

“You may feel a little unusual”

Andrew Carnie’s Works on the Cultural Imagination of the Heart
Tammer El-Sheik

The spaces of this exhibition are highly metaphorical. In the artists’ hands, the figure of the heart is passed from the biomedical or clinical context into a darkened space for dancers, an acoustic space for narratives of lost love, and a photographic space for loaded tokens of gratitude. The artists’ empathetic responses to narratives of transplant recipients are, at the same time, critical examinations of the heart’s symbolism in our cultural imaginary—from science-fiction to art history to Christian iconography. The PITH team and the artists of *Hybrid Bodies* show how a cultural reservoir of meanings of the heart—as an impersonal mechanism, or a highly personal, even spiritual source of moral attributes—contributes directly to processes of identity formation and mitigates, to some extent, experiences of identity disruption for transplant recipients.¹

In a darkly comedic moment during her PHI Centre presentation, Dr. Ross alluded to this mingling of science and culture in the biomedical imagination. With a still from the sci-fi thriller *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984) projected behind her, she noted that mechanical heart-transplant recipients “may feel a little unusual” after their surgery.² The artist Andrew Carnie, perhaps more insistently than the others in the group, takes up the iconography of non-normative bodies in our visual culture. He indicates a wide range of sources for both the art-historical and popular imagination of such bodies.

Carnie’s works for this exhibition emerged from drawings and notes made while viewing the PITH team’s interviews, and hundreds of photos of one nude, male model taken afterwards.³ Within these materials, Carnie calls up a range of art-historical and pop-cultural associations. His variations on the motif of human frailty are a result of two encounters: one with the PITH team and their research materials, and the other with various images of the infirm, the embattled, the filmic, or the athletic body. The artist’s research into these aspects of our visual culture draws on a diverse set of sources, from medieval and Renaissance anatomical drawings, to Dutch Baroque paintings, to the artist’s impressions of the momentarily held patterns of synchronized swimmers.⁴

For the exhibition, Carnie produced five works in various media, from projected images, to sculpture and sound installations, to drawings and watercolours. A consistently dark, almost Gothic atmosphere lends coherence to his range of images of the body-in-flux. In the synchronized double-video projection *A Change of Heart* (2012), we are confronted by a

¹ This aspect of the PITH team’s inquiry is guided by the work of the cultural theorist Margrit Shildrick. In her talk at the PHI Centre, she noted the cultural resonance of transplant narratives. Shildrick asks a provocative question about the relationship between the lived or embodied experience of transplantation and the “cultural stories” that help “mitigate social anxiety” about such experiences. The PITH team and the artists locate the recipients’ narratives—their words and images for very real experiences of transplantation—against a background of cultural reference points for “hybrid bodies.” See Shildrick, PHI presentation.

² See Ross, “PITH.”

³ Andrew Carnie, presentation at the PHI Centre, Montreal, April 27, 2013.

⁴ Carnie ran through these and other references in his 2013 PHI Centre presentation. The works made for the exhibition call up art-historical references, from Mantegna’s *Limitations of Christ*, to Manet’s *Dead Matador*, to Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lessons*. See Carnie, PHI presentation.

luminous, morphing male body. For Carnie, the figure quietly conveys an insight encountered repeatedly in the PITH team's interviews: the body—our own and those of the transplant recipients equally—is constantly changing. Divided, then blurred, then disintegrated, or tentatively rendered whole with over-drawings and photographic effects, the model's image holds a shifting ground of personal identity for brief seconds before passing back into the darkness of the screen on which it is projected. It is an image sequence that describes the exposure of the body, of all bodies, to time. In the sculpture installation *A Tender Heart* (2012), Carnie takes this theme of the changing body a step further. Partly ephemeral and site-specific, the installation was conceived originally for the stainless-steel counters in the restrooms at Montreal's PHI Centre. The artist suspends several lightly streaked, black-and-red, heart-shaped bars of soap from slack ropes fixed to the ceiling, a little like a gallows before or after a hanging. The hearts lie on the counter, awaiting the curious or pragmatic touches of visitors. Over time, their functional outer layer is washed away, revealing a more resistant, heart-shaped core—an enduring and highly symbolic element in the work. Carnie contrasts this durable symbolism of the heart with the body's most banal uses, with the role of its parts and their unavoidable exposure to wear. Touching phobias and real concerns about post-operative susceptibility to infection among transplant recipients figure in Carnie's work and are translated into the private, everyday experience of visitors to the exhibition.

