Petunia

By Maggie Cochrane

A critical discourse on the nature of '*Bodies*' as described by Kelly Bair, Kristy Balliet, Adam Fure, and Kyle Miller in 'Possible Mediums.'

Characters: Gus, male, 31. Daryl, male, 26.

Set: A living-room-cum-laboratory, dimly lit. Dark room, dark wood furnishings. Doorway in the back. Walls of shelves filled with books, vials, scientific instruments. A small furry form sculpture sits on a stand in the center of the room.

Gus enters the room and is startled by the strange fuzzy object on the table. He lets out a yelp. He walks over apprehensively, and sees there is a note under the sculpture. He picks it up, reads it, scowls. Goes over to the telephone to make a call.

Gus: Daryl, what is the meaning of this *thing* in my living room? I know it's my birthd – stop laughing, I really -- *(pause)* Well yes, I think it'd be good if you came and explained yourself. I'll be here all afternoon, although I can't promise this strange object will.

Lights fall. Brief pause.

Lights rise with Gus on the opposite side of the room, staring at the sculpture, looking disapproving and even nervous. There is a knock on the door. Gus opens door to Daryl.

Gus: (*Looking at Daryl and pointing at sculpture*) What is it?

Daryl: (*Smiling*) Relax, Gus, it's your birthday present. Open your mind a little!

Daryl walks over to fuzzy object.

Daryl: Look at it! Look at how puffy and cute it is! These kind of look like legs, and that's where a little mouth could be; it's *cute*, Gus.

Gus: It's not anatomically accurate.

Daryl: Well it's not *meant* to be anatomically accurate! C'mon, you don't always have to be so literal.

Gus: It's an offense to my profession.

Daryl: Do they still consider it a profession? Not a "dark art"? Or a "waste of time?"

Gus: Well whoever made this piece of crap (*gesturing to sculpture*) certainly knows the meaning of waste of time.

Daryl: Boy it's stuffy in here. And it smells the same. I don't know how you work in the same place you live. It's a shame your property didn't come with a shed or something, you coulda turned *that* into your workroom.

Gus: Yeah, well, at least I moved out.

Daryl: Well- I- I did move out, you know that, it's just… And you, what, now you're here? In a formaldehyde-infused dungeon in the woods? And you're happy?

Gus: Very.Look, I'm sure you think this is very funny, but I can't appreciate a sculpture like this. People who make objects like this are "spinning freely within vacuums of their own devising," [1] in my opinion. I mean, what is it for? What does it do?

Daryl: Well now that depends on how you define "purpose," doesn't it? There is inherent value in objects like this; I mean, think about ancient religious totems and statues. It's kinda like that.

Gus: Well I hope this religion involves some sacrifice of strange objects.

Daryl: Okay, so it's a little out there, but it's certainly unique. This sculpture taps into multiplicity; it's an assembly of parts which together create a greater whole, and there are infinite variations and "plications" of this.[2] In your work, you do the same thing every time with the same end goal – pick up some roadkill, revive every squirrel corpse to look like every other squirrel corpse –

Gus: It's very difficult, what I do, to honor accuracy. Not that you care about such things.

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[1] Muschamp, Herbert. "Architecture's Claim on the Future: The Blob." The New York Times. 23 July, 2000, 1.

[2] "Structures such as these are not identically repeatable outside of the particularities of their internal elements or their external environments" Lynn, Greg. "Multiplicitous and Inorganic Bodies," in Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays (Brussels: La Lettre Volée, 1998), 45.

Daryl: But what is "accuracy," even? Mathematics is entirely based in theory; "Geometry is no longer a static measure of invariant and unitary characteristics" but rather, it's a "'plane of consistency' upon which differential transformations and deformations occur."[3] Isn't it exciting how it defies orthographic projection? It's a "topological space of continuous change," you can't hope to anatomically draw it, and that's why it's fascinating![4]

Gus: Alright alright - you're very good at describing what the thing is and what makes it unique or similar to other… um… works of art, but as a newcomer upon the object, I'm having some trouble understanding it. If I can't find the value in it as a viewer, what's the point? If you need to explain it to me and it takes up space on my table, I don't know, man…[5]

Daryl: Well what does your taxidermy do except creep people out?

