

Marlie Mul

Have You Tried Turning It Off and On?

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I Appreciate a Turn-Off

Across cultures hair has been frequently considered a site and an attribute of strength, beauty, as well as other positive traits. As vehicle of expression hair has also been deployed as a political statement, either in its deliberate abundance or lack thereof, as a symbol of nonconformity and defiance or the subject of exercising power, from submission to shaming. In this latter sense, being involuntarily deprived of hair is a highly distressful experience. Among the most widespread fallacies connected to hair loss in men is the claim that individuals affected by it have above-average levels of testosterone and are thus more “virile” – a term used to describe a perceived set of male characteristics, including fertility.

In the recent series of Marlie Mul’s sculptural objects those attributes are amplified to unravel the network of power relations they became embedded in. Cast in soft, pearly white silicone, these hybrids shift scale and perspective: oversized individual sperms observable with a naked eye, as well as human heads at which one looks in an equally unusual way, from above – topped with tufts of artificial hair forming patterns reminiscent of men’s haircuts, with elongated appendages: the sperm’s tails turned human noses turned droopy, flaccid phalluses.

On one level, the sculptures can be seen as embodiments of toxic masculinity: an anonymous, collective phenomenon that presents itself as part of some higher natural order of things and which, upon closer examination, reveals itself to be base, insipid and impotent. They might be prepared specimens of an extinct species. Or evidence of an ongoing war, with trophies mounted on the wall.

At the same time, Mul’s objects reach beyond and blur those antagonistic sets of oppositions. While the artist’s meticulous treatment of hair resembles a transplant, silicone as material triggers associations with another process of altering the body: surgical breast implants. Although painstakingly crafted, the objects also evoke a peculiar aura of mass-produced items, those seemingly practical yet completely useless kitchen implements that you’d never use. They evoke motion, where there is none, always at the user’s disposal. And, more than anything else, they are monuments to humans’ futile and desperate attempts at interfering with the ebb and flow, the cycle of growth and withering that makes any life possible. Mul’s works argue that, despite the fact of being impotent and infertile, the vanity industry – the system that promises the illusion of immortality – continues to reproduce itself. Have you tried turning it off and on?

– Krzysztof Kosciuczuk