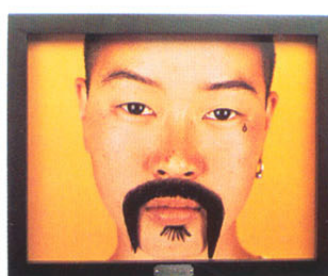
Body language: An early image, TOP, from Hannah Wilke's S.O.S. Starification Object series, 1974, in which she spoofs sensuality with chewing gum. ABOVE, CENTER: Wilke's last self-portraits, *July 26, 1992/February 19, 1992. #4;* and ABOVE, *February 19, 1992. #6;* all from her Intra-Venus series documenting her battle with cancer.



Gender bending: Photographs of "Jake," CENTER, and "Chicken," NEAR LEFT, female subjects in Catherine Opie's Being and Having series, 1991

body of evidence

The female form has always been a favored subject of artists, usually male. But now women have taken control, transforming their own bodies into tools to create art of anger, wit, and even grotesque beauty. **Roberta Smith** looks at the connection between flesh and fantasy

Renée Cox's *Yo Mama,* ABOVE, a 1993 self-portrait with her two-year-old son

"We are making it out of ourselves," Barnett Newman said more than 40 years ago, in reference to his crowd—the brilliant and mostly male generation of Abstract Expressionists who put postwar American painting on the map. Fittingly, this declaration of independence from European art has always had a manly, pioneering ring, an aura of aesthetic land clearing, log splitting, and barn raising.

Not any more. Today Newman's boast applies as easily to women artists, many of whom are infusing it with newly explicit, often shocking, force and meaning. In the 1990s it is women, more than men, who are "making it" out of themselves, quite literally creating a new art of the self. Many of these women use the female body, the container of the self, as their primary mode of expression.

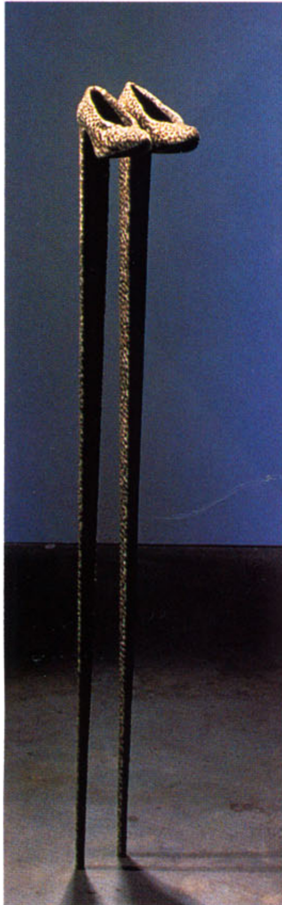
These women are changing an artistic tradition that extends from Titian to Lucian Freud, in which the female face and form have been ubiquitous, usually depicted by men, for an implicitly male gaze. And the most direct way of subverting that gaze, they are finding, is to take charge of its subject. They use the female body as a tool to expose and examine the repressions and prejudices, the fear and loathing, directed at women. With no apologies to Marx, another rallying cry might be "Women of the world, represent yourselves. You have nothing to lose but your stereotypes."

For the most part, nineties body art by women takes a relatively raw, visceral, and hands-on approach. Compared with much feminist art of the previous decade, which was largely photo dependent and conceptually flavored, it is less a critique of the images and commodities that condition our ideas of the feminine than an exorcism of what many people, men and women alike, would prefer to keep under the rug. Its subjects are often highly flammable: domestic violence, racism, homophobia, bodily functions, rape, self-disgust. It deals as well with the variety of feminine pleasure, desire, and sexual power; it also lampoons masculine myths and male domination of the art world. And it strikes emotional keys that include harrowing tragedy, scathing bitterness, rage, and proud celebration.

