



mere mortals

Christina A. West

GALLERY GUIDE

with exhibition essay by:
Madeleine Seidel



The New Gallery acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, and un-ceded territory of the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Cherokee First Nations on which we organize, exhibit, listen and learn.

The Language of the Look: Christina A. West's mere mortals
by Madeleine Seidel

The act of looking is inherently political: who is allowed to look? Who is being looked upon? Is there any balance between the subject and their audience? This act of looking—referred to in psychoanalytic theory as the gaze—has long been the subject of gender theory, with feminist scholars discussing the ways in which the eye of the male audience subjugates the often-unwilling female subject or the ways in which the male gaze reinforces sexual and gender roles that position women as inferior and overtly sexualized. In her landmark 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory to discuss the ways in which the cinema audience also operates as voyeur:

“There is an obvious interest in this analysis for feminists... It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings an articulation of the problem closer, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy. There is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one.”¹

Mulvey posits that subjugation is powered by a visual language, and understanding this specific language that has plagued the arts for centuries is the key to dismantling its power. In the years following this text, women artists sought to decode the insidious vernacular of misogyny, often portraying the female body in a manner that gave the subject(s) a sense of agency or turning the male gaze *back* on men. In her exhibition *mere mortals* at The New Gallery at Austin Peay State University, multimedia artist Christina A. West continues this deconstruction of the male gaze, traditional artistic practices, and their discontents through sculpture and video, portraying an imperfect male figure through a distinctly female gaze that prioritizes the grotesque and aging aspects of the body.

Christina West’s artistic practice is one that analyzes the political and theoretical constraints of the human body, looking at our corporeal form through a lens of gender and sociological critique. Following her bachelors and masters programs at Siena Heights University (Adrian, MI) and Alfred University (Alfred, NY), West began to create sculptures that referenced the human body through abstractions, fragments, and suggested motions rather than full articulations of the corpus. Her sculptures have been shown at institutions such as the Mattress Factory Museum (Pittsburgh, PA), the Abrams-Engel Institute of Visual Arts at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (Birmingham, AL), the Bemis Center of Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE), and others. Beginning her work on *mere mortals* as the Summer Artist In Residence at Georgia State University’s Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design in 2021, West continued her explorations of the mutilated and obscured human form by delving deeper into the installation and multimedia aspects of work she recently exhibited at Atlanta Contemporary and 186 Mitchell in Atlanta, GA. The resulting exhibition is a witty, theoretically rigorous look at the body as it exists in our ecosystem.

In *mere mortals*, the majority of West’s work is a selection of sculptures with accompanying video and sculptures that illustrate the motion suggested by the human-like forms she renders through three-dimensional materials such as foam, plywood, and found construction materials such as nylon straps. The centerpiece of the exhibition is *Napoleon* (2021), a fragmented, industrial composition that references Jacques-Louis David’s 1801 painting *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. David’s original painting was a fictitious homage to the French emperor, portraying his subject as the epitome of power, fortitude, and masculinity as he leads his battalions to victory. West reinterprets *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by mining it for scraps. The horse in the original painting is made from a sawhorse, foam pieces, 2 x 4” lumber, and instead of Napoleon in all of his grandiosity, his form is only suggested through the inclusion of two fragments of a live plaster cast: a lower calf that shows the figure is riding, and a portion of an arm pointing up as in the original painting, there used as a symbol of Napoleon’s impending victory. The rest of the figure is simply omitted by

1 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6.