Gus: I make taxidermy for museums, you know that. I painstakingly reconstruct animals so that people who could never travel and see these animals for themselves get to experience what it might be like! It's educational, it's engaging… people love my work, they love it. Seeing an African elephant up close, or a colony of puffins, people get inspired.

Daryl: Viewing is not doing. Learning is about *method*.[6] Sure, you allow these educational experiences, and I appreciate that it's painstaking work, but real education and learning comes from making and producing; *you're* doing all the learning, those kids in museums aren't. If they engaged in making little body objects like this thing, that's the real learning, Gus. These kinds of objects "reject attempts at replication and embrace artifice and theatricality… where multiple material ontologies freely mix."[7]

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[3] Lynn, 38.
[4] Bair, Kelly et. al. "Bodies" in Possible Mediums, 37.
[5] Frankly, the articles I've found go to great lengths to describe how bodies perform and what characterizes them. They go to great lengths to describe what makes a "body" a "body", but the conversation ends there. I found little discussion about what it adds to the discipline beyond a technological exercise, and non-architects are overwhelmingly unimpressed.
[6] Abrons, Ellie. "For Real." in Log 41, 71.
[7] Ibid.

Gus: Just because you use a lot of jargon doesn't mean you're putting forward deep thoughts; just means you can't really get to the bottom of anything. All this language is certainly muddy, and muddy water might only be an inch deep.[8]

Daryl: Okay, fine – let's look at this thing compositionally. Even though this is a constructed object, there's a proportional logic to it. "Proportional bodies are bound by geometric exactitude,"[9] as cited by Vitruvius and the like, and this object is too. Aesthetics are based on organic, natural proportions, just like animals' bodies are entirely based on proportions. Surely you can appreciate that.

Gus: *(Becoming angry)* What is more natural and organic than an animal that walked the earth?

Daryl: Nothing. So really, you're formaldehyde-infused bodies are little more than sculptures that adhere to an organic logic, like this one.

Gus: I cannot compare my work to this piece of junk!!

Enraged, Gus picks up the sculpture and throws it against the wall. It flumps to the ground, rather sadly.

Daryl: NO, PETUNIA –

Gus: You *named* it?

Daryl: Well I don't know, it's easy to get attached! –

Gus: You named it *Petunia*? What is that, like the neighbor's sad chihuahua?

Daryl: Oh but what did you name that stuffed owl you gave to mom? Not only is it weird and creepy and smelly of you to give your mother a dead

[8] The fact is, contemporary architecture gives most regular humans the heebie-jeebies. Try telling that to architects and their acolytes, though, and you'll get an earful about why your feeling is misguided, the product of some embarrassing misconception about architectural principles." Rennix, Brianna and Nathan J. Robinson. "Why You Hate Contemporary Architecture." Current Affairs, October 31, 2017, 1.
[9] Lynn, 41.

and re-stuffed owl, but you named it Calliope. 'Zat your favorite fan fiction character or what?

Gus: Well nobody wanted to buy it because the eye was a little messed up, so –

Daryl: oh and an afterthought gift too, huh?

Gus: So this crapball of fuzz isn't an afterthought?

Daryl: No, Gus, I made it myself!

Gus bursts into laughter.

Daryl: Gus, c'mon, I… I don't have a stomach for what you do, but I thought I could take some plaster and a balloon and a pelt that you made for me, and I could make you something. For your birthday.

Gus: Oh. Daryl, I… I'm sorry… It's a nice effort. I appreciate the thought, even if I can't appreciate the philosophy.

Gus goes over to the sculpture on the floor. He picks it up.

Daryl: Well, I'll never know why you prefer your dungeon.

Gus: *(Warming up a little)* It's okay bud.

Daryl: It's your birthday. If you don't like Harold, let me take you out to dinner. And I know you hate corny sayings. But you know what mom would always make us say after we fought…?

Gus smiles.

Gus & Daryl together: On this, we'll have to agree to disagree!

Words: 1498

Bibliography

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3. Lynn, Greg. "Multiplicitous and Inorganic Bodies," in Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays (Brussels: La Lettre Volée, 1998): 33-62. [Originally published in Assemblage 19 (December 1992) and Architectural Design 106 (November 1993)]
4. Muschamp, Herbert. "Architecture's Claim on the Future: the blob." The New York Times. July 23rd, 2000. https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/23/arts/art-architecture-architecture-s-claim-on-the-future-the-blob.html
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