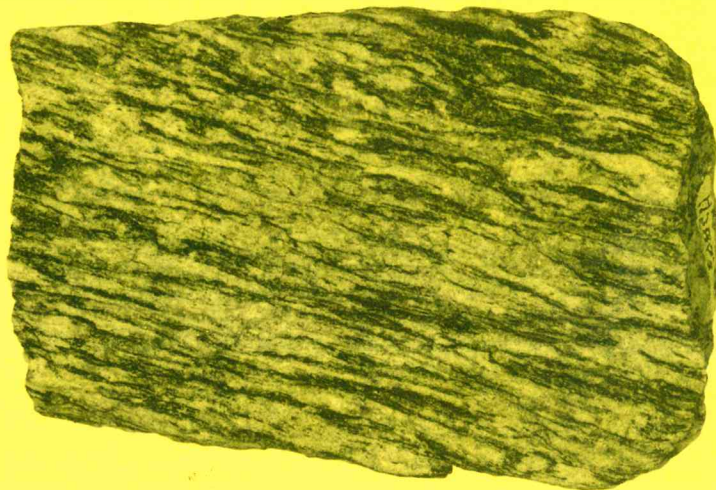


ART PAPERS



Borders, Barriers



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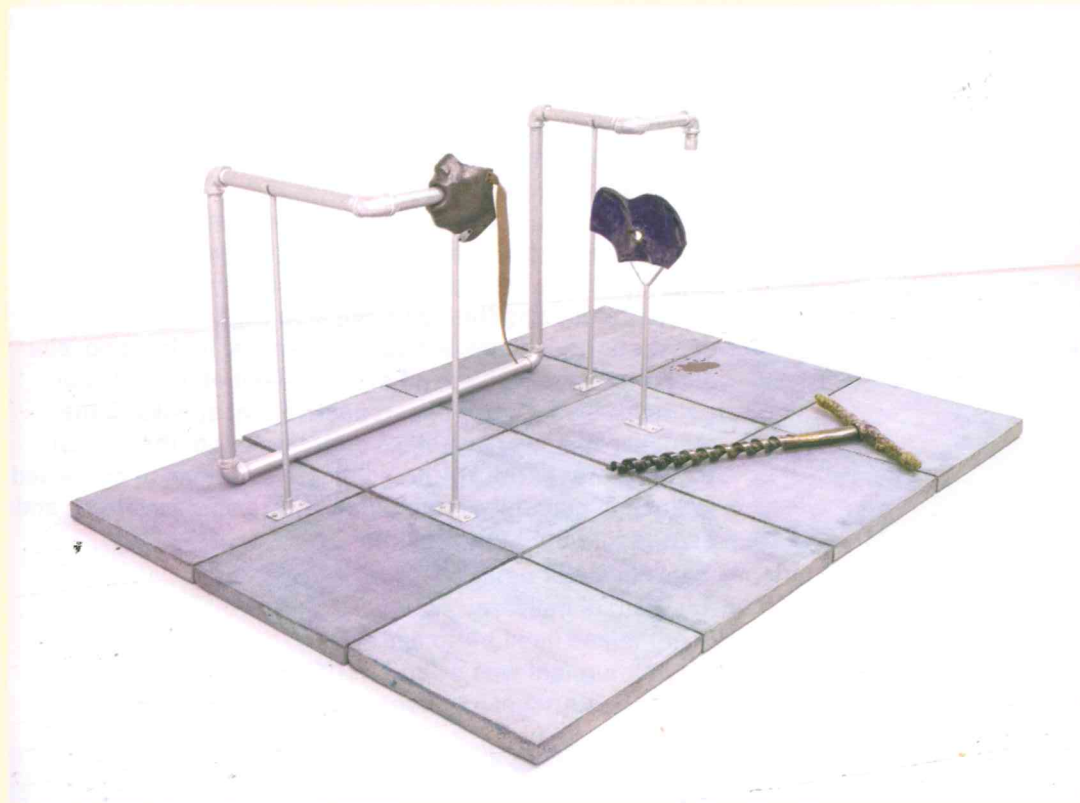
Failure Detection Julia Phillips

Review
Re'al Christian

April 15 –
September 3, 2018

Julia Phillips' work could be called a process of addition by subtraction. Her delicately assembled ceramic sculptures trace, rather than recreate, parts of the human form, leaving viewers to fill in the missing pieces. From disconnected torsos, pelvises, orifices, hands, and feet, she provides just enough information to imagine a figure that is wholly realized. Understated and visually arresting, her figures capture the delicacy of the human form through the soft manipulation of materials by mimicking the organic appearance of

flesh, leather, and viscera. In a manner that is morbid but familiar, these hybridized figures are often subjected to invasive acts, including bondage and sterilization. Working with fragmentary parts, Phillips forces us to focus on the vulnerable nature of her subjects, but also on the ways the figure can be dehumanized or humanized in these processes. Her work speaks to our society's media-fed desire to see brutal acts as means of reckoning with reality, as a desire that is disproportionately imposed upon gendered and racialized bodies. Phillips meditates upon this phenomenon in an extremely thought-provoking way: she transforms the human body into a machine, a series of moving parts



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that can be broken down as easily as they can be put back together. Her recent exhibition, *Julia Phillips: Failure Detection* (April 15 – September 3, 2018) at MoMA PS1, brought together a mix of newly commissioned and existing work in the artist's first museum solo.

