

UNWANTED FLESH

Delphi Campbell

September 2024

Thinking back to 2022, I stepped into Delphi's work and muttered 'this feels like being in a pocket' as I nestled into a lint-abundant pouch complete with half-used and half-forgotten effects.

Similarly, entering into *Unwanted Flesh* feels like burrowing your hand into a pouch or cavity. You are met with warmth, with comfort and tenderness - but something isn't quite right. You feel around and encounter grit, knotted hair, hardened pelt. You can't quite put your finger on it. It is not so much like being inside a pocket, as being inside a tumour, cyst or sac, palpating past the pulpy unwantedness.

At a glance the smallest of marks, ligatures and stitches give rise to a misshapen body - dripping, drooping and all hanging out. Pools of red light ooze from looming silicone vesicles. The red light evokes sex and pleasure, but also therapy - red light therapy can heal relentless wounds and abrasions. I don't doubt that this is a space for healing.

Patterns lifted from micrographs, scans and fingerprints are spread across the space, a corporal imprint of the artist's actual body. The self-portraiture is generous and offers itself up, reaching outward. You are invited in without assumption or instruction, the opening is left ajar but there is no expectation. The work murmurs '*act how you like, feel what you want*'. We are gently encouraged to see ourselves in the squishy knotted messes, to move and breathe amongst the bodies and parts. The caricatured ribs, contorted lungs and parodied skins are both inviting and unnerving - these parts could be from anyone, any-body.

The act of salvaging (and giving salvation to) materials underpins Delphi's practice. The work holds tight to lumps of stuff which are no longer desired by others, or are seen as unpleasant or rejected:

dust, wool, hair, glitter, threads, bent pins, fibres, feathers, latex speckles, tatters, torn lace, lint

These ragged half-forms and off-cuts are given place amongst foamy satin mounds, mirrored surfaces and buttery translucent fabrics. There is a sense that this body (of work) is in a perpetual cycle of shedding and then reabsorbing, feeding upon itself. There is no such thing as 'waste', every part is hoarded, amassed and reserved - just in case. The body consumes and re-consumes - it is a feast. This feasting spans years, as seen in the clump of vibrant pink hair which features the wig worn by Delphi during her 2018-19 performance works. The colours are highly synthetic, radioactively so. With everything so shockingly pink, you question whether this body is meant for consumption, or whether it might be poisonous.

We cannot ignore the underlying threat of these gloriously pillowy lumps. The lump is known for its ability to not be known - for its boundlessness, its lack of strict form and sticky edges. There is a fear in this not-knowing, an unnerve evoked by sprawling, ravaging objects. This work embraces the unknown, while also placing it under a microscope - illuminating it with (red) light to see what might be gleaned. Delphi holds the lumps close in order to disarm them.

I am reminded of the powerful lineage of women and sculpture, bodily or otherwise, soft or otherwise ~ Lee Bul, Simone Leigh, Alina Szapocznikow, Judith Scott, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Eva Fabregas, Sheila Hicks ... The body is always with us, we are body-ridden, for better or worse. We are stuck with all of its needs, commands and sufferings - sluggish, loud, inconvenient bodies. Delphi's body of work is burrowed amongst this sculptural heritage, but it also eats its way through it - chewing it into a pulp, and rebuilding it into a nest to nurture new forms or ways of being.

'There has to be a nest'.

Nests and cysts alike rely upon pre-existing structures, they depend upon having an architecture to cling onto, feed upon and rest into. Often these nests and cysts unsettle the chosen structure, undermining or impeding it in some capacity. These are potentially disruptive forces. There is a tension here: nests and cysts both simultaneously depend upon and break down structures/bodies/spaces.

This tension thrums around the nest/pouch/body, with intuitive motions both building up and breaking down. There is absolute care in every stitch and bind, but also volatile compulsion in each violent cut, splice, tear. I have withheld the words 'monstrous' and 'grotesque' up until now, largely as both terms are loaded with (and hindered by) often unhelpful art historical references which are almost completely devoid of joy. And there is something so wildly joyous, kitsch, camp and queer in the work - each ounce is imbued with a radical love for bodies. The acceptance of your body into such a space is a liberation.

The body of work stems from Delphi's physical experience of being a queer, disabled woman within a wider system which actively works to repress, exploit, silence and exploit. Pain reverberates at both a bodily and societal level, and we recognise its familiar thumping and pounding. This is not about 'making invisible pain visible' as such pain is never invisible, not if you have an ounce of compassion, not if you are willing to listen a little bit closer...

Poppy Jones-Little