

# M. L<sup>E</sup>BLANC

## Isabel Yellin

You were born into what Lacan calls the order of the Real<sup>1</sup>. What does this mean? Basically that your first experiences were without order or boundaries. When you were born, you could not distinguish between yourself and your environment. As humans we were born more prematurely developed than all other animals and therefore with an absolute dependence on the care of others for many months postpartum. Ubiquitous with the world around you, as a newborn you were physiologically incapable of controlling your body's regulatory functions, for this body was not yet recognized as *you*.

Within the Real (or, as Lacan defined it, the *lack of lack*), there was no separation between yourself and objects in this stage of 'primal-unity'. Rather than an integrated totality, you were an uncoordinated series of parts, zones, organs, sensations, needs, and impulses. In this line of thinking we can approach Isabel Yellin's separate-yet-together exhibition of sculptures titled *Velvet Concrete*. Like the child's body, each part, or sculpture, strives for completion or satisfaction, separate from, yet attached to the whole in bits-and-pieces of the exhibition.

Before you were able recognized lack, there was pleasure in "sensual-sucking", even without milk, as you could not comprehend absence...until you did. Recognizing the lack of gratified needs displaced your dependence with self-reliance. Maybe you sucked your thumb? Maybe you still suck your thumb? Substituting a part of your own body provides auto-erotic pleasure. There is a similar act of self-soothing in particular sculptures by Isabel Yellin. The forms twist around themselves to fill their own voids creating impossible spaces as proposed by Borromean knots, the Klein bottle, or Escher objects. Without being overtly diagrammatic of the genesis of the psyche, Isabel Yellin's sculptures can be thought of as re-formulations of familiar libidinal circuits. During this stage, needs were provisionally covered over by the caretaker causing an inability to distinguish between the self and the (m)other, as well as between the self and mirror image.

The simultaneity of sight falsely confirms the integrity of a cohesive body, for the other senses are unable to perceive the body such a nonlinear and non temporal way. Engulfed by the mirror-image's representational status of the self-as-other, the mirror image provides a promise or anticipation of self-mastery, and control the subject lacks. The child's fascination with the image coincides with its recognition of lack. The identification with the image propels it to nostalgically seek an impossible past of symbiotic completion, causing a primordial frustration and aggression. From this moment on, lacking will be its mode of being, always attempting to fill this unfillable lack. Parallel to the child's mirror phase, Yellin's forms sit uncomfortably between the ideal-image of an autonomous, completed unit, and a lacking or estranged part of a whole.

It's useful to understand Yellin's sculptures as pre-oedipal, in other words, they prefigure the mastery of language and the understanding of sexual difference. One can project a (fractured) sensorial body-image onto the crevices and protrusions of Yellin's sculptural forms. Crushed velvet and pleather sheets are stitched in undetermined 'subject-to-be' forms to exaggerate and perverse the body's libidinal orifices. These openings of the body that mark a threshold between its interior and its exterior, and thus they are sites of exchange between the subject and the world. One particularly uncanny sculpture is composed of a row of soft nude fabric hair scrunchies that are at once exterior and interior. Though often 'fully grown' in scale, Yellin's sculptures are closer relatives to the polymorphous newborn than your regulated adult body. Her re-formulations of familiar libidinal circuits radically propose a new flesh while staking out alternative representational possibilities.

- Marie Heilich

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Yellin and I shared a close reading of Elizabeth Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* leading up to her solo exhibition with M. LeBlanc Gallery, Chicago. Grosz, E. A. *Jacques Lacan: a Feminist Introduction*. Routledge, 1990.