



Sofie Muller  
*shadowside*

## Nietzsche vs Nurture

*There is more wisdom in your body  
than in your deepest philosophy.* – Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche's notion that wisdom resides in the body is augmented in Louise Bourgeois' statement "I am not what I am, I am what I do with my hands..." Her deceptively simple proposition suggests that identity, perhaps even soul, may in fact be located within range of the fingertips. The dualistic separation between mind and body, between conception and touch is a flawed notion that leaves no room for the multiple leaps of faith vital to a life of making.

Film footage of Louise Bourgeois in her studio reveals her touching materials, both unfinished and completed works, measuring them with her hands, knowing them with her touch. Such sensate engagement with material doesn't come at the expense of conception, rather it informs and guides it. Without materialisation it remains largely inconsequential.

Being with Sofie Muller in her Ghent studio offers a profoundly similar experience. Part laboratory, part curiosity cabinet, Muller's habitat folds a long regime of making with a life-long dedication to collecting an idiosyncratic range of museological objects. Her 18<sup>th</sup> century carriage house remains faithful in spirit and intent to its much earlier inhabitant, neo-Gothic architect, Jean Baptiste de Bethune – a pioneer of neo-Gothic architecture in Belgium and co-founder of the Saint-Lucas Art Academies in Belgium. It is clearly a site steeped in conception and shaping. The house is a reservoir of ideas and the tools to make them manifest. Especially in these "shelter in-place" times it has become even more of a sanctuary – a haven of reflection and shadow.





This coercion of material is everywhere in the house. The treads on the curved stairway that connects the major levels is shaped with use, the balustrade oiled and polished by touch. The walls on the landing have been co-opted into seemingly casual installations, with no sense whatsoever that this is pretending to be a de-facto gallery space. Rather Muller's family of figures belong there as much as she. Everyone seems to get along well.

For those of us who have grown up in the milder climates of the South Pacific, where architecture often touches the ground more lightly and most structures are oriented so as to face out to the land, I have long been fascinated by the inward focus of so much of northern European architecture. It is easy to draw speculative conclusions about the reasons for and implications of that long history of turning in. Between regular aggressions, protection from climate and other forces, it is perhaps not unexpected. The question is whether it does in fact drive a more 'interior life' – might being forced indoors offer greater opportunities to contemplate the nature of existence? Or is it more simply about shelter and privacy?

In the space and latitude of Australasia, it can feel that nature might overwhelm everything. Heat and light, except in the very peak of summer, draws us outdoors, teasing us with the frivolity of recreation and pleasure. Certainly more than Australia, New Zealand does have its own imported neo-gothic tendencies, impulses that unexpectedly suited its more brooding, shadowy landscape, something that has gone on to form a climatic backdrop for writing, cinema and indeed painting. New Zealand's prevailing sensibility can be simplistically summed up as more Jane Campion's *The Piano* than Baz Lurhman's *Australia*. A kind of barometric determinism does seem to be oddly plausible but whatever the way that the landscape and climate helps shape our psychology, there is a history of image making in Europe that Sofie Muller couldn't avoid, even if she'd wanted to.



Of course, in the end it is futile to make such binary distinctions. Nietzsche's own dictum reinforces Louise Bourgeois' that wisdom and philosophy is to be found in the body, in the atavistic memory that the ceremony of making and re-making encourages. Any artist that suggests otherwise is fooling both you and themselves.

Sandro Botticelli, (1445–1510)  
*Saint Francis of Assisi with Angels*  
 (detail)  
 1475–80  
 tempera and oil on wood  
 49.5 x 31.8 cm  
 The National Gallery, London

*Hand In Alabaster*  
 With Red Crystal, 2020  
 alabaster  
 30 x 20 x 15 cm





*The hand is the visible part of the brain. – Immanuel Kant*

Muller's sculptures of hands feel emblematic – foundational. When we claim to know something intimately, we often say we know it like the back of our hand. The terrain formed by veins and knuckles, by skin and nails is unquestionably the part of the body that we sight most often. It may be that we recognize this topography more than we do our own faces, whose coordinates after all, can only be found reversed in a mirror. Hands are laden with symbolism and responsibility. From depictions of stigmata to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel's 'hand of god', art history is loaded with images of hands – in prayer, at work, cradling, directing, striking, placating, beseeching, nailed to a cross. Thomas, overcome with doubt reaches out his hand to touch Christ's wound and as Dave Hickey pointed out so potently in his *The Invisible Dragon*, Mapplethorpe's infamous fisting image is as much about the disappearance of the hand as it is its new location. The sheer horror of the idea that under some religious regimes, hands may be cut off for theft, demonstrates the most repellent punishment of not merely body but of soul.

