

JESS PERLITZ









FROM THE DIRECTOR

Linda Tesner

Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery
of Contemporary Art

It is with great pleasure that the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College presents work by Jess Perlitz in her exhibition *Forever washing itself*. Perlitz is an assistant professor of art and studio head of sculpture at Lewis & Clark, a post she has held since 2013.

Concurrent with her exhibition at the Hoffman Gallery, an installation by Perlitz entitled *Chorus* is being shown at the Eastern State Penitentiary, a historical site in Philadelphia. This sound installation is based on a question that Perlitz asked, in person, of incarcerated men and women from throughout the United States: “If you could sing one song and have that song heard, what would it be?” Her compilation of the songs they sang is played inside a cell at Eastern State, where visitors experience the recordings as a collage of aural sensations. *Chorus*, I think, is characteristic of Perlitz’s investigations. She is keenly able to embody visually (or in the case of *Chorus*, experientially) what it feels like to be in another person’s place.

This ability to create visual metaphors that summon profound empathy is evident in Perlitz’s exhibition *Forever washing itself*. The title comes from the sculpture *Forever Washing*, a gargantuan foot in the process of being constantly bathed. The image beautifully describes the way in which artists—and all human beings—must acknowledge one’s place in the world while simultaneously being nimble in response to its ever-changing and ever-challenging nature. It is as if we are invariably shedding



our own skin, forever altering, adjusting, and cleansing the image that we present to the world, and to our own selves.

Other works by Perlitz feel like simulacra of the human experience. *Waving* is, quite literally, a drawing machine, a mechanical stand-in for an artist. As a flag—which feels both cumbersome and magnificent—moves, the tip of its mast scrapes against the white wall of the gallery, leaving a trace of a line. The action of the flag—itself a little ungainly—sort of stutters against the wall, as if tentatively finding its voice. The experience of viewing *Waving* feels, to me, both poignant and a little heartbreaking.

Similarly, when I viewed *Face* for the first time, I felt the impulse to laugh and weep at the same time. In this short video, Perlitz creates her own face, a task she assumes while being, literally, unable to see what she is doing. In her efforts to draw a mouth (with peanut butter and jelly) and eyes (with a blue-frosted cupcake) while flying blind, she humbles herself to the task that we all face every day as we prepare to encounter the world. This vulnerability and, frankly, courage, is a most apt message for an artist to model to her students. The job of an artist is, at its root, to make the human experience visual, something that Perlitz's studio output achieves exceedingly well.

above: Waving, 2017; *previous spread: Jess Perlitz's studio*, 2017; *overleaf: installation view, Jess Perlitz: Forever washing itself*, 2018, at the Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art, Lewis & Clark College







Burned Beast, 2017

intimate zones of encounter

STUART KRIMKO

JESS PERLITZ MAKES SCULPTURES, videos, and site-specific installations that depict, depend on, and prompt (and prod and poke) human bodies. In the broadest sense this puts her work in line with the general thrust of sculpture for as long as humans have been making it. The basic desire to see ourselves, to concede some measure of our self-image to an inert thing we have constructed out of mud or plaster or gold or disco balls, undoubtedly fuels most art. But it also says something about the way our bodies—and the emotions and desires that arise from them—work in the first place. Never content to be alone, we'll invent plodding totems to play with in the absence of sentient friends.

Perlitz's work gets at this instinct born of loneliness. Rather than merely revel in the rarefied (if beautiful) solitude that usually crops up between the viewer and an artwork, however, she poses questions about what happens when that solitude is exposed—when being made aware of the uncomfortable, private silence of self-regard has the paradoxical effect of bringing us closer together.

At times these questions take on the formal equivalent of political urgency, as in the absurdly erotic participatory







above and previous spread:
The Calling, 2017



*the force of the siren flows through your body,
beginning with your most intimate parts*

sculpture *The Calling* (all works 2017). Perlitz has altered a wooden chair so that a hole the size of a silver dollar is right where your own hole would be if you sat down on it. A snaking pipe connects the hole to an apparatus on the other side of the room, which turns out to be a crank-driven air raid siren. Get a friend to sit on the chair, then crank the handle and listen and watch as the alert is sounded. Or switch roles and get your friend to do the cranking—seated on the chair, the force of the siren flows through your body, beginning with your most intimate parts.

Perlitz sets up a formal arrangement as elegant as it is warmly human, one that can be read in purely aesthetic terms as well as social or relational ones. The play of materials alone conveys a large part of *The Calling's* poetry. Metal and wood are as different as the two people who complete the piece by “playing” and “experiencing” it. The person who does the cranking in effect reaches over and into the one who is sitting; similarly, the long steel tube, hard and gleaming, flows out of the metal siren in search of the wood, softer both to eye and touch. The relationship between the materials provides a haptic metaphor for the relationship enacted by the work's viewers. Perlitz opens up the possibility for those who encounter her sculptures to become fully engaged bodies capable of more than just sight.



