

STRANGER

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The figure is one of the most recognizable forms in art history. Throughout time, artists have used depictions of the body to confront humanity, channeling both desire and anxiety. As artistic movements and cultural zeitgeists shift, the figure has gone through cycles of presence and absence. There are moments when it has been decidedly marginalized, when its rendering, as image or object, has seemed retrograde, or even “heretical.”¹ Today, with the ubiquity of new technologies that redefine the ways in which our bodies interface with reality and present new possibilities of existence, the figure has re-emerged with a sense of urgency.² This feeling of approaching a threshold also causes backward glances at the profusion of styles, conventions, and iconography from art history and popular culture, which artists mimic, blend, and confound.

Across a wide range of mediums and genres, the nine artists in *Stranger* explore the body as a powerful and perplexing vessel. Together they convey a deep sense of time, spanning the past, present, and future, with references ranging over ancient relics, classical portraiture, and digital avatars. Though the figures appear vaguely familiar at first, this recognition fades, only serving to heighten the elusive nature of these fragments, shape-shifters, and uncanny stand-ins. While evoking our own memories and dreams, they also push back, asserting personality and an autonomous place in the world. Through the aesthetic potential of encounter—meeting another presence on the canvas, pedestal, or screen—each work reveals a different aspect of how we locate ourselves in the world. These strangers prompt us to reflect on our own physicality and continually evolving (and dissolving) notion of being.

Huma Bhabha’s sculptures, paintings, and collages are infused with a chaotic temporality. Diverse references, including Greek, Syrian, and Persian influences, African masks, Modernism, Expressionism, contemporary science fiction, and horror films, collide in her bold forms. Through this mélange, the figure emerges as an adamant expression, one that moves through time and place, broken down and reconstituted.³ As Bhabha describes, she is “fascinated

by archetypes—figurative forms that belong to the collective visual knowledge ... They stand simultaneously for the beginning and end.”⁴ The figure *insists*.

Originally carved from a block of cork and then cast in bronze, Bhabha’s sculpture *Constantium* (2014) has a rough, craggy surface, as if it were an ancient artifact worn down through generations. In contrast, bright painted markings—outlines of the eyes, breasts, muscles, and a radiating burst of color from the back of the head—look like fresh, ritualistic insignia. The torso appears human but the chunky feet resemble talons or paws; part human, part animal, it radiates an otherworldly power. “Constantium” comes from the Latin word “constans” which means constant, persistent, standing firm. Up close to the sculpture, you can feel its heaviness, an immovability emphasized by a chain tethering the figure to a base topped by a hinged door, as if it were standing guard over something valuable, or Pandora-esque. In contrast to the imposing presence of *Constantium*, *Sherry* (2015) is more delicate and sinister. Assembled from two blocks of form-pressed Styrofoam stacked to resemble a torso and limbs, its face emerges through smudged and gauged-out shapes, hazy yet distinctive. Nimble and seemingly precarious, *Sherry* appears like an apparition possessing cast-off packaging.

Emergent faces also populate Bhabha’s *Untitled* (2013-2015) collaged drawings. Outlined in thick, gestural pastel, they morph: some more alien-like, with smooth heads and fanged mouths, others veering into animal hybrids with pointed ears and downcast snouts, and a few recalling human skulls. The collaged images, primarily cut-outs from wildlife calendars, disrupt facial recognition. While representing an idealized notion of nature and freedom, they also conjure viciousness (they are all hunters) and unpredictability. Bhabha has remarked of these works, “It does sometimes feel as though the monster were looking back at you. Maybe they are all self-portraits.”⁵ Mirroring gives these works their forceful presence; they fiercely stare at viewers, and, just as they might articulate the artist’s own sensibilities, they draw out others’ unruly humors.

Such constitutive gazes, though decidedly more personable, take hold in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's portraits, which peer, beam, and glare at viewers with powerful self-assurance. Rendered in oil paint and reminiscent of 16th- through 19th-century realist and romantic painters, Yiadom-Boakye's figures are not painted from life, or even from photographs.⁶ Instead, the artist draws from her own mental archive of art history, popular culture, memories, and impressions that coalesce into new forms.⁷ This makes her figures both familiar (that posture, that shadow, that expression, that shirt) and difficult to pin down. They have been described as "a pantomime of realism, a pastiche of likenesses and resemblances in a sliding scale of the strange and familiar, the vaguely memorable and the utterly de-realized."⁸ As with the five paintings featured in *Stranger*, her works often feature empty, shadowy backgrounds, and clothing that is generically classic. This lack of context frees her subjects, allowing them to dodge presumption that would accompany a particular location in time or place.

