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Superset

An essay by -- Glen Helfand

A few years ago, on assignment to cover a summer party at the estate of major art collector couple, I had to decide if I would actually dive into the pool installation: a James Turrell sky space that seemingly levitated on the surface of the blue water. Experiencing the art would require stripping down in their pool house, a rectangular echo of the structure in the water. The gracious hosts accounted for people who may have not come prepared as in the changing room, in the kind of plastic retail pouches that contain underwear, they provided disposable bathing suits made from a waxy textured paper. There were no excuses not to dive into a pool along with various patrons who were also self-conscious to reveal what they perceive to be their imperfect bodies, or get their hair wet (stretchy blue swim caps, with the estate's name imprinted, were also available).

There was also plenty of other art that didn't require so much revealing effort. Pieces by an array of adventurous young artists, their objects and conceptual gestures were recommended by a notable art advisor in New York. They're piles of t-shirts, a choo choo train, a size that could accommodate an 8 year old child, running on a track that circles other large, head scratching sculptures. But it's the experience of the pool sculpture that was the most challenging, and rewarding experiences to view.

Being paid to cover this party was a perfect excuse to get over myself and make myself get into that waxy swimsuit. The changing room was crowded, full of men in their 60s, guys who could have been CEOs of major corporations. Maybe they were wealthy neighbors with sprawling estates in Napa, or south, in Hillsborough. Maybe both. They probably made more money in an afternoon than I did in my entire life. They might be golfers or tennis players, but only for diversion, they were in their 60s at least, and they grumbled about being in this room. I felt a little sweaty from the summer heat, but also a bit of social anxiety.

"Frank, I think they get a kick out of making us have to make fools of ourselves wearing this," one guy said to another while holding the plastic pouch holding the bathing suit. I jotted down the exchange in my memory bank, a quote for my story. Soon after, the host came in, quelling the chatter. It's difficult to know how old he is, as he's a man who doesn't hide the fact that he's had plastic surgery (at the lovely outdoor dinner, I end up sitting next to the surgeon, someone who I, coincidentally, recognized from my gym). The host had no shame in quickly getting naked and calmly pulling on a Speedo, made of actual stretchy fabric. He seemed so

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comfortable, and nonchalant about revealing himself, his penis was visible to us all. I had to admire him for that—he was, for the most part, in his body.

The water was luxuriously warm, easy to submerge into. You had to do breast stroke underwater for a fair distance in order to get yourself into the structure. The experience made me think of Shelley Winters in the *Poseidon Adventure*. She was a comical character, nervous and zaftig, but her character, in youth, had been a competitive swimmer—tragically, she suffers a heart attack and dies after making a daring, underwater rescue.

There was only a bit of extra exertion, and breath-holding, that made splashing up into the otherworldly Turrell space, but it made the experience all the more enthralling. I found myself in a square room, something like a spa hot tub with Virgin America mood lighting, with the formerly naked collector, a museum director (who swam with his wire rimmed glasses in a Ziplock bag), and a young rock star-like Scottish artist flanked by two women, whose position made them seem like groupies. We'd gotten a hit of endorphins swimming here, through movement, breath, and the refreshing sensation of water on our skin. And then there was the square of sky above, modified by a soft purple glow that altered our perception of what we were looking at. No one was being critical. There was an equality of experience. Most of us were smiling beatifically as we looked up into the atmosphere.

That dissonance between the intimidating garden party crowd and the endorphin high of the pool created a profound moment, at least for me. In subsequent years, I got to go back once or twice, and it seemed like some people, there with groups of friends, were easier to get into the water than in the past. Or maybe I'd gotten over my resistance. I felt proud to have taken the literal leap.

In the art world, even in an age of super health and wellness consciousness, the body of the viewer doesn't seem to matter much. The audience member is the one who brings their eyes and perceptions as they stand at a critical distance. It is something else to experience something in the body, to participate in a manner that generates sweat that might last a little longer. That's what this show is about. Breaking a wall. There are no bathing suits to change into, and we don't require actual perspiration, but you do have to walk up some stairs to get to the work. That will burn just a few calories, we can suggest a workout that makes use of this architectural detail: *Sprint up, jog down. Do a few tricep dips.* Do a few reps and it will take a few moments to get your bearings and catch your breath. Art looks different with your heart pumping.

