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## Relmaging Breasts

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STILL LIFE

DOROTHY WOODMAN AND ALOYS FLEISCHMANN



## ARTIST STATEMENT

I waited until Al showed up for the shoot before I removed my prosthesis. While he set up the photography equipment in my dining area, I dashed into the bedroom to wrest it out of the bra's pocket, my fingers absorbing its reflected heat. I wanted it to be warm, to retain memories of my own body as we began, together, to arrange the still life for our shoot. And I had to figure out how to carry it out into my dining area where we would take the photographs. Now outside my clothing it had become strangely public. Just minutes before it was a simulacrum, a half-sister to the mound of tissue, blood and lymph next to it; now it sat on the Ikea cabinet, tipping awkwardly on the polished veneer.

Arranging the fruit I had selected from studied arrangements in the enormous store, we took turns sliding the prosthesis back and forth across the surface, squinting to determine if its aesthetic place had been located. All the while, despite our handling, it cooled, the vestiges of intimacy evap-

A decade ago, Dorothy and I were walking through the courtyard at the University of Alberta. She'd just returned to our doctoral program, and she had been telling me about her experience with cancer. By then our conversation had moved on to pollution and global warming, and I made a wisecrack about us all dying of cancer. I physically stumbled, I recall, at the effort to stop the words that were pouring out of my mouth. Too late. If it registered at all with Dorothy, I'm guessing she filed it under "*faux pas*" and moved on to the next topic. But I've always been like this—my casual banter veers suddenly into the mortality it was meant to avoid. The last time I saw my uncle in law ... the final time ... he had developed incredibly aggressive lung cancer, the product of working in the New Mexico desert while the army tested nuclear weapons. I made a joke about the ending of *War and Peace*. Reading it was on his bucket list and, sadly, he was halfway through. "Everyone dies," I quipped ur-

orating, and fell back into an anonymous plasticity. Even though I irreverently fling the lopsided bra onto a chair at night, thinking of slingshots as I lob it, the jokiness of the bedroom somehow couldn't slide into the dining space now crowded with Al's photographic equipment. The joke was between me and this body part, and now with its relocation from body chest to dining chest, the seriousness of its new public purpose became a kind of alienation and freedom at the same time.

This collaboration began as a project to disrupt and overdetermine current significations of the breast. Formerly students in the same doctoral program, Al and I reconnected after many years when I contacted him about my quirky project. We would let the prosthesis be a proxy for that iconic, culturally freighted body part that was now a distant memory for me, for indeed, publicly this manufactured product functions very well as "my breast." I wanted, in our collaboration, to experience my/the prosthesis other than a negative (fakery, false conscious-

banely. My aunt jumped in to change the subject: "Oh, well now you've given the ending away," she interjected, her eyes wide. But I didn't know the ending. I probably never will.

This wasn't my first rodeo, so as we planned the shoot, I watched my language. I noticed I tended to refer to the prosthesis as an "implant." Because it was silicate? I'm inclined to think of prosthetics as metal rods with plastic casings. Or perhaps it was a defense mechanism, a way of hiding the gravity of Dorothy's experience behind a glittering wall of mass media culture, where implants are simultaneously treated as a concession made by second-rate talents to their unsophisticated audiences *and* a celebration of conspicuous consumption by powerful women. This marketplace logic leaves little room to think about implanted breasts and their illusory fullness as a response to the failure of biology—of meat—to maintain the eternal geometry of an idealized curve. Was I fleeing the mortality of the cold Latinate sound of *prosthesis* for the warmer vowels of *implant*?

ness, a feminist cop-out) or a positive (a fakery that enabled normalcy: the glancing eye could be easily tricked and so could I; in fact, I often tap my breasts to remind myself which one is “mine”). But, in moving this translucent wobbly, off-centre shape here and then there, I just didn’t know what to make of it/me.

Yet, my asymmetrical body seemed oddly at ease as AI and I worked together. The distance between half-sisters created a new set of relationships. Their kinship had become expansive; the prosthesis had now become engaged in a whole new set of discourses. Why, then, cannot this be the case for flesh? How are the cremated remains of the original, unceremoniously expelled, now entangled with a miscellany of dust, still me and not/me? The prosthesis, up against my chest, fills up with the revenant of my history. Bearing air and dust motes jostled by strawberries, haunted, it cannot be extricated from my body even as it is turned into an/Other. Yet, as an/Other, it welcomes me into new kinships with myself, encourag-

This is not whimsy: the verb-based root of prosthesis is “to add,” while the root of implant is “to plant” (also *Latinate*). The prosthesis lies atop the skin, the implant takes root underneath and grows. I realized how often I had said “flesh out the concept” during the planning phase—how many times my words had wished living tissue over Dorothy’s concept, and her prosthesis.

Roland Barthes popularized the idea of *studium* and *punctum*. Photographers often take *studium* to mean a pleasant standard composition, while *punctum* is that jarring pinprick of contrast that gives the photo its contemplative appeal. Yet contrast was always part of standard composition, and most likely always will be. If anything punctuates the clinical blue image for me, it’s that perfect focus on the serial numbers of Dorothy’s breast. It was dark, and I had to use a very wide aperture for the shot; I originally planned to edit two focal points together but chose to discard the forward-focused image. Or could *punctum* be less a puncture, and more the full frame uncan-

ing me to experience my body as intrinsically fragmented, processual, *off-centre*, an assemblage of parts that slip on and off, into and out of, multiple sites of engagement.

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niness that comes out of imitating a squared two-dimensional painting with a camera whose rotational axis kept slipping into unwanted depths? (I should have brought my “heavy” tripod.) And, as we widen out further, as we take in the two people and all the apparatus in that late-afternoon dining room studio, how do I name the difficulty of showing in real time Dorothy’s prosthesis is still warm?

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