

Waterbury's Mattatuck Museum features 'The Body Imagined'

Figurative exhibit shows how the human figure has been depicted across generations





Nick Cave's "Soundsuit #1" (2011), a color photograph made with archival pigments on fine art rag paper with matte finish.



Renluka Maharaj's "Lalika's Daydream" (2023), a pigmented ink print, acrylic paint, acrylic markers, nylon mesh, glitter, cotton fabric and thread on canvas.



Ebony G. Patterson's "Studies for a Vocabulary of Loss III" (2022).



Alfredo Ramos Martinez's "Zapatistas" (1932).

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY
STAFF WRITER

WATERBURY — From the moment humans began painting, they've been wrestling with the body.

The bird-like figure discovered in the caves of Lascaux, France, looks nothing like the broad-backed male drying his face off in Peggy Brook Bacon's "Casual Ablutions," now on view at the Mattatuck Museum. He wasn't meant to. Whoever ground the images into those caves in the Dordogne 15,000 years ago was far more interested in the animals than the cursory, stick figure with the beak we call "human."

But Keffie Feldman, chief curator at the Mattatuck, said the same principle is at play in "The Body Imagined: Figurative Art in the Bank of America Collection," one of the museum's biggest shows yet. Paleolithic culture cared about animals and their nourishing power. Humans? Not so much.

How the body is depicted — whether as a shamanic figure in Lascaux, in Rubens' voluptuous nudes or even on the pages of Vogue — says far more about the culture than what people *actually* looked like, she says. So, whether contemporary females really resemble the repeating bikini-clad screenprints of Julian Opie's "Watching Suzanne" is almost immaterial, Feldman said. The duplicating, whippet-thin female figure in the black two-piece suit reflects what the 20th-century culture values — or, in this case, what the media tells it to value.

In this case, it's the slender buxom torso of a woman whose face is so irrelevant, it's not even depicted.

"Every culture has its own perception of beauty and that's reflected in the way it represents the body," Feldman said.

"The Body Imagined" includes 97 objects from the 20th century to the present that explore how artists have rendered, reimagined and transformed the human figure over generations and artistic movements. Featuring the work of artists like Milton Avery, Nick Cave, Andy Warhol, Alex Katz and Cindy Sherman, the exhibit is particularly rich in figures that have been traditionally underrepresented in museums. How the bodies of those marginalized communities have been seen, used and abused is an undercurrent of the exhibit that is difficult to ignore.

Take Cave's "Soundsuit #1." The fiber artist and dancer (no relation to the

singer) first began creating these visually and texturally ornate costumes in 1991, in response to the Rodney King beating. Cave then puts on these elaborate suits, crafted of materials — doilies, crochet patterns, bits of socks — that he calls “discarded, devalued, viewed as less than.” They are metaphors for Black men meant to rattle and rustle with the wearer. It’s hard to see how this one would not. The costume is pierced, not by arrows or bullets, but by metal bike bells, rattles and tin noise makers popular in the 1960s. Cave then photographs himself leaning backward on his toes, buckling as if stricken by a volley of lethal toys. The warm, speckled texture of the outfit serve “as a cocoon and armor at the same time,” Feldman said. It’s equal parts laughable and lethal.

The exhibit is divided into three thematic sections — “body language,” “changing forms” and “framing the figure,” the latter of which explores how mass media and consumer culture — what Roland Barthes called the “tissue of quotations” through which we see the world — affects how we see the body.

Because all the objects are from the 20th and 21st century, media concepts of the body — whether in Warhol’s buffalo nickel or the eroticized postcards of South Asians passed around among European sophisticates — takes on a powerful relevance. It’s almost impossible to see the body today — one’s own or anybody else’s — without superimposing the media’s idealized (or airbrushed) presentation of perfection. A recent Ipsos survey found that 83% of women report feeling unhappy with how their body looks at times. For minority populations, particularly those whose bodies were used and abused for the pleaser and profit of colonizers, the body clearly means something different.

Take Renluka Maharaj’s “Lalika’s Daydream,” which superimposes vibrant paint, glitter, fabric and thread on a historical image of a so-called “Coolie Belle.” During the 19th century, the British transported 2 million South Asians as indentured laborers to work on sugar and cotton plantations in Trinidad and Tobago, to which Maharaj’s own grandparents were transported in 1913. (The practice ended by 1917, CNN reports.) By the end of the 19th century, a thriving trade of postcards and exoticized images of the women — called “Coolie Women” — emerged, satiating the pleasures of the urbane Europeans, according to CNN.

Maharaj has taken one such image and reimagined it, covering the figure in more austere, sepia tones and patterns, and draping her face in bursting white flowers and encasing her hands in magenta gloves.

Ebony G. Patterson’s “Studies for a Vocabulary of Loss,” for example, takes archival imagery of butterflies, turtles, snakes, flora and fauna from her

native Jamaica, and pins them together in a three-dimensional cabinet of color. She uses a T-head pin — of the sort European collectors of the 16th and 17th centuries used to secure specimens in their “cabinets of curiosities” — to tether this delicate collage together. The pin is an intentional reference to the ravages of colonialization in the British “sugar islands,” Feldman said, and the mania for typology that, by the 1730s, culminates in the Linnaean system of species classification.

The final section, which explores how the media affects how we view the body, features the work of Sherman, in this case posing as a very bored-looking Marilyn Monroe, and Robert Longo’s “Cindy,” a lithograph from his “Men in Cities” (1978–83). For that series, Longo had friends, like Sherman, pose in office garb and asked them to “strike a pose,” to invoke Madonna. Those poses were typically contorted and theatrical. The Whitney Museum of American Art reports Longo pelted his pals with tennis balls to get the recoil he was after. The effect is a peculiar commentary on the impact of advertising and the encased quality of the corporate environment.

“We have this body that’s floating in space, with all the contextualized information removed,” Feldman said. “She’s clearly dressed for a professional setting. To me, it speaks to this question of purpose or futility.”

It’s worth comparing this twisted figure in light of early contorted figures in the exhibit, including Reginald Marsh’s orgiastic “Coney Beach” (1934) and Peggy Brook (Margaret) Bacon’s “Casual Ablutions” (1931). Bacon captures a broad-backed man drying his face off in a cramped apartment where a sofa arm crowds an adjacent sink, and pots and pans cluster along the towel rack. Here is a man trying to look his best under adverse conditions, perhaps in anticipation of time off with the frolicsome crew crowding a Coney Island beach.

Marsh has plenty of buxom bathers and Michelangelesque physiques coiled and entwined in a carnival-like beach scene that borders on the orgiastic. Is Marsh sneering in contempt or leering lasciviously at the scene? Part of the thrill is not knowing. What’s clear from the faces in this raucous crowd is that nobody seems to care how their bodies are perceived or presented. They seem to be having too much fun.

“The Body Imagined: Figurative Art in the Bank of America Collection” continues at the Mattatuck Museum, 144 West Main St., Waterbury, through Sept. 28. For information, visit mattmuseum.org or call 203-753-0381.