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FEMALE FACTORY

Elsa Sahal

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According to Pseudo-Apollodorus, there were two rocks at the edge of a road in Panopeus in Greece that smelled like human flesh. It was said that they were the remains of the clay used by Prometheus to create the first humans.

The specter of these blocks of clay, ready to come to life, haunts the world of Elsa Sahal, which is populated by ductile forms bearing the imprint of her hand, never finished, always in a state of becoming. Growths reminiscent of viscera, masses of half-mineral, half-organic flesh, fragments of itinerant bodies ... For more than twenty years, the artist has been tracing the analogy between clay and body that stems from mythological and literary tales regarding the "creation of life from clay" (the golem, the god Khnum, Adam ...). For her, "the body is inseparable from this material, as if the clay was already of the body."

While Elsa Sahal may be re-enacting the act of creation, her work is in no way governed by some spiritualizing intent preoccupied with a quest for sanctified origins. In fact, by using ceramics—this domestic art form largely ignored by the history of art—Elsa Sahal prosaically reconnects with the wretched, earthly and feminine face of the human condition, while disassociating herself from a representation of man as a spiritual being and the cause of an array of toxic oppressions—social, environmental, racial, and gender-based—since the Enlightenment.

It is significant that the motif of the head is almost absent from Sahal's oeuvre, whereas the foot, a symbol of being anchored to the reality of the earth, constitutes a leitmotif. Somewhere between an elephant's foot, a horse's hoof and a glam-rock platform shoe, the sculpture *Grand futuriste* (2003) opens the exhibition with this idea in mind. The work is inspired by a sculpture by Umberto Boccioni from 1913; centered around two blocks, a triumphant bronze figure emerges, striding away with a sense of its own movement. Reworked by Sahal, the figure becomes liquefied. All that remains are its buttocks, about to be absorbed by the ground. Boccioni's futuristic man has lost his head, literally and figuratively, and its presence now gleams with the dark enamel of its dissolution.

Until now, the "universal" human was a man, a man that Elsa Sahal has knocked off his pedestal. Through the use of ceramics, this medium "lower than the earth," he is now reduced to his role in a larger ecosystem and a porous corporality. Soft, vibrant and lively to the eye, yet cold and hard to the touch, the artist's ceramics are thus characterized by their sensuality and formal ambiguity. They are redeemed by the sense of collapse that presides over their existence, as if they have been sucked in by quicksand and the source of their erectile sap has run dry. Erected to the glory of the patriarchy, or at any

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rate dated principles, they have struggled to stand up straight and extend their power, and their destiny has finally caught up with them: that of being symbolically castrated (animalized/feminized/queerized), or of total collapse. "Remember, human, that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Sahal's oeuvre and its forms are in fact in accordance with the idea of a primitive chaos that existed before the world was arranged into fixed categories. Her work establishes an era in which a tired and toxic masculinity gives way to other forms of being in the world. For her, a human being is neither man nor woman, but rather a spectrum leading to a utopian new world where the binaries underpinning modern Western philosophy (human/non-human, masculine/feminine, body/spirit, interior/exterior) are no longer relevant.

Elsa Sahal prefers entities that are tired, lying down, and influenced by their environment (whether this is the marine world in her *Fontaine*, or even baby pink, the color of girlhood in our globalized Western culture). The sculpture, an organ in decay, metamorphoses and reveals itself as unstable as flowing lava. The theme of the mutant body, which stretches, produces and ejects new forms, is notably addressed in a sculpture by the artist on the subject of maternity (*Grotte généalogique*, 2006).

Straddling the line between the grotesque and the violent, Elsa Sahal deconstructs the history of modern sculpture—vertical and all-powerful, because it is essentially masculine—through the lens of an interfering feminism guided by the principle of horizontality. Throughout her career, she has sculpted forms evoking collapsing towers, thus destabilizing the symbols of phallic omnipotence.

The artist inscribes herself into a conventional art history, battered and beaten to better bend it to her desires and sense of mischief. Her sculpture of female genitalia urinating like a man (*Fontaine*, 2012) is nothing more than a reimagining of the public fountain, the symbol of a public space monopolized by men and erected in their honor. For Sahal, this homage to modern art always flirts with a form of ironic distance, informed by the cartoonish character of some of her works, such as *Dancing Twins*. Sensual, obscene and bordering on the grotesque, the armada of buttocks and smooth breasts parodies the male gaze (the female body as mere sexual object) as much as it appropriates its stigma to reveal its absurdity and to turn it into a tool of pop feminist empowerment.

It is with this in mind that the *Pole Dance* series, begun in 2015, presents dancers in contrast to their gamine depictions by the masters of modern art (Edgar Degas' portrayal of women as "frail little things," for example). Pairs of buttocks and/or breasts defy the gaze of the disarmed spectator. Through an ambiguity between sincerity and criticism of the desiring gaze, Elsa Sahal distils her perverse humor into the "noble" motifs of sculpture (the nude, the dancer, the fountain ...). Beyond their farcical nature, the nauseous malleability of the bodies creates—both on its surface and in its depths—new

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corporalities emancipated from all norms. The incandescence of their desires and the permanent excitement of new horizons call for the emergence of all forms, and not some arbitrary social, economic, genetic or sexual heritage. Phalluses, breasts, vulvas, skin and earth form a melting pot of metamorphoses, giving tangible form to the idea of an ultra-plastic body, anchored in the earth and infinitely modifiable: a utopian body that Elsa Sahal invites us to take hold of.