

By Losing Them, I Become a Whole

Maria Kapajeva

Curated by Šelda Puķīte

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To this day, a woman's body – its pain, illness and lived experience – is often treated as other, constrained by rigid gender norms and medical bias. Rather than embracing the complexity of womanhood, society continues to mystify and objectify women, reducing them to narrowly defined roles. In her solo exhibition *By Losing Them, I Become a Whole**, Maria Kapajeva draws on her recent physical transformation and ongoing healing process to explore identity politics, womanhood and queer embodiment. It marks the first chapter of a new body of work – one that begins in loss but unfolds through tenderness, resilience and radical self-connection.

Kapajeva inherited the same genetic risk as her late grandmother, who died of cancer at the age of 49 – the same age the artist will reach later this year. As a result, she underwent two preventive surgeries: an oophorectomy and a mastectomy. With the removal of body parts so often defined by patriarchal society as essential to womanhood, she now navigates questions about how these changes might empower her identity as a queer woman – and whether these deeply personal interventions have granted her the chance at a longer life, a future once denied to her grandmother.

Known for working with image culture, photography and video – often incorporating crafts and elements from public and domestic spheres – Kapajeva explores her journey through a range of media. In the photographic series *A Portrait of a Woman*, she stages a visual narrative of transformation and embodied change, offering a farewell to her menstrual cycle. This is echoed in the video work *Period. Period*, which signifies the end of her reproductive stage. The healing process – marked by the management of bodily fluids and intimate, repetitive procedures – is also part of this exploration. The journey culminates in a fearless portrait of her post-surgery body, referencing Sarah Lucas' *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996), though here, the eggs remain on the plate.

Before surgery, Kapajeva created a series of images, prints and casts of her breasts – leaving behind emotional imprints of what once was. In the series *Parts of Me, Not*, scanned images of her breasts are abstracted into a space where they exist independently from the body. In another gesture, she prints their forms onto limited-edition T-shirts, offering others the symbolic opportunity to wear them. Reimagined as form-filling entities, the breasts are also cast in clay as hanging bell-shaped sculptures titled *The*

Transformation of Silence. The fleshy materiality and earthy tones of the clay, combined with the bell's function as a ringing object, give these forms a voice – capable of breaking silence, drawing attention or sounding an alarm. The installation will later continue to evolve, incorporating casts made in collaboration with other women, forming a growing archive of diverse bodies and voices.

Another installation, *My fears were the fears of us all***, composed of found and ready-made materials, features paired seashells that evoke ovaries, breast shells or protective armour. Once natural shields for soft bodies, these shells now sit on a reflective surface, expanding the imagery and incorporating reflections from the space and viewer. The piece is anchored by a raw tree stump, stripped of its bark. This contrast – between hollow shells and exposed wood – captures the tension between vulnerability and defence, echoing the emotional landscape Kapajeva explores.

The large-scale textile work *Golden Becoming* comes closest to evoking a sense of sacred transformation. Its surface is imprinted in gold with the whole body – past and present – merged into a single form, reminiscent of the Shroud of Turin. It becomes a symbolic site of rebirth, where what once was is allowed to evolve into what may become. Over time, the textile will be embroidered with the stories and experiences of other queer people, gradually transforming a solitary imprint into a collective archive – an expanding tapestry of shared memory, resilience and identity.

Working across photography, video, textiles, ceramics and found objects, the exhibition is at once a case study, a therapeutic process, a tribute to Kapajeva's grandmother, a farewell to her breasts and ovaries, and an ode to the body she now inhabits. By weaving together physical, visceral and psychological experiences, the artist has created a roadmap for navigating a transitional state of being – learning to mourn, care for and celebrate the body's evolving form. What begins as a profoundly intimate story opens into a collective experience – one that looks toward a future filled with diverse voices and bodies, sharing stories, raising awareness, and celebrating new ways of being and becoming.

* A reference to Ocean Vuong's poem *Beautiful Short Loser*, 2022

** A quotation from Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, 1980