



Christine Borland

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File Note #60 Christine Borland *Cast From Nature*

Dominic Paterson

Bodies of Knowledge

For more than 20 years, Christine Borland's artistic practice has led her to investigate the ways in which knowledge of the human body is produced and represented in both scientific and aesthetic fields, often working collaboratively with experts or institutions outside the art world. Borland has suggested that it was with a visit to the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, and in particular through encountering the anatomical teaching specimens collected there, that she found a productive route into what has become the connective tissue running through her work. For Borland, the uncanny power of these bodily fragments was a revelation: 'looking at the specimens, preserved in glass and in formaldehyde,' she states, 'I found beauty in these things, and the combination of a kind of attraction and a kind of repulsion.'¹ This combination of affects is a hallmark of her own practice, which often deals with bodies which have been damaged, opened, subjected to violence, abstracted or refigured through the objectifications of science, but does so through precise, pared down and often visually seductive formal means.

The preserved bodily part objects used in medical research or stored in museum collections can be traces of historical and ethical problems of great complexity and significance for human self-knowledge. There is a consistent concern in Borland's practice with addressing these complexities using sculptural processes. In this vein, Borland's modus operandi has previously seen her forensically research and reconstruct a complete human skeleton she had purchased from a medical supplier (*From Life*, 1994), commission sculptural likenesses of the notorious Joseph Mengele (*L'Homme Double*, 1997) and scan then construct plastic busts from an anatomical collection with eugenicist connotations (*The Dead Teach the Living*, 1997). With each of these works the question is raised as to whether the beauty of the final result is able to effect some kind of restitution, restoration or reanimation of the source material. Similar concerns are vividly embodied in *Cast From Nature* (2010–2011).

Borland has suggested that one of her motivations in *Cast From Nature* was to restore some dignity to the astonishing figurative sculpture which

Inside front & back cover: *The Dead Teach the Living* 1997
Courtesy Landesmuseum Munster,
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was its starting point. The artist first encountered this figure through a fiberglass copy on prominent display in the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. The original sculpture replicated by the museum's copy is attributed to Sir John Goodsir, titled *From Nature*, and dated 1845. It is a cast, presumably from life, of the body of a partially flayed man, posed after Michelangelo's famous Vatican *Pietà* of 1499. After some searching, Borland eventually located a damaged plaster version of the work, stored in the basement of the University of Edinburgh's anatomy department. Her response to this highly charged object developed gradually during a production residency at Glasgow Sculpture Studios. For the exhibition which followed that residency, Borland made the audacious move of presenting the process of making itself, as the work. For most of the exhibition's duration the main gallery space was empty, while a specially constructed arena, suggestive of the traditional anatomy lecture theatre, offered the viewer a chance to view live feeds of an adjacent space in which the work of making a new mould was going on.

The current exhibition presents the outcomes of that process of mould-making and casting. The forms Borland has produced are ghostly, seeming to float on their specially constructed supports, rather than resting squarely on a plinth like the figure from which they are cast. They are ghosts of the process of making, offering an inside view of casting's processes of replication, with the traces of Borland's hands perhaps the most tangible marker of embodied existence to be found in them. One might contemplate them in relation to uses of appropriation and replication in modern sculpture, and they may even exemplify Marcel Duchamp's provocative notion of the 'infra-thin,' an example of which is, he suggests, the separation between two (almost) identical objects produced from the same mould.² At the same time, however, it is difficult to ignore for long the thought that it is only a thin, imperceptible divide which separates the surfaces of these casts from the skin of the unknown man whose form they double. A series of intimate contacts, culminating in that of Borland's hands on the plaster, connects



Cast *From Nature* 2010/2011
Photo: Christine Borland



these spectral forms to real flesh and this thought might intermittently haunt our experience of them. Like the medical specimens which caught Borland's attention in the Hunterian Museum, these works deal in a preservation and supporting of the body, in giving it an afterlife which might solicit both attraction and repulsion.

What, then, is the relationship of the formal beauty of these works to the artifact from which they are derived? The philosopher Arthur Danto has argued that we should make a distinction between 'external' and 'internal' beauty in artworks.³ As an example of the former he gives Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), where the aesthetic properties of the urinal as object do not carry over wholesale into those of the work; as an example of the latter he offers Jacques-Louis David's painting *Death of Marat*, in which the representation of a French revolutionary hero as the dead Christ (via an allusion to the pose of Michelangelo's *Pietà*) is inseparably part of the work's affect — it is through this use of beauty that its political meaning is conveyed. Cast *From Nature* utilises both of these strategies; in bringing the found object and the technology of reproduction into the gallery it echoes aspects of the readymade, whilst at the same time operating through complex aesthetic associations, and bodily empathies. In its use of beauty, as in its formal appearance, Cast *From Nature* oscillates between or combines internal and external perspectives.

