy milk.

In Fan's work, soy has served as a symbolic androgyne. A source of both pharmaceutical estrogen and testosterone, it reappears in various forms — from solid bean to simmering liquid. A literal and metaphorical fluidity pervades the sculptures: They tend to look as though they're oozing, dripping, melting and merging. "Everything's transitory, nothing is stagnant," he said. That philosophy, more and more, is guiding current approaches to the body.

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Kayode Ojo's "Overdressed (Emerald)," from 2022, includes materials like heat-resistant synthetic wigs and faux fur. Courtesy of the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin

The artists pursuing figurative sculpture today don't share a unified strategy, style or concern. They work with plaster, bronze, resin, fabric, motors, glass and clay. They use everyday objects and sometimes more corporeal materials: semen, urine, teeth and hair. Some make legible figures, while others skew toward abstraction, creating works that don't even resemble bodies in the traditional sense but remain eerily, unmistakably real. What they do have in common is a suspicion of physical perfection. Ideals that suffused Western art for centuries — statuesque proportions, whiteness — are in their hands no more desirable than they are attainable. Young sculptors are poking holes in “the idea of the Cartesian man as the center of the universe,” said the curator Cecilia Alemani, who

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made physical metamorphosis an organizing principle of the Venice Biennale in 2022.
But in the absence of bygone standards emerge bold new freedoms.

HUMANS HAVE BEEN depicting bodies for thousands of years, but figurative sculpture
grows more conspicuous at moments when physical fragility becomes impossible to
ignore.

The mechanized slaughter of World War I shredded old notions of decency and valor,
and the shattered, burned and blind survivors who emerged from the rubble made a
mockery of classical ideals. Cyborg blends of human bodies, machines and mass-
produced goods defined Dada and Surrealist art in the years that followed, capturing the
trauma of the era but also the thrill of reinvention. Androgyny, queer culture and a new
sexual freedom flourished in the wreckage.



Tschabalala Self's 2023 sculpture "Heroine Inspired by the Fantasy of Saartjie Baartman in Paris 1," which plays with stereotypes of Black bodies and eroticism. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/Vienna. © Tschabalala Self. Photo: Lance Brewer

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Figurative sculpture filled galleries again during the 1980s and '90s, when the AIDS crisis transformed certain bodies into objects of fear and distaste. The artist Robert Gober responded to the panic over contagion, cleanliness and the seepage between public and private spheres with a series of realistic legs and feet that protruded from walls, usually at floor height, as though the bodies to which they belonged had collapsed. Some sprouted phallic candles, which seemed to suggest a vigil for and of the flesh, while other limbs were penetrated by lesion-like sink drains. At the time, the idea of a universal body had become passé. "There is no 'human' body anymore," the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell wrote in 1995, "there is the gendered body, the desiring body, the racialized body, the medical body, the sculpted body, the techno-body, the body in pain or pleasure."

Many young sculptors today are continuing to address how bodies are represented in public discourse. Today, however, sensuality and leisure have eclipsed images of abjection and vulnerability. Portraying the body at ease has become a means of dismantling pervasive representations of minorities as victims and villains incapable of rest or everyday intimacy.

Tschabalala Self, for example, makes sculptures of self-possessed Black figures in repose. At the most recent Paris edition of Art Basel, Self, 34, who was born in Harlem and lives in upstate New York, presented "Heroine Inspired by the Fantasy of Saartjie Baartman in Paris," a pair of life-size sculptures completed in 2023. Each depicts a fictional character based on a young Khoekhoe woman from what's now South Africa who was exhibited as a freak and a sexual object in Europe during the early 19th century. After her death in 1815, Baartman's genitals and other organs were stored in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, where her skeleton remained on public view until the 1970s. With her sculptures, Self imagines a different life for Baartman, portraying her as a free Parisian woman enjoying the safety and privacy of her home. In one sculpture, the voluptuous seated figure is topless. In the other, she stands, wearing a fishnet bra, a self-assured smile and a sheer polka-dot skirt over a turquoise thong, as though she were preparing for a night out. The semi-nudity might startle viewers sensitive to the hypersexuality that was projected onto Baartman during her life, but Self rejects a logic in which Black dignity hinges on modesty. "I don't feel like I need to cover them as a means of elevating them," she said of her sculptures.

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Andra Ursuta's "Yoga Don't Help" (2021), which depicts a body in a state of degradation and failure. Courtesy of the artist, David Zwirner and Ramiken. Photo: Dario Lasagni

FOR MUCH OF art history, figurative sculpture was steeped in a sense of the eternal. Ancient statues of leaders, heroes and gods tended to embody what their creators believed (or hoped) would endure forever. Now figurative sculpture reflects profound anxieties over permanence. Our bodies are bombarded by stuff — for example, the microplastic particles of broken-down goods that lodge in our testicles, guts and lungs — and our eyes by an onslaught of images. “When I think about all the garbage that is made and bought on Amazon every day, I find it absolutely terrifying and overwhelming,” said the Romanian-born artist Andra Ursuta, 45. “As someone who

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makes objects, I need to resolve that for myself, or whatever I make needs to engage with that." Ursuta, who is based in London and New York, is known for unpredictable, darkly humorous work in which the body is usually a site of tragicomic degradation. In recent years, she has created monstrous cast-glass creatures that combine her own face, limbs and torso with cheap Halloween props, plastic bottles, bondage masks and other kinds of fetish gear. The detritus of overproduction that lingers on in landfills is part of us, her work suggests, an extension of our physical selves and a monument. Ursuta first exhibited the series in 2019 at the Venice Biennale, as she entered her 40s. "Your body starts to change, you become aware of all the indignities that are coming down the pike," she said. "Some things are going to spill out or leak or droop despite your best efforts." The sculptures, with titles like "Yoga Don't Help," distill the anxiety of inevitable bodily failure. In Venice, Ursuta poured a little alcohol inside the hollow works — a riposte to the cliché of female bodies as vessels. The booze, fittingly, ate through the adhesive inside the sculptures, threatening to dribble out.

The perils of self-presentation in an age of heightened exposure find keen expression in the seductive, disconcerting sculptures of the American artist Kayode Ojo, 34. To create "Ice Queen" (2020), Ojo sheathed two chairs with chrome-plated legs in matching white sequined dresses. The identical chairs face each other, the dresses linked at the wrists by chains of steel key rings emerging from the sleeves, as though two headless divas were holding hands — or as though a single woman were coldly regarding her own reflection. Swiss Army knives, blades out, dangle in place of fingers.

The various components of "Ice Queen" are balanced on vertical stacks of rectangular plastic boxes — Ojo never fastens, glues or screws together the elements in his sculptures. A sense of precarity haunts the work, "whether it's economic precarity or social precarity," said Ojo, who was born in Cookeville, Tenn., and currently lives in New York. "Anything could move at any point."

Sculpture is audacious in its demands. Painting tends to hang politely on walls; sculpture takes up space. We take representations of the body personally and react with a curiosity, empathy or disgust rarely elicited by abstract cubes or hunks of metal. In our doubles, we recognize our own vulnerability or recall the intrinsic marvels of being inside breathing, sensing bodies in constant flux — works in progress shaped by labor, genes, vanity and, ultimately, time.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/21/t-magazine/contemporary-body-figurative-sculpture.html>