

Figuration (cont'd): Kathy Venter and Evan Penny

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Evan Penny, *Self Portrait after Gericault's Fragments Anatomiques*, 2017, pigmented silicon, fabric, resin, 57 x 78 x 18 in.

When last we spoke about what I've been calling "figuration" – the aesthetic drive towards representing the living, breathing organisms that populate this here planet (even if only in our fevered imaginations – I'd introduced work that tended towards the smaller scale, towards sculptures that referenced figurines, addressing issues raised by such mass-produced items of collectible nostalgia, like Hummel or Royal Doulton figurines, or the even smaller stuff that once came with the tea bags we purchased.

But of course we can and do go beyond the necessary reductions entailed by the figurine, its relationship to domestic clay ware and the limitations of the kiln, and move up and out. So to the realm of 1:1 and beyond, and to two sculptors who approach the human body in very different ways.

Meet Kathy Venter and Evan Penny, both Canadian artists. Venter (www.kathyventer.com) is South African-born, having emigrated here in 1989. She works with clay, building up full-scale sculptures by hand (no molds here), shaping work – much of it installational in nature – that she's exhibited in Canada, the US, Europe, and Africa. I first encountered it at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto several years ago, the exhibition *Life*



Evan Penny, *Ali*, 1984, 133 cm. height, resin, pigment, hair

comprising several installations of life-size sculptures and busts of women, as well as architectural elements – Greek columns – also made of clay.

Venter's work is figurative, but not in a hyper-vigilant, obsessive sort of way, not held hostage by the imperative of absolute fidelity. In her work we never lose sight of the material of representation; Venter ensures we are always aware of what we see, aware of what makes the made, and what we see of these made things of hers are representations in mud. The alternative story of biblical Genesis is of some use, here, the one in which Adam has not an Eve (not yet; she comes later in this version), but rather a Lilith, created of the same proverbial dust, the same mud, as her equal (unlike Eve). But she has some very different ideas of how things work, refuses to subsume herself to Adam, and leaves.

In a sense she returns in Venter's *Coup d'Oeil Series*, full-size clay figures of women (six in all) standing before us on the gallery floor, unplinthed. It's not possible to forget that these are representations of truly living beings, of individuals, real people, each a unique creation utterly unlike any other; there is no refuge, in Venter's work, in the intellectual distancing made possible via abstraction. And it's not possible to forget that these are figures confronting us as equals – in physical scale, yes, but also emotionally and mentally. There's no emptiness in Venter's work, no aesthetic distance being dictated and determined. We come up against mud, but mud made human and intimate.

There's more. Venter's figures (nudes, all of them) are the color of clay. But something painterly intrudes into that scheme of things. Venter has

messily applied colored slips (a watery solution of clay) to the figures. They seem contaminated, brutalized, even. It's a little bit shocking, actually. But a closer look reveals brushstrokes, and while the slip indeed dribbles down the figures, there is real intention here beyond intrusion. The slip is suggestive, perhaps of clothing, of adorning ornament and decoration. And it is a reminder, too, that the classic Greek sculptural figures we so admire and even revere were often painted, and apparently in somewhat garish colors. Austere monochrome may satisfy the modernist in us, but it's not necessarily historically correct. And in any event. Kathy Venter work is not austere cool and distant. It is absolutely present, front and center, and conceptually and emotionally impacting.



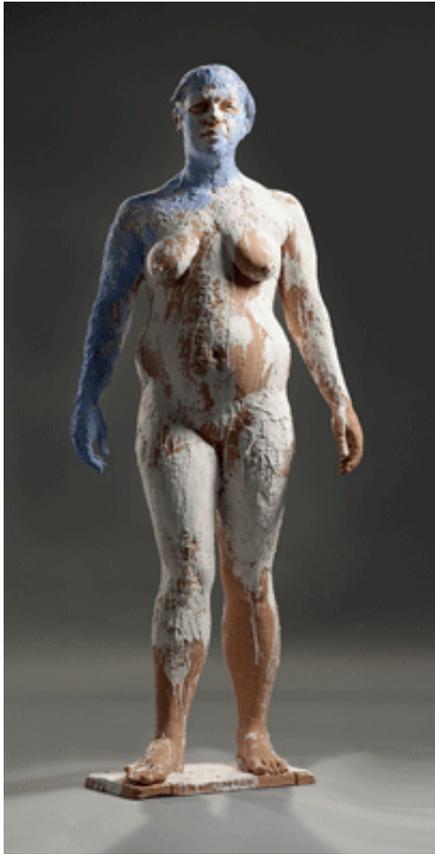
Kathy Venter, Coup d'Oeil Series 3, polychromed ceramic