In so doing it negotiates what Susan Buck-Morss has termed the modern history of aesthetics as a desensitising 'anaesthetics'⁴. For Buck-Morss, medical, philosophical and artistic approaches to the aesthetic since the Enlightenment have tended to disregard embodied existence in favour of sight, rationality and disinterestedness. This is, she argues, a deeply problematic shift, leading away from the visceral implications the term 'aesthetics' once possessed. Aesthetics, according to Buck-Morss, should be grasped as 'a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell — the whole corporeal sensorium. The terminae of all of these — nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of skin — are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer'⁵.



Cast From Nature 2010/2011

Borland recounts a story she had heard of an osteologist asked to identify bones by the police, whose ‘initial test, which has never yet failed to be proven by the later findings, is to stick her nose into the polythene bag and sniff’⁶. In *Cast From Nature* the body’s materiality may be more elusive, but its traces are felt everywhere. The works elicit a tactile and emotional response, and not, or not only, an anaesthetised, disinterested one.

Amongst those who studied anatomy under Sir John Goodsir was Joseph Bell whose emphasis on close observation and deductive reasoning inspired his pupil Arthur Conan Doyle to create the character of Sherlock Holmes, that arch-rationalist solver of crimes and decipherer of mysteries. Borland has suggested that she has often consciously ‘played detective’ in her work, but, unlike Conan Doyle’s fictions, her works don’t tie up all the threads, identify culprits or close the case. Rather they offer us clues to the ways in which our bodies are moulded by historical, technological and aesthetic regimes, and ask us to question art’s role in figuring our sense of what we are. The beautifully realised works resulting from her investigations might be thought of as invitations to share in the questioning attitude which has brought them into being.

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1 Christine Borland, in Peih-ying Lu, ‘Medical communication as art — an interview with Christine Borland’, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Routledge, Philadelphia, 2010, Vol. 10, No.1, pp. 90–99

2 See Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp. 159–163.

3 Arthur Danto, ‘Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art’, *Art Journal*,

Vol. 63, No. 2, Summer, 2004, pp. 24–35

4 Susan Buck-Morss ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, *October*, Vol. 62, Autumn 1992, pp. 3–41

5 *Ibid.*, p. 6

6 Christine Borland, in Charles Esche, *Christine Borland*, Tramway, Glasgow, p. 38

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Christine Borland (b. 1965, Scotland) lives and works in Kilcreggan, Argyll and in Glasgow, where she studied at Glasgow School of Art from 1983–1987. Her practice spans sculpture, video and installation in an exploration of the self, medical practice and representations of the human body. She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1997 and has exhibited widely, including at Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Switzerland (2010); MOCA, Miami, USA (2010); Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2007); Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (2006); and The Hayward Gallery, London (2006). Christine Borland is represented by the Lisson Gallery in London and is a Medical Humanities Researcher, School of Medicine, Glasgow University and an Honorary Professor, Peninsula College of Medicine & Dentistry, Universities of Exeter & Plymouth.

Reading List

- Michel Feher (ed.) *Zone 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 1; Zone 4: Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 2; Zone 5: Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 3* Zone Books, Massachusetts (1989)
- Michel Foucault *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Penguin Books, London (1991)
- Gunter Grass *The Tin Drum* Vintage Classics, London (2009)
- Lewis Grassic Gibbon *Sunset Song; A Scots Quair* Jarrolds Publishing, Norwich (1932)
- Henry Gray *Anatomy of the Human Body* Lea & Febiger, Pennsylvania (1918)
- Alasdair Gray *Lanark* Canongate Books, Edinburgh (1981)
- James Joyce *Dubliners* Grant Richards Ltd., London (1914)
- Cormac McCarthy *The Road* Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2006
- Rozsika Parker *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Women’s Press Ltd., London (1984)
- Ruth Richardson *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London & New York (1987)
- Mary Shelley *The Last Man* Henry Colburn, London (1826)

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Stay yet awhile, thou dear old friend of mine;
Though mould now gathers on they shrunken face,
And wither'd are those once strong arms of thine,
And scarce a nerve is left for me to trace:
Alas! 'tis true thou lookest very old,
And much has passed since we as brethren met,
But still thy vessels do injection hold:
So, dear old friend, we must not sunder yet

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—Anonymous Anatomist, 'To My Old 'Subject' I am advised to Bury!' Verse 1, Medical Times & Gazette (1859), in Ruth Richardson The Making of Mr Gray's Anatomy, Oxford University Press (2008).

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