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Art World

Editors' Picks: 12 Things Not to Miss in New York's Art World This Week

Here's what's going on this week.

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Through Friday, July 26



Caitlin Keogh, *Study for Hands (After Dante Gabriel Rossetti)*, 2019. Courtesy of Magenta Plains.

8. "A Detached Hand" at Magenta Plains

As Bastille Day approaches we can take a moment to consider the legacy of the guillotine with this exhibition full of unattached limbs, ears, hands, and the like. Centering on imagery of corporeal fragmentation and its meaning, this fourteen-artist show's curatorial inspiration comes from Linda Nochlin's 1994 essay "The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity," which posited that the visual breaking apart of the figure is a symptom of modernity. Here this visual trope is out to a fascinating variety of ends, from the fetishistic in [Hans Bellmer](#)'s prop-like female forms to the spiritual in Caitlin Keogh's divinely rendered floating hands, with many, many others along the way.

Location: Magenta Plains, 94 Allen Street

Price: Free

Time: Wednesday–Sunday, 11 a.m.–6 p.m.

—Katie White

Filthy Dreams

May 2019

filthy dreams

The Corporeal Fragment: A Symbol of Revolution or a Rejection of the Postmodern?

Posted on July 23, 2019 by ADAM LEHRER

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Narcissister, Mask Art Series (Profile with red braids and bows), 2015, digital print, 24h x 18w in. (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

In her 1994 essay *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, art historian Linda Nochlin ties the genesis of modernism to the French Revolution, framing the guillotine as a symbol of the severing of inherited dynastic power ushering in an era of radical politics, creativity, and culture. The guillotine becomes representative of modernism's shifting focus towards the fragment or dismemberment. The corporeal fragment, according to Nochlin, is essential to modernism's revolution towards the future and destruction of the prevailing orders of the past. "What of the larger implications of the topic?" asks Nochlin. "What of that sense of social, psychological, even metaphysical fragmentation that so seems to mark modern existence – a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value that is so universally felt in the 19th Century as to be often identified with modernity itself?"

But does the corporeal fragment still evoke the revolutionary ethos of modernism in our era? Can it wield power in the post-digital landscape? We are, after all, well beyond the flattening of meaning that Baudrillard warned was occurring/would occur in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Modernity, Baudrillard argued, was the "radical destruction of appearances," whereas postmodernity was "the immense process of the destruction of the meaning." So, that symbol, the guillotine, signifying a dismembering of an archaic order, would be just as fractured in its meaning contemporaneously. An image of a headless body, like all images, could be read in a multitude of ways. Nochlin does acknowledge the shifting role of the corporeal fragment in postmodernism, but with the essay published in 1994, surely she couldn't have foreseen the abuse of images and flattening of meaning we now see in the post-digital era.

Symbols rarely hold singular, unified meaning anymore, as images are dispersed en masse via digital networks subjecting them towards any number of interpretations. As a result, the image is often used to reinforce the various fractured ideologies of the population far more than it brings the larger population towards any understanding of an objective truth. For example, [a recent video circulated on the Internet of Mike Pence visiting an immigration detention center](#) in which the Vice President expresses almost no empathy towards the humans living in atrocious conditions. One is left wondering why the administration would let such a damning video circulate before realizing the answer: I am interpreting this video from my leftist perspective, whereas a right wing American interprets this video as positive. To them, it becomes evidence of an administration willing to make the hard decisions. As the media continues to report through the prism of "both sides," no objective truth is gleaned from this video or any other image.



Installation view of *A Detached Hand* at Magenta Plains (Courtesy of the artists and Magenta Plains)

Using Nochlin's *The Body in Pieces*, curator Nicole Will seeks to explore Nochlin's paradigm in an excellent exhibition of both modernist and contemporary artists at Magenta Plains gallery. Entitled *A Detached Hand*, the exhibition focuses on artworks that use fragmentation and distortion of the body to different ends. Obviously, you could see these artworks in terms of the context that Nochlin lays out in her essay: in modernism, fragmentation elicits a positive rather than a negative connotation. It "enacts the deliberate destruction of the past, or at least a pulverization of what perceived to be its repressive traditions."

But it is unsure whether now, beyond postmodernism let alone modernism, fragmented bodies can have such direct meaning. If anything, the corporeal fragment now could elude more to the fracturing of identity and ideology amongst the confused and digitally filtered information landscape. The exhibition could be better understood as a survey of artists employing the tropes of modernism, especially in terms of its use of symbols, as a way of distancing themselves from the flattened meanings of postmodernism and mass image reproduction to find some semblance of coherent personal meaning.



