

**Artspeak Postscript 63:
The Flesh of the World**

**BOPHA CHHAY
on Erica Stocking**

*We recommenders of present action have learned to say “perhaps” our bodies produce space; “perhaps” our words make a bunting canopy; “perhaps” the hand-struck, palpable wall is an anti-discipline; “perhaps” by the term “everyday life” we also mean the potential.*¹ (Lisa Robertson, Office for Soft Architecture)

Walking into Erica Stocking’s exhibition is like walking into a performance that has already been underway for some time. It’s a pantomime without physical bodies, one consisting only of the past movements of bodies, or an open rehearsal, where the body of the viewer immediately becomes implicated in an act continuing to unfold.

The traces of these absent bodies take the form of sculptures made from canvas, stitched to resemble items associated with everyday life: a lampshade, items of clothing, parts of toys, household objects, close to twenty in number, all life-size. Cultivating a dual form, the sculptures are also paintings, as their surface is enlivened with colour. The works are propped up on canvas plinths of varying shapes and sizes, mostly circular or elliptical. Stocking refers to the plinths as “space holders that ground the work.” There is a sense that these works are grounded as they maintain a conviction, determined by their own spatial conditions and logic. *Ding Dong Hot Dog* seems to deliberately defy the provided support, choosing to hover in two parts simultaneously, appearing secured and suspended as if moments ago it were tossed into the air. The nylon armature reveals its staged presence. A lone oversized yellow Playmobil boot sits on a plinth at ankle height, its companion boot out of sight. A wooden foot leans against the plinth supporting the work *Christmas in Chinatown*, a caricature or sketch of a foot. Similarly, the form of *Towel Turban* is defined by its missing head. A cyan blue sleeve hangs from the ceiling and above its allocated plinth, neither here nor there, as if gesturing

towards the ceiling. The works carry a persuasive energy, as though they are performing a series of bodily indices, or re-enacting vestiges of a lived experience. These bodily traces rendered in canvas demarcate possibilities for a singular body over time.

Moving through and between the works, we start to embody the spaces between. It's as if we are on a self-guided tour of a selection of someone's intimate belongings where we begin to inhabit domestic iterations, memories and gestures defined by the fabric structures. The titles of the works cue in on possible associative bodies and actions. For instance, a jacket that appears to have been casually thrown on the back of a chair is titled *Found in a closet of an old Kitsilano Home. A grandmother passed, a friend moved away. You Look like a Frumpy Peggy Olsen. A chance taken. Tossed on the edge of the nursing chair.* These fleeting evocations resonate with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept "the flesh of the world" in which he articulated the body as the primary site for knowing and experiencing the world and discussed the vitality of the 'between spaces' where social relations are enacted and formed.² Stocking's sculptures hinge on these 'between spaces,' as they hint and spark possible narrative entry points and the viewer becomes a conduit through which to sketch out a patchwork of affiliations, intuitively configuring a series of relations that start to resemble a collective social body.

To whose bodies and lives do these objects and actions belong? In her conversation with Elizabeth Zvonar, Stocking

intimated that the basis of the works were pulled from a home video she made and her earlier inquiry into fashion videos, particularly their medium and their impetus to sell a kind of zeitgeist 'lifestyle'.³ Underpinning these works is a domestic sensibility that reclaims and reworks fragments of activities and routines. Upon initial observation from the street, the exhibition space can potentially be perceived as selling another kind of 'lifestyle' than the one from which Stocking abstracted the home video, as it can play host to a projection of various fantasies and desires from passing meandering window shoppers. In his argument regarding the primacy of the body, Merleau-Ponty said, "Here the body is no longer the means of vision and touch, but their depository."⁴ Stocking's sculptures almost seem to behave as a kind of 'depository' themselves. While their origins are anchored by real bodies and real actions, in the space of the exhibition these replicas become 'bodies without bodies.' Do they become a depository for the consolidation of unsubstantiated narratives conjured by the bodies of viewers?

What struck me most was how loosely my memories hinged on visual prompts that were so seemingly ordinary. The familiarity of a resting oven mitt, a pot of boiling carrots, wayward pieces of Lego or Playmobil waiting to be trampled upon by unsuspecting feet. However mundane, they remain pertinent.

The assembly of replicas casts a glance back at the odds and ends of everyday life. Despite their disembodied

form and their utility rendered static, they appear lively. Fragmented affinities with certain objects establish an index of commonality, reiterating the ways our bodies shape and reconfigure space. How does the body produce space rather than being determined by space? A private world seems to be made public as our associations converge and collapse into those of the artist's own life. While an uncertainty remains around the pieces and to whom these bodies without bodies belong, there is an awareness of a persistent schema dictating how our bodies simultaneously form and are formed by a collective embodied consciousness.

NOTES

1 Lisa Robertson. "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," *Occasional Work and Seven Walks From the Office For Soft Architecture* (Astoria: Clear Cut Press, 2003), 16.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Galen E. Johnson, Michael B. Smith (eds.) "Eye and Mind," *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Northwestern University Press, 1993) p. 121-149.

3 Erica Stocking and Elizabeth Zvonar, *Tête-à-Tête*, Artspeak, June 20, 2015.

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Galen E. Johnson, Michael B. Smith (eds.) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Northwestern University Press, 1993), 138.

BOPHA CHHAY is a writer based in Vancouver. She is the co-founder of livedspace, a research and publishing organization investigating the social production of space in relation to contemporary cultural production.