

Doctrine of Signatures





NICKI CHERRY

Doctrine of Signatures

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NARS Foundation

Brooklyn, NY

Tung Chau *Pain Beyond Metaphor*

2–7

Exhibition Images

8–35

Dominika Tylcz *Among living things: on boundless empathy in Nicki Cherry's work*

36–47

Pain Beyond Metaphor

TUNG CHAU

Growing up in China, I was taught folk medicine lessons to eat food that resembles the organ one wants to enhance. I was coaxed into eating many walnuts, pig kidneys, and fish bellies that way. Ingesting the world as such gave new meaning to eating; it became visual, purpose-driven, prescriptive. At the same time, it felt like my innards are running around in the wild. The ubiquity of similitude-based thinking across many cultures garnered the attention of Michel Foucault. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault observes that up to the end of the sixteenth century, people perceived the world as full of things that look alike, and that this likeness carries with it instructions. When the appearance of a plant indicates what it can be used to heal—like how aconite, resembling an eye, is good for the eyes—or when lines in the palm contain one's destiny, the world can be read like a user manual.¹ Foucault named these markers of similitude “signatures.”

Taking its name from Foucault, Nicki Cherry’s new show at NARS Foundation, like signatures, probes the link between inner state and outward manifestation, especially where it concerns health. In *Doctrine of Signatures*, visitors walk into a clinical setting with privacy curtains, IV bags, and tubes. Chains and grow lights emphasize the control and domestication aspects of hospitalization. The beast they are trying to tame seems comical at first, as a host of tulips appears where danger is expected. Throwing us for a loop, the tulips are a pause, a turn of phrase, like a proverb that paints a picture of some wisdom. It is a little true, a little absurd, but above all, it defers the immediacy of affliction so that something else may enter.

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 26-27.

What occurs in this deferred sick time is a reorientation: what is “in here” and what is “out there,” what is “me” and what is “others.” The patient appears in fragments. Arm, legs, pelvis—made earthy by their chthonic material and palette—wear a tired look of something that sags and trudges. Two pet-like figures, *The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals* (2023) and *Keye* (2023), have breast-like pendants that drag down their otherwise erect posture. Even an arm that seems to hover magically in *The sensation of touch is a refusal* (2023) is bearing down on a grab bar with all the weight of its invisible torso. Emphasis on parts of the lower body—the sciatic, knees, toes—recalls a Bataillean fascination with base matter. In “The Big Toe,” Surrealist Georges Bataille linked the digit to the homo erectus’ horror at losing their uprightness.² Here, lumpy and twisted feet defamiliarize the act of standing, balancing, and walking.

The sinking body, as it loses its axis and center, begins to form new ties with other elements in the room as the flesh opens up into pouches, holes, hollows. In *I keep my secrets from everyone, even from myself* (2023), a milky white liquid drains from the holes and is cathetered to an external circulation system. The whole inner mass is gouged out, turning the legs into a vessel, like the foot- or leg-shaped wares from Iran that Cherry referenced in an earlier body of work. In this and other sculptures, hollows are filled with soil, plants, and rocks. What does it mean to fill a space so private—so much so that it cannot be felt, smelled, or tasted by anyone else—with things of the world? What does it mean to open up this space?

2. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20-21.

In our conversation, Cherry hinted at the link between negative space and pain. “Pain carves out a space within you,” they said, which led me to think of pain as queering the ideas of self, privacy, and our conflation of the two. If pain were a signature left by the ailing body, it would be a confusing one. For in pain, we lose control over what we signal—pain alters our mood, habit, personality—and we fail to signal in full whatever we are going through since no one can feel our pain. We are isolated from others and ourselves. Making us even less at home is the fact that the afflicted body can sense and react before we are aware. It knows to ready a space within us for the next attack, and then once that passes, to make room for the memory of it. I imagine the limbs in this show to possess that involuntary knowledge, perhaps even adapting their shapes to it. The self is further eroded by the breach of privacy in hospital stays. In *Doctrine*, even medical curtains that seek to restore some sense of privacy are stripped of their sterile, opaque look. *Boundary* (2023), a silk curtain printed with a collage of the artist’s acne made to look like abstract camo patterns, fails to hide anything.