In more recent times Guillermo del Toro memorably placed the Pale Man's eyes within the palms of his hands in his 2006 film *Pans Labyrinth*. This conflation between the mechanisms of touch and sight further collapsing Descartes's dualism. Whatever your position on mind-body dualism, unquestionably hands signify a lot.

Sofie Muller's hands then illicit the most visceral awareness in us. No part of the body so completely informs our understanding of touch, of feel – expresses the utter necessity of contact.

previous page.

*Hand 2*, 2019

alabaster

17 x 29 x 19 cm

*Hand 1*, 2019

alabaster

17 x 37 x 18 cm

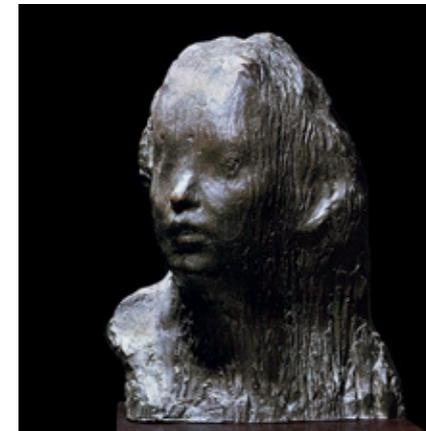




*AL/LXXXVIII/20*, 2020  
alabaster  
36 x 30 cm

Medardo Rosso  
*Ecce Puer*, 1906  
bronze  
50 x 32.5 x 38.5 cm  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Each work simultaneously enhances and chastens the subject's symbolic beauty by exposing their complexity and vulnerability. In most all, contaminants invade the stone, breaching the deeper substrates of the form. These crystalline intruders seem to signal decay but also a more existential metamorphosis. We become hyper-aware of their sensitivity, empathising with their physical corruption but they also serve as prescient signifiers of the cyclical progress that is beyond our grasp and our control.



The manner in which Muller's forms remain partially imprisoned by the alabaster reminds one of Medardo Rosso whose heads are forever captive of the larger mass of material. This communion between the form and its original material DNA seems to suggest that our mineral life is always at hand. We may escape it – but only for a time. If animation is only temporary then we need to find a way to wrestle less with its inevitability, be somehow accepting of this fugitive state and deal more with the quality of our existence.

*I usually solve problems by letting them devour me. – Franz Kafka*



Collectively the heads in this exhibition manage to entwine multiple threads of Art History. The alabaster Muller selects, with its alluring translucency, was used in ancient Egyptian, Greek and Cycladic sculpture and centuries later in the lowlands of the Netherlands and Belgium. But as much as these finely sculpted forms and their kindred materiality draw connections to those more distant histories, her sculptures are invested with a quiet, yet forceful contemporaneity. The two sculptures of merging heads, the first a mother and child, the second two lovers perhaps, put one in mind of Louise Bourgeois and Bruce Naumann. Both these sculptors were very much aware that the head exists as the most prized vessel, the receptacle of our intellectual, emotional and psychological trappings. Each made works of con-joined figures, Siamese amalgams that evoke powerful feelings, not simply of love and intimacy, but conflate passion and danger, eroticism and violence in their desperate fusion.



previous page.  
AL/LXXXII/20, 2020  
alabaster  
27 x 36 x 4 cm

Louise Bourgeois  
TÊTE V, 2004  
fabric and stainless steel  
22.9 x 27.9 x 20.3 cm  
Private collection

AL/LXVI/18, 2018  
alabaster  
36 x 30 x 32 cm



*They were so close to each other that they preferred death to separation.*  
– Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

*A kiss is the beginning  
of cannibalism.* – Georges Bataille



*AL/LXXII/18*, 2018  
alabaster  
44 x 36 x 25 cm

Bruce Nauman  
*Julie head/Julie head*, 1990  
wax on wood base  
31.1 x 48.3 x 29.2 cm  
Private collection

Both Bourgeois' and Nauman's use of lesser materials, felted wool and PVC for example necessarily establishes a different tone for the sculptures, a more determined sense of degradation, primitivism and otherness. And yet Muller's folding of high art materiality with a neo-gothic ambience gives the works an almost Kafkaesque absurdity that is haunting and timeless. Muller's figures feel both enduring yet mortal, their demise brought about by a psychic disturbance in the form of a crystalline intrusion.

