

19 April 2012

## Alice Channer: Out of Body

Written by Adam Walker

South London Gallery, March 2 – May 13 2012

Meeting Alice Channer in her studio several weeks prior to the opening of *Out of Body* I asked if she was going to be able to see these entirely new works in their finished state before they were exhibited. Her relatively modestly proportioned workspace was clearly far too small to fully unfurl even one of the drapes of fabric printed with distorted classical sculptures, their unclothed limbs and heads deleted, which now reach up to the ceiling of the South London Gallery's beautifully renovated main space.



Installation view from Alice Channer: *Out of Body* at the South London Gallery, 2012. Photo: Andy Keate. Image courtesy the artist and the South London Gallery.

It was hard to make sense of the work. Both *Reptiles* and *Amphibians*, which now glide sinuously across the gallery's parquet floor, were cooped in amongst the paraphernalia of a working studio. The spandex covered frames of *Eyes* and *Lungs* didn't make sense, whereas now both works fall in line along the long aspect of the gallery, each frame rhythmically syncopated behind the previous.

As Channer explained the work's development it began to make some sort of conceptual sense. The distorted statues, Yves Saint Laurent silhouettes, imprints of the knee: all references to the proportions of the body but covered, draped or hidden in clothing.

*Out of Body* is an exhibition which treads a fine line between scale and delicacy. The

works combine to fully occupy (colonise perhaps?) the large gallery space. Having seen them in the cramped studio there is a sense of relief in encountering *Cold, Hard* and *Warm Metal Body* unfurled up to the ceiling. Much the same can be said of how *Eyes* and *Lungs* stretch away down the long side walls or the fleet-footed skipping of *Reptiles* and *Amphibians* across the floorboards. The gallery feels full but at the same time spacious, no sense of weightiness or monumentality, rather something quickly unpacked which could just as easily be put away in a moment.



Installation view from Alice Channer: *Out of Body* at the South London Gallery, 2012. Photo: Andy Keate. Image courtesy the artist and the South London Gallery.

Here in the gallery an odd assortment of fabricated objects that made no sense in the studio starts to come to life.

All the works in *Out of Body* derive from the proportions, lines and contours of the human body. As such it falls well outside of what might conventionally be termed 'abstract' and Channer herself considers all the work here figurative. But what is abstraction? Fundamentally it is something that comes from an internal rather than outside source. A geometry, composition or colour choice remote from nature and derived from the human mind: the ultimate artistic expression of a journey to ever greater celebration of humanity's apparent superiority over nature.

But are we really still so self-assured as to believe that the outpourings of our mind stand alone as some distinct higher category? Everything has some source or inspiration, some outside influence. It may be distant, refined through the cognitive process or perhaps even completely subconscious, but it's inevitably there somewhere: the notion of a distinct 'pure abstraction' is an unachievable chimera.

With that in mind, in creating these works around the proportions of the body Channer has democratised her reference point. It's something we all have, the ultimate equaliser, and despite the figurative aspect of some of the works not being immediately apparent there is an easy sense of familiarity with the scale and dimensions. This is particularly the case in *Thighs*, *Reptiles* and *Amphibians*.



Installation view from Alice Channer: *Out of Body* at the South London Gallery, 2012. Photo: Andy Keate. Image courtesy the artist and the South London Gallery.

A dialogue between hard and soft runs through the show. Spandex is stretched around metal frames. Stretch-fit clothing is cast in aluminium. Stone sculptures of clothing come full circle and become hanging fabric once again. That the works are not self supporting (*Cold, Large* and *Warm Metal Body*) or are an arrangement of at least two separate constituent parts (every other work) makes it seem as if they clothe the space and so draw attention to the architecture of the room rather than dominating and occupying it. There is an inter-relationship between the gallery and the works within: the room itself becomes the body giving form and shape to the artworks which dress it.

It would be all too easy given this emphasis on clothing, fashion, fabric and the body to fall into the tired cliché of primarily reading *Out of Body* through the lens of feminism. The female artist, re-claiming and re-presenting the contested terrain of the female body... We've heard it all before and it isn't what Channer has in mind.

In *Out of Body* the body has become a motif, and there is nothing specifically female about it. In these works it becomes almost the opposite of the body as conventionally considered through feminism, it is emptied and devoid of all those collected associations and subjugations. In *Thighs, Reptiles* and *Amphibians* it quite literally becomes just a yardstick. The body is very evident in the work, but it itself is not the central concern. It is a fixed reference point within an exploration of wider social and economic concerns, and its universal familiarity prevents it from overshadowing this. The body is the means, rather than the subject, of investigation.

What Channer is grappling with is consumerism and production. The copy of *Das Kapital* left open at 'The Fetishism of Commodities' included in the display of associated materials is hardly necessary but makes this very clear. *Out of Body* throws together cheap and rapidly discarded fast fashion with the expertly factory produced object, both equally unfamiliar in the fine art context they're brought into. An aluminium cast of Topshop tights, perhaps usually worn twice then laddered and thrown away, form a sculpture in conjunction with precision-engineered curves of polished steel, expertly produced in a factory more used to supplying to industry.

The body seems oddly out of context in this. Vulnerable and soft against the hardened steel, yet permanent and precious against the cheap clothing. Ironically in a show where every work derives from the body, the only one actually present is our own as the viewer, and as we negotiate our path round we are reminded of how transient and fragile we are compared to the classical statues of *Cold, Large* and *Warm Metal Body*.

*Out of Body* is decidedly not an autobiographical or feminist look at the female body, but rather an exploration of the bodily reality of each of us as individuals in the huge, incomprehensible system of production and consumption we inhabit.



*Installation view from Alice Channer: Out of Body at the South London Gallery, 2012. Photo: Andy Keate. Image courtesy the artist and the South London Gallery.*

Intriguingly though, Channer does allow one vestige of humanity to slip in. A postscript with the potential to dramatically change the way you consider the whole exhibition; only as you come back towards the exit do you see a hand and arm print that could almost be waving goodbye.

Adam Walker  
[www.adamwalkerart.co.uk](http://www.adamwalkerart.co.uk)