The tulips and limbs are like metaphors, their viscerality capped by a calm, quiet, literary sensibility—a quality most evident in the works’ titles. They point, as metaphors do, to the real thing (pain) while holding it at arm’s length, deferring it. Yet they are more than metaphors. The works presented here defy linear logic between any two things: the “symptoms” they bear do not simply reflect what is internal, buried, secret, but reaches out to join the multitude

of matter, living or dead, in the space. The certainty of diagnostic tests—"my bloodwork shows an abnormal count of X, therefore I am sick with Y"—gives way to uncertain reckonings, as in the case with autoimmune and chronic illnesses where physicians must sit with the ambiguity and promiscuity of signs from the sick body.³ More than a metaphor for pain, Cherry returns pain to the web of signatures in search of new contexts.



The doctrine of signatures betrays two conflicting impulses: one is the will to control, silo, sort, and order things; the other is the will to preserve the complex interconnectivity of things. With their strong associative power, "signatures" string together different species and scales, gliding smoothly and with great strides between two things (the aconite and the eye), or, within the same thing, between the part and the whole (the palm line and one's life story). And it is not always clear whether we are using its power for care or control.

Cherry's biomes renounce control by decentering the human. In this reoriented world, decay is tender, but life is aggressive. In fact, the two do not exist as opposites but in a loop, nested within each other. The loudest bit of life in *Doctrine* is the force-bloomed tulip. With all their flaming colors and excess vitality, they are an enduring motif in Cherry's work. Rather than a token of delicacy or health, the flowers induce fear of uncontrollable growths like tumors or anxiety,

something too alive. Cherry's fascination with tulips goes back to a 1494 Hieronymus Bosch painting, *Cutting the Stone*. In the painting, the fool Lubbert Das implores a doctor to excise from his head the stone of madness. Bosch, playing on the Dutch word *keye* which could mean both a bulb of stone and flower, replaces the stone with a tulip. Having absorbed the mess and gore of the open-head surgery, the flower blooms and dies inside a limp body. Now, we get to see it bloom and die in the gallery over the course of the show. Decay, in contrast, is muted and diverted. The two *Signature* (2023) pieces, cast in aluminum from the remains of a spine-shaped wax candle, crawl on the wall like silver caterpillars. The cast itself harkens to the insect's molting. Burdened bodies become gardens, holding the soil and milk that feed the tulips. Cherry shepherds the cycle of life and decay it as it passes from solid to gas, from liquid to metal, letting it live beyond any specific body.

Perpetually in metamorphosis, the objects in *Doctrine* slough, molt, and leak, laying plain the failure to stay in the same form, a condition Cherry refers to as abjection. Rina Arya sees the abject body as one that is in danger of having its boundary violated by a threat, one that can come from inside or outside. This trespass renders the body momentarily "leaky," shedding all kinds of nails, fluids, skin cells—pieces that are "both 'me', and 'not me'" which upset the stability of bodily boundaries and one's sense of self.⁴ In so doing, the artist returns the sick body to the world, an alchemy that aims not to cure but to build empathy.

3. Meghan O'Rourke, *The Invisible Kingdom: Reimagining Chronic Illness* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2022), 37.

4. Rina Arya, "The Fragmented Body as an Index of Abjection," in Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare ed., *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 108.