The figure in *Wrist Action* (2010) towers over the viewer, filling its large canvas almost entirely. Against the muted palette of black, brown, and white, a bright pink hand, draped casually over crossed knees, jumps out like evidence that something is *off*. Is it a glove? Prosthesis? Erasure? A grin stretches across the figure's face, but the joyfulness doesn't appear completely natural: there's a gloss of charm. In *Concrete* (2010), a woman casts a beguiling glance over her shoulder as if beckoning the viewer to join her as she walks into a soft blue haze, an expansive pictorial atmosphere. *Delivered* (2011) shows only a head closely cropped on a small canvas, setting up a direct face-to-face encounter. But the painted eyes are cast up and sidelong, staring past the viewer with intensity and purpose. When hung together, these personalities configure the room, and you find yourself always sensing your body in shifting relation to them, their eyes following. Yiadom-Boakye makes her paintings in a single sitting, and this contributes to their liveliness, the energy of coming into being, a sense that they are not of the past but continually present. On the medium itself, the artist says: "It moves like a skin."⁹ This flesh is only gently held in place, breath inhaled, pose struck—these enigmatic beings receive our looks but don't wait for them. As Yiadom-Boakye says, "They don't have our concerns, that's for sure. They aren't here. The figures are almost fully liberated, I don't concern them with the worldly. They are superhuman."¹⁰

Sascha Braunig's paintings do have real-life referents (the artist herself, friends, constructed masks, and other props), yet the images appear like hallucinations or fantastic visions. The models are not straightly depicted, rather, they act as transitional parts, lending structure and gravity to elaborated images that have a quality of mimicry or simulation. Braunig has stated: "I don't think of them as being distinct characters—more as subjects or Ur-characters, blanks. They're stand-ins for how I feel. I think they're alive, but I like the ambiguity of that feeling between sentience and death."¹¹ Patterns of stripes, polka dots, and dashes engulf these fragmented and distorted busts in playful, seductive, and slightly sinister ways. The precisely rendered surfaces act like veils for unsettled psychological states, emphasizing the boundary between the exterior and interior.

A floating head composed of tightly wound, flesh-colored chords materializes in *Chur* (2014), evoking brain tissue. In *Untitled* (2011), a face seems to stretch or melt, eyes are wide open but stone-like, waving along with the dark blue and black stripes that cover it and everything behind. In many of Braunig's paintings, the eyes are missing altogether, creating a feeling of impenetrability and the impression of a dream state. In her most recent work, Braunig has begun to explore more abstract indications of the figure as positioned within the illusionistic architecture of the canvas. In *Pillar* (2015), thin bands that mimic the contours of a human face and body confidently stride out from a background of columns. While Braunig's paintings recall the work of surrealist artists such as Kay Sage or the metaphysical art of Giorgio de Chirico, their distinctive personalities root them firmly in the present. More than depicting space, they realize it; rather than merely taking the shape of a body, they seem to contain the *pressure* of one.¹²

Valérie Blass explores the figure through a range of materials and processes, a restless experimentation that produces "strangely familiar hybrid forms."¹³ Even her most reduced and abstracted works strongly evoke the body in their scale, the way they stand, lean, and stretch, the space they claim, and the touch they call out for. *Élongation en forme d'éclair d'une tête de rousse* [Elongation in the shape of a lightning bolt from the head of a redhead] (2007) projects from the wall to the floor in an array of taut, hairy joints. *Ne pas essayer à la maison*

[Do not try this at home] (2014), suggests a narrow torso and head, formed through stretched and interwoven cords of hair that resemble muscle tissue. Perched on the corner of a plinth, it seems to hang its head in contemplation. These works are playful (as expressed in their poetic and jocular titles) but also knotty and bizarre. Hair, an all-too-human texture, becomes abject on something other. Blass's works maintain their postures tentatively, as if, when the viewer turns away, they might again be free to move.