This art has not materialized out of thin air nor by accident. It comes at a moment when the issue of women's rights and their control over their bodies encompasses a thousand points of contention—and counting. These range from high-profile rape and sexual-harassment charges to the on- ▶152

Subject and object: Rona Pondick's sculpture *Treats,* LEFT, 1992, and ABOVE LEFT, Lorna Simpson's 1988 *Sounds Like,* in which women's faces are obscured

Clockwise from center: courtesy of Renée Cox; courtesy of Simon Watson; Collection: Ursula Hodel, New York City; courtesy of Jose Freire Fine Art, New York City; DENNIS COWLEY/courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; DENNIS COWLEY/courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; LES WOLLAM/courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles; courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



The sum of the parts, **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** **Kiki Smith's cast bronze *Virgin Mary,* 1993; *Lick and Lather,* two of a group of self-portrait busts made from chocolate and soap by Janine Antoni, 1993; Cindy Sherman's *Untitled, #258,* 1992; and *High Heels,* a sculpture of shoes, fabric, and wood by Rachel Lachowicz, 1991**

going battles over abortion, pornography, and gay rights. Despite 30 years of women's liberation, the average working woman in the United States earns 25 percent less than the average man. But even this progress can seem dwarfed when newspapers report, as they did last winter, on the State Department's annual human rights survey and its grim statistics concerning the physical abuse of women worldwide.

Body-oriented art by women is not entirely new; its history stretches back to the late 1960s and includes such figures as Carolee Schneemann, Yayoi Kusama, Judy Chicago, Lynda Benglis, and Hannah Wilke. But work by these women has never gotten much respect from the mainstream art world; perhaps it raised issues and emotions that made people uncomfortable. I remember my own discomfort with Wilke's photographs and performance pieces of the early 1970s. In both, Wilke took full advantage of her considerable beauty—and ridiculed male desire—by covering her naked torso with miniature vulvae made of chewing gum. Coming from the ironclad perspective of Minimalism, I found Wilke's work embarrassing, narcissistic, and dumb, not much better than a conventional pinup. These days body art by women is getting more than respect. It's winning grants and awards, being shown in commercial galleries all over the world and in prestigious exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennale.

The work can be divided, in extremely conditional fashion, into three main modes: blunt, unsparing realism; grotesque exaggeration; and scathing satire full of wit and rage. These modes are not completely fixed or separate, and many of the artists don't adhere exclusively to any one of them. Still, they bring a temporary sense of order to the fray.

In the category of the feminist art of the real, no artist is better known than Kiki Smith, who worked throughout the eighties in relative obscurity and did not have her first solo show until 1988. Smith has long incorporated idiosyncratic, implicitly fragile materials into her work, making figurative sculptures of paper and using hair, fabric, and glass in other pieces. These materials evoke human frailty, while their intimations of craft redefine art as "women's work." But Smith is most effective in her often unbearably poignant life-size wax figures, which give a new edge to a generalized realism that can be traced back to George Segal's cast-plaster sculptures and Edward Hopper's paintings of isolated figures. Like Segal, Smith makes casts from actual people, which she then converts to colored wax. But she intensifies and transcends her realism with shocking details whose actuality is ambiguous, more emotionally resonant than physically real. For example, a white spinal column attached to the back of a prone figure literalizes its vulnerability.

For gay or nonwhite women, straightforward, uninflected realism is often sufficient to convey their sense of difference and to drive their points home. Over the past five years, Lorna Simpson, a young artist of color, has honed a severe documentary-like style based on repeating hieratic images of women, often wearing simple black or white shifts and seen from the neck down or from the back. Cryptic words engraved on plaques accompany the images, suggestively layering different stressful situations and invasions of the self—the medical examination, rape, the job interview, and racial attacks. At the core of each of Simpson's carefully controlled images lurks the collective memory of slavery, when those who were black and female had little control over their bodies or their destinies.

One of the more striking images in the East Coast portion of the Bad Girls exhibition, a flawed but informative survey of recent feminist art at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and the Wight Art Gallery at the University of California at Los Angeles, was a photograph by Renée Cox from her Yo Mama series. A towering self-portrait, it showed the artist, naked except for a pair of black high heels, holding her two-year-old son. The title echoes a taunt frequently exchanged by teenage boys of all races (as in "Yo mama wears combat boots" and worse). The image presents a woman, both regal and erotic, who seems singularly disinclined to take guff from anyone and whose son will undoubtedly grow up to respect her gender. Even more aggressive is a three-dimensional self-portrait: a white plaster cast of Cox, naked and very pregnant, standing with her feet apart, hands on hips. Her confrontational stance is complicated by an accompanying audiotape on which the artist's voice zigzags in tone and meaning, from "Baby, you want to fuck me?" in a seductive purr, to an outraged and angry "Baby, you want to fuck with me?"