I keep my secrets from everyone, even from myself, 2023

42" x 45" x 33"

Fiberglass-reinforced gypsum cement, polystyrene, stoneware, paper pulp, concrete pigment, wax, latex tubing, IV bag, oil of milk, soil, tulips





12



13



14



15



The sensation of touch is a refusal, 2023

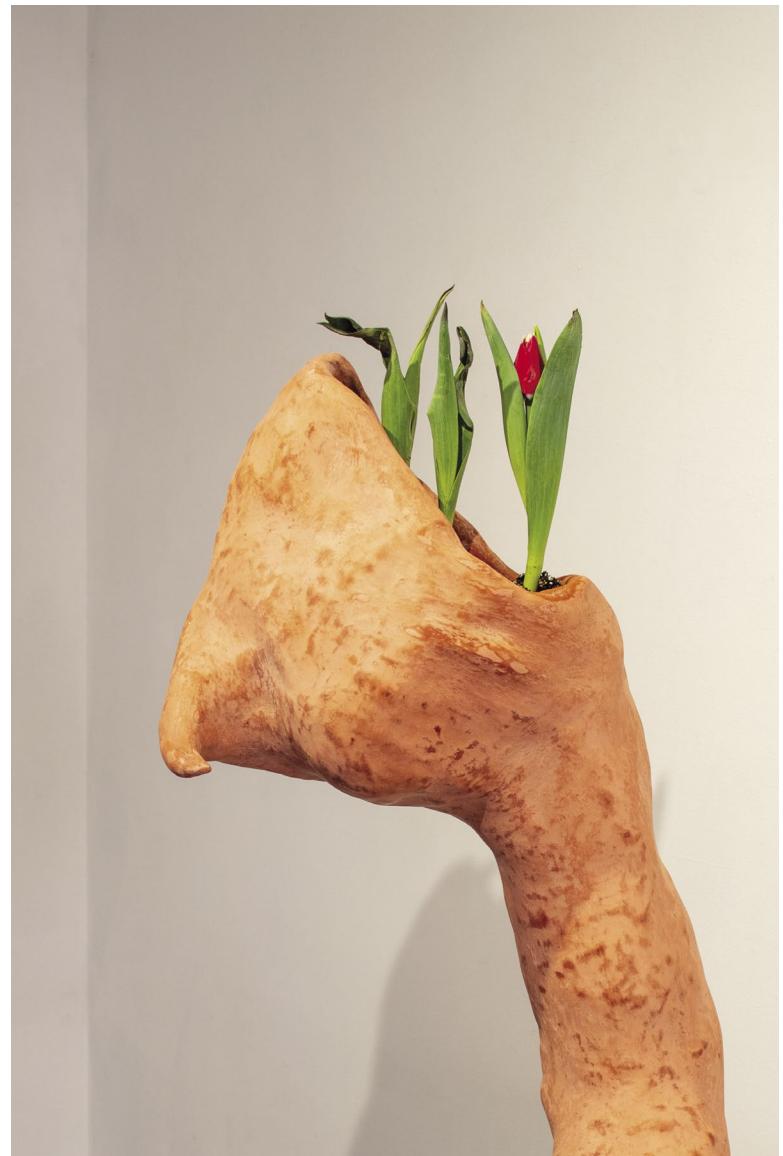
62" x 16" x 33"

Fiberglass-reinforced gypsum cement, polystyrene, concrete pigment, stainless steel grab bar, soil, tulips





