



Evan Penny: Ask Your Body

2017 VENICE BIENNALE

In your body he dwells; he is your body.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE
Thus Spoke Zarathustra

THE body serves as an integral site for investigation in the work of Toronto-based artist Evan Penny. In *Ask Your Body*, curated by Michael Short for the 2017 Venice Biennale, the very title of the exhibition challenges the Cartesian duality of mind and body that has so dominated Western thought. Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the first modern philosophers to question this mind/body objectification, sought to explore selfhood as a lived, bodily experience. This phenomenological approach is key to understanding the subjective body in Penny's eloquent work, and its resonance as installation in the Chiesa di San Samuele. The soothing darkness of this ancient church functioned as a sanctuary after the art buzz of the themed *Viva Arte Viva* of the biennale. This small church shares the same campo on the Grand Canal with the much grander Palazzo Grassi, the venue for Damien Hirst's *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*. This overwrought commercial spectacle contrasted profoundly with Penny's quiet show. Unknowingly, the artist came to Venice as the art world's David and succeeded in slaying the Philistine giant Goliath. Where Hirst's colossal statues speak more of corporate bodies and of an artist disassociated from art making, by contrast Penny's *Ask Your Body* addresses the corporeal body as "a meditation on what it means to be human."

IN staging a collateral event, an exhibition shown outside of the main Giardini or Arsenale venues, Penny and his curator Short were given the opportunity to select from an assortment of historical “churches, palazzi, and enchanted places” (as explained in the *Viva Arte Viva* promotional material). The relationship of church architecture to its art has a long history and is rarely seen in contemporary art; it is rarer still for this relationship to be shown successfully. Penny’s achievement is to spatially resolve the work by relating it to the site, specifically, to the Chiesa di San Samuele. *Ask your Body* merges past and present in a quiet dialogue with the architecture, religious art, light, smell, and mood of the old church.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in his *Self Portrait after Géricault’s Fragments Anatomiques*: an arrangement of severed limbs on a slab, based on preparatory paintings by Géricault for *The Raft of the Medusa*. The sculpture’s site-responsiveness, in front of a side-altar with a sixteenth-century painting of the Virgin and Child, deepened its meaning by association. The work is strangely poignant, more suggestive of Michelangelo’s *Pietà* than the morgue sensibility of Géricault’s studies. By using his own body as the model for *Self Portrait after Géricault’s Fragments Anatomiques*, the artist has shifted Géricault’s morgue sensibility into a lament for loss.

The church is notably dedicated to the Old Testament prophet Samuel, and his relics are recorded as being on the site. In this already embodied space, *Hanging Torso* is the first work the viewer encounters – a massive fragment of marble (simulated) that is suspended upside down from the ceiling. *Hanging Torso* is one of two works by Penny referencing the Greek myth of Marsyas, the satyr who is defeated by Apollo in a musical contest. As Alexander Nagel has noted in one of the catalogue essays for *Ask Your Body*, Marsyas’ death by flaying served as a prototype for Christ’s crucifixion. In Ovid’s telling of the myth the satyr asks the god, “Why do you peel me from myself?” – a question prefiguring Christ’s plea to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” Penny’s cognizance of these narratives deeply informs the work. He recalls a sudden revelation during the casting process: “As I peeled the rubber away, revealing the torso, I thought, ‘Oh, my god, this is like the flaying of Marsyas.’” In an interview with Robert Enright, Penny acknowledges that he is Apollo, and “.. I am also Marsyas. The hubris of Marsyas is, in turn, the hubris of the artist playing god.”

This iconic circularity is prevalent throughout the exhibition and is a constant theme in Penny’s work. Nagel has described this work as a

OPPOSITE AND OPENING IMAGE: Evan Penny, *Self Portrait after Géricault’s Fragments Anatomiques*, 2017, pigmented silicone, hair, fabric, resin, wood.



IN TERRA CORPUS

“flaying of realism,” as discovered in several of the pieces where the body parts anatomize the act of sculpture. Penny’s interest is in the body made vulnerable – his *Hanging Torso* is suspended from an industrial chain, its fleshy body suggestive of the hanging carcasses painted by Rembrandt, Soutine, or Mary Pratt. Based on a fragment of a colossal second-century Roman torso of a centaur, this work’s indebtedness to art history is typically disrupted by its artful materiality. What appears to have the weightiness of stone is, in fact, pigmented silicone mimicking marble. Its normative reading as antique sculpture is further ruptured by the uncanny appearance of chest hairs curling from what mimics the *skin* of the body. This play on perception, where the tactile body acts as mimesis, breaks down the Cartesian categories of subject and object in a malleable, even porous way. Penny likens this to the preverbal stage of language development, where self and other are indistinguishable: “The bodily response is primal, visceral and immediate, and it precedes the intellectual process.” As language is acquired the distinction of self from other is formalized through context or intellectualized.

