

Fleshpunk

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ABSTRACT

Where does art go - in a time of war - when beauty is a dirty word - when painting has been declared dead decades before - when austerity-measures rule, and hoodies cloak anonymity and suspicion, when the body is commodified, homogenised, exteriorly-grown, utilised, mutilated, genetically-matched and restored, when class-divisions have widened and protests and debtmanagement are daily news, when using paper has to be justified, and the health of our world is transparently linked to our own survival? The use of wax-casting, twigs, bones, fabric, and the linking of different lifeforms, recognition of animals in equality to humans, and tackling contemporary issues including survival, political power, climate-change, gender and species equality, war, imprisoning, torture and escape, crossing eras and times, make this art both contemporary and fleshy. In a contemporary world, where greed is forced to share, the debt-ridden are pressed beyond endurance, marriage equality is sought, genetic solutions and matter can be bought, corporations have no surety, when the health of the land has to be recognised and reconstituted, where there are no clear winners and losers, where food sources and energy sources must be sustainable, where dark sides are being revealed, where there is no security, and institutes of church and home are threatened - we are left with just our bodies - the flesh/our land, the heart/our drive, the brain/our connection.

FULL TEXT

Where does art go - in a time of war - when beauty is a dirty word - when painting has been declared dead decades before - when austerity-measures rule, and hoodies cloak anonymity and suspicion, when the body is commodified, homogenised, exteriorly-grown, utilised, mutilated, genetically-matched and restored, when class-divisions have widened and protests and debtmanagement are daily news, when using paper has to be justified, and the health of our world is transparently linked to our own survival?

In 1976, in an overheated British summer, punk clashed out as an underclass, rebelling against stifling systems. Over the next decades 'punk' has been appended to subcultures - movements rising from crush, the unheard, the visionary.

Around 1980, Steampunk rose against the mass-produced and the commodified. In 1987, the name Steampunk was coined. Steampunk is a way of seeing, and making, outside the system - dilettante in the sense of trying and testing and re-trying - as a lover of art; libertine in the freedom of thought and individualism. Reviving the Victorian sense that anyone could be a scientist, artist, inventor - even self-taught, simply by doing and making and learning - the art-is-try of continual action.

Evolving from Gothic brings Steampunk a sense of love and beauty lasting beyond the grave, of things that endure, in themes, and use of materials such as wood, leather, brass and taxidermy. Steampunk rebels against the mass-produced; practitioners make, re-use, re-cycle and create handmade, individual objects - striving for beauty, and often including working-models. The auteur, the bricoleur, the self-taught, and multi-arts work on slowly-made, inventive works. Steampunk unites eras of past, present and future, using as root-source - soul, survival, slow-technology, and the co-dependency of species.

Mirroring the Arts and Crafts movement of 1880-1910, when William Morris championed artists, architects and crafters working together; Steampunk recognises the artists' guild, the bricoleur - in hand-making and crafts. Slowly-

made art that strikes some sort of harmony, of out-cast and futurecast, a melding of ugliness and beauty - a terrible beauty under threat of extinction, bridging both the Victorian era and cyber-age, and traversing life-spans. Even William Morris fabrics and patterning, and slow-ways of printing are revived in some practices.

Early Steampunk individualised PCs in leather and brass (playfully invalidating their warranties), using "upcycling" - "more than recycling: re-using things from the past and making them better ... more beautiful than before," and "modding" objects from mobile-phones to cars. Steampunk's autonomy, make-it-yourself approach hand-makes and crafts in taxidermy, wood-carving, knitting, crochet, hand-sewing, metal-working and casting. Steampunk has a machinery aspect, with brass and cogs and working-models.

After thirty years, some Steampunk art appears to have branched out into an art of the body, the self to humanity, and animating animality, incorporating faith and beauty and truth in a contemporary, yet still ageless, time. The use of wax-casting, twigs, bones, fabric, and the linking of different lifeforms, recognition of animals in equality to humans, and tackling contemporary issues including survival, political power, climate-change, gender and species equality, war, imprisoning, torture and escape, crossing eras and times, make this art both contemporary and fleshy. This can be called Fleshpunk.

Artists who work on the body with its vulnerability, beauty, in a time-committed, unifying death-and-life revivification way, include Berlinde De Bruyckere, Pedro Almodovar, Ricky Swallow, Ron Mueck, and, living in Australia, Adam Laerkesen, Jazmina Cininas, Lisa Black, Aly Aitken and Kate Just. That some artists who trained as drawers and painters have turned to sculpture can indicate a striving towards full-bodied impact, walk-around, multi-layered readings, and a realism that might be discounted in flat wall-art.