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I like it when there is a conceptual gesture that makes you feel the muscle strain of the artistic action. Clad in a full latex body suit, Jennifer Locke once did a performance in which she jumped rope for twenty minutes and then snipped the rubber at her toe, draining the quart or so of sweat that excreted from her pores. The audience screamed with nervous revulsion. There's something visceral about the fluid that cools us and remind us that we're beings primarily made of water and salt. Lick your lips.

That piece, called *Fountain: Piss, Sweat, Water*, was performed in 2007, and Jennifer notices shifts in her strength and abilities. She still trains regularly in jiu jitsu, but she's made a piece in which she is playing with the imperfection implicit in taking things to failure. That's the thing that gets muscles to grow, but it seems harder to do after a certain point of middle age. She's filmed herself doing single exercises, shortly looped, on each monitor, adjusting digitally to keep the rhythm of the movements in sync. Failure comes earlier on push-ups than with squats. They face Edward Muybridge motion studies of weight lifters, images that affirm the fact that the camera has had so much to do with capturing the strangely glorious repetition in exercise reps.

This kind of failure is ambiguous. It's required to move forward, but it's also a symbol of mortality. The flow of movement changes as time goes on. If you look at the Robert Mapplethorpe photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his *Pumping Iron* prime, it's difficult not to think of his later self, the more pared down, if still solid version of himself. He stands in that 1976 picture in front of a paisley curtain in a funky photo studio, a moment when he was still young and hungry, and the photographer, so enamored of the body, was flexing his now legendary quest for success. The corporeal aspect is somehow so vivid with Mapplethorpe, and so many artists who died of AIDS back in the day. I actually saw him once at a fairly intimate reception, in his later years. He was skeletal, his hair thin yet carefully combed. He wore a black velvet suit, and carried that photo-famous cane with a silver skull at its top. He sat regally in a cushioned chair and graciously greeted guests, none of whom actually acknowledged their shock at seeing him in this state.

There's some Dorian Gray to this, but maybe not. The photographer was the opposite of the body builder at this point. Arnold went on to film icon status, major political office, and embarrassing scandal. By some accounts, upon leaving the governorship, Arnold had a notably orange cast to his skin. He was an alien creature, a bronzed terminator in the hot tub. No recent photos of Lisa Lyon appear on a google image search, though Wikipedia notes that she's now 64-years old. Most likely she looks great, or did she do too many drugs back in the day and now lives in a Visalia trailer park? It's easy to slip off of the exercise wagon. Danish artist Lea Guldditte Hestelund has paid homage to Lyon in earlier works, undertaking body

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transformation. Her cast aluminum dumbbells are posed on dyed rabbit fur. They send us back to *Barbarella*, a timeless retrofuturistic icon of the female body, and a name that sounds awfully like those weights. *Barbell-ella*. How fitting that Jane Fonda went on to be an eighties fitness icon, who is now 80.

Motivation, that's what keeps you there. It may be the designer stamps on Libby Black's facsimile, paper-light weight set and Burberry punching bag; or it is in the grimacing, scrambled faces of Chris Finley's power lifters, whose features morph, unhinge and rearrange on the skull to reach a limit? (Personally, I find inspiration in Finley's bizarre watercolor that depicts designer lamps having a session on a trampoline—if they can do it, so can I!) Joshua Abelow's *Running Witch* paintings suggest a marathon, a competition between the inner and outer self, nervous system and skin. They harness elusive energy sources. Summer Wheat's process is about pushing—her paint is squeezed and filtered through a mesh screen, more skin. You sense the material resistance, though also caloric implications—the paint is piped on with a pastry bag, frosting transformed into hardened and muscular.

Transitory transformation. The body is ephemeral as much as we try, we'll never be able to cheat its eventual demise, its erosion and disappearance. Those Muybridge dudes are long gone, so is Michael Jackson, whose athletic dance movement becomes ghostly, a little bit monstrous in Paul Pfieffer's processed purview. Live Evil, it's called, a palindrome. I appreciate the ephemeral nature of Eric Giraudet's evacuated skins, shed as they are like the residue of a molting snake. He titles them *Movement studies* and when seen from a distance, they seem to transcribe a dance, wriggles and trapeze stunts, a lightness of the soul. Which of course leads us to Marina Abramovic's *Standing With Skeleton*, a totemic example of the weight of mortality. The body is lighter when it's down to the bone, but at the same time a heavy burden. There is some irony to the fact that the large-scale framed photograph is itself a weighty object. It took some heavy lifting, and sweat, to get this piece on the wall. But it looks so good there, fighting with gravity to be grounded, but also to ascend to some other state of being.

Hopefully we'll all meet our goals.

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