An exceptionally promising artist emerging on the West Coast is Catherine Opie, a 33-year-old lesbian from Los Angeles who will have her first New York show in the spring of next year. Opie uses an unstinting realism to question what is real, especially as far as gender and sexuality are concerned. Against backgrounds of saturated tones of blue, deep yellow, and purples, she photographs women dressed as men and men dressed as women. Some of her most powerful images are portraits of lesbian couples whose garb and use of hormones bring them as close to the biker ideal of manhood as seems possible. The photographs cast adrift any notion that sexual identity is limited by gender. Their subjects may at first strike many viewers as fascinating, freakish oddities, but ultimately they are simply women who have overcome extreme versions of the obstacles and repressions society imposes in some way on almost all females. Their portraits are images of triumph that any woman should identify with: They depict women caught in the unusually courageous act of being exactly who they want to be.

In contrast to such realism are the artists whose weapons of choice are grotesqueness and exaggeration. Work of this kind covers an immense qualitative range. A low point, for example, is the French performance artist Orlan, whose inadvertently grotesque work consists of repeated bouts of plastic surgery designed to give her the facial features of famous paintings—like Mona Lisa's forehead. A notable high point in this category is Cindy Sherman. Sher- ▶154

Clockwise from top left: courtesy of Fawbush Gallery, New York; JOHN BESSLER/courtesy of Sandra Gering Gallery; © Cindy Sherman, courtesy of Metro Pictures; courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery.

man is already famous for film-still photographs from the 1980s, which starred the artist in myriad disguises and explored different female stereotypes. But her nineties sex-doll photographs go for the jugular. In these images, leering plastic faces, exaggerated genitalia, and ludicrous anatomies give form to nightmarish extremes of rage, fear, and sexuality. One suggests the aftermath of a rape; another portrays a monstrous female of mismatched body parts who epitomizes the sexually aggressive woman while satirizing the reclining nude, whether in high art or *Playboy.* In their wild swings between powerless and powerful, these images force the viewer to confront not only his or her own experiences of these states but also the role of gender in creating them.

The body is sometimes exalted, sometimes degraded, sometimes simply presented as is, for the world to see and understand

Rona Pondick also has a way with fragments, but she rarely lets them add up to a complete human being. Rather, she prefers to divide and multiply, reducing the body to drastically mutated forms and repeating them in absurd numbers so that almost all vestiges of humanness are expunged and extreme states of appetite and need are revealed.

One of Pondick's sculptures consists of hundreds of small pink balls that suggest detached breasts but have voracious toothy mouths instead of nipples. These simple forms seem to compress male and female together, as well as infant and octogenarian, expressing a hunger that borders on lust. Other sculptures include breastlike clusters of milk bottles that stand around like tiny malformed sheep, or distorted child-size pieces of overstuffed furniture that have baby shoes for feet. Pondick's work can be full of surrealist shortcuts, but she often succeeds in making visible the hormonal currents of emotion and ambivalence underlying even the sunniest experiences of motherhood.

The grotesque plays a big part in Sue Williams's scathing indictments of sexual exploitation at its most overt. The raunchy black-and-white stream-of-consciousness cartoon style developed by this 38-year-old New Yorker is full of smudged, ineptly drawn images, profanity, embarrassing confessions, and sarcastic asides. But its visual crudeness dovetails with its unbearable subject matter: domestic violence, a topic with which Williams is intimately familiar (first from her parents and later from a series of lovers, one of whom eventually shot her). Williams's savage combination of rage and humor shows man at his worst, but she also lays bare, to a painful degree, the cycles of internal self-abuse that sometimes make women vulnerable to mistreatment. In *A Funny Thing Happened,* the artist lists the possible sites for a rape, maps the different stages of a sexual assault, and concludes that the funniest thing of all would be to simply shoot the attacker ("Geez," he asks, "is it really that bad?"). In other works she describes a world in which men bear children and diagrams a tawdry extramarital affair, with the husband in a cheap hotel while the wife is home alone eating Oreos.

