

Chamber

written by Yang-En Hume, 2015

[...] *the coherence of the body is totally shattered. The dispersed fragments are then reconjoined at the will of the artist in arrangements both horrific and elegant...The mood of these works shockingly combines the objectivity of science - the cool, clinical observation of the dissecting table - with the paroxysm of romantic melodrama.*[1]

The Vrolijk Medical Museum, Amsterdam and the Museum of Morbid Anatomy, New York employ a combination of scientific and theatrical means to display fragmented bodies. Both these museums endeavour to be informative places of research while also appealing to the curiosity of the general public by emphasising the macabre and abject nature of dismembered bodies. In doing so, their collections embody the theatrical and mysterious. The amalgam of science and theatre within a single space resonates with Linda Nochlin's above description of 19th century paintings of mutilated bodies and hints at the complex relationship humans have to the body fragment.

The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity (1994) by Linda Nochlin outlines some of the ways in which the dismembered body has been depicted and interpreted by artists throughout history. At times it has served a literal reminder that the human body is not only the means by which we experience desire and sensuality, but that it is also the site of pain and death. During Modernity, the dismembered body was used as a metaphor for the disintegration of society and human connectedness or what Nochlin describes as a '*sense of fragmentariness*'. [2]

In his 1966 text *Dolls and Puppets*, Max Von Boehn writes that the earliest representations of the human figure were not considered to be inanimate objects but rather were thought to be imbued with life. [3] The sacred, divine and mystical was invested in them. This impression is reflected in the Vrolijk Museum; The entire room is permeated with a sense of the mysterious and revered, a feeling which is heightened by the darkened spaces, dramatic lighting and large timber cabinets, as well as the fact that the specimens are preserved fragments of real human bodies.

The ancient notion that inanimate objects in human form are inhabited with deeper meaning is given some contemporary relevance by Kitty Carriker. She writes in her book, *Created in Our Image: The Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object* (1998), that according to Freud's theory of the Uncanny, any object created as a replica of the human body serves as a reminder of the presence of death. She writes:

The subject's tendency is to identify death not with the self but with the other. However, once the other is acknowledged to be the subject's double, the similarity between the subject/self and the other/double brings their qualities into alignment. If the double can die, then so can the self.[4]

Simultaneously embodying a collection, mausoleum and sanctuary, *Chamber* brings together and reflects these understandings of the dismembered body and representations of the human form. As in the case of Theodore Gericault's depictions of wounded soldiers and severed limbs, the viewer is reminded that the body is the locus of physical suffering. Yet we are also reminded of the division between the anonymous 'other' experiencing pain firsthand, and those for whom such pain is a mediated experience. For the more affluent societies of the West, suffering is often largely confined to what is revealed to us by the media, and the dismembered bodies of overseas tragedies become dehumanised through their anonymity. *Chamber* thus evokes the early modernist artworks that use the fractured body as a metaphor for human alienation and social disjuncture.

The delicate paper and wax replicas of the artist's fragmented face recall both the ancient conviction that the replica of the human body is mysteriously significant and the Freudian position that it is a reminder of death. The multiple reproductions of the face elicit both the artist's (and by extension the viewer's) mortality. *Chamber* ultimately seeks to be a space, which like the Vrolijk Museum and the Museum of Morbid Anatomy is both clinical and theatrical, and within which the viewer is able to consider the dismembered body and all its associations.

- [1] Linda Nochlin describing Theodore Gericault's paintings of severed limbs in *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (1994). *The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994, p19.
- [2] Nochlin, Linda. *The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994, p22.
- [3] Von Boehn, Max. *Dolls and Puppets*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966, ch 1 and 2.
- [4] Carriker, Kitty. *Created in Our Image: The Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object*. USA: Associated University Presses, 1998, p32.