Evan Penny, *Self Portrait after Gericault's Fragments Anatomiques*, 2017, pigmented silicon, fabric, resin, 57 x 78 x 18 in.

Like Venter, Evan Penny (www.evanpenny.com) is also South African by birth, now a Canadian citizen. He's been exhibiting since the late 1970s, and has shown in North America, Europe, and Asia. I've fibbed a bit in contextualizing him within the limitations of 1:1 scale. Penny's work comes close, and yet at the same time doesn't. But it does engage hyper-realism in a very big way. I first saw his work in 1984, a piece entitled *Ali*. It's the figure of a nude standing woman, seemingly casually resting her weight on one foot and staring off into the distance. It was a disconcerting work to see. Critic Gary Michael Dault called it "over-real," and that absolutely sums it up. Not quite a full-size reproduction of its subject (it was based on a clay original from which Penny pulled a mold), its absolute exactitude, its excruciating fidelity, seemed to extend far beyond representation of the real. I recall feeling a headache coming on as I looked at it, overwhelmed by what it was aesthetically proffering. Intense.

Yeah, that would indeed be the correct word: intense. I sweep across



Kathy Venter, Coup d'Oeil Series 3, polychromed ceramic

several decades, now, from the hyper-realism of his full figures (and busts), and into much more recent work directly organized around pivotal points in art history. The intensity of Penny's vision is so unremitting, it's overcome, even entirely dispensed with, the aesthetic equivalent of the blood-brain barrier. I offer, by way of example, his Self Portrait after Géricault's *Fragments Anatomiques*. Best known for his dramatic and controversial painting *The Raft of the Medusa* based on a horrific shipwreck that became a national scandal in France, Theodore Géricault also painted a series of works – studies, apparently – depicting severed limbs and heads he obtained from a morgue.

They're gruesome, to be sure, but safely contextualized within the plane of canvas, tidily distanced from the real by oil paint and gestural brushstrokes. We're safe here on the other side of representation. The membrane of aesthetics is whole and unbreached.

Well, it was. Working with silicone, his usual material, Penny re-invests the third dimension so as to rupture painterly illusion and give us Géricault's source as a sculptural work. It's harder to evade the real, here, more difficult to hide behind the aesthetic (and of course there is one) and seek respite in our usual means of distancing. The brutal and the beautiful are truly co-extensive in *Self Portrait after Géricault's Fragments Anatomiques*.

It's perhaps even more so with the more massive *Hanging Torso*, a work that is exactly what its title says it is. Suspended from a metal chain, it's a chunk of human body (hanging upside-down) as represented via silicone,

and detailed with (but of course) actual bodily hair.



Evan Penny, Hanging Torso, 2017 pigmented silicone, hair, steel, 65 x 48 x 34 inches

But there's a kind of flickering going on ere, an instability courtesy the work's decided resemblance to a chunk of marble (but then there's that hair, you know....), and even via a kind of sculptural abstraction that conceivably could let us off the emotional hook (so to speak).

But there's the hair, you know, tugging us relentlessly back to the meaningful ickiness of the real, and anyway (let's be entirely honest, here) the availability of refuge in abstraction is really only due to an urgent need we might have to distance ourselves, to kid ourselves.

Penny's Hanging Torso is border blur, unsettled and indeterminate. It may be hanging, but it is in no way pinned down.

That's good. That's really good.

By [Gil McElroy](#)