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**Why Is the Met’s New Show About the Body in Art History So Stultifying and Dull?**

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Can an art exhibition be a *frenemy*?Something you intermittently sort of grudgingly like but also dislike intensely and need to get away from? Because that’s a perfect description, actually, of “Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body (1300–Now),”the intentionally titillating, often stultifying two-floor extravaganza all about the body now at the Met Breuer. Many of the works are explicitly naked — the majority of them, of course, white — many done in a male-pervy way, many others either misogynist, racist, or nativist (when it comes to bodies of other colors and races).

This isn’t because of too much gynecological detail or sulfurous sexism; indeed, of the 110 sculptures here (and 13 paintings) there’s a virtual 50-50 tie between male and female bodies on view. (Maybe #MeToo *is*already making institutions rethink these issues.) No, “Like Life*”*isn’t to be faulted for being “incorrect.” It is to be faulted for taking something as fecund, mysterious, and bottomless as the human body and deadening our senses to it with a mindless overabundance of hyperrealism, to the exclusion of all other forms of possible depiction. Seen en masse like this, this narrow definition of realism produces a kind of claustrophobia that makes you feel in your bones why centuries of Western artists — from Velazquez and Goya to Constable and Delacroix to Manet, Cézanne, and almost everyone since then — had to break away from it and experiment. Indeed, after seeing “Like Life*”*I think art would have begun to die had artists not broken down these conventions along with strict painterly adherence to organized, rule-based, receding perspectival space that similarly limited the imagination from taking wing.

This isn’t to say there aren’t laughs, frisky or high moments here. *Like Life*is a Felliniesque walk-in *Wunderkammer* of bodies dripping with blood, covered in wounds, wrapped in leather, splayed and exposing internal organs, giving birth, being deformed by war and disease, crucified, vivisected, hanging upside down, lying in state, asleep, and made of real blood. There’s a manikin with a real skeleton inside it, an animatronic figure babbling pop philosophy, a Madame Tussauds *Sleeping Beauty*that actually breaths or something, and, of course, recent razzle-dazzlers like Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons. In other words, it’s a crowd-pleaser and a would-be attendance troll. (Although every time I’ve been there the place is pretty dead.)

*“*Like Life*”*is all art from the West. “Unfinished*,”*the Met’s first similarly thematic show at this Madison Avenue location, was the same. All exhibitions can’t be surveys of world art, of course, nor should they be. But since each of these shows already dealt with almost 1,000 years of art, and with the Met owning or being able to borrow *anything*it wants (see the Donatello bust here), you’d think the museum would be capable of doing something a little more interesting when they tackle a subject this big and expansive. It’s too bad the Met didn’t; even a cursory comparison of Western figuration with that of Asia, Africa, or Oceania — all of which approach the nude more exuberantly, with less conflict, neurosis, and guilt — would have revealed fabulous fissures and disparities in approaches and establish how deeply Western art has been determined and distorted by the Judeo-Christian fixation on — and phobias about — the flesh, sex, and sublimation.

What turns this possibly exciting show into such a devitalizing slog (dark theatrical lighting doesn’t help) is that even with the sensationalism of blood, guts, and genitals, and a batch of really great art, “Like Life*”*produces very little of that inner tension or psychic friction. All we do is marvel at skill, mimicry, and look for naughty bits. Thus, everything goes down with a prepackaged ease; no one’s going to get upset at anything here.

Which *isn’t*like life or art at all. I surmise that most of the time viewers will be in self-referential feedback loops of noticing things: noticing details, hair, freckles, wrinkles, etc. I found myself giving out Verisimilitude Awards for Best Varicose Veins, Foreskin, and Labia Majora; imagining internet-ready listicles of Top Ten Weirdest Works in “Like Life.” And getting more sleepy.

Then again this is the Met. So individual things and galleries *do*stand out. Behold Donatello’s 1430s polychrome terra cotta *Bust of Niccolo da Uzzano,*a man — not a symbol, saint, or mythical figure — turning his head, becoming human even as you look at him, and you feel the breath of life of the early Renaissance.A melodramatically darkened gallery doubles as a sort of sculptural morgue has more than half a dozen prone figures. It’s a wonderfully knotty sight. You can see Maurizio Cattelan’s unnerving life-sized JFK in his coffin, coiffed with human hair, dressed in black suit and tie; his pallid resin-and-wax skin conjures a disconcerting visage that no one ever saw and transforms this object into a mystery picture of history that never was. Even a fragment of the long title of Reza Aramesh’s 2006 perfectly painted, carved miniature of a young man in his shorts with his hands behind his back and his clothes piled next to him braces: *An Israeli soldier points his gun at the Palestinian youth asked to strip down as he stands at a military checkpoint.*

Finally, the show establishes two formal poles of realism that might serve discerning viewers who wish to probe what sculptures like these can really do. Duane Hanson’s 1984 *Housepainter*is a full-sized black housepainter standing on a splattered drop cloth next to a partially painted wall. He holds a paint-covered roller and looks around, taking a break. The levels of realism are off the charts; it’s possible to think a museum worker is touching up the exhibition and you caught him. Yet the verisimilitude and detailing is *so*perfect that Hanson’s figure starts to blend in; he disappears into a banal sight you might see anywhere. So you stop seeing it as art and then stop seeing it at all. This not only touches on realism but on class, race, and what we expect to see in the world — social codes being acted out, enforced, maintained. This electric vacuum refills the figure with another kind of presence that really transfixes. Contrast this with Charles Ray’s nearby 2003 *Aluminum Girl*,an all-white seemingly classical three-quarters sized female nude with infinitely articulated labia majora and labia minora. What stops us in our tracks about the differences between the sculptures is that Hanson’s figure is so real it becomes unreal while Ray’s figure is so fake that it becomes more real — almost superreal, like a hologram of strange flesh from another sculptural dimension.

So with all the above caveats, I recommend “Like Life*”*as a highbrow, campy curatorial exercise filled with objects that would otherwise remain out of sight or under people’s radar.