

Frieze

Olga Balema

Skins

BY ELVIA WILK

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How it feels I and II 2013, plastic box, steel, hose, water pump and textile (courtesy: the artist & Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam; photograph: Gert Jan van Rooij)

Her Curves. Warm Bodies. Body of Work. What Enters ... When listed together, the titles of four of Olga Balema's most recent exhibitions indicate a clear current in her thinking: the body as a simultaneously self-contained and permeable entity. That is, the awareness of the hard limits of human consciousness and selfhood despite the body's porousness, and its constant interaction with its environment. Consequently, the Ukrainian-born, Berlin- and Amsterdam-based artist often deals with the tension between material resilience and fragility. One way this manifests is through an investigation into the membrane – the interface, however slight, between inside and out.

Perhaps her best-known works to date are a series of untitled flattened plastic bags, resembling giant intravenous drips, filled taut with assorted objects and water. First shown in 2013 at 1646 in Amsterdam for *What Enters* and most recently at the 2015 New Museum Triennial, these works are compelling in their fragility – looking like they might pop at any moment – and poignant in their combinations of trapped everyday objects and materials. Differing each time, the materials have comprised pieces of rusting metal, disintegrating cloth, garden ornaments, pebbles and chilli peppers. Immersed in water, these petrified

items, many of which are disintegrating, might signify the pollutants we ingest into our own bodies and inject into the environment. And yet as they decay, the foreign objects slowly dissolve into their host.

Fossilized inside their plastic containers, the objects themselves are revealed as aging entities with a life and afterlife. Other works by Balema likewise harness the transforming of materials over time. Metal buckets shown in *Body of Work* (2013) at Fons Welters in Amsterdam slowly oxidized as water was fed continuously into the containers via a tiny tube. Inside the buckets or draped over them, t-shirts and leggings printed with badly translated Chinese-to-English texts increasingly dampened with rusty water. This slow process, here a form of degradation evinced by the changing pigmentation, was a melancholy rather than celebratory one. The garments signified not only the uselessness of the object without a body to animate it, but in turn suggested the return of the dying body to its material substrates.

Also in *Body of Work*, Balema displayed three handmade, coloured latex gloves with distended arms, one of them resting on the floor and two dangling from the ceiling – like the t-shirts, these were limp, empty shells for noticeably missing limbs. As Judith Butler might say, there is no body that is not a gendered body, and in Balema's practice, with its references to beauty culture and anxieties of aging, many works could be construed as an investigation into female corporeality and its subjectification. However, this is only one facet of her broader preoccupation with the body's interaction with its environment. By addressing the body as gendered without reducing its meaning entirely to gender, Balema's work could be compared to some of her (incidentally also female, also Berlin-based) contemporaries: Marlie Mul's *Puddle* series, abject artificial puddles of sand, stone and resin arranged on the floor; Juliette Bonneviot's plastic membranes shaped into one-sided female torsos; or Kasia Fudakowski's wiry, almost-anthropomorphic comic/tragic sculptures.



Both works: *Untitled*, 2014, mixed media, installation view, *nature after nature*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum Kassel, 2014 (courtesy: Croy Nielsen, Berlin, High Art, Paris & Galerie Fons Welters Amsterdam)

Moving beyond the membrane-as-enclosure, Balema's most gestural and abstract works are flat, twisty sheets of foam, some coated with brightly coloured latex, affixed to walls and ceilings by thin steel rods. These are floating slices, like samples of tissue removed for lab analysis. Each with the root title Interior biomorphic attachment plus numbers or singular parenthetical addendums such as , (*Sunset*) or (*The return*) , works from this series have appeared at SculptureCenter in New York in the group show *Puddle, Pothole, Portal* (2014), at High Art in Paris for the solo *Her Curves* (2014) and at Kunstvereniging Diepenheim for a collaborative show with Jonathan Baldock, *Warm Bodies* (2014).

In a recent two-person show with Anne de Vries at Michael Thibault in Los Angeles, the body is turned inside out, becoming downright visceral, even comically so. A series of long, latex intestines (resembling the long-armed gloves in *Body of Work*) represent the body's plumbing without its shell. Balema recently told me she's intrigued by the metaphor of the stomach when talking about emotions – 'spill your guts', 'trust your gut', 'butterflies in your stomach' – using these linguistic references to highlight the physicality of such metaphors: the enduring centrality of the body when talking about emotions that may in fact be inexpressible otherwise. Many works incorporate fragmented text to further allude to language's shortcomings, such as a series of prints on canvas with phrases bearing platitudes of love and emotion, for example the lyrics to the country song *You Are My Sunshine* (*You Are My Sunshine*, 2013).

Texts like these evoke the sometimes futile pursuit of human connection – physical or linguistic – in the face of prescribed or clichéd routes of emotional expression: cheesy songs or love poems. How can sadness be communicated without becoming saccharine or trite? Balema searches for sincere material meaning in a time of overabundant, throwaway objects, and pursues the representation of intimate emotional connection when affect has itself become a manufactured product. The membrane between sincerity and sentimentality is ultimately the one holding her sensitive, self-aware work together.

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