The word "punk" began life as "mean and petty villainy," "rotten" and "worthless". Yet it has gained the strength of the outsider, going against establishment, of autonomy and individuality against crushing systems - a precursor to change.

The NGV's exhibition Napoleon promotes him as a great innovator, yet his rise was due to his participation in "The Terror" and three million dead. Concurrent in July 2012 was ACCA's exhibition of Berlinde De Bruyckere's We Are All Flesh. Perhaps comparative as an establishment crown-power show and a Fleshpunk counter-balance.

Steampunk artists rifle through opportunity-shops, markets, side-of-the-road cast-offs, then start repairing, re-making, and re-inventing things into a working, kind of savage harmony. Wondermakers, self-taught tinkerers, generous with tips of making, and modding, and crafting across the internet, creating new beauties by doing and learning. Akin to the Arts and Crafts movement, the value is not in precious materials used, but rather in the making, the hands-on quality, and the harking to the heart of things.

From Gothic romance of the soul enduring, beyond vampiric, sacrificial love where death is a transformation, Steampunk passes on this uneasy faith to the flesh artists. If the body is a machine, and workers cogs in a Metropolis world, then where does the heart, the wasted flesh come in?

Looking at imprisoning systems, and ruthless or repressive governments, I recall in Port Arthur tourist-trailing a roofless, abandoned church. During its making, two convicts with life-sentences made a suicide-pact. One would axe the other fatally, and the killer would hang, thus their bodies be no longer imprisoned. The church remained unfinished, as it could never be consecrated. In restrictive times, pressed to the nth degree, we start thinking about a life beyond the physical - both as escape and re-balancing.

Art, especially in financially-strapped times, demands faith. De Bruyckere speaks about the ACCA space as being like a church and her horse sculptures as an altar-piece "like heroes" "made out of corpses." She says she is "always looking for some beauty." There is fragility, temporality and a ruthless reality in the veins showing through skin. De Bruyckere's blue-and-red coursing through the wax commands witness; Aly Aitken's sewn-seams remind me of scar tissue, and the collusion of our actions or walk-aways. Jazmina Cininas uses the she-wolf were-wolf as both hunter and the hunted, and the dismembered paw/arm as sympathetic wound. For De Bruyckere "rent-open flesh first makes us aware that there is an inner being to the body, ... the wound is a symbol of change."

The quest to make beautiful, a dark romance, is a recurrent theme. De Bruyckere speaks about her series of entwined antlers My Deer as also being "my lover." In Inside Me III the "dead branches that I found along the street"

"become bones." Laerkesen states "a desire to reveal forces of nature, making the invisible visible." Ancestral memory reels in his deer-heads with twig antlers and wrapped rags seeming to leak blood and body-fluids, his chrome-eared wolves, and creatures on the fringe of survival and other-world. Mutated beauty and screaming humanity recur in the work of these artists working in the flesh.

When viewed by the general public, contemporary art can seem a label-less mass. Although themes affecting the world: mass debt, terrorism, survival of both planet and species, genetic engineering, are earthing into art that has some similarities across the globe.

We have had a series of political-draws, or close-calls of ballot-counts in Australia, England and Europe, where right and left are no longer clear divisions, and negotiation with independents has to be made to stay in a seat. A mining-tax under-mined a political leader's tenure. A power-player has bought out a major part of the Australian press. Watching street riots on television brings out the tension of both external and internal battles being fought. Our under-skin, underground, undergarments, and under-state are now shown.

Steampunk incorporates discards - initially the spent-bodies of computers, of junked nature-strip finds, brass, and cast-offs. When the machinery is gone - the steam in steampunk, the Victorian retrospect, we are left with the body, a flesh shell, and questions of just what are we, what do we need, where do we go?

Steampunk brought slow-tech over low-tech, quality over quantity, memory over media-sell, and an anti-mass-market art. When I go to the internal sources of memory, heart, soul, the darkness after violence and scars, I come to a Fleshpunk way of looking - a renewal of the shared experience of flesh and bone and the bit-by-bit piecemeal making of healing.

In the Separate Prison in Port Arthur, where masks were worn and there was no conversation, many were driven mad; the Chapel was the only place where prisoners could use their voices, and they sang rousingly loud - fit to lift the roof.

In an era of war, fear of terrorism further limiting individual rights and movement, torture and imprisonment, governments being increasingly secretive and unanswerable, and formal education expenses rising - individual freedoms have to be re-fought.

De Bruyckere's earlier work was of cages, "I was interested in the notion of being inside as opposed to being outside the cage, of freedom versus its absence, of being mentally imprisoned." "In the 90s, I began to include woollen blankets in my sculptures. I envisioned these as an answer to the metal of the cages." "Blankets bear the smells of the people who have used them. They show signs of use ... A blanket can ... serve as a second-skin. It offers warmth and protection, however a great mass of blankets can evoke suffocation." Not unlike the stifling atmosphere of the political nanny-state.

