MOMUS

The Abject Intimacies of Chris Curreri

BY SKY GOODDEN • REVIEWS • JUNE 8, 2017

Chris Curreri, "Kiss Portfolio," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery

I would like
to be like water or rather like
milk – completely pourable
am right now more like
stone but like sand or
like a sauce full of
lumps – what does one do with the
lumps?

– Louise Bourgeois, diary from 1957

Chris Curreri's most recent exhibition has the appearance of something messy. It unfolds as a portfolio of men's mouths kissing, with fingertips jammed between lips like giblets, tongues forming labia, facial hair competing across chins and cheeks, a frothing font of

movement. There are mashed and fallen sculptures, too, the dark clay like bellies, extended and bent – or penises, spent and folding. However, despite the squirm and spume, and the show's title, "Unruly Matter," Curreri is characteristically exacting. A paragon of this control arrives at the back of Daniel Faria's expansive gallery, with an image tucked into an alcove that's easy to miss. Here, we begin at the end, with a profound and anomalous photograph that retroactively rivets through gestural, feral, and abject effort, and sends out a chill.

Settling into his mid-career, Chris Curreri has one of those rare practices in Canada that underscores the professionalism in art. From show to show, project to project, his work (across photography, sculpture, and film) appears to be of a piece – coherent and untripping. Its faultlessness is jarring for an artist with a clear penchant for invoking the intemperate (recent exhibition titles include "Fan the Flames," "Medusa," and now "Unruly Matter"; and recent criticism gleefully sputters "grotesquerie" and "orgiastic" in its appraisal). It's fair to assume that this discrepancy is, itself, a device or a formal exercise, for Curreri.

Chris Curreri, "Kiss Portfolio," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

188 St Helens Avenue
Toronto ON M6H 4A1
416 538 1880
www.danielfariagallery.com

Louise Bourgeois, "Janus Fleuri," 1968. Photo: Christopher Burke.

The bodies beneath the teeming earth – and seemingly wet clay – of "Unruly Matter" are themselves both precise and inchoate. Louise Bourgeois's sculptures of Janus (the god of beginnings, time, and passageways, and symbolized by two faces) shudder to mind in Curreri's collapsed, round-headed sculptures, and dual-mouthed photographs. Bourgeois greeted her ambivalent subject with a similar bemusement, the two heads of her Janus unmistakably penile, and connected by something vulval in its fray. Robert Mapplethorpe, too, lies supine beneath this body of work, though perhaps more for his formalist precision than the mere fact of photographing gay men's desire.

However, the figure that stirs beneath even these, in Curreri, is the complicated legacy of Surrealism: its formal experiments with eroticism, and ties to psychoanalysis. André Breton established the driving force behind his movement as the notion of amour fou, or "mad love." (A Surrealist flyer reads, "If you love love, you will love Surrealism.") As curator Christine Macel writes, for her 2015 exhibition "What We Call Love," "For the Surrealists, love was defined in the strictest sense as a 'total attachment to another human being, based upon the overwhelming awareness of the truth'." Truth was argued for in many forms. An absolute fervency about the deployment of media for Surrealist aims, for instance (photography would contradict its ethos, but photo-collage was acceptable); or a varied approach to free love and sex ("unique love, successive 'unique loves' or libertinism," as Macel instructs, which could take place between same-sex or

polyamorous couples). “They achieved this revolution outside the bourgeois realm of family and convention, even though some of them became more critical thereafter of their own phallocentric perspective and their contradictory attitude towards homosexuality, which remained a scarcely represented phenomenon among them (with the exception of René Crevel).”

René Magritte, “The Lovers,” 1928.

One of two images that sit outside Curreri’s “Kiss Portfolio” (one work, comprised of eight photographs) is a singular photograph that hews especially to the Surrealist aesthetic. Equal parts design legerdemain, formal poetics, and self-analysis, “Seem” (2016) frames the heart-shaped cavern formed by lovers’ faces – joined at the cheek, and flipped. Their mutual gaze issues from beneath lyric brow lines and the valley of our noses, and speaks of love peering out; of seeing one another and the world, as one. As lucence emitted from our shadow selves.

188 St Helens Avenue
Toronto ON M6H 4A1
416 538 1880
www.danielfariagallery.com

Chris Curreri, "Seem," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

In a body of work so myriad in couples merging, sinking into one another, the myth of Narcissus squirms in sight. Its presence in Surrealism is well-established (Salvador Dalí, among others, played with its narrative – and what better mascot for mise-en-abyme self-analysis than the man who peered at himself so long, so lovingly, as to fall into the water and drown in his own image?). Where this slips its hold is in reading homosexual desire as one man mirroring himself in another. The leading 20th-century psychoanalysis, like that of Jacques Lacan – and the English psychologist, Havelock Ellis, who came before him (introducing the term "a Narcisus-like tendency" in 1898 in a paper titled "Autoeroticism: A Psychological Study") – exhibits a disturbing diminishment of homosexuality as mere "self-absorption." While psychoanalysis was incredibly influential to Surrealism (and the "lingua franca" of mid-20th-century artists, generally, including Louise Bourgeois), the narrative of Narcissus threading its way through these contemporary theories is unsettling, and broadly speaking, discounts homo-erotic desire as lacking sexual difference.

188 St Helens Avenue
Toronto ON M6H 4A1
416 538 1880
www.danielfariagallery.com

Chris Curreri, "Lifecast," 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

Curreri splits off from his stream of couples in the final gallery, an anteroom where a single photograph exists to break your heart. Here, a plaster cast of a young boy with a large neck tumor is cradled by two white-gloved hands. The tender grasp on this boy – eyes closed, head bent, as though keening into a supporting palm – can be identified as that of a caretaker (a curator at the Harvard Medical Museum, as it turns out, though my first impression was that of a sculptor – or a medical professional). This image, not unlike the Kiss Portfolio, carries some agitation (even provocation) of the abject. We are, simply, unsure of what we're looking at – though we know it's a body, not unlike ours, and so fear and love exist in us, looking out, and then back on ourselves. We stutter to catch up. But what's so extraordinary about this photograph, and what sets it apart from the demonstrative exertions of the rest, is its imaging of the unconscious. The way the body exerts itself against us, sometimes; the way, with eyes closed, the tumor becomes a

188 St Helens Avenue
Toronto ON M6H 4A1
416 538 1880
www.danielfariagallery.com

swell of feeling. The tender touch of a curator, his attention to the internalized and pained figure (a boy of "10 or 12," Curreri tells me, from the 1850s) – his nearness and distance from his subject. This image radiates through Kiss Portfolio, and Curreri's collapsed sculptures, and changes everything I saw. Because in our "mad love" effort to fall into another's face, their skin, to see out from where they see – we never quite slip from our quiet cast, our exclusive pain. The gloved touch from another, across centuries, though, to meet us in our sleep? This is "Unruly Matter"'s most exquisite embrace.

-Goodden, Sky, "The Abject Intimacies of Chris Curreri," *Momus*, June 8, 2017.