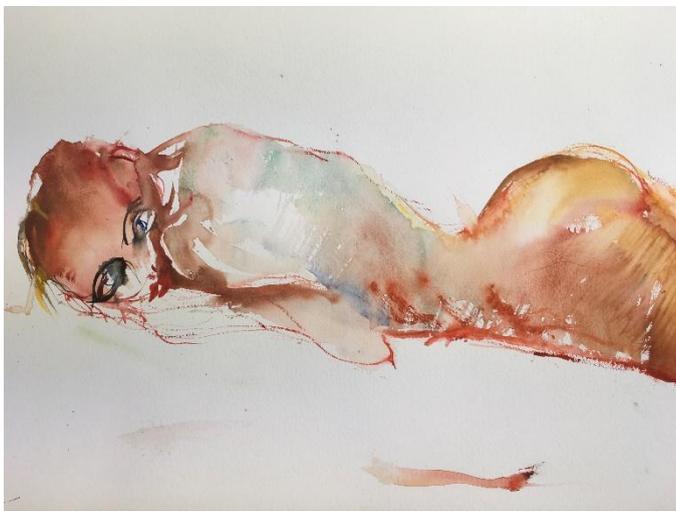


Corpus: A Presentation of Bodies by STANISLAS SLAWOMIR BLATTON

A body is an image offered to other bodies, a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body, local colours and shadows, fragments, grains, areolas, lunules, nails, hair, tendons, skulls, ribs, pelvises, bellies, meatuses, foams, tears, teeth, droolings, slits, blocks, tongues, sweat, liquors, veins, pains, and joys, and me, and you.
(Nancy, 2008, 121)



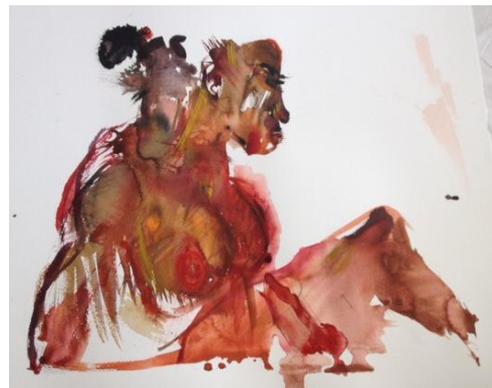
Surging through the exhibition space, a corpus of paintings perform corporeality. This selection has been drawn from a much larger body of work in watercolour (over 600), created over a ten-year period, by London-based artist Stanislas Slawomir Blatton, who has committed to a practice of extraordinary physiological attentiveness. There is nothing tame or genteel about these watercolours. The dribbles, bleeds, stains, puddles, blooms of the medium become equivalents for mottled, pulsating, historiated skin; for breathing, flexing, sagging, emotional flesh. Watercolour becomes both metaphoric and metonymic of body fluids and flows. The gestural movements of the medium register shifting rhythms and exchanges of bodily energies between artist and model.



On one level, this corpus presents tight conceptual and material seriality. All works consist of rich watercolour worked into thick handmade paper, A1 format. All works represent anonymous, naked female models, detached from specific contexts of time and place. None of these works, *Studies for a Figure*, are distinguished through titles or dates. None of the bodies appear to drive outwards from standing poses but explore myriad extensions from compressed or horizontal positionality, although none are visibly grounded. The repetitive folding and unfolding of bodies come from performances enacted in private space, beyond normative social codes. The re-presentation of the bodies, detached from context, enhances a sense of liminality. Made to float on the white ground of the paper, the gravitational pulls which contoured their forms on the floor of the studio, are now released, furthering corporeal potentiality for bodily becoming.



Whilst the corpus has rigorous coherence, each painting carries the unique physical charge of an individualised encounter. Bodies and faces are highly fragmented or distorted but bring specific features, hairstyles, dishevelled hair states, sense of breathing, shimmering skin, into live presence. Bodies are abstracted from time and place but the paintings hold and release a vivid phenomenology of the artist's body; his situated responses to the particular cartographies and materialities of a model's body and mutable being. Whilst one painting attends to this model's skull, belly, navel, teeth, hair, sweat, odor, adrenalin, another work explores that model's areolas, tongue, saliva, veins, mass, lethargy. Nuanced modulations of watercolour become transubstantiation of bodies' invisible traces and stigmata. Blatton's acute corporeal attentiveness finds a parallel in poetic writing about memory traces on skin by philosopher and phenomenologist, Michel Serres: '*the fluctuating traces of caresses, memories of silk, wool, velvet, furs, tiny grains of rock, rough bark, scratchy surfaces, ice crystals, flames, the timidity of a subtle touch, the audacity of aggressive contact*' (Serres, 2008, 24).



