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Runny yolks and Running Jokes

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In Marlene Steyn's *Your Skin is Not the Best Hiding Place*, there is scant distinction made between painting and sculpture. The work slithers freely between two and three dimensions, flippantly slipping in and out of frame. In defiance of their assigned medium, they punctuate indiscriminately. Small growths emerge from the well-primed gallery walls. Opportunistic plants, moulded tissues, and other miscellaneous bulbs settle in where

they can.

And eggs.

Steyn has a soft spot for eggs. Some are fake-fried and flopped over surfaces, hanging up like laundry, or like a Dali clock. Some are intricately drawn or painted, while others seem to be real, still encased in their shells and pinned perilously to the wall. While whole, the egg is an excellent metaphor for bodily integrity – a potential lifeform neatly zipped up in a calcium casing; a perfect protein, ready to nourish itself to life (or else to participate in a light brunch). The way it is made; film upon film hardening and taking its place; reproduces ideas of meaning, function and safety. But implicit in the form of an egg is its propensity to crack.

In *The Story of the Eye*, Bataille writes:

That open crack at the summit of the sky ...

... a broken egg, a broken eye, or

my own dazzled skull weighing down the rock, bouncing symmetrical images back to infinity

This show is also full of open cracks, distended skulls and peeled eyes. Her drawings, with their peculiar embellishments on the human form and renderings of parallel worlds, also extend indefinitely. This is particularly evident in the sheaths of cloth which hang from the ceiling, printed with unsettlingly detailed line drawings which seamlessly repeat themselves, creating an illusion of infinity. The patterns coalesce into an afterimage – what's branded onto eyes after staring for too long.

This bizarro forever-vision contributes to Steyn's sprawling, boundless territory of abjection; laying bodies bare, and leaving nowhere to hide. She performs her dissections with wry humour and an unabashedly unsteady hand, vacillating between the most precise incisions to the most gestural slash. All bodies, forms and materials here are subject to decomposition – manipulated and turned inside out, deconstructed and made absurd, but never truly reduced to a sum of their parts.

Did you know that the skin is the largest organ in the body?

This factoid, hidden in chappies wrappers and biology textbooks alike, is poised to shock as much as to educate. But why should it come as a surprise? There can be no part of the body that is outside the body. The shock of it brings into focus the obscenity of an organ carried in full view – the revelation that skin is not a smooth covering but an undulating, irregular, porous machine. Steyn explores exactly this counter-intuitive physical state. She challenges the myth of wrappers, the false comfort of containment, causing rifts which allow small worlds to seep out, and uncertainty to grow.

One of the ways she does this is by making room. The negative space around her work reacts to the pulling apart of faces and bodies, to the stretching of forms, creating gaps that are charged and self-conscious – almost tangible. In *Crocodile Tongue Romance*, a twisted dentist's model of a mouth lashes its tongues out as if to taste the air – licking at its own cavities, embracing the distance between the two dislocated halves of itself. This attention paid to the nothing which settles around her works has the uncanny effect of ionizing the atmosphere of the gallery, making visitors conscious of and sometimes disorientated by

the space (twice I almost stumbled into sculptures). The twin activation of space and form traces moments in which forms break down into space, and space in turn congeals into form.

In other works, these pregnant spaces are explicitly crammed with *stuff*. *Your Face is My Zen Garden* fills the gaps between facial features with small white stones, cacti, and ideas of balance and harmony. Zen gardens play with scale and control, allowing humans to tower above plants,



rocks and sand, raking and erasing patterns in slow easy gestures meant to inspire calm. Steyn has obscured this dynamic by collapsing a human face into the garden, its eyes staring up at the viewer, its expression disquieting. But a viewer can still pick out a face from a garden, and take the two apart again. Pebbles cannot disguise the existence of space and disjuncture. They cannot offer sanctuary to a face on the run, exposed and turned out from its own skin.

Steyn extends her experiments with space in *How to Be a Door*. Here, a blue body stretches and splits itself apart to form an archway, its smooth lines turning lumpy and cracked, trying as they do to retain some part of their original body (breasts, a head, trunk-like feet). This figure, rolled like dough into long sausages, reveals different possible configurations of a body – it is a body made of and interrupted by different materials (a living plant suspended in the hollow of its bronze arc). It is a body that can be passed through and remain whole. There is no thin film of skin which seals it shut. An empty space is as much a part of a door as frames or hinges.

This is an exhibition composed not of paint, bronze and silicone, but of stem cells. It is made of matter capable of indefinitely replicating and recombining – organisms with the potential to mutate into any form. Steyn's works are clumsy shape-shifters, figures half-born, and constantly remade. Whether their placentas are tidily tucked away or spread sunny-side-up over walls, floors and sculptures, they remain signifiers of the unstable business of living in a body, and the kaleidoscopic moments of contact with the world beyond.

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