Kafka's statement that the "meaning in life is that it stops" goes in many ways to the heart of Muller's works. Each sculpture, every drawing somehow acknowledges the temporary bargain we've made – one most choose to ignore or actively run from – but precious few of us embrace.





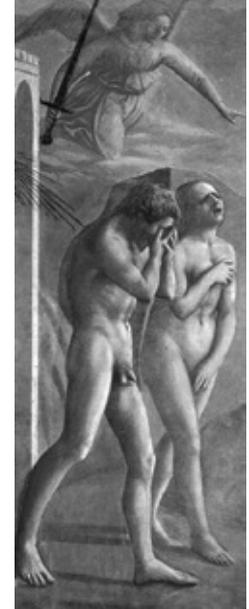
*Hanging Portrait*  
AL/LXXX/19, 2019  
alabaster and marble  
35 x 25 x 27 cm

AL/LXXVII/19, 2019  
alabaster  
33 x 31 x 27 cm





If the sculptures have a dignity and gravity, not least because of their material density, then it is Muller's drawings where we witness a more fragile description of the trials and tribulations of human condition. Rendered with smoke and blood, these drawings present the figure with a deep sense of attachment and melancholy. Some way from the idealised notion of the human figure, Muller's figures feel closer to Durer or Masaccio, even Bosch – artists whose figures were shaped by significant anxiety and turmoil, the kind brought on by apocalypse, expulsions and a pronounced fear of hell.



Tommaso Cassai Masaccio  
*The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1425-1427  
 tempera and oil on wood  
 100.96 x 138.43 cm  
 Church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence

*Untitled*, 2020  
 aquarel on alabaster  
 29 x 21 x 0.5 cm

*Men must live and create. Live to the point of tears. – Albert Camus*





Bent, grasping and incomplete Muller's figures belong more to tragedy than to comedy and yet there is something oddly sympathetic and tender in her examination of their physical and psychological condition. Though they share something of the psychological scrutiny apparent in the watercolours of Joseph Beuys for example, or perhaps the uneasy conflation of sex and death narratives implied in Marlene Dumas's gouaches, they don't have Beuys's unexpectedly elegant attenuation of form, nor Dumas' near comic facial distortions. It may be that Muller's ambitions with the drawings, their rendering and presentation on an alabaster slab insinuates an atmosphere of emotional autopsy. In this way I am reminded of Leonardo da Vinci's fascination with anatomical drawings made of dead bodies. And whilst da Vinci's coded observations of the human form were undoubtedly anatomically accurate, Muller's own probing of the human body in both her drawings and her sculpture demonstrates a profound commitment to the junction of empiricism and existentialism but less to anatomical fidelity.

previous page.  
*Untitled*, 2020  
 aquarel on alabaster  
 29 x 21 x 0.5 cm

*Untitled*, 2019  
 aquarel on alabaster  
 29 x 21 x 0.5 cm

Joseph Beuys  
*Zwei Frauen*, 1955  
 pencil, watercolour,  
 gouache and iron  
 chloride on paper  
 21 x 29.5 cm  
 Private collection



Muller's understanding of the human condition is without question one that is rooted in the judgement and comprehension of the human form and yet these works deliver a poignancy and metaphorical weight that transcends their depiction and their material, instead offering the viewer an other-worldly experience that is rooted in the worldly.

Much as hers and Jean Baptiste de Bethune's interior sanctuary remains faithful to shared aspirations – to the spirit of invention and discovery, one can sense in all Muller's works a fundamental acknowledgement of our flaws and our indignities and with that an acceptance of our shadow side. Jung said in 1938, "everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is." It is from this understanding that Sofie Muller begins.

– Andrew Jensen



Marlene Dumas  
*Dorothy D-Lite*, 1999  
 lithograph in colours  
 with bronze powder on Arches paper  
 122,2 x 68 cm  
 Edition 30/50  
 Private collection

*Untitled*, 2020  
 aquarel on alabaster  
 29 x 21 x 0.5 cm

following page.  
*Untitled*, 2020  
 aquarel on alabaster  
 29 x 21 x 0.5 cm





*Tears are the silent language of grief. – Voltaire*



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ISBN 978-0-9925137-4-0

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Text: Andrew Jensen

Design: Andrew Jensen & Tane Andrews

p.1 *Untitled*, 2020 aquarel on alabaster 29 x 21 x 0.5 cm

p.3/4/20 Image by German Bourgeat

p.13 Museo Medardo Rosso, Barzio, Italy

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We would like to thank our colleagues at Geukens De Vil for introducing us to Sofie Muller and her wonderful work.