

BRUISELESS

I want to start by recalling Karen Barad, who writes, “So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others — other beings, other spaces, other times — are aroused.” Just before this, they begin their text: “When two hands touch, there is a sensuality of the flesh, an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, of presence, a proximity of otherness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself.”¹ Notable as someone who unites poetry and physics, Barad’s queer, quantum perspective is so edifying. It encourages us to understand that the material, substantial world is infinitely entangled, and that the position of the self can be — is — deeply integrated with that slippery notion of a counterpart, the other.

Touch as a foundational sense and an ontological proposition runs throughout the work of Ja Jess and Andrea Marcellier in their exhibition *Bruiseless*. The works show, for one thing, that not only entities can touch and be touched, but that these infinite, molecular entanglements offer meaningful ways to consider forms of connection that interfere with normative thinking. But the exhibition stimulates other questions too: How do we grasp our experiences beyond the structures that determine how we live, and how do our intimacies form? As the title inversely suggests, not one of us moves through social life unscathed, without the *bruise* of societal conditioning.

And *Bruiseless* itself opens with an inversion: holes puncture a piece of card used to darken the gallery’s front window, giving the effect of apertures. Through one of the holes, street activity is projected back into the room through a mirror, while the rest illuminate a series of enlarged images of frozen embryos that hang on a facing wall. The images are printed onto and between pieces of curved glass using a technique typically used to make church windows, evoking non-sexual — immaculate — conception in that orthodox relation between egg and holy space. Yet we are also asked to view the gallery as a camera, or perhaps a microscope, bringing the fact of touching into the realm of (scientific) observation that finds a parallel bridge between science and poetics as posed by Barad. This work forms one part of Jess’s new commission, which begins with the artist’s experience as an egg donor, to follow the passage of a fertilised egg as it moves from one body to another in a simulated reproductive environment.

In one respect, Jess traces the ways in which the body is modulated physically, emotionally, and psychically in order to perform its role as living host. But there is another emphasis on subjectivity and attachment that complicates established boundaries in medicine, when one considers how genetics and DNA are carried across and between individuals. Jess’s work disrupts fixed notions of social and gender roles by drawing attention to language — seen especially in their written “scripts” where the conjoined-differentiation between mother and other is drawn up syntactically with a thoughtfully placed forward slash (m/other)—as well as how certain aspects of personhood are made manifest and enshrined within ostensibly neutral medical terminology. Through the context of in vitro fertilisation, then, Jess’s focus rests on intimacy and non-genealogical kinship, in contrast to the systems and codes that determine an individual’s experience of the world.

While carrying out a distinct artistic practice, Marcellier draws on similar ideas to produce her work, proposing relation (to others *and* to the self) as something braided and intricate. Standing free in the centre of the gallery, a structure made of charred and painted wood serves as a dais to a trio of delicate portraits. These are slender, almost planar figures, reclining female nudes made from lean cuts of translucent leather and overlaid with silver-cast filigree. The works wear a skin so fine they appear vulnerable to puncture and contusion, bringing the idea of wounding to the surface of the display — translucency as a visceral quality serves as one link between the artists, to articulate a sense of physical, almost sensual, vulnerability. Indeed, the lace-like pattern that blankets the figures has been tattooed onto the surface of the skin, which here resembles scar tissue. The patterns themselves are adapted from the metal- and stonework found adorning church cloisters.

Mounted on their dais, the figures are cast into stark light and shadow in a suggestively votive treatment, and it takes a closer look, perhaps, to reveal a more unexpected gesture: they are engaged in autoerotic touch (this conception of touch conjures Luce Irigaray, who had a notion that feminine pleasure is an inherently, and anatomically, plural and continuous caress). Another fine detail: the dainty, touching hands of the portraits are sheathed in gleaming armour, insinuating both protection and harm.

Marcellier's work addresses a politics of desire, asking how normative sexual codes perpetuate hetero-patriarchal masculinity. Since the touch visible here remains noticeably demure, the artist chooses to accentuate the internal sexual fantasies of the masturbating figures, their possible inner landscapes of arousal. Marcellier questions what projections impel masturbation, and how fantasies are conditioned by external influences, especially when sexual fantasy implies some kind of transgression. Even so, while these depictions of self-pleasure perhaps demonstrate emancipated bodies, the artist situates the figures at a boundary between tenderness and violence, intimacy and voyeurism. At once precious, withdrawn, and assertive, the figures repose in masturbation (crucially, they face away from the viewer), disrupting an historically constructed morality by depicting feminine pleasure in the manner of an art historical motif. Yet the fact of their display compromises the privacy of the act, and how can we be sure these nudes wish to be seen? While the wooden furniture is constructed with a sense of front and back, or public and private, it remains viewable from all sides. Marcellier's figures are not performing, and yet they are always observable. We are compelled to consider to what degree viewership violates a boundary, or else participates in a private intimacy.

Bruiseless draws its name from the Canadian poet Anne Carson, who in her novel *Autobiography of Red* suggests (as others before her) that language doesn't only name things in the material world, but is central to constructing it. The artists take hold of this proposition as a catalyst for work that begins somewhere deeply personal, but that ultimately must expand outward. Soft or hard, violent or tender: touch remains central to work that considers intimate life as both rich and essential. If interiority and material existence are entangled in *Bruiseless*, it is as a disruption of binary logics and a curiosity for life in so many forms.

1. Barad, Karen. "On Touching – the Inhuman That Therefore I Am." *differences: A Feminist Cultural Studies Journal* 23, no. 3 (2012): 206–223.