To engage with this corpus, it is vital to understand that the artist had no intention to make illusionistic copies of a static reality of subjects (life-drawing). Furthermore, he resists re-deploying

familiar visual codes (popular visual clichés) for the female body. He commits to taking risks in this fluid medium as a means of discovery; open to crossing thresholds of being and knowing. He uses chance marks and stains of paint, followed by continuous modulations to 'capture' unpredictable flows of bodily forces, both visible and invisible. Philosopher, Gilles Deleuze has discussed this type of material capture in relation to the work of artist Francis Bacon where the distorted figurative forms become an event resonant with sensation (Deleuze, 2017). This thinking is founded on the premise that individuality is not a singular or bounded thing. Rather, subjects/bodies are events; complex dynamic assemblages, bundles of affects or modes of force that are affected themselves. Philosopher, Jean Luc Nancy has characterised bodies as both an event and a place: *'Bodies are places of existence...the body-place isn't full or empty since it doesn't have an outside or an inside...its skin is variously folded, refolded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated, exogastrulated, orificed, evasive, invaded, stretched, relaxed, excited, distressed, tied, untied. In these and thousands of other ways, the body makes room for existence.'* (Nancy, 2008, 15)

Blatton's paintings can be thought of as *'a vibration or movement from matter'* (Sauvagnargues, 2018, 47); an ensemble of actions and reactions, always in the plural. It is fascinating to consider the durational gaps between the artist's actions and reactions. The bodily performance of painting becomes an event of being, comings and goings of subjectivity through mark-making, with different forces coming into play. For example, it is in the varied gaps of action and reaction, when Blatton's kinetic memories, his understanding of his own and other bodies, inflect the work. There is a synergy between the weighing of his thoughts, the weighing of paper, weighing of differently 'charged' brushes in his fingers and the weights, masses of physical bodies he encounters. Nancy has discussed this exchange between physical and conceptual weighing:

A Corpus of the weighings of a material, of its mass, its pulp, its grain, its gulf, its mole, its molecule, its turf, its trouble, its turgidity, its fibre its juice, its invagination, its volume, its peak, its fall, its meat, its coagulation, its paste, its crystallinity, its tightness, its spasm, its steam, its knot, its unknotting, its tissue, its home, its disorder, its wound, its pain, its promiscuity, its odor, its pleasure, its taste, its timbre, its resolution, its high and low, right and left, its acidity, its windedness, its balancing, its dissociation, its resolution, its reason...'(Nancy, 2008, 99)



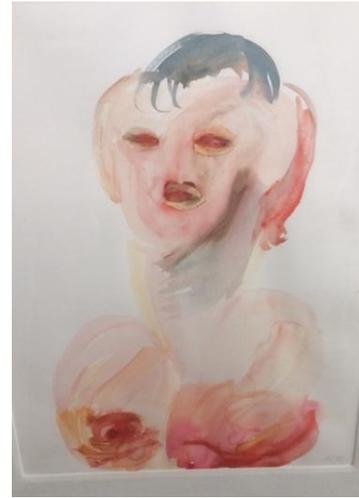


The dynamics of Blatton's mark-making in this mutable medium, register rhythms and resonances between artist and model through time; sensations of both visible and invisible bodily effects. None of his paintings represent a fixed position or singular moment of vision. The dynamic presentation of the bodies with open contours and fluctuating colours, suggest a synthesis of responses to each model's changing movements but also memories of his responses to other bodies both real and pictorial. It is significant that he worked for many years as a Conservation Officer at the National Gallery in London as the corpus carries multiple moments of bodily haunting from the art of the past. When Blatton's body responds to the movements of another living body it conjoins with the memories of touch, not only those of his own art, but the physical and speculative touching and tracing of other painted bodies through time in the history of art. Throughout the corpus there may be fleeting sensations of dappled flesh painted by Venetian artist Titian, or the spiralling torsions of a 16th century Mannerist painting by Pontormo reconfigured by Rubens a century later.

