

Under her skin

By Taylor Hall

From a mere touch, an artwork is made. Fingertips collide with matter and are driven by a maker's agency. Two skins meet. An artist collaborates with a material, guided by the characteristics of its substance, to transform it into a vehicle of human expression. Placed within the gallery's white cube, a space that forbids physical touch, *Something More* teases the viewers tactile impulse. The exhibition contains an unavoidable intimacy. A closeness. A hum of the female experience embedded in each work's material skin.

In her article *How to Be Complicit with Materials*, academic Petra Lange-Berndt muses that "to follow material things is to enter a true maze of meanings."¹ Molly Smith, Sharna Barker, Dana Lawrie, Natalie Lavelle and Hailey Atkins boldly enter this maze. There is a hyperfixation on the bodiliness of each work, one that allows us to imagine that it might feel just as we do. They highlight that materials have always had a sense and sensibility prior to their artistic alteration, although we may have not yet taken the opportunity to listen.

Despite the exhibition's minimalist thematic references, *Something More* is in stark contrast to mid-20th-century Minimalism's aim of creating controlled objects without emotion. Instead, it lends itself to a reappraisal of the legacy and impact of Post-Minimalist female artists working in the 1960s and 70s. Eschewing Minimalism's originally monolithic, male-orientated tenets, female Post-Minimalist figures such as Nancy Graves, Eva Hesse, Hannah Wilke and Michelle Stuart turned to evoking human experiences, feminine bodies, and natural occurrences in their work. By prioritising the spontaneity of materials and how they conjure our lived experiences, these artists helped expand minimalism into areas of subjectivity and reflexivity.² Rather than using materials as a springboard to leap into abstraction and viscosity, their work used its substance as a conduit of emotional meaning.

Through evoking the human body via materiality, *Something More* beckons the viewer to consider their own bodily state. Each work's sensuous and tactile nature transforms the ocular sensation of viewing into a corporeal experience. You may begin inhaling and exhaling with the movement of Molly Smith's *Breather* as wind softly moves through the pouch of excess silk. Or lower into a crouch to inspect Sharna Barker's waxy forms jutting from the wall, offering frayed calico-like nerve endings. *What is beneath their surface? Is that bone... or cartilage?* Pulpy and frisk, Hailey Atkins' sculptures stand in the centre of the space, confronting the viewer. Standing at the height of an average human, they echo bodies with metal spines protruding through their mushy, matte surfaces.

The viewer within the exhibition space, rather than being just a mind or a set of eyes, becomes aware of their own body amongst other (non-human) bodies. The paradox of 'self' and 'other' blurs to engender a more empathetic way of seeing and creates a foundation of fundamental human connectedness.

To intertwine materiality with feminist sentiments is a natural and powerful coupling. Academics such as Judith Butler have notably discussed material as being 'coded feminine', stating that, "in reproduction, women are said to contribute to the matter, men the form".³ Butler's claim that material is inherently feminine indicates that *Something More*, in its intense materiality, evokes a feminine sensibility. This sensibility contrasts with Minimalism's refusal of pleasure, as suggested by Amelia Jones; the movement clashed with feminine agency and ignored the 'possibility of desiring female

¹ Lange-Berndt, P., 2015. *Materiality (Introduction, How to be Complicit With Materials)*. pp.12 - 13.

² Stoops, S. L., 1996. *More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70's. An Introduction*. pp. 2.

³ Butler, J., 2015. *Materiality (Bodies that Matter, 1993)*. pp.120 - 121.

viewers and makers of art.’⁴ Each surface contained within the exhibition therefore acts as an extension of feminine skin with the ability to relish in the pleasure and gratification of material and perception in all its spontaneous subtleties.

Stained with soft hues of pinks and purples, the surface of Natalie Lavelle’s *Untitled (Purple, Crimson and Violet)* gives the impression of a fading blemish. As your gaze slides down the length of the canvas, you notice the erasure of her paint’s contusion due to its past life being briefly dipped in bleach. The canvas’s skin is a palimpsest. It could act as an allegory of history’s efforts to conceal the achievements of female artists, or the continuing impact of gendered marginalisation of women at large. The canvas emulates the skin’s capacity to retain experience— settling into the epidermis just as bleed-layers have penetrated each weft and weave.

Each poke and prick implied by the stitches contained in Dana Lawrie’s *Gutless* might appear with familiarity to a woman who has undergone a caesarean or other surgery. Housed in the belly of Lawrie’s transparent, stretched polyester is the evocation of a wound healing. Remnants of the cutting, pulling, painting and then stitching are witnessed by the viewer. The paling and delicate membrane of her work lends its viewer a gentle insight into with the impermanence of their own skin.

Molly Smith’s *Boundary I* contains a brutal fragility suggested by the contrasted duality of the materially submissive, pliable latex and the dominant strength or inferred brutality of steel. The tensile power embedded within the materials and their relation to the body brings bondage to mind. Each link of the works’ chain tests the submission of its prior material as it creeps onto the gallery’s floor.

Despite being forbidden from touch within this strict gallery context, each anthropomorphic form inspires a curiosity or craving to reach out and make contact with the object. Though there is no ability to state their boundaries, each work hums with life and agency. The desire to touch the body of the work elicits questions not only on our ability to touch, but whether we have permission to touch in the first place. If these works evoke the female body, the hands-off rules of the white cube can be analogous to contemporary discourse on consent.

The reality is, we are all material objects made up of the same whizzing atoms and unbending molecules as the artworks we view. With the ever-growing digitisation and technical innovations of our world, Barker, Lavelle, Smith, Atkins and Lawrie invite us to consider our relationship with material we coexist and share a physical world with. By referencing materiality as a touchstone between body and matter, the exhibition is a declaration of feminine subjectivity, independence, and power. Each artist within the exhibition allows their artworks’ agencies to be vagabond, contagious, gritty and raw: or soft, spineless, forgiving and familiar. They get under your skin and crawl with possibilities. *Something More* ultimately highlights the burgeoning need to pay attention to the thingness of things and to empathise with something more than ourselves.

⁴ Stoops, S. L., 1996. *More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70's. An Introduction*. pp. 3.