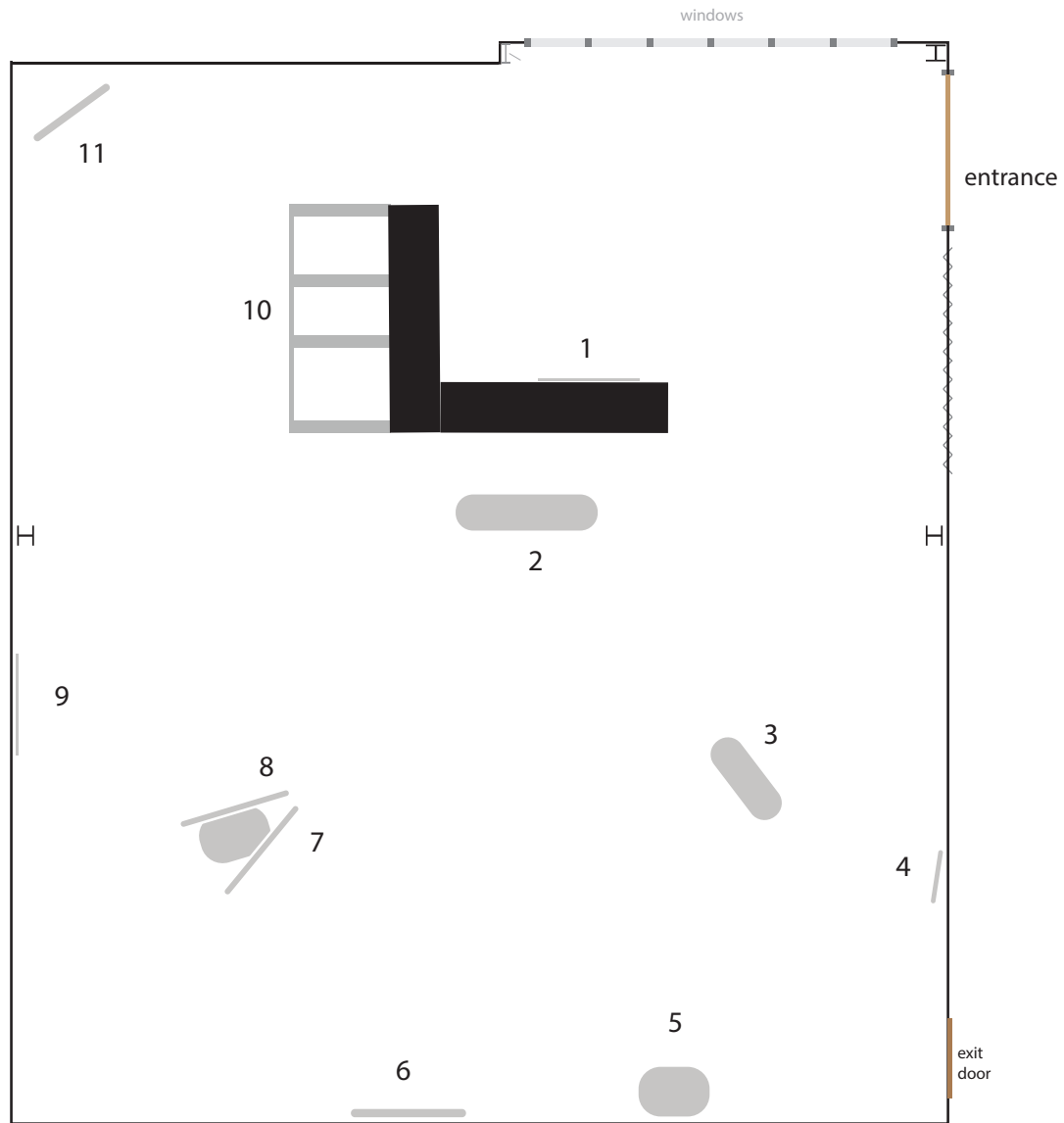
the artist.

In sculptures like *Napoleon* and others, West uses a rigorous understanding of art and gender history to dismantle the politics and accompanying aesthetics of the gaze. The most visually striking and discernible portions of West's sculptures are the plaster casts of life models, suggesting at once a human form and a reference back into the annals of artistic practices. The slick plaster forms share a visual resemblance to Greco-Roman marble sculpture, but this method also allows her to capture the small, life-like intricacies of the human body such as imprints on the skin from fabric or a stray hair. West's *Discobolus* (2021) is a reference to the iconic sculpture *Discobolus* from the Classical period of Grecian sculpture, which showcases the toned and athletic body of an ideal Attic youth mid-discus throw. In West's hands, the discus thrower becomes a site for clever reflection and parody of the gaze. This contemporary *Discobolus*--like *Napoleon*--is only suggested through a life-cast of the leg; the remainder of the body is constructed with wood, and the discus itself is made with the lid of a gallon bucket of plaster. By fragmenting the human form, West is interrupting the audience's visual pleasure of looking at the male figure: there is simply not enough of a body for the unflinching eyes of the audience to subjugate. The video component to *Discobolus* is shown elsewhere in the gallery, capturing two male models struggling to hold the acrobatic pose of the discus thrower for an extended period of time. Not only do West's videos showcase a broader range of movement not accessible in inanimate objects, it also shows the corrosive coercion of bodily perfection and pleasure as amplified by the gaze--West's discus throwers nearly collapse under the scrutiny of her lens.

