

PRESS RELEASE

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Charlotte Colbert 'A Family Portrait', 2017. Corten steel structure, TV Screen displaying moving image.

BODY LANGUAGE

Polly Penrose, Camilla Hanney, Paloma Tendero
22 October – 20 November 2022 (Long Gallery)

Charlotte Colbert
22 October – 15 January 2023 (Barn)

Messums Wiltshire

PREVIEW: Friday 21 October, from 6:30pm, free event
EVENT: Body Talks, Saturday 22 October

This October, Messums Wiltshire is devoting its spaces to contemporary female artists. Each makes work centring around the body, using either their own or others to reflect upon ideas around power, pleasure, and disgust. All of these women has interrogated the nature of flesh – abstracting it into sculpture, focussing on its surface or recreating it from porcelain. They ask the viewer to think about the female form and the politics of the gaze. Bodies are presented as objects or even deconstructed, far removed from the idealised nudes of previous generations. The body becomes a painful vessel or a tool – something to be used and viewed rather than admired or sexualised. These works question women's roles – as makers, mothers, subjects, objects, lovers, to name but a few.

Polly Penrose's series of nude self-portraits, entitled *Chased by Swans*, brings together images made in several locations over recent years. The title is taken from a text in which Penrose shares some of the situations she encountered while making her pictures. The stillness and apparent ease of pose that Penrose presents to the viewer is often the result of a great deal of repetitive physical pain coupled with potential danger. Penrose works alone, using a self-timer, in difficult spaces that are often abandoned or hard to access, such as condemned housing. She often seeks out empty family homes about to be gutted, embracing the histories that are stored within them, giving them a final exposure before developers move in. She talks about the tension between vulnerability and empowerment within her work. The risks in working alone and naked in a strange space can be frightening; overcoming that fear and using it to make a picture is exciting and empowering.

It is a trope of art by women that they work with what they have, and this is certainly Polly's modus operandi – she becomes a sculpture or an abstracted shape, contorting herself and holding a pose. Sometimes she will attempt a pose up to sixty times, leaving her bruised and exhausted. What began as a necessity, not having the resources to hire models, has become a strength. She has given birth twice since her work began and has gradually aged before our eyes. Although her work is not diaristic, the inevitable evolution of her body reminds us of the shared reality of being human. These images are a form of escapism as Penrose uses her body to great effect, sometimes humorous, sometimes sculptural, but always anonymous (she never shows her face to the camera). This anonymity is essential: Penrose becomes a part of the image, no longer particular and certainly not personal but rather an object within a space.



Polly Penrose 'Self Portrait in Blue Tights, Johns' Flat', January 2017, © Polly Penrose

In contrast, **Charlotte Colbert**'s multi-part video piece, *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, 2017 confronts the viewer with a re-take on one of the most recognisable nude paintings made in post-war Britain. Freud's nude of the same title, painted in 1995, depicts Sue Tilley asleep on a sofa in his studio. The painting was a challenge to portraiture and the tradition of the recumbent nude. Colbert subverts these themes further, presenting Tilley as an active participant, as she wakes up at the end of the film, opening her eyes. This act reverses the gaze, as the subject looks back at the viewer, demanding to know why we are looking at her, questioning the power dynamic between artist, subject and viewer. The piece is large and heavy – deliberately so. It has physical presence, presenting the nude as a fractured, abstracted collage of screens. These are framed in rusted metal, in contrast with the gilt frame of traditional paintings. Colbert's nude is confrontational, excessive, and engaging, re-framing the history of art from a female point of view. The film, made in Freud's studio on the same sofa, demands that we question societal structures and the place of women within the art market. Freud's painting was briefly the most expensive work by a living artist to be sold (while prices realised by women artists remain disproportionately low). It reminds us that Sue Tilley was paid very little for her time and did not benefit from the record auction price.



Charlotte Colbert 'Benefit Supervisor Sleeping', 2017. Corten steel structure, TV Screen displaying moving image.

Camilla Hanney's plaster torsos, *Pillow Talk i & ii*, appear to be casts made from the body. They are in fact fabrications made using found domestic objects such as sheets and cushions. Like Penrose, Hanney is working with what she has. The white plaster torsos reference idealised Greco-Roman sculptures, appearing to be displaced archaeological fragments of draped figures. In contrast, the sumptuous ceramic banquet, *Indelicate Delights*, which at first appears to be inviting the viewer to dig in, incorporates insects and bones with elements moulded from Hanney's fingers. By subverting traditional genteel culture Hanney transgresses conventions of femininity, threatening the natural order and toying with the tension between desire and disgust. In *Wandering Womb*, a complex work of hinged porcelain, a female torso opens to reveal a fecund floral backdrop supporting a sleeping rat, its long tail curled like an umbilical cord. This is a reference to the medieval belief that the womb was almost creature-like and could wander around the body independently causing an array of mental health disorders and 'hysteria' in women. The piece suggests the multitude of real and metaphorical matter that we carry within and the depth of feeling that the body contains.



Camilla Hanney 'Wandering Womb', 2021. Porcelain, gold lustre, pearl lustre.

Paloma Tendero's photographs and sculptures focus on her genetic inheritance: she carries an incurable illness that was passed from her mother. Her work explores her body as a place of beauty, energy, and emotion as well as a vessel damaged by its genes that could fail at any time. She scrutinises the universal struggle between biological determinism and free will.

The series *Flawed Beauty* is presented as a large colour print with accompanying sculpture and a concertina piece that reveals the images as a series of evolving stills. In each image, Tendero presents herself as an antique sculpture, seated on a plinth and increasingly covered in small hand-made objects, which appear to be growing across her body, tendril-like and disturbing. The work questions our appreciation of classical sculpture (despite damage and imperfections) in contrast to the reality of the human body, subject to pain and flaws and beyond our control.



Paloma Tendero 'Flawed Beauty', 2016. Digital C-type Photograph.



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MESSUMS LONDON is a 2,000 sq ft exhibition space on Cork Street behind the Royal Academy. It hosts a rolling programme of exhibitions for our contemporary artists and is home to our photography department.