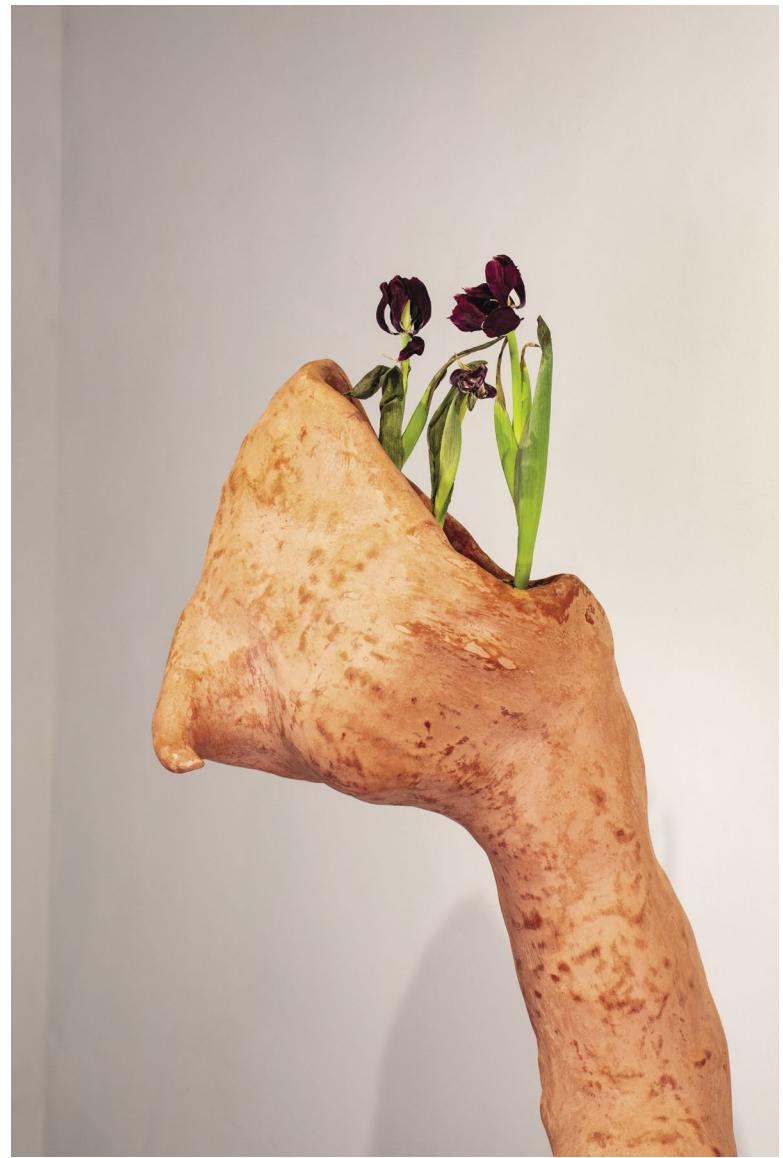
20



21



22



23



Keye, 2023

28" x 9" x 23"

Stoneware, paper pulp, wax, stainless steel chain, grow lamp, ocean-polished stones from the coast of Maine







The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals, 2023

28.5" x 8" x 22"

Stoneware, oil paint, linseed oil, stainless steel chain, grow lamp, soil, tulips





30



31



32



33

Signature: April 2022 Philadelphia, 2023

10.5" x 3.5" x 3.75"

Cast aluminum and metal bracket

Signature: October 2022 Chicago, 2023

13.5" x 4" x 3.25"

Cast aluminum and metal bracket



Among living things

On boundless empathy in
Nicki Cherry's work

DOMINIKA TYLCZ

Can vulnerability be a shared experience between plants and humans?

In Nicki Cherry's hybrid sculptures, flowers and estranged body parts inhabit the same affective register, within which their parallel existences intertwine and branch off. Seedlings wobble in their imperceptibly slow growth, petals burst out of the scaled buds, and the lumpy gypsum sculptures appear to be a result of a similarly ungainly development, one marred by a strenuous struggle with disease or perhaps inhibited by adverse circumstances. *Doctrine of Signatures* offers itself as an imperfect environment, deliberately calling attention to points of failure and inadequacy, as infinite factors, too minute for human mind to notice, fluctuate and never approach the optimal threshold. Amidst these unfavorable conditions, both tulips and the disfigured, fiberglass-reinforced, clay-covered body, which the artist describes as belonging to the same impossible being, strive for a moment of temporary equilibrium, ease, or rest.

