

**a thyroid, a vessel, a neck, a drum** by Eloise Sweetman

written in the context of ***Full-bodied (hum)*** by Gwenneth Boelens

*Full-bodied (hum)* sites the exhibition as a body and tunes the building as a musical instrument. Drawing from her studies in Ayurvedic medicine, interests in musicality, and embodied experiences of making, artist Gwenneth Boelens produces new works from brass, flax, clay, and copper. In step with the feminist minimalist sculptural tradition, Boelens' artworks take on many forms in their refined and subtle states: a thyroid, a vessel, a neck, a drum, a shell, a shield, a cymbal, and a nervous system. By taking on multiple bodily forms, the artist points to "how the shapes cover and envelop what we vitally need for our bodies to sustain, maintain the fluidity, the breath"<sup>1</sup>.

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The title *Full-bodied (hum)* refers to a nourished, receptive body, one that might hum while making. The artworks create a happy thrum of activity, that purls, and glimmers across the gallery's architecture. The word "Purl" refers to the interlocking of yarn, to go against the flow, and—in the most pleasing of ways—a small swirling stream<sup>2</sup>. Boelens' practice has a purling motion and the artworks in *Full-bodied (hum)* are open vessels that sound and light move through.

Boelens' practice has a cyclical flow: rest, preparation, making, and the inevitable release of the work into the world. And so begins the process again, while the trace of the previous work enters into the new cycle, nothing ends, but instead picked up and purls into new artworks, weaving works become contact c-prints; the mesh to make a chromogenic print becomes a large-scale textile wall sculpture; lengths of newspaper spears return as shields or shells, and leftover clay is soaked and kneaded into new vessels. She is building towards something, re-cycling, which returns us to cycling, swirling, to revisit anew. This brings to mind the lifecycle and the heartache that contemporary life can bring. With the current state of the world, Boelens' work offers a place to rejuvenate and find some semblance of communal harmony.

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The artworks in *Full-bodied (hum)* sprang into being after our last exhibition together in 2020. After the opening, Boelens' health was affected by major life events causing her

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<sup>1</sup> Boelens, personal communication, 2022

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from [https://www.etymonline.com/word/purl#etymonline\\_v\\_47586](https://www.etymonline.com/word/purl#etymonline_v_47586) on 1 June 2022

thyroid condition to exacerbate. “The Thyroid gland is a soft, small gland, located in the front of the neck, below the voice box or larynx (Adam’s Apple) on either side of the trachea (windpipe)”<sup>3</sup>. If the hormones are not in balance it can cause a range of health problems. “I’m intrigued by this small gland because of several reasons; it’s an inner part of my own body that made itself apparent and became visible to the surface. It became a new thermometer as it were, which tells me how I am doing.” The thyroid is bow-shaped, in Dutch it is *schildklier*<sup>4</sup>, *Schild* meaning shield, *Klier* meaning gland. The shape is similar to *Shield*, *Shell*, *Shhh* (2016-2022), two of which are presented in the exhibition. Both pieces are cut from single sheets of offset printing plates, a material that transfers a flat image to paper<sup>5</sup>. The plates in this exhibition have been bleached by the sun, with a small wedge indicating their original blue. By its sun damage, we can see the artwork as a gland, or a shield, offering itself as a protector.

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As in the vast network in the body, *This Dusk Song (subtle body)* is a large-scale installation made of copper<sup>6</sup> threads that pass over rollers, through spindles, and across pulleys reclaimed from textile machinery from the disused textile factory in Treignac, France. *This Dusk Song*<sup>7</sup> (*subtle body*) is a version of a work made for the art space Treignac Project. Importantly, the work can be experienced as a nervous system, which is “the major controlling, regulatory, and communicating system in the body.”<sup>8</sup> To Boelens “Subtle body”<sup>9</sup> refers to all subtle involuntary processes in the body, and the subtle changes that imperceptibly occur. The artwork is indicative of Boelens’ minimal and sensual practice and marks a shift in her artistic practice influenced by her studies in Ayurvedic medicine.