Much of her work considers violence not simply as transgressive but also intimate—not in a romantic or even sexual sense, but as something deeply interpersonal. Media interpretations of violent acts could be perceived as intimate and often decontextualized scenes for mass consumption. Phillips' work cleverly functions this way, with figures and apparatus apparently existing in a series of discrete scenes or vignettes that are part of a larger narrative. The entry point to the exhibition featured *Drainer* (2018), Phillips' recent sculpture of a partially formed ceramic torso suspended by cable above a concrete platform incorporating a stainless steel drain. It recalled a horror movie set or, perhaps less dramatically, a butcher shop. The "flesh" of the figure is muddied and gray, while the interior glaze is flecked with crimson and violet, like the dismembered form of a rotting carcass.

The nearby *Operator II* (2018) added another layer. Combining four smaller ceramic sculptures—*Opener*, *Destabilizer*, *Distancer*, and *[R]Ejecter*—on a surgical trolley, *Operator II* features casts of the artist's body used to create a series of ominous medical devices.¹ She uses herself as a subject, alluding to a dark, often overwritten history of medical experimentation on women and ethnic minorities for the advancement of science. Given Phillips' notorious reluctance to have her picture taken, her sculptures become all the more powerful in their intimacy and self-referential nature. By blurring the practices of medicine and vivisection, she reflects on the victims who were seen as necessary casualties in the pursuit of knowledge. Her work feels especially prescient now, amid debates over a slew of statues dedicated to men who perpetrated violence on people of African descent, as well as removal of the Dr. J. Marion Sims statue from Central Park earlier this year.

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Julia Phillips, *Failure Detection*, installation view, 2018 [photo: Pablo Enriquez; courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1, New York]

¹ "Julia Phillips." 10th Berlin Biennale. berlinbiennale.de/artists/j/julia-phillips

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Julia Phillips, *Failure Detection*, installation view, 2018 [photo: Pablo Enriquez; courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1, New York]

Phillips' look at the intersections of race and gender complicates the boundaries between the powerful and the powerless, the liberated and the subjugated, the torturer and the tortured. *Burdened* (2018) was among the new works featured in the show. The one-minute video shows the torso of a backlit feminine figure, arms uplifted, dancing violently as if trying to escape invisible chains. Intercuts reveal a growing mound of gray clay being thrown together. The scene seems arbitrary and futile. Phillips presents the subjugated figure in a way that immediately raises questions about consent, and about those who are (or are not) granted the right to give it. In *Fixator #2* (2017) Phillips focuses her gaze on black men. Specifically she examines representations of black masculinity, how our culture perceives it as a threat, and attempts to neutralize it. *Fixator #2* consists of an onyx-colored lower abdomen and ceramic fixtures made to look like leather straps

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and buckles. The figure hangs from a metal structure that emphasizes its lack of extremities, at once completing the figure, but also underscoring its deficiency. Implied but truncated, the work's missing genitalia symbolize the psychological emasculation black men can face and highlight our culture's fixation on the link between gender and power, power and potency.

In her work, Phillips takes a subversive look at violence from the perspective of the person who inflicts it. She objectifies her figures to elicit both sympathy and desire, fetishizing their pain but also triggering powerful questions of consent and consciousness. In doing so, she shows how the "failure" of systems—whether bodily or political—is a matter of perspective that speaks to the influence of power and class on treatment of the human form. Her "apparati" offer indelicate solutions to perceived failures in humanity, reminding viewers of the systems and abuses that bred this condition.

PALERMO
Multiple Venues

Manifesta 12

Review
Teresa Retzer

June 16 –
November 4, 2018

Only the early birds of the art world were able to secure a spot in the Oratorio di San Lorenzo to see Manifesta 12 Palermo's opening performance, *i'm happy to own my implicit biases (malo mrkva, malo batina)* by Nora Turato. The warm air in the oratorium, which gave up its architectural intimacy in order to host the crowd of VIPs, heated up further around the chattering audience inside. Turato's nagging voice suddenly broke in: "You don't call back—I call again, you don't call back, I call again," jolting the waiting audience to attention.

The murmurs of the audience subsided abruptly, and from that moment on Turato proceeded to speak, sing, preach, and shout for about half an hour while moving through the crowd, and climbing along the iron cage that was placed in the middle of the chapel. The script—a composed, rhythmic mixture of platitudes, useless wisdoms, and sharp observations on the contemporary role of women—was secondary to her shimmering presence. Her excessive facial expressions, body gestures, and extravagant movements, combined with her stature—she was by far the tallest person in the room—worked in contrast to the content of her speech. She looked around greedily in search of eyes she could stare into and held eye contact with viewers for as long as 30 seconds. The intensity of her gaze and the perplexity of the text clearly pushed some in the crowd out of their comfort zone. Others even left. She continued, mixing sense with nonsense: "Reading famous quotes about world power does actually increase your world power." Such brief moments of fragmented legibility came as a relief.

Whereas her floral dress might have been borrowed from an Italian mamma, her six-inch heels were riddled with sharp spikes that could slice anyone who came too close. This grotesque outfit sparked considerations of the contradictory expectations women face in society. Women are expected to balance their way of dressing as much as their *modus vivendi*: a woman has to be successful but not bitter, strong but not violent, caring but not selfless, sexy and elegant but not vulgar. Turato represents a rowdy housewife who refuses to get in line with the conventional. She also represents the *donas de fuera*—the women from the outside—who were subjected to persecution in Sicily by the Spanish