In Cherry's work, vitality runs deep. It's a silent undercurrent that doesn't distinguish between organic and inorganic matter but animates all materials the artist works with: clay, gypsum, stones, fabric, aluminum, steel. Their fragmented, headless figures come into being as externalizations of embodied feelings of pain, anxiety or dysmorphic unease with which queer individuals too often navigate the world structured by gendered conventions. For these feelings take root deep in the body, they attach more easily to other sticky matter that partakes in the condition of vulnerability to harm, pain, distortion, pressure and recovery. In this embracement of the affective potential of simple things and forms, Cherry's work conjures a promise of

empathy: a possibility of feeling across bodies, mirrored and dispersed among sensitive—breakable—beings. In this artistic endeavor to untether compassion from the exclusivity of the human form, tulips play a central role through their arresting weakness and accelerated, therefore dramatic, life cycle.

Cherry's employment of tulips has been a consistent element in many of their sculptures. The living needs of the flowers necessitate the cavities of the sculptures to be filled with soil, and the gallery to be equipped with grow lamps sparsely hung above the works, bathing the works in their purple light although the body parts rendered in gypsum and ceramic remain impervious to their nurturing aura. While the flowers inoculate the sculptures with the rhythms and exigencies of organic life, most crucially, they open up symbolic interpretations. To follow the path suggested by the artist herself, what could the tulip be a signature of? If a signature is a physical sign of an unseen but profound relationship between humankind and the natural world, what kind of relationship would a tulip indicate? Its resemblance to the human body is not apparent, perhaps hidden under the eye-catching exterior or buried underground. One of the earliest spring flowers, the tulip today possesses mostly decorative and seasonal associations, but Cherry's thoughtful use of the perennial bulb points to the history beneath the surface of the benign sign in which tulips denote social aspirations, precarity of life, and most importantly here, psychic instability and detachment from the yoke of rational thought.

Historically, the symbolic potential of tulips was most explored by Dutch early modern artists, who placed these flowers in their carefully arranged still lives and allegories. Representing a nexus of economic and social relationships, tulips became a potent artistic symbol expressing nobility both in social status and in taste. Native to Central Asia, the flowers traveled to Turkey, where they had been cultivated and incorporated as an ornamental motif as well as a garden favorite since the 12th century. It was through the Ottoman Empire that tulips reached the Netherlands, where they quickly grew in popularity due to their vibrant colors. Bulbs of these flowers were avidly collected for their beauty and the very act of collecting became a signifier of refined taste, a method of self-fashioning in the dynamic social world of Netherlands during the 17th century, when it was undergoing a sociopolitical shift thanks to its burgeoning markets spanning across oceans.¹ The tulip trade catered to the needs of a growing circle of collectors, seeking to express their status and individuality with ever more extravagant varieties of the plant. This demand for more eye-catching blooms took advantage of viral mutations resulting in striped coloration and feathered petals, at the expense of the overall health of the bulb, leading to the intrinsic unpredictability of the market. The value of the coveted flower rose so high that in fact it stirred what is believed to be the first recorded speculation bubble, which burst in 1637 partially due to the arrival of the bubonic plague to the Dutch cities where the tulip markets

1. For more detailed accounts of how tulip collecting, among other collectibles, was a form of social expression see: Goldgar, Anne. *Tulipmania: Money, Honor, and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age*, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, Schama, Simon. 'Money unconfined: "I invest, he speculates, they gamble"' in *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, London: Collins, 1987, and Bass, Marisa Anne, Goldgar, Anne, Grootenboer, Hanneke, Swan, Claudia. *Conchophilia: Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, Princeton University Press 2021, for a study in the practices of connoisseurship and collecting during the period.