Face, 2017

someone (or something) capable of expression



As if to underline art's potential for moving us beyond the visual, both videos included in *Forever washing itself* feature performances in which the negation of seeing is a central theme. In *Face*, for instance, Perlitz wears a large, white papier-mâché head. As a recording of Bach's Cello Suite no. 6 in D Major plays in the background, she begins to methodically paint a rudimentary face on the surface of this otherwise featureless mask. Her materials are a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a chocolate cupcake, and grape soda. In order to make herself into someone (or something) capable of expression, she first has to make a mess—and part of the deal is that, without any eyeholes in the mask, she can't see what she's doing. The cello's plaintive melody only accentuates the melancholy that permeates the work by the end, when the soda she has poured over her "head" makes it look like she's shedding tears. Perhaps she's lamenting the fact that, even with her new eyes and mouth, she still can't see or speak to her viewers.



the body is completely continuous with the world at large



In *Ghost*, meanwhile, Perlitz can see out, but we can only barely see her. Wearing a white sheet as a ghost costume, she twirls against a white backdrop, and the image is severely overexposed: the eponymous ghost blends all too easily into the ethereal space that surrounds it. The ghost's eyeholes are its most conspicuous features, gently mocking reminders that one needs to strain one's own eyes to see the ghost at all. Perlitz's invisibility is simultaneously a means of hiding from view and an agent of humble transcendence, for it allows her, chromatically speaking, to become one with her environment. As such, her flirtation with disappearance enables a way of being in which the body is completely continuous with the world at large.

left: preparing for **Ghost**, 2017
upper right: **Presence**, 2015
overleaf: still from **Ghost**, 2017



An artist who has realized a number of projects outside of gallery contexts—in places as diverse as prisons, playgrounds, and sculpture parks—Perlitz emphasizes a literal and embodied connection to shared space. She does so by recognizing the body's frailty as the source of its strength and the key to our commonality. Because we are vulnerable, we must rely on one another. Perlitz points to this tender spot at the core of the municipal ethos, generating art that is uniquely equipped to open up intimate zones of encounter.

Even a monumental sculpture like *Barely There*, the exhibition's most virtuosic technical achievement, holds rather than occupies space, conceding power rather than claiming it. Like the videos, the work hinges upon concealment and disappearance. The massive, freestanding mask form is nine feet tall and eight feet wide. When approached from the front or back it functions like a wall, dividing the gallery and beckoning viewers to shield their bodies in its textured recesses. Its eyes become windows. Those who are tall enough can peek through it, "donning" the mask in the process and subsuming themselves in a full-body act of seeing.

However, when approached from the side, the mask is indeed barely there; in profile, it is a mere three feet wide. A slight change in perspective transforms something apparently substantial and volumetric into the sculptural equivalent of a line. Such transformation reflects the rules of the game here on Earth, where the transience of life means that it can change shape—or disappear—in an instant.

Its form inspired by ancient Hellenistic masks, *Barely There* channels an archaic, older-than-time-itself uncanniness. For all their insistence on coming to terms with bodies in real time, Perlitz's sculptures are late links in a long chain of cultural artifacts extending back into the recesses of prehistory. Their effect is due in part to their archetypal reverberations and the artist's willingness to address primal emotional states. This prevents her work from fitting neatly into recent categories, like relational aesthetics, that privilege social interaction over other modes of experiencing art. Perlitz retains a belief in the totemic power of art objects as discrete things. As a result, she also ends up grappling with the fact that art's role in the human story is inseparable from its use in ritual, religious, or spiritual settings.

left, and [1]: **Barely There**, 2017 (details of installation view); [2] **Monkey haniwa**, Kofun period, 6th century AD; [3] **Head of a female haniwa figure with headdress**, 5th–7th century AD; [4] **Haniwa head of deer**, Kofun period, 5th century AD



this tender spot at the core of the municipal ethos





installation view, **Barely There**, 2017, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, NE



a belief in the totemic power of art objects



above and right: **Endless Night**, 2017



Forever Washing, 2017

humility reigns supreme



**Nose from a terra-cotta mask,
6th century BC**

A particularly clear example of this is *Forever Washing*, in which an oversize foot is constantly bathed by a trickle of water that emerges from the place where its ankle would meet the rest of the leg. It sits in a decidedly unromantic rubber tub. Humility reigns supreme, as it did when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, but this foot washes itself, suggesting that we each need to bow down before the realities of our own flesh—preferably with a sense of humor. The foot, despite (or even because of) its size, exudes an affable, sheepish personality.



left: Joseph-Benoît Suvée, **The Invention of Drawing** (recto), 1791; right: Unknown, **The Dragon Giving the Scepter of Power to the Beast from the Sea**, ca. 1255–1260

The wooden creature titled *Burned Beast*, on the other hand, movingly fails at instilling fear. A charred hobby horse with a head grafted from some mythical, vaguely doglike animal, it bears what looks like a faint smile. For this viewer, the strange monster recalls W. B. Yeats’s apocalyptic vision of a “rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem to be born.” Indeed, among Perlitz’s references for the work is an image found in a fourteenth-century tapestry depicting the Beast from the Sea that heralds the end of the world in the Book of Revelation. And yet the mild expression on her beast’s face is questioning rather than threatening, an invitation to consider that one’s eventual disappearance needn’t necessarily be an ominous or depressing proposition. If anything, the exercise of snuggling up to our own demise puts us in touch with the radical truth of what it means to be alive. Perlitz gives us an opportunity to approach the fleetingness of human life as if it were an exotic family pet—a pet the whole of humanity has been called to care for and love.



