

1st floor  
3, 4, 5 november 1994

**kate ellis**

Kate's work resonates between possibilities; never quite one thing or another. Her work creates space(s) where many readings are possible; none of them final.

Each form is both a container and contained; a golden stocking and the leg it encloses; a suggested bodily presence missing its interior. The dislocated leg is hardly any less absent than the rest of the body, as it has been described but not filled in, its absence merely highlighted through transparent mesh, the lightness and emptiness of the legs is revealed. The absence of an internal body makes these forms also vessels, propped against the wall and filled with air. Silence, and emptiness, can actively refuse, and work makes use of an "active" emptiness in this way. Our experience of the body as a biological subject or a medical study is denied when we gaze straight through its gold exterior like some x-ray machine and find only space inside.

maria griffin

For plato beauty existed as a transcendent category, which any individual could only ever embody in part. Thus, socrates advises the seeker after beauty to love it, where it is found in sensuous form, but, not contenting himself with that, to proceed from object to object, loving always the one 'beauty' until he beholds beauty in its purist form, and recognises all of its physical manifestations to be mere shadows.<sup>1</sup>

The sculptors of classical antiquity created their images of goddesses not from one model, but from a synthesis of various

models, taking that element in each which approached nearest to the Ideal. The use of bronze is kate ellis' work, and the concern with the human figure links her to the sculptural tradition which has its foundations in greek classicism and idealist metaphysics.

These works interrogate the notion of Ideal Beauty which is implicit in the history of figurative sculpture and haunts the representations of women more generally within culture.

She does not portray the body directly, but the wire mesh stockings delineate the contours of the absent legs so precisely that they are given an almost palpable presence. If looked at in relation to the task of the classical sculptor - to create, by synthesis, an ideal image of beauty - these works suggest a moment of dismemberment prior to that of construction. The sculpture has the appearance of a storehouse of limbs, waiting to be selected. Or we might think of a row of legs in a chorus line. Each one differs a little from the next but resembles it as well, as if organised by their mutual relation to an invisible prototype. Beauty, according to neo-platonic logic, is the result of a resemblance, whereas ugliness, like formlessness, resembles nothing. Ugliness is thus a form of failure - a failure to replicate, to re-present, to create a double.<sup>2</sup>

None of these "legs" seem entirely free of this sense of failure. Some have a kind of bright hopefulness - flexed and expectant - but stacked against the wall they appear discarded, perhaps the ones rejected in the

process of selection. One, in particular, slumps grotesquely back on itself.

What these works bear witness to is the fragmentation of the female body, and the cost to subjectivity, involved in its relegation to the role of beautiful object. Stockings are a privileged signifier of the sexualised female body. They function both to conceal and reveal the body beneath, inciting desire by the deferral of sight, creating the partial obstruction which is the essence of erotic pleasure. But here the stockings are divested of the body that animates them. There is no female subject, just the empty signifiers of her objectified existence, which survive her and assume a life of their own, thus entering the realm of the fetish.

gabrielle martin

1. Plato, *symposium*, transl. w. hamilton, 1959, penguin books ltd, harmondsworth, middlesex

2. Denis hollier, "The use value of the impossible", *october*, vol. 60 p20. This notion of beauty is put forward in this article, but without reference to plato.

*"Like all representations of sexual difference that our culture produces, this is an image not simply of anatomical difference, but of the values assigned to it."*

craig owens

As women we are all framed by the circulation of images in society. More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. With specific regard to the female form, there has been an unequivocal masculine desire to fix the woman in a

stable and stabilising identity, particularly through the imagistic stereotype, the pose. Kate ellis' work offers the viewer an image exploring the fragmentation of the female body within visual culture. By using a particularly female or feminine image to parody sexual stereotypes existent in society the stability of the image is denied.

The values embedded within the traditionally fetishized female leg reveal the body's reduction in its transformation to image. Sewn bronze mesh and the sculpting of the overall form, imply a construction of femininity, one that has traditionally positioned viewers according to established codes of gender. Whilst Kate's work is undoubtedly beautiful and appeals to our desire to look, it also subverts this desire by revealing the way in which representations position women as objects of the male or masculine gaze.

Within the work there is no containment, only faltering borders and frayed edges. There is a sense of pent up aggression in the forms, a blurring of the boundaries between inside and outside. Meaning is complex and contradictory. Yet by taking control of identity and drawing attention to the complexities and fractured nature of our sense of self there is a challenge to the assumption that the image of women is somehow 'natural'. Such a project offers an important element in the struggle for self-definition and self-representation.

lucy elliot

## leg skins

There is an air of melancholy about this work, a sense that something valuable has been lost and that all we have left are old, discarded skins, remnants of a former glory. Skins which have been diligently collected to be pinned up flat against the wall exposed for all the world to see, disintegrating before a too insistent gaze and the harsh light of day - some still resounding with the violence which comes with the chase, capture and dismemberment involved in collecting as fetish. Yet these aren't brittle skins ready to decompose at the slightest touch, but images of organic matter made from a bronze metal (a material burdened with meaning through its traditional usage) shaped into long lines forever crisscrossing, paradoxically suggesting both an inflexible mathematical grid and a pliant textile weave. So there they stand, these ephemeral-like sculptures of legs, as haunting reminders of the body that had been there, a body of which all that remains is infinitely empty and unfillable space. There is no hot blood coursing through veins, rather, only a trace has been left of abject matter made all the more conspicuous for its absence. But where is that ballet-like leg reaching to, standing on highest tiptoe? It is posed in readiness, trying oh so hard, stretched tight to reach some ideal that others have decreed at the risk of collapse and deformation, unable to walk forward any more.

andrea tu

**kate ellis acknowledges the generous assistance of Melwire.**