

## Fantasy Body

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The phenomenal feminist show *Fantasy Body* at Projet Pangée offered artworks in a range of materials that were often erotic and playful. In its beautiful new space on Avenue des Pins, a light-filled, multi-room gallery with high windows, pink walls and fireplaces, the colourful works glowed and shimmered. *Fantasy Body* brought together sixteen artworks by three female Brooklyn-based artists: Danielle Orchard, Rose Nestler, and GaHee Park. The paintings, drawings and sculptures fit brilliantly together, not only because the majority of the pieces share a vibrant colour scheme (pinks, purples, oranges, reds and blues), but also because most of the works invite interpretations that consider female pleasure, desire and agency in close proximity to loneliness and isolation. These intersecting themes have new resonance, of course, in the context of pandemic life.

There are repeated details in the different works of these artists as well, which attest to the curators' careful selection of pieces that flow seamlessly and deliciously together in and through the various rooms. Cherries appear in works by both Park and Orchard, and nipples abound in the works of all three artists. This focus on female nipples could well be interpreted as a thumbing-of-the-nose at Instagram's draconian censorship of that particular body part. The majority of Orchard's colourful paintings portray solitary female figures with ambiguous facial expressions smoking near windows, and Park's small-scale erotic paintings are a joy to look at closely. The sensuous colours draw our eye, and the details invite us to linger: a dragonfly on a slice of orange; a ruby-red cherry lying on a yellow tablecloth; or the shimmering purple liquid in a wine glass. Looking at these paintings is like slowly consuming a lover's body with our eyes, taking in every line, every bruise.

The sculptures and wall hangings by Nestler are seductive objects that draw the viewer towards them through their pliant materiality. Her soft sculptures made of purple velvet, for example, are simultaneously humorous and beguiling, and they invite haptic visuality: the desire to look as well as touch.<sup>1</sup> The light purple sculptural wall hanging entitled *Woman with a Book (After Léger)* is worthy of special note because of its sophisticated play with both materiality and art history, appropriating Fernand Léger's 1923 painting. Nestler's work is a lot more fun than Léger's in its playful materiality, however, and it suggests the solitary pleasures of reading, fashion and self-touch. The headless figure wears a ruffled collar and has a book clutched under their left arm; the book is pierced by a conical breast with a pointed, neon orange nipple. Nestler's wall hanging is a feminist intervention into a canonical male modernist's work, but the inclusion of three long-stemmed flowers made of black leather adds a touch of melancholy. It is a work that combines pleasure and sadness, desire and loss.



Nestler's sculpture *It's Ruff Out There* (2020) was positioned in the centre of one of the rooms and placed directly on the floor, so that viewers could gaze at it in the round. The title suggests that Nestler is once again channelling the ruffled collar seen in many Dutch Golden Age portraits, but it could also refer to the challenges of living through a pandemic. On the ground, protruding from purple velvet folds, are two flattened purple breasts with orange nipples that have curlicues on the tips, surely an allusion to nipple hairs. These fragments of the sexualized body, isolated in space, flow with the curators' vision of eroticism in isolation. Produced in 2020, this work is in direct dialogue with the consequences of the pandemic, including quarantine, lockdowns and loneliness.



In the same room, Park's oil on linen painting, *Caterpillar on a Table* (2020), depicts what might be a male chest close to the picture plane; the figure is cropped just above their feminine bottom lip, and painted lines suggest dramatic abdominal muscles. A black-haired woman with striking blue eyes peeks over the figure's left shoulder; she pinches the central figure's pink nipple between her fingers, which are capped with pointy white, talon-like nails. Unlike the other artworks in the show, Park's paintings depict intra-personal desire and pleasure. Her figures are not alone, although they are isolated from the rest of the world, a point that Park underscores by framing her subjects tightly within the pictorial space. Female sexual agency is playfully enacted in Park's images, and there is a mixing of gendered visual cues that destabilizes gender categories. Many of her figures could be described as androgynous or nonbinary, thus making space for subject positions beyond cis-female and cis-male.

Orchard's oil on linen painting *Cantaloup* (2020) depicts a femme subject who wears a translucent blue corset and sits near a window smoking. Her sculptural body and large nose are reminiscent of Picasso's neo-classical depictions of women from the 1920s, although her waist is rendered tiny by the corset, an item of clothing that invites us to interpret the painting in terms of the performativity of gender (the corset as a symbol of femininity), and as a result, the subject can be read as a cis-woman or a trans-woman. Orchard's smoker is solitary, possibly sad or bored, and the work is an empathetic, perhaps self-reflexive depiction of the day-to-day life of women living alone in quarantine and using addictive substances as a strategy for coping with anxiety and depression.

In *Fantasy Body*, the curators did a brilliant job of interpellating straight, queer and bisexual viewers by including erotic images that depict subjects who are sexually alluring but also ambiguously sexed. Feminist artists have been exploring female sexuality and desire since the 1960s, but these recent artworks by Nestler, Orchard and Park move away from straight, white, cis-female desire in order to make room for a range of sexualities, desires and fantasies. *Fantasy Body* was a beautiful, joyful, and at times, melancholic exhibition that spoke to issues of sexuality in the age of COVID-19.

1. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 151.

Julia Skelly teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. Her publications include *Wasted Looks: Addiction and British Visual Culture, 1751-1919* (2014), *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (2017), and the edited collection *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1600-2010* (2014). Skelly's next book, *Skin Crafts: Affect, Violence and Materiality in Global Contemporary Art*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury, and she is currently co-editing a volume on politics and power for Bloomsbury's *Encyclopedia of World Textiles* (forthcoming 2023).