

The Public Body.02

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Regina José Galindo, a different take on real estate

Our age is one of unprecedented permissiveness and militant puritanism. Pornography of every description is available at the click of a keyboard, small children are sexualised in a manner that would have been inconceivable to our grandparents' generation. Yet Newton's third law applies in psychology as well as science: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

The growth of sexual freedoms has been matched by an upsurge in religious extremism, and not just of the Islamic variety. The sexualisation of children has made pedophilia into a crime that stirs up a murderous public rage. Look for instance at the calls for Donald Friend's once-fashionable pictures of Balinese boys to be dumped from public collections and even destroyed.

The ongoing debacle of the same-sex marriage saga tells us everything we need to know about our divided polity. Treated as a simple human rights issue there is nothing to discuss, but to its opponents the idea of gay marriage strikes at the very foundations of their worldview, unleashing all kinds of demons.

Artspace is stepping into this minefield with *The Public Body .02*. The show follows last year's *The Public Body .01*, which dealt with "sexualised bodies". This event passed under the radar, overlooked by a general public that shows little interest in the avant-garde fringe of the contemporary art scene.

I'm slightly nervous about drawing attention to this new exhibition, but Artspace director, Alexie Glass-Kantor, has made it clear she welcomes debate and controversy. My concern is that many

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This is as close as I get to a Trumpian twitter storm.. but it's

people's idea of a reasonable response would be a furious call for the show, and perhaps the gallery, to be closed.

The Public Body .02 brings together the work of more than 40 artists or artist collectives in one of the most explicit surveys ever seen in this city. The curators, Glass-Kantor and Talia Linz, have continued the theme of "the sexualised body" but taken us into more marginal territory. Some works are satirical or buffoonish, others stridently political. Several artists explore the dark regions of the human psyche.

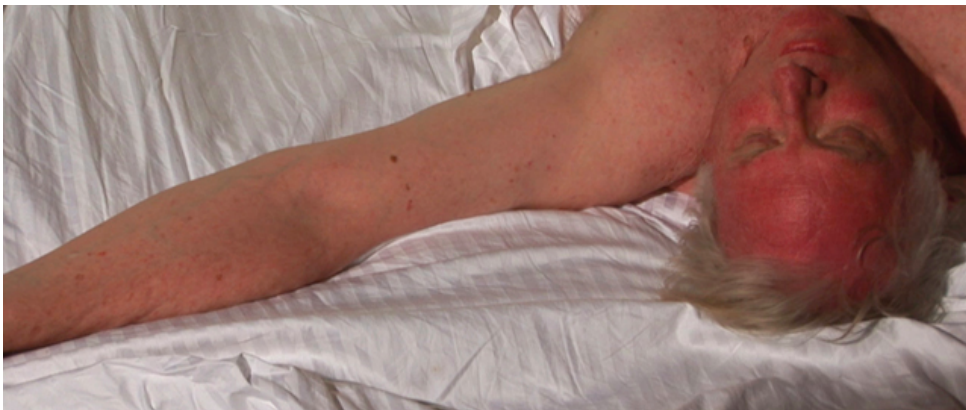


Wall to wall Leigh Bowery at Artspace

There is an emphasis on works with a strong performative element, starting with wall-sized photographs of actions by Leigh Bowery, the Australian performance artist who became notorious in London's underground club scene. Bowery would dress in outrageous, gender-bending costumes, spoofing perceptions of the body, sexual and social identity. There's also a long, grainy film of one of these performances, which is arguably the dullest item in the show.

At the other end of the spectrum is Dani Marti's video showing the art collector and patron, Peter Fay, having a first-ever experience of human intimacy in his mid-sixties. It's a gruelling affair for the viewer, let alone the participants – all agony and ecstasy, with sweaty, hairy, aging bodies exposed to public scrutiny.

Marti crosses a line here, tearing away the veil of privacy that we guard most jealously. Fay's self-exposure is brave to the point of recklessness. Yet it's impossible to be unaffected by this piece, which is the very opposite of pornographic.



Dani Marti, Still from 'Bacon's Dog' (2010)

infuriating to see ignorant
cultural vandalism disguised as
policy about 6 months ago

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I can't say the same about the archive of super-8 films by Richard and Pat Larter, which gleefully embrace the pornographic sensibility in the spirit of 60s' sexual liberation, which saw everything a bit kinky or dirty as a blow against a straight-laced Establishment. Both the Larters, who have passed on, were shameless enthusiasts and connoisseurs of pornography.

They were also products of a particular time and place, with everything modelled on antiquated men's magazines, or more extreme versions of tabloid page three girls. Watching an elderly Pat posing with a garter belt, spreading her legs and pouting at the viewer, one feels like shouting "Gore blimey!"

There's less comedy in the photographs of American artist, Leigh Ledare, who has made his reputation with pornographic pictures and films of his own mother. One can only wonder what sort of upbringing generates such Oedipal extravaganzas, but if your mum is a dedicated exhibitionist and you're a would-be avant-garde artist, it's a productive combination.

Ultimately Ledare's taboo-busting work is probably less confronting than Ella Dreyfus's black-and-white photos of old women's naked bodies, collapsed into a mass of sagging, wrinkled flesh. Few viewers will be able to imagine their mother as a porno queen, but we can all recognise the inevitable ravages of aging, and feel the chill of our own mortality.

Alongside these photos and audio-visual works, the erotic paintings of artists such as Del Kathryn Barton feel rather subdued. It drives home the message that the photographic image possesses a greater quotient of reality than the work of a painter's imagination, which is always more strongly aestheticised.

Aesthetics provides a measure of protection for many of the works in this show. To call something "art" makes it much harder to dismiss (or embrace) as pornography. If I've used the latter term freely it's precisely because so many artists want to challenge that shaky distinction, which is largely a matter of context or our instinctive feel for a creator's intentions.

A large part of *The Public Body .02* is devoted to political statements, notably a film in which the South African performance artist, Tracey Rose, pisses on the wall built on the Gaza strip; or one in which Regina José Galindo, of Guatemala, strands naked on a block of turf while heavy earthmoving equipment tears away the ground on all sides. The paradigm for Galindo, as ever, is the frail body of the individual pitted against a corrupt and brutal power structure.



Rabbaya Naseer and Hurmat Ul Ain, 'White as Snow' (2008)

A two-minute video called *White as Snow* (2008) by two young Pakistani women, Rabbaya Naseer and Hurmat Ul Ain, is the sleeper of this exhibition. The artists appear to be reading from a list in Urdu, but it's really a parody of the way boys are taught to chant Quranic verses. With gentle wit they draw attention to their country's huge disparities in gender roles and expectations.

There is no bare flesh in Naseer and Ul Ain's work, no obvious attempt to cause outrage, but it could be the most dangerous piece of all. For where strange sexual aberrations raise only a smile or a shake of the head, the smallest criticism of the great public enterprise of religion has been known to set off the largest of tremors.

The Public Body .02

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