Blatton's paintings of female bodies are not objectifying or voyeuristic. Bodies are not mortified or fixed into position, they are not set apart to be contemplated in a detached way. Each work is participatory, capturing intimate resonances between artist and model. Nancy makes the point that *'a body is always seen by a body'* and has described a profound interplay of seeing and touching which is characteristic of Blatton's painting:

'vision doesn't penetrate but glides along, swerves and follows along departures. It is a touching that does not absorb but moves along lines and recesses, inscribing and inscribing the body. A mobile, unstable caress, seeing the image in slow motion, fast-forwarded or frozen, seeing as well with touches from other senses, smells, tastes, timbres, or even sounds from the senses of words. (Nancy, 2008, 45)

From a Polish heritage, Blatton has, characteristically, drawn strategies from European Expressionism: the heightened colour, gestural marks, figurative distortions used by early 20th century male artists such as Egon Schiele, Kokoshka and George Grosz. However, his training in the Warsaw Academy of art in the 1960s, early 70s, happened at a time of progressive cultural politics which led to engagement with the critical and subversive practices of performance, conceptual art and counter-cultural politics of feminism. Unlike Schiele's nudes which are pinned down by incisive lines drawn from a lingering voyeuristic gaze, Blatton's bodies are fully performative and participatory; unruly, grotesque bodies which palpitate vibrantly; continually morphing between states and identities. In this respect, his work has something in common with the highly speculative figuration of contemporary female artists such as Wangechi Mutu and Ellen Gallagher whose practices have responded to recent posthumanist thinking about identity as hybrid, multiple, nomadic.



Mikhail Bakhtin's subversive spirit of carnivalesque informs the performative spaces of Blatton's corpus. Some bodies suggest mercurial subjectivities through trans-gender or trans-species formations. There are those with uncertain limbs suggestive of phallic tails, hoof feet, amoebic hands. A figure with wild blond hair, sits cross-legged, hunching baboon-like for a moment. Another, 'body without organs' appears to shrink inwards, all monstrous head and breast-legs. By contrast, a muscular black woman, head fashionably shaven, sits erect, rotating to stare over her shoulder. Her gaze takes on apotropaic force, shape-shifting between flesh and skull. This figure moves through the times and spaces of other paintings presenting differently. At other moments, she reclines gently, her skin variously reflecting coloured lights which seem to change in rhythm and density like breath, her energies withdraw into different dream depths and spaces.



Serres considered this mutability of bodily presence and absence, exposition and withdrawal of the self, in metaphysical terms relating to ideas of 'soul' and specifically noted artist's attentiveness to its moments of emergence: *'All real bodies shimmer like watered silk. They are hazy surfaces, mixtures*

of body and soul...the changing, shimmering, fleeting soul, the blazing striated, tinted, streaked, striped, many coloured, mottled, cloudy, star-studded, bedizened, variegated, torrential, swirling soul' (Serres, 2008,23).

'Corpus: a body is a collection of pieces, bits, members, zones, states, functions. Heads, hands, cartilage, burnings, smoothnesses, spurts, sleep, digestion, goose-bumps, excitation...it's a collection of collections, a corpus corporum, whose unity remains a question for itself. (Nancy, 2008, 155)

Experiencing Blatton's corpus is like watching film speeded up, flickering traces of sequential time, complex bodily movements, memories, becoming. There are uncanny flows between sensations of intimacy and otherness; swerves between familiarity and estrangement. The destabilizing effects of each work become amplified when experienced together as an immersive installation in the gallery. The artist has further concentrated and accelerated the tempo of bodily intra-actions by presenting a number of the works as new assemblages: diptychs, triptychs, polyptychs. The gallery becomes like a performance space/dance studio. Surrounded by the powerful rhythms of bodies in multiple states of becoming, viewers are invited to become attentive to their own bodies as active participants. Writer, Christopher Watkin, drawing on Nancy's philosophy, has reflected on the equations between dancing and painting. He points out the fully physical experience of viewing *'I am bodily in tension with the painting like two dancers locked in a hold. My muscles, tendons, thoughts, breathing and circulation are held disposedly accented towards the image...* (Watkins, 2016, 50). Rather than seek closure through categorisation or interpretation of art works, Watkins underlines viewers' responsibility to extend themselves, discover resonance with the works, keep art open, alive and in play:

Art is no longer a more or less distant object represented by a skilled copier and observed by a detached viewer, but a movement caught by a participating artist/dancer and passed on to one who catches and dances it in turn' (Watkin, 2016, 52)



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Written by Lizzie Perrotte July 2021

Director of SolasArts and Consultant Programme Director MSc Art, Law Business at Christie's Education London