Will seems to agree that the exhibition in a contemporaneous context could evoke meaning beyond the confines of its conceptual impetus, and that whether or not the symbol holds the same kind of meaning, artists are returning to the trope of the severed body part. There must be some reason for the trend. “I noticed that when I would walk into galleries I was seeing that idea being articulated,” says Will. “I realized in terms of the Linda Nochlin text that we were at a similar point in our own politics. What I really loved about the text was on the last page. That there could be a formal inception of this concept.” What Will is referring to here is Nochlin’s closing statement: “I would feel obliged to dissect or even deconstruct the very concept of modernity — itself a constantly changing discursive formation in which the trope of fragmentation plays a shifty and ever/shifting role — with as much care as I lavished on the fragment itself. But that would be another undertaking altogether.”

As Nochlin observes in this section of the text, Will acknowledges that the disembodied form might shift and mutate in symbology. It might be most beneficial then to look at the artists assembled in *A Detached Hand* individually to see how closely their emphases on disembodied forms relate to Nochlin’s conception of the technique’s relation to modernism, while contrasting that with the artists’ engagements with more contemporary readings. The point connecting the different manifestations of the disembodied form is certainly its abject visual appeal. Beyond that, what is perhaps best exemplified in the exhibition is artists using the modernist trope of the corporeal fragment to find meaning in a world that has been made devoid of it, or at the very least, using the trope to locate their own personal truths, ranging from alienation and dread to power and freedom.



Hans Bellmer, *Untitled*, 1946, vintage silver gelatin print, 3.13h x 2.38w in. (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

The artists from the first half of the 20th Century in *A Detached Hand* arguably could be interpreted as using disembodied imagery towards an ethos like the one laid out by Nochlin. The late German photographer/sculptor/draughtsman Hans Bellmer, who has drawings in the show, is certainly a “problematic favorite” amongst critics and artists alike. Specifically his photographs of disembodied fetish dolls, though iconically visually striking and undeniably provocative, have often been accused of misogyny and sexual exploitation. Interestingly, much like other complicated artworks made by complicated men (Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* comes to mind), Bellmer’s work also has been subject to some feminist defense. Art historian Sue Taylor, for instance, argued in her book *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, that Bellmer’s dolls are a manifestation of the artist’s repudiation of his brute father: “These repudiations continuing long after the latter’s demise in 1941.” Bellmer’s disembodiments then directly relate to Nochlin’s conception of the fragment: a destruction of patriarchal power and order. In Bellmer’s drawing, *Untitled* (1946), it’s hard to tell if the artist is subjugating the tangled female form, or if he is identifying with it. Bellmer’s perversions were complex, and can be seen as a rejection of German male dominance. They become even more complex in the photograph of a female model posed over a motorcycle; anus fully on display while the limbs entwine with the machinery. It becomes hard to separate readings of the image from Ballard’s *Crash*. What is clear is in the glut of images and ideologies of 2019, Bellmer’s intentionality is farther from the image than was previously possible.



Penny Slinger, *The Safe Period*, 1969-2014, c-print from original collage, 16h x 10.63w in. (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

Two artists in the exhibition, Penny Slinger and the late Kiki Kogelnik, came to prominence in the mid-'60s and late-'70s. In other words, between the shift from modernism to postmodernism. British mixed-media artist Slinger's collages like *The Safe Period* (1969) represent this give and take relationship between the modern and the postmodern. While Slinger passionately studied Max Ernst's surrealist collages and Freud's studies on dreams, her work also has a relationship with the mass media. This image seems to allude to a woman's sexuality in its totality: its seductiveness and its medical/reproductive functions (note the cut-out of the fetus placed atop the vagina). The images certainly could work within Nochlin's paradigm in their rejection of patriarchal notions of a woman's sexuality, but they themselves in 2019 don't look vastly out of place in the edgier realms of advertising. Collage is inherently tied to symbols, and as we are seeing: symbols are slippery in a post-digital landscape.