were held. The exorbitant prices the flowers fetched, contrasted with the ephemerality of the luxurious item, as well as the morbid reality of the deadly epidemic crushing the inflated market led to a flurry of satirical activity, which bound symbolically tulips with madness that allegedly drove people to spend fortunes on the shortlived status symbols.² Tulipmania, however, reveals something else about the tulip as a signature—its tight enmeshment with economic and social circumstances that render human life precarious and susceptible both to physical harm and mental turmoil. In the satirical allegories of the tulip craze, some paintings from the period point to the dangerously unguarded gap between the realm of unbound corporeality, often portrayed as a return to animality, and the erosion of the social system. In *Flora's Wagon of Fools* (c.1667) by Hendrik Gerritsz Pot (fig.1), a Roman goddess of vegetation sits atop a cart full of madmen, who have lost their senses purportedly to the tulip speculation. Tulip blossoms sprout from their heads as they still cling to the tools of trade and collecting: a bag filled with guilders or seedlings, scales, singular bulbs carefully counted on one's lap. The passengers undergo metamorphoses that move them away from the human form, while indulging not only in economically irrational behavior but also in other forms of consumption such as drinking. These cues of intemperance, transformation and departure from society imply abjection brought about by the tulip folly. The concept of abjection refers to a process of transgression of distinctive borders between subject and object, and the consequent human reactions aimed to

2. The history of tulip as a symbol is richer and older than the 17th century tulip trade. Its symbolic associations are thoroughly explored in Taylor, Paul. *Dutch flower painting, 1600-1720*, New Haven: Yale University Press; 1995.



1. Hendrick Gerritsz Pot, *Flora's Wagon of Fools*, 1637, oil on panel, 24" x 33", Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, Netherlands

safeguard it.³ The boundary breached by the collective tulip craze is a social one but it inescapably leads to corporeal repercussions, as it brings the individual closer to the realm of undifferentiated animacy, whereby flowers, animals and humans exist along the same continuum of organic life and shared sensibility. In the event of a single flower bulb costing a yearly livelihood, the social hierarchy becomes undone and the difference between plant life and human life is dangerously blurred both in the economic and ontological order.

3. Kristeva, Julia. 'Approaching Abjection' in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982; Arya, Rina. 'The fragmented body as an index of abjection' in *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, Manchester University Press 2016.

In Cherry's sculptures, the fragmented clay-color body is similarly infected with tulips, growing out of the wounds of the separated body parts. Their growth and wellbeing is predicated on the hospitality of the body-turned-vessel, which now has to endure moisture and the bulging root system. But the sculptures are not sealed containers so the seepage of water gradually discolors and blemishes the skin-surface. This intertwinement of the sculptures and plants might be a symbiosis of necessity but it places both actors in a space of empathetic, affective companionship. What deepens this attunement is the fact that none of the sculptures presents the body as a whole—the fragmentation relinquishes any notions of personhood or subjectivity. The body fragments are monstrous because they lack a face, the ultimate signature of individuality. On the other hand, tulips, singled out and placed in the spotlight, take on an anthropomorphic quality as they droop or reach forward towards the light.

What brings the flowers closer to the representations of the body in its affective power is their tropism, that is: their ability to react to external stimuli. These adaptive powers, indexes of environmental entanglements, are shared across all biological forms of life. This basic fact of cross-species vulnerability and interdependence is brought forth by Cherry's composite sculptures, which display moments of fragility, engendered by an unfulfilled need. I think about needs here in a way that doesn't enclose it within the limits of skin but rather as a dynamic event that emerges from an encounter between a living being and its milieu. Not confined to the internal rhythms of the body, need can be produced by cruelty, disease or systemic omission.

In this, I follow Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995), a French philosopher and physician, who theorized need as the primary individuating factor in living beings, stating that a “need is that which divides the organism from its environment without setting it completely free.”⁴ For Canguilhem, need is different from a biological necessity because it attaches an organism to its ecological context while creating an awareness of individuality, through which it renders it a subject. In Cherry's works, need is a similarly differentiating but ambiguous factor: while it creates vulnerability that grounds the objects in their surroundings, it also endows tulips and detached limbs alike with the gravity of subjecthood. Makeshift structures of support and medical equipment manifest needs literally and point to the fact that need is also a field on which biological and social forces mesh together. In *Keye* and *The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals* (both 2023), the ceramic sculptures take the shape of fantastical creatures, whose quixotic bodies resemble jugs. It's the furthest point from the human form in the entire exhibition, where animacy reigns unchallenged but for the few markers of human control: the chains and the lamps. The chains, attached to the jugs' tiny handles, reference a leash and the way it's used to curb any unwanted movement on the animal's part. It's one of countless tools in the extensive systems of control devised by people to mold, bend, confine or suppress unpredictable natural processes of growth, adaptation, and degeneration. Nearly all forms of biological life are subject to some of these mechanisms of control, including ourselves. In fact, the very subjection to the constant policing of the body is what makes