PENNY’S work moves fluidly between these two stages, operating on both a primal experiential level and on a cultural level, as he articulates: “We move from the body to the representation of the body.” In his most representative work, *Homage to Holbein, Variation 2*, after Hans Holbein’s 1522 painting of Christ entombed, cultural appropriation has come full circle. Surprisingly, as the only explicit reference to Christian iconography, the sculpture’s uncanniness disrupts this religious reading. As Nagel writes: “Penny’s signature method, which is to send one medium’s effects into the conditions of another medium ...” is manifested here, where Holbein’s painterly elongation of Christ “... is retranslated into sculpture, a virtual trespass becomes absurdly factual.” Holbein’s heavily framed painting literally entombs the body of Christ. This strange embodiment is further extended into Penny’s minimalist box that holds his seemingly anamorphic and much elongated rendering of Christ. His work dislocates the viewers’ perception of what is real and what is artifice in its play on simulacrum, mirroring, and projection. The ginger-coloured head of hair, bodily hair, and bony fingers of the Christ figure extend into the viewer’s space to create uncanny association akin to touristic spectatorship of relics of sanctified bodies in churches.

OPPOSITE: Evan Penny, *Hanging Torso*, 2017, pigmented silicone, hair, steel.





**Evan Penny, *Homage to Holbein, Variation 2*, 2016,
pigmented silicone, hair, polychromed wood.**

This Lacanian mirror stage is a subversive subtext throughout *Ask Your Body* – from the Venetian mirror placed at the entrance of the church to the simulacra of bodies that are enlarged, elongated, aged, scarred, fragmented, anatomized, or dismembered. Several of these bodies are, in fact, self-portraits, including *Old Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Will (Not) Be* and *Young Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Was (Not)*. These earlier sculptural busts frame the exhibition as a form of self-interrogation by an artist unafraid of closely observing both psychic and physical aspects of his own human frailty through a simulated cycle of life. Penny comments on this aspect: “I find myself going back into all of my history, which really means



going back into myself and pulling out the threads that allow me to move forward.” Yet by using the language of the *vanitas* this series also allows us to reflect on our own mortality.

Evan Penny: *Ask Your Body* takes full advantage of the historic site of Chiesa di San Samuele to present a coherent and comprehensive exhibition. Placed in the white cube of the gallery the show would have lost some of its site-responsive integrity, but as a spatial intervention, within the church, the work is layered with a sympathetic and historical context. We are invited to engage directly in a dialogue with past and present and to contemplate the larger questions of what it means to be human. I consider this one of the best shows of the 2017 Venice Biennale.

All photographs by permission of Evan Penny, unless otherwise stated.

References are from the exhibition *Evan Penny: Ask Your Body* (2017); Michael Short's essay "Ask Your Body: An Invitation"; Alexander Nagel's essay "Why Do You Peel Me from Myself?"; and Robert Enright's interview with Evan Penny, "Close Encounters of a Corporeal Kind." The author would like to thank Evan Penny and the TrépanierBaer Gallery, Calgary. Special thanks to Sarindar Dhaliwal, Jocelyn Purdie, Gord McCrae, and Randy Koroluk for sharing the Venice Biennale with me.

This review is in memory of Dr Allison Sherman, a brilliant and much-loved art historian, professor, and coordinator of Queen's University's Venice Summer School. She is fondly remembered for her sage advice to students to "hug a column" whenever the opportunity arises.

Queen's Venice Summer School information is available at: www.queensu.ca/art/art-history/venice-summer-school.

ANNE KOVAL is a curator, art writer, art historian, and poet. She writes on nineteenth-century to contemporary art. Her recent publications include essays in *More Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women* (2016) and *Poetry in Painting: The Lyrical Voice of Pre-Raphaelite Paintings* (2017). Her poetry has been published in *Queen's Quarterly* and *Ekphrasis* journals. She was commissioned to write a series of ekphrastic poems for *The Radcliffe Line and Other Geographies: Sarindar Dhaliwal* (curated by Marcie Bronson at Brock University's Rodman Hall Art Centre in 2018). She is currently working on a biography of Mary Pratt and is a professor of art history at Mount Allison University.

FOLLOWING PAGES:
Evan Penny, *Marsyas*
2017

pigmented silicone, hair, aluminum



Installation of *Young Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Was (Not)*, *Hanging Torso*, *Old Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Will (Not) Be*. Photograph by the artist.