Blass often includes casts of the human body in her work, discombobulated arms and legs with minute details rendered in smooth substances. *Je suis une image* [I am an image] (2015) seems to be caught in a private, intimate moment of dressing or undressing, a silky pair of pink underwear stretched between an ankle and outstretched palm. The cryptic title implies that the three-dimensional figure exists first and foremost as a flattened visual. Seen from the front, the sculpture appears to be a solid form shrouded in a curtain of blonde hair, however, a walk around to the side reveals empty space and fragmented parts. In *Ce Nonobstant* [This, notwithstanding] (2011), an ashen arm emerges from a stone-like monolith, gesturing with a pointed stick. Is this a costume or a confine? A vision from a waking dream? Blass describes the incoherence that she aims for in her sculptures: "By creating works that are deliberately ambiguous, I am initiating a semantic dialogue between object and subject, between what is perceived and what is real, between the arbitrary and the logical."¹⁴ Just as the viewer is drawn in by the hands, the hair, the *human*, they are rebuffed, sidestepped by these wayward forms.

Andro Wekua's sculptures also have a coiled energy, their delicate bodies poised as if in a trance. His work is populated by androgynous, smooth-featured adolescent characters that the artist describes as stand-ins for himself, stating: "They act out what disturbs me, they enable me to become an observer."¹⁵ The defamiliarized faces offer an element of protection and "act like a mask for the whole work."¹⁶ One such enigmatic face is worn by the miniature figure in *Untitled* (2014), whose shiny silver sneakers match her sleek bionic arm. She sits atop a loping wolf, and the pair seem to be quietly determined, on an unknown quest. Made of wax, the slender, almost translucent fingers appear fragile and tentative, a stark contrast to her powerful metallic claw and the beast's heavy bronze body. A juvenile vulnerability emanates from the figure, endearing, yet chilly.

Memory is a central focus of Wekua's work; his art is tied, often ambiguously, to his personal biography and recollections. In 1989, the artist's family fled his birthplace of Sokhumi, Georgia during the civil war, and Wekua has not returned to the coastal town since. Fading impressions of the architecture and landscape, augmented in recent years by digital images found online or shared by friends, infuse his work. The animated video *Never Sleep with a Strawberry in Your Mouth II* (2010/2012) opens on a seaside villa, soaked in hallucinogenic color. Inside, a cast of masked and mannequin characters pace through sprawling rooms and corridors where vivid tableaux bleed into frightening visions.

In one scene a child lies on a table, gazing upwards to stroke the cheek of a worried companion. There is a tender, emotional intensity here, which seems to confuse the mysterious blue creature that materializes in the room. This being also appears puzzled by its own body and movements; it pensively examines its mechanical limbs (strikingly similar to that of the aforementioned sculpture) before striding out towards a massive, blazing sun amid a sky full of floating dolphins. These chimerical scenes elude any definitive interpretation, but they leave the viewer with intense emotional, bodily, and retinal sensations: solitude, fear, loss; warmth, caress, light; and blue, red, gold.

While more directly sourcing his subject matter from the "real," Simon Dybbroe Møller also creates deeply felt, unsettling imagery, drawing attention to the ways in which the things we build, use, and desire are formed in relation to our (very strange) bodies. His installation *Untitled (How does it feel)* (2014) plays with the language of promotion and entertainment, the tri-monitor setup meant to evoke a television store display.¹⁷ Seductive images of food, flowers, landscapes, and a model flash across the screen, interspersed with footage from consumer reviews for the Canon D5 digital camera (fondled, caressed, held up). A deadpan voice-over narrates the frenzied visuals: "We translate what we see into bodily experience with such speed that we can no longer distinguish between eye and muscle ... This is our clay condition ... Here we are with nothing but sunscreen on our bodies ... The tingling sensation of connectedness with the world."¹⁸ Close-ups of hands and mouths squish, chew, and ooze; the sounds of breathing and swallowing are amplified to uncomfortable volumes. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that not everything is as it appears, and the

camera shifts down to reveal the model as a creepy, floating bust, sliced below the shoulders to reveal its meat and hollows. Dybbroe Møller often mines the thin border between desire and disgust, the pangs we feel inside when brought into visceral awareness of our bodies.

Antoine Catala's considerations of images and affect are much more removed. Focused on the cerebral as opposed to the sensory, his works investigate communication and connection, especially as altered and expressed through different technologies. The artist often incorporates moving elements into his work, such as pneumatic pumps that "breathe" and motors that crawl, but he is most concerned with the lives of images.¹⁹ As he describes, "I'm fascinated by images, their psycho-physical perception, and dissemination. Images are shortcuts, hybrids between the virtual and real. The more we surround ourselves with images, the quicker we create an artificial universe around us and we, humans, transform in that man made universe."²⁰