4. Georges Canguilhem cited in Cassandra Xin Guan; ‘Critique of Flowers: The Exigency of Life in the Era of Its Technical Reproducibility’. *October* 2021; (175): 26–69. My own description of adaptation in flowers is influenced by Xin Guan's brilliant reading of the film *Miracle of Flowers* (1926) in the aforementioned essay.



2. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness or Cutting the Stone*, 1494, oil on board, 19" x 14", Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

one a subject. The social mediation of the body is a process harnessed in the biopolitical modes of governance, encompassing manners of embodiment related to gender, race, and class, and regulating health, reproduction and death. The cultural control of the body is also foundational to the psychoanalytic concepts of abjection, whereby excessive or unrestrained corporeality threatens the integrity of the subject, for it undoes the clear symbolic separation from what is considered an object. As Kristeva put it in her seminal book *Powers of Horror*, abjection is caused by “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, position, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”⁵ Hybridity, queerness and opacity are by this token qualities inherently capable of producing abjection, for they elude the disciplining force of clear-cut categories. Cherry’s twin sculptures inhabit this thorny territory of socially-generated and -controlled needs, where natural processes of adaptation and self-regulation are both allies capable of regeneration and threats to personhood. Their tender awkwardness in response to the grow-lamp-chain apparatus approximates the tensions between social norms and bodies.

The stones carefully nested in the two pockets of Keye further the meaning of obstinate somatic substance, and push it into the realm of minerality, infusing not only clay, traditionally related to the body, but also water-polished rocks, with the tender quality of flesh. The title alludes to the latent vitality in seemingly lifeless rocks, as it takes the Middle Dutch word *keye* signifying both a stone or a bulb. The term

5. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4

often appeared in the context of the trope of the stone of madness and frequently in the company of the satirical figure of Lubbert Das, an archetypal country fool, most notably portrayed in the 1501-5 painting by Hieronymus Bosch *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness* (fig. 2). The word and its history affords tulip bulbs and stones the same potential. Both objects become carriers of folly, turning the twin sculptures into recto and verso versions of the same event, a bizarre diptych of the before and after blossoming of folly. The allegory of the *keye* of madness, closely related to the figure of Lubbert Das, suggests that madness was also conceived of as an outgrowth of stupidity, in which one's divergent cognitive abilities were seen as inferior. The gullible nature of the fool made him prey to quackery, of which the operation was an exaggerated symbol represented in numerous satirical images (fig. 3). The *keye* then acted as a nexus in which somatic impulses, socioeconomic relations and abnormal intellect intersected. Stupidity, similarly to insanity, undermined the integrity of a person, opening up paths to abjection and zoomorphism. Cherry's *Keye* appears like an effigy of this dreaded detachment from rationality and the sealed model of personhood.

As the exhibition runs its course, some tulips adapt to the barren conditions of the gallery while others languish. I cannot help but feel sorry for them, seeing the flaccid plants as extensions of the impossible bodies that shelter them. Their adaptive efforts harmonize with the failed, unheard needs of the gypsum sculptures, whose fragmented forms are signatures of internal states, expressing their anguish as if according to the rules of the genetic code. Nicki Cherry's work strings



3. Pieter van der Heyden, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Stone Operation or The Witch of Mallegem*, 1559, engraving, 14 x 19 in, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States of America

together disparate affects and vulnerabilities across separate bodies, blurring the symbolic boundaries between them in the process. What underlies their hybrid sculptures is a relentless pursuit of empathy, conceived as a mode of encounter anchored in the shared experience of weakness.

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-NC

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