Burned Beast, 2017





left: **Waving**, 2017; upper right: Caspar David Friedrich, **Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer** [Wanderer above the Sea of Fog], ca. 1817



Untitled, 2017
Untitled, 2017
Untitled, 2017
Untitled, 2017





installation view, **Forever washing itself**, 2018, Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art, Portland, OR



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Forever Washing, 2017

Concrete, Styrofoam, water pump, water, rubber tub
24 x 36 x 36 in.

Burned Beast, 2017

Burnt basswood, charcoal
48 x 96 x 60 in.

The Calling, 2017

Steel, hand-cranked air raid siren, chair
3 x 7 x 25 ft.

Endless Night, 2017

Mirror, Styrofoam, cable, motor, beanbag chairs
Dimensions variable

Untitled, 2017

Ink, collaged paper, oil pastel on paper
23 x 28 in.

Untitled, 2017

Pencil, gouache, ink, oil pastel on paper
33 x 26 in.

Untitled, 2017

Pencil, ink, collaged paper, oil pastel on paper
28 x 23 in.

Untitled, 2017

Pencil, gouache, ink, oil pastel on paper
33 x 28 in.

Barely There, 2017

Fiberglass, FGR-95
9 x 8 x 3 ft.

Ghost, 2017

Video
5 min.

Face, 2017

Video
5 min.

Waving, 2017

Steel, Structo-Lite, fabric, motor
10 x 7 x 4 ft.



Foot Land Drawing, 2017

SOURCE IMAGES

- P. 17 Jess Perlit
Presence, 2015
 Gouache, ink, collaged paper, pastel on paper
 12 x 12 in.
- P. 21 [fig. 2] Unknown
Monkey haniwa, Kofun period, 6th century AD
 Terra-cotta
 Courtesy of Tokyo National Museum
- P. 21 [fig. 3] Unknown
Head of a female haniwa figure with headdress
 5th–7th century AD
 Earthenware
 Height: 8 1/2 in.
 Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- P. 21 [fig. 4] Unknown
Haniwa head of deer, Kofun period, 5th century AD
 Earthenware
 6 7/8 x 6 1/2 x 10 1/4 in.
 Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- P. 27 Unknown
Nose from a terra-cotta mask, 6th century BC
 Terra-cotta
 2 5/8 in.
 Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- P. 28 Joseph-Benoît Suvée
The Invention of Drawing (recto), 1791
 Black and white chalk on brown paper
 21 1/2 x 14 in.
 Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
- P. 28 Unknown
The Dragon Giving the Scepter of Power to the Beast from the Sea, ca. 1255–1260
 Tempera colors, gold leaf, colored washes, pen and ink on parchment
 Leaf: 12 9/16 x 8 7/8 in.
 Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
- P. 31 Caspar David Friedrich
Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer
 [Wanderer above the Sea of Fog], ca. 1817
 Oil paint
 37 x 29 in.
 Courtesy of Kunsthalle Hamburg
- P. 37 Jess Perlit
Foot Land Drawing, 2017
 Ink, collaged paper, oil pastel on paper
 23 x 28 in.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Jess Perlitz makes work that considers landscape and the ways in which we define it and seek to recognize ourselves within it. Her projects take many forms, including performance, sculpture, and drawing, and have appeared in a variety of sites, from playgrounds and fields to galleries and museums. Venues that have shown her work include the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, PA; Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, NY; Cambridge Galleries in Ontario, Canada; and De Fabriek in the Netherlands.

Born in Toronto, Canada, Perlitz is a graduate of Bard College. She received her MFA in sculpture from Tyler School of Art and her clown training from the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation and Performance. She is currently based in Portland, Oregon, where she is an assistant professor of art and studio head of sculpture at Lewis & Clark College. Perlitz was recently an artist in residence at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska, and at the Vermont Studio Center. Her project *Chorus* is currently installed at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia as part of the historical site's ongoing artist installation series.

Stuart Krimko is a poet, translator, and art writer. His most recent book of poems is *Studio Visit* (The Song Cave, 2017). Krimko is also research and editorial director at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.

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*left: Jess and Moondog with **Endless Night**, December 2017; right: **Endless Night**, 2017 (detail); cover image: **Burned Beast**, 2017*

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FOREVER WASHING ITSELF