Recently, Catala worked with the ad agency Droga5 to craft a new "brand" for empathy in the digital age, *Distant Feel*. This "cool, detached, focused form of empathy" speaks to the ways in which people observe and connect with others around the world through screens as face-to-face exchanges become less natural.²¹ Catala's *Feel Images* (2015), large photographs printed on fabric, simultaneously evoke connection and distance. Large, stuffed, puffy letters that spell out the words "distant," "feel," and the logo of two facing "e"s are sewn onto their surfaces, distorting the images while making them appear friendly. In *Feel Images (Hug)*, a woman embraces a young boy who gazes out searchingly; *(Distant)* shows one man with a calm, delicate smile absorbed in his smart phone; *(Feel)* presents another staring out longingly. Although familiar people in familiar poses, the subjects feel far away, untouchable. If empathy is, as Catala proposes, "the original OS" its upgrades (which inevitably have bugs, crashes) are illustrated by the figure's various mutations, driven by our shifting capacity for identification.²²

Cécile B. Evans pushes these questions into the virtual realm in the installation *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen* (2014), which explores the ways in which the self is no longer confined to the physical world. The video component features PHIL, a CGI copy of a very famous actor;²³ an invisible woman who "was a figure in

a landscape until someone erased her content aware filter;"²⁴ Yowane Haku, a holographic pop star developed in Japan AGNES, the bot that Evans created for the Serpentine Galleries' website; and many others. The invisible woman is especially wry when it comes to her disappearance ("You know what they say about older women ...").²⁵ The overall mood of the piece is melancholic: longing for connection and grappling with limitations, vulnerability, and the monotony of forever.

Evans's work raises the question: where can a self be located if not in a physical body? Even though PHIL's textures are not-quite-there imitations, his musculature not-so-naturally articulated (his mouth doesn't even move when he speaks), he is a deeply sympathetic entity. He's funny, insightful, poetic, and acutely aware of his situation as he reflects: "I will always be here. Lurking somewhere on this drive until they drag me to another, more acclimatized drive ... 'What's the weather like,' someone will ask. 'What's the weather?' I'll reply."²⁶ PHIL's lack of physical awareness is emphasized by the tactile aspect of Evans's installation: a plush beige carpet cluttered with printed images related to the video that can be handled and recombined and a rubber tree plant that stands nearby, quietly drinking and breathing in the controlled museum atmosphere. Evans has described her interest in "the possibility 3D video offers to create hyper-real images possessing volume and shape that still remain completely elusive. This disarming sense of immateriality is an important tool for my work."²⁷ Being in nothingness, or being in numbers (code), proposes new, intangible forms for the figure to move through, a new ontology for it to confront. "I really feel like I can touch you," sighs PHIL, "even in this darkness. It goes on forever."²⁸

The indefinite plays a guiding role in Ian Cheng's work. In 2013, he began creating live simulations with computer applications: models that learn, explore, and mutate before our eyes. Building off video game software, Cheng engineers a game that essentially learns to play itself without the need for human intervention. *Something Thinking of You* (2015) features an ambiguous organism ("an animal, a vegetable, a pet, a tamagotchi, a sentience, for you") sensing and responding to its rendered environment, which is littered with rocks, grasses and saplings.²⁹ Once the program is started, there is no pre-

determined end, and no scene will reappear. Playing out in real time, the viewer and the *thing* are in the moment, together.

Cheng's simulations are attempts to understand behavior and how it animates material. As he explains, "The idea of composing with behaviors hopefully leads to being able to test the idea what it means to be non-human. We obviously have human impulses, but simulations will hopefully allow more exposure to the mental practice of embodying say someone else's body, the body of a plant, the body of a virus, of the universe."³⁰ When watching *Something Thinking of You*, absorbed in a bright projection as the darkened room falls away, the mind wanders into this peculiar form and its pixelated tendrils. Watching the amorphous shape maneuver, expand, propel stones, and crawl out of view, it is hard not to lend it sympathetic traits—curious, young, healthy, shy. With an audioscape of caws, chirps, and grunts, the setting hums like a thriving ecosystem. But this is no paradisiacal knoll; the jagged forms and confounding slips between flatness and volume draw the viewer into an erratic, speculative orientation.

There is a certain tension that pervades *Stranger*, a push and pull between seduction and repulsion, immersion and illusion, familiar and bizarre. This tension articulates the body as a boundary: shapes, parts, and skins that create interiority and support an inside that moves independently from the out. Each figure we encounter mirrors something in us and brings something of the other inside. As much as it is formal, the figure is also deeply somatic; we can't help but *feel* it. These moments of recognition reveal how we imagine ourselves in the world—the ways in which we transcend our bodies and the ways in which we cannot escape them. While our human, flesh-and-blood structure appears relatively constant, staying essentially the same over centuries, this is a material delusion. As an integrated part of a variable, chaotic world, the body itself is an ever-changing system. Continually analyzed, augmented, consumed, and destroyed in different ways, it becomes animated by new behaviors, fantasies, and fears. The figure is enduring and persistent, and we will never be through wrestling with it because the questions it poses are ultimately unanswerable.