Almodovar says of his film *The Skin I Live In*, "It's about the abuse of power. I think a lot about governments that abuse positions of power." *The Skin I Live In* traverses gender-realignment, imprisoning and escape, death and life, and the enduring power of love and belief. In Anthony Lucas's *The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello*, Jasper makes the ultimate sacrifice to try to save his city from further calamity, from another greedy doctor's ambition.

Aloneness, wit, raw determination, fabricious story and scars of memory are strong in Adam Laerkesen's and Aly Aitken's creatures. Anthropomorphism, of imbuing animal and tree-limbs and antlers with human qualities, unites species in the urge to thrive.

We make sense in recognition. Until I had to fight for a place, and began collecting broken branches that reflected the breaking of my limbs, and memories of multiple bruises, I did not realise my own artwork was a continual search for place, and a home. As a child I tried to imagine my bruises as yellow and purple flowers, but the illusion left whenever I pressed and felt pure pain. My 2012 Limbs drawings are disembodied, hugging, playing, or being supported by and supporting the parent-arms of trees. They come from memory of being locked outside as a four-year-old, having to conquer my fear and trying to make a story - a kinship with something with life in it - with the tree limbs tall and scary, looming in the darkness.

I moved from painting shell-bodies as space-ships in a Steampunk kind of imagery, to limbs striving to make contact

and recognising the interdependence of inner and outer worlds. A fleshtopia of pieces is not the cyberpunk world I wish to make - but rather a search for re-connection and reintegration. In branches and limbs I draw out their humanness, and otherness, and link them together as a life-support. I strive for balance and flow, and beauty is integral to my melding together of disparate parts - to strike harmony.

In De Bruyckere's Inside Me III, transformation of branch to intestine or bone, reminds it is less what I know, more how we grow - a Voltairean freedom of mind, to think for oneself when faced with what remains - remnants, rejections. Recycling found-twigs into flesh-like wax brings the tenuousness of love, life, and lost-time closer. The sacrifice of life to beget life is inherent in its cradle balance. Both the end and beginning of life is apparent - cradle-and-bough of re-generative lullaby. The edge of repulsion and attraction is as borderline as the shaky balance on string and wooden sawhorse. Everything breaks - it is how we rebuild - our inner outlook and action that transforms our future.

Laerkesen's The Stain of Memory bandaged deer-head holds individual stillness of wounding, of both hollow and wholeness. The hunter's coat and lantern nearby, can also be the resting-place of the healers/salvager's hut. Shadow-play of branch-antler invokes a soul-shade moving on - geographical shift. Animal and human presence are linked by both the need to survive and the need to care. The past is invoked with kerosene lantern, a hand-held light needing someone to carry it, and the much-weathered coat. Time takes on a Narnian change - personal action is needed to restore life. Winding-bandage earth-tones of mulled-wine/dried-blood, green, brown, remind of Silent Spring, the co-dependency of survival, as well hope healing the fertility of imagination, multiple-process, grafted branches held high as a torchlight for future in-sight.

De Bruyckere does not put heads or faces in her works. She said, "War involves masses of people: ... difficult to seize through the ... single individual." Yet a mutated, headless, doubled-horse invokes all war-horses in We Are All Flesh. Laerkesen does have faces. These artists reverence humanity in its most vulnerable, raw, sometimes hollowed-out form. Laerkesen's animals - fleeing, curious, prowling or fearful are recognisably human and earth-core dependent. Severed branches regrow as antlers.

Tree-roots are often used in art to reference the land - like a seed, an arm, an embedded entwining. The publicity poster for Bangarra's dance Terrain uses tree-root hair and earth-marked limbs. Fleshpunk themes are uniting animality and humanity as one - not as distinct lesser or greater - but in equality. The cost of survival of the fittest is seen as the destruction of the most vulnerable. Blueveins are not the ownership of blue-bloods, but of all - dis-ease, old-age, yearning, and love and work are a shared experience.

In a contemporary world, where greed is forced to share, the debt-ridden are pressed beyond endurance, marriage equality is sought, genetic solutions and matter can be bought, corporations have no surety, when the health of the land has to be recognised and reconstituted, where there are no clear winners and losers, where food sources and energy sources must be sustainable, where dark sides are being revealed, where there is no security, and institutes of church and home are threatened - we are left with just our bodies - the flesh/our land, the heart/our drive, the brain/our connection. Written on the body is all our time spent, how we move, the circulatory of memory, the experience of tales - uniqueness beautifully-structured and re-generated. This particular strand of flesh art is where my heart lies.

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DETAILS

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