Another Gothic image, set against a black background, appears in *Lacuna* (2012). The same model's ghostly pale image reappears here, but in a cylindrical formation at the centre of the screen. The boundaries of the figure are placed into question by Carnie's careful layering and overlapping of the image. It is a stark and simple picture, rich with associations from histories of media technology, art and popular culture. Carnie pays homage here to the nineteenth century chrono-photography of Eadweard Muybridge and to state-of-the-art MRI imaging technologies. We see in the arrangement of the figures a riff on the familiar but wondrous close-up view of the iris. For the artist, it is a military as well as an anatomical picture. Modelled on the Roman infantry formation called the "tortoise," *Lacuna* is an allegory of strength in vulnerability.⁵ The image offered Carnie a way to sort through the testimony of male interviewees, in particular, from the PITH team's research, who were not accustomed to describing their emotional and physical pain.⁶ Open and vulnerable, or closed, focused and pensive, the group describes a range of gendered attitudes at play in the scenario of transplantation. The image calls forth the imagination of masculinity in early to mid-twentieth century film culture, from the highly functional cyborg or detective figure to the dysfunctional war veteran. Carnie mentions the films of Busby Berkeley in this connection, and *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927), that classic text on the odd and inescapable coupling of men and their machines.⁷ Beyond this intricate tissue of references, the work's main value for Carnie consists in the metaphorical space it provides for

⁵ The "tortoise" as Carnie explains it, is a defensive formation involving twenty to thirty soldiers standing with their backs to each other and their shields pointing outwards. Andrew Carnie, interview by the author, February 2016.

⁶ Andrew Carnie, interview by the author, February 2016. Carnie's treatment of the boundaries of the model's body especially recalls Schildrick's challenge to the Cartesian concept of the bounded and sovereign self. See her "Corporeal Cuts."

⁷ Carnie notes that many of the patients' descriptions of the violence of their surgery—of the opening of their rib cages with chrome equipment, and of the "macho" heroism of their surgeons who wield this equipment—recall conventional gendered roles from science-fiction films. For an analysis of comparable images of male vulnerability and dysfunction in Cold War-era noir films, see Michael Davidson's chapter, "Phantom Limbs: Film Noir's Volatile Bodies," in *Concerto for the Left Hand*, 58–80.

those struggling with identity disruption in the wake of an experience of transplant surgery. For these viewers, *Lacuna*'s image of male vulnerability says plainly what they labour to say, or can say only indirectly with mechanical metaphors and defensive gestures.

How is such profound identity disruption to be described? What language is appropriate to capture an experience that lies so far beyond any single text or utterance? In his installation *The Beat Goes On* (2013), Carnie calls on philosopher Margrit Shildrick to begin an answer to this question. A soundscape emanates from two very small speakers nestled in black serge wool hearts. From a looming, nine-foot-wide, wall-mounted sculpture, a collage of hospital sounds, drum beats and broken, natural and synthesized voices passes into our acoustic space. Shildrick's voice cuts through the noise to clarify the philosophical stakes of the PITH team's research, and of her own, previous work on the phenomenon of conjoined twins: "the cutting apart of con-corporate bodies is paralleled in its theoretical implications by the stitching together of previously separate body parts. In both instances, the verb to cleave would be appropriate, for its double meaning of to divide by force and to closely unite."⁸ Carnie and his fellow artists in *Hybrid Bodies* are focused on just this tension. Through their works we begin to see, hear, touch and reflect on what Shildrick calls "the sense of hybridity, of in-between-ness... and of the body which is not one."⁹

⁸ The presentation by Shildrick that Carnie uses here is titled "Hybrid Bodies: The Psycho-social Significance of Heart Transplant Surgery."

⁹ Ibid.