¹ James Lingwood, "After the Fall: The Re-emergence of the Figure in Sculpture," in *The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*, ed. Ralph Rugoff (London: Hayward Publishing, 2014), 35.

² As curator Ralph Rugoff has written, "It is tempting to say that we are in the midst of yet another figurative 'revival.'" Rugoff, "The Human Factor," *The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*, 9.

³ Bhabha's birthplace of Northern Pakistan—a region known for its collision and remnants of ancient and contemporary cultures—has had a profound impact on her approach to blending styles and referents. See Karen Reosenberg, "Totems That Tell About the Past and the Future: Huma Bhabha: *Unnatural Histories* at MoMA PS1," *New York Times* online, December 6, 2012.

⁴ Quoted in Marcus Woeller, "Onwards into the Past," *Welt am Sonntag* online, May 11, 2014.

⁵ Quoted in Steel Stillman, "Huma Bhabha," *Art in America*, November 11, 2010.

⁶ While Yiadom-Boakye's style evokes these histories, her subjects—nearly exclusively black—have been historically excluded from representations of power, wealth, or simple daily life. The artist does not emphasize this as a gesture of reclamation, instead pointing out that as a black person herself, blackness is normal, familiar, and compelling. Jennifer Higgie, "The fictitious portraits of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye," *Frieze Magazine* 146 (April 2012), 91.

⁷ One can see affinities with Edouard Manet, Paul Cézanne, John Singer Sargent, El Greco, Diego Velázquez, and Francisco Goya; for a thorough analysis of these echoes and associations, see Naomi Beckwith, "Yiadom-Boakye's Black Paintings," in *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Any Number of Preoccupations* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2010), 6-15.

⁸ Okwui Enwezor, "The Subversion of Realism: Invented Lives in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Post-Portrait Paintings," in *Any Number of Preoccupations*, 23.

⁹ Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Naomi Beckwith, "In Conversation," in *Lynette Yiadom-Boakye* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 103.

¹⁰ Lynette Yiadom-Boakye to Jamie Stevens, *Two Coats of Paint*, April 25, 2013.

¹¹ Sascha Braunig to Hannah Ghorashi, "Sascha Braunig Enters the Void: A Q&A," *ARTnews* online, March 13, 2015.

¹² Some of these ideas on Braunig's work have been excerpted from my previously published essay "Sascha Braunig," *CURA*, 20 (Fall 2015), 172-175.

¹³ Quoted in "Valérie Blass: An Interview with Wayne Baerwaldt," in *Valérie Blass* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2012), 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Andro Wekua and Boris Groys, *Wait to Wait. A Conversation* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2009), 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷ The piece is titled in reference to the eponymous 2001 song and music video by D'Angelo, in which the camera slows moves into and around the nude body of the singer (which Dybbroe Møller likens to the Ken Burns effect), offering him up as an object of desire.

¹⁸ Quotes from *Untitled (How does it feel)*, 2014, color video with sound, 8:20 minutes.

¹⁹ Antoine Catala, *The Brooklyn Rail* online, March 5, 2015.

²⁰ Quoted in Fran Gavin, "Antoine Catala," *Post* online, March 10, 2014.

²¹ Antoine Catala quoted in Kurt Shaw, "Carnegie Museum exhibit examines detached empathy of digital age," *TribLIVE* online, March 7, 2015.

²² Antoine Catala, www.distantfeel.com

²³ While he remains unnamed, PHIL clearly resembles Phillip Seymour Hoffman. In 2014 there was a rumor—ultimately false—that Hoffman would be digitally resurrected after his untimely death, in order to complete his role as Plutarch Heavensbee in *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

²⁴ Cécile B. Evans, *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen*, 2014, color video with sound, 22:30 minutes.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ PHIL, in *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen*.

²⁷ Cécile B. Evans to Johannes Fricke Waldthausen, *Artsy* online, April 24, 2013.

²⁸ PHIL, in *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen*.

²⁹ Ian Cheng, "Something Thinking of You," in *Live Simulations* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015), 79.

³⁰ Ian Cheng to Jeppe Ugelvig, *DIS magazine* online, October 18, 2013.