A lighter artillery is used against more limited targets. Women coolly attack male domination of the art world by arming themselves with materials and techniques that are intensely gender-specific and loaded with physical associations. Some even use their bodies as artistic tools. Rachel Lachowicz, another Los Angeles artist, has made abstract grid paintings out of pristine squares of eye shadow and especially likes making sculpture out of lipstick, thereby creating a startling sense of displacement and sensuality. Thus she has "feminized" certain milestones of modern art, including Carl Andre's plate sculptures and Richard Serra's huge, macho leaning lead piece *House of Cards*—which she titled *Sarah.*

Lachowicz's work is on view in Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties at The Museum of Modern Art, in New York, but she takes aim at other art movements as well. Marcel Duchamp's famous urinal has been given the lipstick treatment. And in a performance in Los Angeles last year, she painted a naked man with lipstick and had him imprint his body on canvas. The black-tie event spoofed Yves Klein, the French nouveau realist who in the late 1950s made paintings by taking similar liberties with naked women covered with blue paint.

Janine Antoni is another artist whose work is also largely satirical in intent. She makes extensive use of "female" materials and processes, although an undercurrent of pain connects her art back to Kiki Smith's silent figures and perhaps Sue Williams's images of abuse. In a 1993 performance, Antoni collapsed two of the most acceptable of female activities, domestic chores and looking good, by mopping the floor of an art gallery with her hair. Much of her work contrasts the more "presentable" public face of narcissism with its private, more abusive side, for example juxtaposing the obsession with physical beauty or hygiene with suggestions of eating disorders.

In the most recent Whitney Biennial, Antoni exhibited two Minimalist cubes, one of solid chocolate, the other of lard, along with a gleaming Bendel's-friendly display of two traditional aids to romance: tubes of red lipstick and heart-shaped bonbon boxes made of chocolate (one for getting a man, the other for getting fat). Antoni made both these products from scratch, using chocolate and lard that she had "gathered" by gnawing at the large cubes, clearly a difficult, humiliating exercise. Antoni has also made drawings using her mascara-covered eyelashes as brushes. And at the Venice Biennale last year she exhibited fourteen classical portrait busts of herself—seven made of white soap, seven of dark brown chocolate. This unusual reprise of the sacred/profane duality extended to Antoni's choice of sculptural process, which involved licking the chocolate sculptures and lathering the soap ones until their features were vague and distorted. These blurred visages seemed to illustrate both the wear and tear of life on the female psyche and the frequent inability of women to be truly visible within society. Either way, Antoni was simply doing what was expected of any normal well-bred woman. But instead of conducting her rituals in the bedroom or the bathroom, she brought them out into the open and used them to make art.

The body is a constantly changing presence in the work of nineties women artists, sometimes exalted, sometimes degraded, sometimes simply presented as is, for the world to see and understand. Whichever guise these and other women artists choose, however, their collective goal is to tell hard truths, uncover dark secrets, and expose hidden pleasures, to talk out loud and to seize the power that emanates from their disclosures.

Fittingly, the most unforgettable power seizure and disclosure of self during the 1993–1994 art season was Hannah Wilke's posthumous exhibition, held in February at the gallery of her longtime dealers, Ronald and Frayda Feldman, in SoHo. After wielding her body beautiful as an ironic sword through much of her career, Wilke finished by recording her battle with terminal lymphoma in a harrowing series of monumental color photographs. (Still ironic after all these years, she titled the series Intra-Venus.) In some images, she vamps coquettishly in the nude, as in her early work. In others, she is bedecked with medical paraphernalia and bandages or shown in the bathtub or on the toilet. In every picture, her beauty lies in waste: Her head is bald, her face and body bloated, her eyes wide open, staring into the camera as if it were death itself. Also exposed is the courage with which she confronted her suffering, as well as her indifference to it. It is indifference grounded in an unwavering sense of worth that has nothing to do with narcissism.

It is tempting to see the distance between early Wilke and late Wilke as a measure of how far women artists involved with the body have come in the last two decades, but that would be a little too tidy. If anyone has come a long way it is more likely the viewers, not the viewed; the context, not the content. Amplifying what was there all along, Wilke's farewell performance reminds us that while the body can be a potent artistic tool, it is first and last the dwelling place of the human spirit. And that is, after all, what we really look at when we look at art. ●

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