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Chris Curreri: *Medusa*
Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto
November 28, 2013 - February 1, 2014
by Sam Cotter

Chris Curreri's *Medusa* at Daniel Faria Gallery worked to introduce a degree of malleability to any clear distinction between form and formlessness. The exhibition consisted of three distinct, yet closely related entities: a portfolio of 21 small-scale gelatin-silver prints of discarded clay, a large faceless sculpture of a heavily muscled body and three large-scale photographs of cave interiors. Each of the works possesses a degree of tangibility and immediacy resembling life, yet all confound a simple reading—both enticing and rejecting the viewer's gaze.

The portfolio of small, untitled gelatin-silver prints document clay in a state of uncertainty. Curreri took the photographs while enrolled in ceramics classes, where each week he documented wet clay forms discarded by his fellow students. The clay depicted has been partially modelled and though legibility shifts from one photograph to the next, some provide recognizable shapes – bowls, urns, figures, et cetera – while others have wholly collapsed into fleshy abstractions. The clay depicted is not refuse, it is awaiting re-animation – it will be passed through an extruder that will convert it back into raw material for future sculptors, erasing any evidence of its past lives.

The prints themselves are classical, masterfully rendered and tonally rich, close enough to life to seem active and breathing. In their still life perfection they bring to mind Edward Weston's similarly meticulous photographs of green peppers, but whereas Weston seems tied to the mystical eroticism of peppers turning into bodies – idealized, whole and perfect – Curreri's clay becomes something other than a body. The photographs show something meaty and perverse, lying heavy in heaps, raw with fleshy orifices and phalluses commingling in the frame without any sense of order or wholeness. In their evocation of flesh that transcends a normative bodily understanding, they gain a surrealist quality similar to the slaughterhouse photographs Eli Lotar produced for Georges Bataille: we are consciously hyper-aware of what we are looking at (given the descriptive nature of the photographic medium) yet we are incapable of separating it from an unnatural-seeming bodily otherness.

Several of Curreri's photographs include a subtle solarization effect that further queers their relationship to traditions of "straight photography." In exposing the permeability of the unfixed photograph, the images become much like the precarious clay they document: hovering between finite form and intangible non-form. The darkroom is brought forth as a place for sculpting the raw material contained in the photographic negative. Fixing a photograph becomes akin to the firing of pottery; both arrest their respective matter – the wet clay and the latent image – excerpting them from a continuum of possibilities. Here the medium-specific dialectics of photography and sculpture collapse in on themselves, becoming like the indistinct piles of clay.

Curreri's life-size cement bust, *Medusa*, acts as a sentinel overlooking the gallery space, the viewer and the clay portfolio. The sculpture is of a heavily muscled torso and neck connected to a head whose face has been removed. Atop the sculpture's head is a braided ponytail that echoes the snakes of the Medusa of Greek mythology's hair.

The sculpture is heavy – almost oppressive – and unsettling in its physical and psychological weight. She – Curreri identifies his Medusa as female despite its being modelled from a male subject – keeps watch over the exhibition. Though, as a sculpture made from life, it should be an impotent version of a living being, its presence still seems to act on viewers, capable of altering their viewing experience through its presence alone and refusing to be a passive ornamental object. Like the mythological Medusa, though it may seem that all her power has been stripped away, we are still denied the ability to return her gaze. Instead of a face, we are met with a vestige of violence and can feel the visceral sensation of a wire cutting through flesh when looking upon her.

Virginia, a suite of three large-scale black-and-white photographs of cave interiors, hangs apart from the rest of the exhibition in the smaller rear gallery.

Chris Curreri, *Untitled (Clay Portfolio)*, 2013, gelatin silver print, 19.7 cm × 14.6 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO

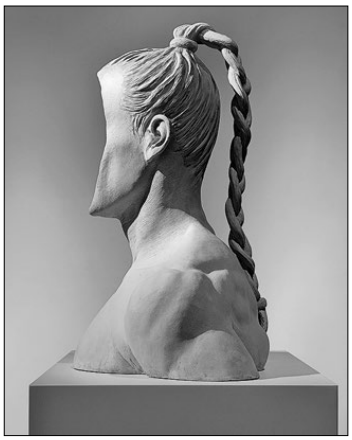
Though physically and thematically distant from the other works, the cave photos seem to complete the logic of form and formlessness that plays out across the exhibition. The caves themselves are elaborate structures, solid rock faces carved and shaped by the formless force of water. They evince the capacity of these nearly invisible forces to physically change matter through durational engagement. However, in the case of these caves, this almost mystical phenomenon has been reformed and reframed to be viewable by visitors (Curreri included) – the natural process of sculpting is arrested and monumentalized to become a tourist destination; Curreri nods to this transformation through the subtle inclusion of handrails and tiled flooring in one of his images.

