



THE BODY IN PIECES

MARY
MILLER

The Body in Pieces

I met Felipe Baeza a few years ago, when he had just begun his Master of Fine Arts at the Yale School of Fine Arts. He signed up for my class on ancient American art in the Yale University Art Gallery, and at the second session we were able to examine Pre-Hispanic works in the collection personally. Some members of the class wore gloves; some simply scrubbed in like surgeons at the lab sink. Standing carefully over the foam-cushioned table, we picked up the objects, all works from Mexico. There were figurines of terracotta and beads of colorful stone; pots with slip and stucco and relief finishes. I handed around a small cup in the shape of a gourd, with a lip that turned inward, and each member of the class held it in sequence, and I asked everyone to “do” something with the vessel. Some held it gingerly, and others tried to pour from it or drink from it or simply turn it around. Others placed it back on the table, to see if it wobbled or turned. Felipe looked for cracks.

Some of the objects were, in fact, fragments without wholes—a terracotta leg or head. We looked at the dark clay inside the reddish surface, a clear indication of the low firing temperature characteristic of open-pit firing. We slid a finger along the clay surface, feeling the roughness that comes from temper, or material ground into the clay to lower the firing temperature. Some figurines had substantial reconstruction and restoration: a leg added here or there or a new upper arm constructed to attach an ancient wrist to an ancient shoulder. These fragmented

bodies, or perhaps more precisely, body fragments, spoke to Felipe Baeza, but I did not understand the depth of the body in pieces until I saw his own art. Felipe was seeking the body in its components, breaking ancient forms down into their most fundamental elements.

The Pre-Hispanic body did come apart, in life, in death, and in religious practice and belief, particularly as seen in deity images captured in stone at the Templo Mayor, the Aztec capital, today at the heart of Mexico City. The goddess Coyolxauhqui lives and dies in eternal fragmentation, her limbs severed, bones jutting out from bodily flesh as centrifugal force rips her body apart. Her severed head rolls away like a boulder, gravity further separating the body’s elements. Probably once on the plaza floor, the Tzitzimime stood as guardians, most notably the goddess Coatlicue, the most important example of which had been dismembered. Two serpents spurt up from the cut of her neck; other serpents rise from the elbows, where her arms have also been lopped off; another serpent descends from her skirt, as if a twisted cord of menstrual blood now extended like an oversized penis. These Aztec bodies are not whole: the body is bloodied and battered and fractured.

A warrior gained power if he could capture the thigh bone of a woman who died in childbirth, defleshing and preparing it to wield as a weapon or wear it the way some leading warriors did, swinging from the loincloth or secured in the headdress. The fleshless death gods seem to be ani-

Mary Miller

mated skeletons, their eyeballs sometimes extruded, a spiky row of smaller bones forming a headdress, teeth that seem oversized when the flesh of face and jaw is gone. The very notion of heart sacrifice, conducted on the living, is to fragment bodily organs, yet keep them whole, removing the heart in its pericardium, the surrounding sac that could be clamped at the aorta and ventricles to retain a pint of blood within.

Bones and body parts could come apart: the Aztec deity Tezcatlipoca, made manifest by the constellation Ursa Major, lost one human foot seasonally when the long arm of the “big dipper” handle plunged into the Gulf of Mexico, to be replaced by a serpent: the body was never whole. But perhaps the most powerful Pre-Hispanic address of the male body is Xipe Totec, a deity known best for the Aztec but with resonance and presence elsewhere in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. Patron deity of a month associated with springtime and renewal, Xipe Totec is usually translated as “our lord the flayed one.” The celebration began with a heart sacrifice and a flaying, such that images—usually stone or clay renderings between half and two-thirds life size—of the deity emphasize the carefully seamed stitching over the left chest, the point of excision, as well as the detailed lacing of the ties of skin across the back. The tactile quality of skin, the body’s largest “organ,” is made explicit in the way that living skin is layered within dead flesh. The flayed face is usually shown to be independent of the body, the careful ovals cut for eyes

and mouth masking human individuality, a practice that quickly disintegrated from the sculptural ideal as Xipe’s attendants wore flayed skins until they shed from the body, the renewal visceral and complete, like a sprout from a seed. This nudity draws attention to the male body’s sexual organs, which hang loose, as if stuffed—although the penis is usually absent—but the three dimensional protrusions draw our attention, like the extra set of human hands which hang down in sculptural renderings, as if inviting touch: are they real, are they alive?

These and other Pre-Hispanic bodies underpin Felipe Baeza’s work, as he explores the discomfort of the body in pieces, the ancient sculptures reaching to touch a modern human body, the discordant engagement of body to body. His work unsettles and refuses the easy glance in ways that both recall and engage with the works of the past. The body is in fragments, the body is in motion, the body of the past is embraced by the body of the present. The body is gendered and engendered. The body is skin, the body is bone.

Felipe Baeza’s work insists that we look at the body in motion and in pieces. He insists that we see the body in time and through time, an ancient body reconstituted and alive only when we limn the living and present onto the past. His works make us see, and they make us feel.

Mary Miller
Director, Getty Research Institute