

Exquisite Corpses: Drawing and Disfiguration

In Paris in the 1920s, artists and poets in the Surrealist circle played a collaborative, chance-based parlor game called “the exquisite corpse.” Taking turns adding onto each other’s drawings and collages, they subjected the human body to distortions and juxtapositions that resulted in fantastic composite figures. Though this kind of aberrant figuration associated with Surrealism has at times been overshadowed by modernism’s more well known engagement with abstraction, it recurred throughout the twentieth century and continues to be seen in contemporary art.

This exhibition explores the various operations to which artists have submitted the human figure since the turn of the last century. In a series of cross-chronological groupings, works from various moments and movements are brought together, highlighting shared strategies for disrupting the body’s order. MoMA’s five exquisite corpse drawings join other examples of composite bodies, cobbled together from disparate bits. Formless bodies, scrambled or deflated, sink into or are penetrated by their environments. Some figures are endless, proliferating into landscapes, while others are doubled, as if in uncanny mirrors. Still more are tumescent, swollen with excess bulges of flesh. The introduction of foreign objects engenders prosthetic bodies, while other figures are fragmented, their parts substituted for wholes. Merging with plants and animals, humans become fantastic hybrids; melding with machines, they incarnate industrial dreams. Finally, in literal acts of defacement, the very features that express human emotions are stretched, scratched out, and scribbled over.

Such distortions disorient us from our most familiar referent—our own image—as artists play out personal, cultural, or social anxieties and desires on unwitting anatomies. Art’s academic tradition regards the human figure as a symbol of perfection and a primary system of organization, yet these works prove that artists have just as persistently been driven to disfiguration.

The exhibition is organized by Samantha Friedman, Curatorial Assistant, with Jodi Hauptman, Curator, Department of Drawings.

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