Each of the photographs is illuminated by harsh flash—a force that simultaneously flattens the image and makes it recordable. The flash is again a violent action on the part of the artist, one that helps to unlock a deeper current running through the show; the flash – much like Medusa's gaze – freezes all that it sees. Here the artist seems to be forwarded as a Medusa-like figure, creating through acts of seizure and selection.

Within the exhibition, it is perhaps most fruitful to think of both "the artist" and Medusa as gatekeepers: both possess the authorial power to designate and declare "thing" to be "form." The petrifying gaze of Medusa turns her onlookers to stone. She converts the continuum of the living into finite monuments. The artist has a similar role; he or she freezes segments of a fluid continuum of potentialities.

Within this framework Medusa self-consciously appears throughout all aspects of the exhibition: she elevates formless clay and stands guard over it, her presence is felt in the camera's shutter and flash, the firing of clay and the drying of concrete. It is only fitting that the version of Medusa – and, by extension, the artist himself – is faceless and dilute. Medusa is an active force in the place of production, and though she asserts her presence within the works, she can't be fully confined to a gallery setting. Medusa makes visible the immediacy of the creative act in a context where works have left the artist's hands and are malleable only in the minds of the viewers.

Sam Cotter is a Toronto-based artist and writer; his practice employs photography, film, installation and sculpture to focus on issues of visual representation and relationships between art and culture.



Chris Curreri, *Medusa*, 2013, cement, 38.7 cm × 38.7 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO

Glam North: Doris McCarthy and Her New Contemporaries
Doris McCarthy Gallery, Toronto
February 26 - April 26, 2014
by Bill Clarke

While organizing this exhibition last fall, curators Jennifer Rudder and Alexander Irving could not have anticipated the bone-chilling temperatures that gripped most of Canada during their show's run. Titled *Glam North*, the exhibition included paintings by the gallery's namesake, artist and teacher Doris McCarthy, and works by eight contemporary artists to consider how artists' perceptions of the Arctic have evolved.

It's a timely premise. For much of the 20th Century, the general public thought little about the North. More recently, however, concerns about global warming and the plight of First Nations communities there, as well as the discovery of fossil fuels and other natural resources, have made the far north a geopolitical hot spot. Four countries – Canada, Russia, the US, and Denmark – currently claim ownership of large swaths of the region. From a Canadian art world perspective, the north is also home to several vibrant art residencies and communities, including Cape Dorset.

Glam North opens with a 1976 photo of McCarthy, sitting in the snow before a landscape of soaring icebergs, a palette in her lap and a canvas propped at her feet. McCarthy travelled north frequently to make art. The show's first two paintings, *Ice Research Station, Arctic* (1976) and *Winter Night, Igloolik* (1994), by her, feature nondescript residential and research buildings buried in snow. Following are two vitrines housing figurative sculptures by the Cape Dorset-based Samonie Toonoo. Immediately, Rudder and Irving confound expectations about what a show examining "the North" should be – where are the paintings of majestic, pristine landscapes?

Toonoo's haunting sculptures, which touch on the harsh realities of life in the far north, almost steal the show. A gaunt white face, carved from antler, stares out from a fringe of golden fur in *Priest* (2007). The mystical and contemporary collide in *Transformation* (2011), which depicts a hoodie-wearing youth morphing into a bear. The hanging figure in *Suicide* (2005) reminds viewers that Native Canadian youth are five times as likely to commit suicide as non-Aboriginal youth.[1] Toonoo's playful side comes out in *My 2 Balls* (2008), a black stone figure holding two white snowballs against his groin.

The bony faces of Toonoo's figures reappear in the