Other pieces in *mere mortals* explore the gaze by instead showing too much of the body. Next to *Discobolus* in The New Gallery, a video entitled *Untitled (bodybuilder)* (2021) is placed on a loop. Whereas the Grecian *Discobolus* West appropriates is the epitome of the male figure, *Untitled (bodybuilder)* shows the male form in all its untuned glory. In a split screen, West shows a close up of a man's nude crotch, stomach, and buttocks in various states of motion, and as this man is not the trim, youthful figure of the Classical past, his flesh and fat shake vigorously. With his flailing penis and jiggling gut, it is a somewhat uncomfortable viewing experience that draws both the expectation of female nudity in the arts and gendered body standards into sharp relief in their absurdity and obsolescence. Elsewhere in the gallery, the question of male visibility in the confines of the gaze is brought to its absurd conclusion. *Centerfold with Cereal* (2021) captures an aging nude man lying down in front of the camera, fully exposed. The prone stance of the man references the historic *Dying Gaul* of Pergamon--which West also references in *Dying Warrior* and its accompanying video (both 2021)--but here, this reference is drawn out to absurd and grotesque effect with the inclusion of the constant loop of eating. The overtly sexualized visual cues such as the nudity or centerfold-style pose as indicated by the piece's title does not follow through on its supposed sensuality; instead, it reveals the cruel folly of the male gaze by making men the subject of its politicized, gendered looking.

"The alternative [of the gaze] is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire," writes Mulvey.² Christina A. West's *mere mortals* takes the visual language of the male gaze and fragments it across artistic practices, media, and human forms to usher in a different kind of looking. By subjecting male subjects to her gaze, West is both referencing the pressure of an idealized form while gleefully dismembering it, exposing its bumps, bruises, and flesh to an unforgiving audience. The tyranny of the male gaze still lingers, but its power wanes due to the work of artists like West uncovering a sense of equality in looking.

2 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 7.



1. ***Napoleon***, 2021
Digital photograph printed on Phototex paper
2. ***Napoleon***, 2021
Sawhorse, 2x4's, plaster life-casts, foam
3. ***Dying Warrior***, 2021
Plywood, 2x4's, plaster life-casts, nylon straps, sandbags, caster wheel
4. ***Fountain***, 2021
Looping HD video with sound
5. ***Discobolus***, 2021
Plywood, 2x4's, plaster life-cast, plastic bucket lid, foam, casters
6. ***Untitled (bodybuilder)***, 2021
Looping HD video, no sound
7. ***Double Discus*** (video), 2021
8. ***Dying Warrior*** (video), 2021
Looping HD video on monitors (no sound), lumber, casters, plaster life-casts
9. ***Fragmented***, 2021
Digital photograph printed on Phototex paper
10. ***Narcissus***, 2020-21
Constructed wall, mirrors, television with looping HD video
11. ***Centerfold with Cereal***, 2021
Looping HD video, no sound, iPad, drywall, lumber

About the Artist

Bio

Christina A. West is a sculptor and installation artist who has extensively exhibited her work across the country in venues such as the Mattress Factory (Pittsburgh), The Everson Museum of Art (Syracuse, NY), Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center (Buffalo, NY), Plug Projects (Kansas City, MO), and Atlanta Contemporary (Atlanta, GA). Additionally, West's work has been supported by a grants and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, The Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts, the National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts, and the Virginia Groot Foundation.

West earned her MFA from Alfred University (Alfred, NY) in 2006 and currently lives in Atlanta where she is an Associate Professor of Ceramics and Three-Dimensional Studies in the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design at Georgia State University

Statement

The awkwardness and ambiguity of body language, the enigma of interiority, and the tension between a desire to connect and a discomfort in social situations, make the human figure an endlessly captivating subject for my sculpture, video, and installations. My work is rooted in figuration as a way to try to understand and connect with others, and is informed by contemporary art criticism and social theory about the gaze as a way to call out dynamics and politics that complicate the act of looking. Broadly speaking, addressing the gaze allows me to reflect on my relationships to others and consider what those dynamics can reveal about how we understand ourselves and others.

My site-sensitive, immersive installations engage viewers as both voyeur and subject; it is common for mirrors, video feeds, or openings cut through walls to implicate viewers into the work in a visually explicit way, conflating the roles of actor and audience to disrupt the illusion of an omnipotent one-sided gaze and highlight the fact that we (humans) move through the world as both subject and object.

My most recent installations explore the female gaze on the male body as a way to empower and understand this underrepresented perspective. These works include video made during multiple sessions with male models as I directed them to perform a range of activities that convey vulnerability with strength and beauty with awkwardness, sometimes overlaid with references to classical art. These videos flip tropes common to the male gaze, while presenting a perspective that moves beyond a simple reversal of the objectifying male gaze, conveying a mixture of desire, curiosity, and empathy. The presentation of these videos is an integral element of the installation. With strategies such as placing the videos within small boxes that require people to lean-in to view, or integrating mirrors into a display composition, viewing these videos engages the viewer's own body and creates a hyper-awareness of the act of looking.