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Olga Balema @ Croy Nielsen reviewed

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Reviews

Who doesn't end up a cultural cannibal? There is no such thing as a new idea; even this is not a new idea. Everything is recycled, including the cells of our own bodies, and if we squint resolutely enough, we could believe that our creations are not just memory-tinged collages of everything we've ever known, that arrant originality is not an absurd event at its very core. Denial is important. But the more we ingest, the more we see and feel and read and love, the more vital flesh we bring to the table; this is important too.

"One eats in conversation with others. One becomes subsumed by one's context," writes Tess Edmonson in her introduction to Cannibals, Olga Balema's recent show at Croy Nielsen. The small, almost improvised gallery is strewn with soft PVC plastic bags filled with murky, copper-coloured waters in which various materials swamp and decompose. From certain angles, they resemble body bags, or bags one's body would be thrown into if it was already dismembered, the wiry bits already removed. Slumped against the white walls of the gallery, the sculptures are completely devoid of life and yet uncannily human—the paradox survives even in decomposition.



Installation view, *Cannibals* (2015), Croy Nielsen. Courtesy Croy Nielsen.

The nine sculptures, all titled either 'Threat to Civilization' or 'Border/Boundary', are themselves the cannibals; they have ingested the materials of other, former sculptures and lie listless on the floors of the gallery, their clear, plastic skins exposing their gluttony. "The round bellies of some are greedy and full, pregnant from autoerotic absorption," Edmonson writes, while "[t]he latex skin of others is concave around the scaffolding of sharp and unnatural growths." The consumption neither begins nor ends with my visit; the cannibalized parts transform their consumers from within,

releasing rust and dye from their steel and fabric parts into the clear water, gradually turning it tawny and black throughout the duration of the exhibition.

Alongside Edmonson's introductory text is a paragraph from Maggie Kilgour's *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. Bodily needs betray our vulnerability, she notes, and expose the carefully crafted appearance of autonomy as an illusion:

The need for food exposes the vulnerability of individual identity, enacted at a wider social level in the need for exchanges, communion, and commerce with others, through which the individual is absorbed into a larger corporate body.

Without others, we cease to exist. Better yet: we feed on others to nourish ourselves.



Installation view, *Cannibals* (2015), Croy Nielsen. Courtesy Croy Nielsen.

What did Balema feed on to give birth to *Cannibals*, and was it the same feast as that of Serbian artist [Ivana Basic](#)? The similarities are striking—the abstracted, flesh-like shapes, the haunting simplicity of their [material loneliness](#); the frozen moments of “life into matter”, as Basic says, or “economy of fungible volumes”, as Edmonson write. The permeability of the human body is not a unique or even contemporary idea, but its execution in the works of the two artists is almost literally cannibalistic. Who fed on whom, and who was nourished from it?

Later in her introduction, Edmonson states that food scarcity during periods of overpopulation is “really the solution to its own problem”. That those who “obey the tenets of the cannibalism taboo” will be the first to die. Eat or be eaten, she whispers. The statement seems extreme, scandalous, but of course it's not. They are just the cannibalized words of Jonathan Swift in [A Modest Proposal](#) in which he tells us: “I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled.”

[Olga Balema's Cannibals](#) is on at Berlin's Croy Nielsen, running from May 1 until June 13, 2015.