

BODY AS VERB

Sanné Mestrom



A body exaggerated

through love.

Through the fierce heat

of molten metal.

This unsettling arrangement

of stacking up everything I've ever been

next to everything I'm about to become.

Holding the weight for you, my love,

before you turn to water, to stone.

Climb up my hips, rest on my shoulder.

Your touch

becoming a tool for carving

these dense moments.

Dragging everything out of the river

to wrestle matter

through the deepest of times.

Holding space

for this love and the next.

Over and over.

One of the hallmarks of the English language is the provision of a substantial lexicon where one can find multiple terms to describe a single phenomenon, each with specific connotations that deviate ever so subtly. We can select from a list of synonyms a word that pinpoints with relative precision an action we wish to communicate and a particular feeling we wish to signify. We can hold, carry or cradle a weight, each term's accuracy changing with the context of the situation described. Sanné Mestrom's new series *Body as Verb* formally and conceptually explores the complex relationship between support and agency, which is echoed in the slippage between these four words. Experimenting with notions of monumentality, permanence and precision, Mestrom has fashioned abstracted bodily forms of varying materiality, finish and size. She has intentionally designed the series, including six robust legs and a reclining body, to be both aesthetic and functional – to hold each other (and the viewer) up visually and physically.

Mestrom's practice has always worked to complicate understandings of sculpture, but has recently focused more intently on exploring the agency of sculpture and its accountability to public and private space and the people that inhabit it. For Mestrom, this research is inseparable from the personal: *"like my body, particularly since giving birth and motherhood... every bit of me now has to 'function'. My body has a job to do, it has a responsibility to the world, and to the beings in my life. Equally, these objects are not inert, they also have a responsibility to other objects, and to the world at large."*

While each individual object is autonomous, the group can be reconfigured in countless arrangements – prostrate, outstretched or squatting structures all offer up sturdy support for smaller components or real bodies in the space. Scattered across the lush green grass of her Blue Mountain's yard, Mestrom moves her models around countless times allowing these humanesque contours to climb and cradle one another, a process that is equal parts chaos and nurture. The physical enactment of her creative process becomes a rumination on her own maternal body pulled in all directions as she works to sustain her loved ones and her career. She laughs as she describes to me how you would find her moving through life most days, *"I've always got my baby in one arm, grocery bags in the other, I'm kicking the car door shut with my foot, phone on my shoulder; that's kind of the picture of the working mum – everything is working, every bit of me has a job to do – my brain as an academic, my body as an artist, my heart as a mum."*

The utilitarian state of the female body could not be more relevant to the lives we've lived over the past 12 months. Termed the 'she-cession'

by researchers in the US, women have been disproportionately affected by the ongoing social impacts of the global pandemic. The situation is strongly tied to the realities of women's labour. Female-dominated industries have been hit the hardest and the pressure on working mothers to juggle careers with caring responsibilities has intensified during periods of school shutdowns. The ambiguity of Mestrom's raw, changeable forms enact visual and experiential cues that reflect the ambivalence linking the theoretical offerings and practical realities of liberation; the conundrum of keeping up fulfilling work both within and beyond the walls of the home.

Mestrom's now distinctive curvilinear language has been developed, remoulded and refined in constant dialogue with male masters of modernism such as Brancusi and Picasso. Previously referencing particular works or archetypes of their stylistic legacy, here Mestrom shows a maturity that exceeds the deconstruction of extant historic objects and forms, instead manifesting the visual residue left from a lifetime of canonical exposure into novel forms that take on a life of their own. The inheritance of Modernism is still palpable, but here, the playfulness of her mutable sculptures share a resonance with a particular female figure of 20th century art. Pivoting away from her equivocation between reverence and defiance of male modernists, the parallels that can be drawn between *Body as World* and the work of Dada artist Hannah Höch offers a reappraisal of women exploring notions of creativity, labour and the female body in new contexts.

The echo of Höch's cyborg-like 'New Woman' mashed together through the process of photomontage is palpable in Mestrom's sculptures. Described by Matthew Biro as a "heterogenous constellation of fragments" these images of the archetypal modern 'liberated' woman – part machine, part human, part media – reflected both trauma and regeneration, the dual spirit of the interwar Weimar period. Like Mestrom, Höch used photomontage to move beyond plain political critique and transform pre-existing images and forms into entirely new entities, yes with inescapable references to modern life, but with their own agency and energy to perform. While Höch dealt with an unprecedented historic moment that saw women enter the political and professional sphere, almost a century later Mestrom's work allows us to sit with the lived reality of these modernist legacies. As our weight is lifted from the floor we can appreciate the value of supportive mechanisms, be they as conspicuous and tangible as a bench or as ineffable as maternal nurture.

Imogen Dixon-Smith

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Mestrom lectures at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney

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Sullivan + Strumpf

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