

The Thin Line of Embodiment

By Colin R. Johnson

Given the centrally important role they play in our lives, it is actually sort of astounding how inaccessible and unfamiliar our bodies are to us. For example, most of us will never directly observe the inside of our own body because it is virtually impossible for us to do so, except in very limited ways. We may sense our interior, of course, often in the form of dull, menacing aches or a grumbling, upset stomach that petitions for redress. But we seldom get a good look inside. And even when we do—say, in the form of an X-ray—what we discover there is something that seems alien and largely unrecognizable to us.

With this in mind, it would obviously be nice to think that we know our body's exterior somewhat better. In truth, however, we occupy the least privileged vantage point from which to view our bodies, and some might even go so far as to say ourselves. Hence our incredible reliance upon one another when figuring out who and what we are in the world. Hence Virginia Woolf's famous claim that "there is a spot the size of a shilling at the back of one's head which one can never see for oneself. It is one of the good offices that sex can discharge for sex," she contended, "to describe that spot..."

We live, when all is said and done, like thin lines of consciousness and sensitivity drawn delicately between the inside and outside of bodies we scarcely know. And remarkably, probably as a matter of sheer necessity, we do this naturally, as if there were nothing particularly strange about it. Throughout her short but eventful career Anne Drew Potter has made it her business as an artist to remind us that having a body—that being a body—is odd, and alienating, and discomfiting. Specifically, Potter's work draws our attention to the body's social and cultural contingency by showing us in ways that are sometimes beautiful, sometimes disturbing, but always arresting, that embodiment, like so many things in life, happens somewhere *in between*—between inside and outside; between black and white; between old and young; between male and female.

On the most basic level Potter's work undermines such simplistic binaries by demonstrating in powerfully realized forms what the human body might be were it to be released from them. In a more subtle and unexpected sense, however, her work also

points to what the body actually already is for most people: necessarily less than ideal, beautiful but abject, damaged but alluringly animate, labored and laboring—a site, in short, where identity is constantly negotiated and renegotiated, produced and reproduced, rather than a site of “self-evidence” where aspects of personhood such as race and gender are simply resolved in some final and irreducible way.

Put differently, Potter’s sculptures compel us to ask explicit questions about bodies—questions to which perceptual habit and social convention normally provide seemingly workable but ultimately dissatisfying answers. Is that a sculpture of a male or female figure? Is he or she young or old, black or white, in pleasure or in pain, malevolent or beneficent? Given how animated Potter’s figures always are, there is never any doubt that such aspects of identity or experience are made manifest in them. But the question—the crucial question—is always the question of *which ones* are manifested there. To her credit, the answer that Potter’s figures almost always provide is “yes,” an answer that appropriately and provocatively is really no answer at all.

From a conceptual perspective, of course, Potter’s intention is never to misrepresent stone cold ambiguity as a solution to the sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia she abhors. That would be easy, but it would also be naïve. Rather, the point of Potter’s work is to lure viewers into the position of having to be explicit and suddenly aware of the manner in which they make sense through and around bodies and, by doing so, to force some recognition that historically loaded characteristics such as age, race and sex always define our relation to one another in advance, no matter how sincerely we might wish to disavow their significance.

This is not an effect that is easily accomplished. Doing so requires incredible technical skill and an uncompromising attention to detail, which Potter demonstrates in abundance. But most of all it requires conviction, and no small amount of courage. For as it turns out most of us are made exceedingly uncomfortable by bodies, and not least of all by our own.

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