The inclusion of the late Austrian sculptor, printmaker and painter Kogelnik particularly fascinates me and reinforces my thesis. Kogelnik fragmented the human body, especially in her prints, but she also worked within a colorful and kitsch Pop-influenced style as informed by advertising and fashion illustration as it was Art Informel modernists like Arnulf Rainer. In her work, there is a reconciliation with and acceptance of the tropes of modernism losing some power in the glut of mass media reproduction that would accelerate in the late-1960s and continue through the digital age. Kogelnik is represented in the show by three very different drawings. Of those, *Untitled (Robot)* (1967) invites the most complex readings. From one perspective, it could be a stirring call for humans to transcend the structures that imprison them, surely fitting in within Nochlin's conception of disembodiment. From another, it could read as a chilling warning, as the human body blurring with the mechanical brings to mind Baudrillard's essay on clones. Nevertheless, Kogelnik seemed less concerned with the disembodiment as revolt than she did in using it to frame her own desires, anxieties and beliefs from a personal perspective. Kogelnik as a figure is also interesting to note here: the artist became just as famous for being more read about on society pages than in critical texts. She herself is emblematic of the commercial world's devouring of the avant-garde that would occur as modernism made room for postmodernism.

That brings me to the contemporary works in the show. While the Nochlin text, as well as Will's curation, suggests that corporeal fragmentation is a manifestation of revolution and modernity, it also becomes a fascinating study in how the tropes of modernism themselves have been equally fragmented in meaning by postmodernism and contemporary digital culture. The corporeal fragment can now signify infinitely more, or infinitely less, than it did during the modernist era. As we see with these artists, it appears that artists are using this modernist trope to try and grasp at a coherent meaning whilst living in a deeply confusing and traumatic era.



Artist Ebecho Muslimova is known for her drawings that depict one character, the zafdig contortionist the artist has named "Fatebe," in multitudes of compromising situations. In one of the drawings here, for instance, Fatebe shits into a tea cup with her ass poked out of cell bars. As critic John Yau noted, Muslimova's Fatebe drawings differ from similar artists such as Raymond Pettibon in that Muslimova doesn't seem to demand empathy for Fatebe from viewers. Why? Because it simply doesn't matter, the drawing suggests. Living in a reality TV culture, humans debase themselves for viewing public regularly and rarely do their transgressions last longer than a news cycle in cultural memory. Interestingly, Muslimova uses a modernist aesthetic, the bulbous human form, but finds freedom in contemporary culture's meaninglessness.

Artist Dan Herschlein's use of fragmentation comes from a very different angle. In his sculptures and drawings, you see forms colliding with their surroundings and buried, in a sense, by inescapable trauma. In Herschlein's work, the domestic space itself becomes haunted by both cultural and personal anxiety. It emphasizes the hyperconnectivity of the group in the contemporary world, and shows how there is truly no escape or respite from the dread of the world that we inhabit. His sculpture, *The Long Dumb Voice* (2017), features half of a face and a hand perching out of soil enclosed in a pair of denim jeans. The figure seems more resigned than engaged, less radical than defeated. The fragment has less to do with galvanizing change than it does the inescapable dread of living now.



Dan Herschlein, *The Long Dumb Voice*, 2017, wood, pigmented joint compound, paint, wax, graphite, grass, and soil, 42h x 17w x 4d in. (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

Of the contemporary artists in the exhibition, perhaps performance artist Narcissister most neatly fits into Nochlin's conception of the corporeal fragment. Nochlin does after all acknowledge the role of the fragment in postmodern production: "the postmodern body is conceived of uniquely as the 'body-in-pieces': the very notion of a unified, unambiguously gendered subject is rendered suspect by their work." Narcissister's performances often feature her as a mannequin and exude pornographic sexuality suggesting a shedding of humanity could lead to sexual utopia. In her fragmentation, we do get a hint of a radical future. Her digital collage entitled *Mask Art Series (Profile with red braids and bows)* (2015) features a mannequin head emblazoned with various human parts of different races, sexualities and genders. Again, a revolutionary, utopian notion is elicited.

Curator Will isn't interested in nostalgia. "Nostalgia can be dangerous when you're not looking at it with clarity," she says. *A Detached Hand* isn't an exhibition endorsing a "return to modernism." No, it works better as a survey of artists using a modernist trope of direct and clear art historical meaning to try and extrapolate some coherent understanding of the contemporary world. Remember the end of Ari Aster's *Hereditary*: Toni Collette's Annie removes her own head with a garrote wire effectively liberating her children from the postmodern trope of the severely dysfunctional family and into a new life of ancient, ritualized power (Most people wouldn't see the ending as positive, but from this perspective, it could be. Why not?). Perhaps in contemporary art then, the corporeal fragment is better understood as a severing of ties with postmodernism than it is as a symbol of political shifts. The use of corporeal fragmentation becomes a mechanism to return graspable, coherent truth to the ideologically, politically, and culturally confused contemporary landscape. Cultural meaning, it seems, eludes the artist, but personalized meaning can be obtained and perhaps is attained through these mutilated forms.