

Derek Liddington

Marbled Bodies, Softened Earth

March 16 - April 22, 2023

Daniel Faria Gallery is pleased to present *Marbled Bodies, Softened Earth*, Derek Liddington's fifth solo exhibition with the gallery.

In Naxos, Greece, three unfinished marble *Kouros* (free-standing statues often depicting nude male youths) lay on their sides as if toppled over by a giant hand. Looking at images of these lumbering bodies, you can imagine their weight, slowly pressing into the earth. You can imagine what it would be like to have a body so heavy that it not only imprints but is absorbed into its environment. You can imagine laying your own body ovetop theirs, yours hot in the sun, theirs cold. You can imagine the difference between cool stone underneath your skin as opposed to the warm, wet ground.

In a new series of paintings, Derek Liddington explores the material of bodies and their representations, the weight of flesh and stone, and the way both sink into the earth. An encounter with a body rendered in marble offers a confrontation with death, the cold surface of the material an uncanny simulacrum for warm flesh. In painting, the corpse is often rendered as a smooth, marble-like surface in greys and blues, whereas the material reality of the body is more readily found in still-lives of decaying fruit or flowers. Liddington's works straddle both these depictions, stony forms emerging from under patterns of blemishes, rust and rot that blooms across the canvas, flower-like.

While much of Liddington's work relies on, and circulates around, the notion of memory, the paintings in this exhibition find genesis in life drawings done in-studio. Many of the works depict body parts, including heads, wrenched from the rest of the figure and rendered in the textures and colours of marble, their weight palpable. This initial abstraction of the body into disparate parts is exaggerated by the surface of the paintings, which threatens to consume the image, both devouring it and concealing it like a veil or curtain.

Barely noticeable until viewed at different angles are small protrusions in the paintings, as if bony knuckles are pressed into the canvas from behind. Upon closer inspection one finds small wooden carvings squeezed in behind the stretcher bars. Sometimes they jut out into the edges of the works, exposing raw canvas and reminding the viewer of the formal mechanics of the object at hand. These small disturbances create real depth while reminding us of the illusory nature of painting alongside the physicality of the subject rendered flat. We are pushed back to the surface.

Two heads are intertwined as one form in the paintings *Their heads, embraced, the ground, compressed (daylight)* and *Their heads, embraced, the ground, compressed (moonlight)*. They

appear petrified while in the process of transformation, mid embrace. To be turned to stone amidst the throws of emotion, be it anger, desire, or grief, is a common fate in mythology. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Lichas is hurled into the Euboean waters by Hercules and his body hardens in the wind like "whirling snowflakes" turned to "solid hailstones," becoming a low-lying rock with human features, rising out of the sea. Perseus wields the head of Medusa as a weapon against Atlas, whose bones then scatter across the earth as giant boulders. Olenus and Lethaea share in punishment for her pride and are turned to a pair of stones on Mount Ida. In Liddington's paintings, the texture and surface of the paint fuses the two figures so that they become one marbled entity, like the many snowflakes turned to solid mass in Lichas' tale.

In *The marbled form in darkness and light, in bloom and rot, both laugh and cry, they beckon and scream, in love and hate (grotesque heads)* disembodied heads appear as though hewn from a rockface. Referencing depictions of *Grotesque Heads* throughout art history, by artists such as Jacques de Gheyn III and Leonardo da Vinci, the heads in Liddington's work are laughing and jeering, a cacophony of menacing smiles and rolling eyes. Seen from afar, they break apart into abstracted form and colour, like the dazzling mosaic of terrazzo.

The term *grotesque* was first used in the visual arts around 1480, when excavations uncovered the emperor Nero's *Domus Aurea*, a perfectly preserved Roman palace built after the great fire in 64 AD. Renaissance artists were astonished by the elaborate frescoes and intricate friezes adorning almost every inch of the interior, which were dubbed *grottesche*, or "from a cave." The Renaissance understood the word *grottesco* not only as something "carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one — a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid."¹ This could equally be a world in which Liddington's paintings take their shape, one where material and form are at odds with weight and depth, and where transformations oscillate, bodies becoming inanimate and vice versa.

Derek Liddington (b. 1981) obtained his MFA from the University of Western Ontario and BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Recent solo exhibitions include: Richmond Art Gallery, 2022; Musée d'art de Joliette, 2022; the AGYU, Toronto, 2017; the SAAG, Lethbridge, 2017; AKA artist-run, Saskatoon, 2015; and Cambridge Galleries, 2013. He has been the recipient of numerous public and foundation grants, including support from the Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts as well as being a finalist for the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts. He lives and works in Toronto

¹ Kayser, W. as quoted by Michael Squire, "Fantasies so Varied and Bizarre": The Domus Aurea, the Renaissance, and the 'Grotesque,'" in M. Dinter and E. Buckley (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Age of Nero* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell), pp. 444-464. 2012.