The concepts of universal interconnectedness, the body’s constitution (*prakriti*), and life forces (*doshas*) are the primary basis of ayurvedic medicine. Goals of treatment aid the person by eliminating impurities, reducing symptoms, increasing resistance to disease, reducing worry, and increasing harmony in life. Herbs and

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.thyroidfoundation.org.au/Definitions> on 1 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup> In German it is *Schilddrüse*

<sup>5</sup> As in newspaper printing

<sup>6</sup> Copper, which is electro-conductive is used in transcendent practices to commune with spirits as well as to detoxify the body and improve the circulation system.

<sup>7</sup> “This Dusk Song” refers to the bird song that Val Plumwood hears from her office window. The song tells her that the seasons are changing. The changing of light, the sound of the earth, the passing of seasons brings Boelens’ work to my mind.

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from

<https://training.seer.cancer.gov/anatomy/nervous/#:~:text=The%20nervous%20system%20is%20the.for%20regulating%20and%20maintaining%20homeostasis> on 1 June 2022

<sup>9</sup> Subtle body as a term used to “ [...]map of central nervous system function in traditional Indian and Tibetan medicine, neuropsychiatry, and neuropsychology”

other plants, including oils and common spices, are used extensively in Ayurvedic treatment.<sup>10</sup>

Boelens has been uncertain how to reconcile her artistic practice and her ayurvedic studies. How much should she share in either? Is the conundrum of being in two minds reconciled in splitting the pieces in *Full-Bodied (hum)*? Each piece has a counterpart and companion, like the “best-friends-forever” charm, the two parts both individual and whole.

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Seeing an artwork reach its full and varied potential is so satisfying and is why I think Boelens' work is so gratifying. First, there are the artworks, which are graceful and substantial. Boelens is excellent at thinking about her work spatially, so her work often dialogue, triologue, and chorus together. And then the supporting elements begin to appear: a bench carefully sanded back, speakers reclaimed from a church, clamps and joints purposed made for spools and spindles. They are beautiful examples of interconnection and harmony where the artwork reaches beyond itself like in the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination, the cause cannot be untied from its condition. In the same vein, the textile work of flax and steel was woven from a pattern with 36 different options within the weaving parameters. The textile can drape over the audience's arms or legs. The weightiness of the work gives a moment of pause to take in the intricate patterns woven by the artist. While making the piece, Boelens showed me the pattern that to my untrained eye looked like a musical score, common to the regular weaver, but magic to me.

Throughout her career, the artist has included sound or the instrumental form in her works. “The history of music is something which has interested me, especially how we used sounds as a means to communicate over large distances. Often these sounds were made with the body, clapping, stamping, calling (with different sounds from the mouth), and (body)percussion. The work *Riveted* (2013) is most closely related.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, the clay vessels with coverings could become drums and the copper thread of *This Dusk Song (subtle body)* can become strings that play the architecture of the building. The clearest example is two hand-hammered brass sculptures, the shining material could refer to cymbals that can be played against one another as well as the thyroid gland. Here we return to the gland and the “vulnerable neck region (where the voice, our breath,

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<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/ayurveda> on 1 June 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Boelens, personal communication, 2022

our nervous system, our blood, our hormones run through; you could say this area is key for our expression, one thought is that if you can not freely express yourself this may result in illness)"<sup>12</sup> Having a voice means that it can be used, to be heard. Losing it means that one must trust others to know what you want to say and then speak for you. The ultimate form of vulnerability. When the spoken or the written becomes inadequate other languages are called upon such as art-making. These ideas are found in the video work, depicting a neck accentuated by a glorious slice of morning sunlight.

Throughout the exhibition two voices hum to each other, meeting each other's tone. The audio work moving through the space, and the shiver of thread being skimmed by a comb, envelop the exhibition. When I hear the movement of the audio work, I am reminded of a line that curator Lorenzo Benedetti writes about Boelens' work [...] a hand that 'feels' space while defining it".<sup>13</sup> Through that definition –the holding of space– each artwork folds into the other, like a canon or a round, where the melody is repeated but distinct from each other. They stand-in for Boelens, like her body stands behind the works. In unison the artist and her works are always on the move, shifting from body to instrument, from protector to communicator. This is an exhibition that hums in tandem, giving pause for another body to join in.

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<sup>12</sup> Boelens, personal communication, 2022

<sup>13</sup> In *Two Minds*, edited by Gwenneth Boelens & Nickel van Duijvenboden, Roma Publications, 2014