

'BETWEEN HISTORY AND THE BODY' IS A DAMNED GOOD SUMMER ART SHOW

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Look back: Chungpo Tsering's *Selfie* (2014)
Courtesy of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection

"Between History and the Body" is a damned good summer show on view in a vaguely corporate art space you've never heard of. Called the 8th Floor, the gallery occupies — wait for it — the eighth story of a sleek sliver of a Chelsea building; its interior is as clean and sober as a foundation office, which it essentially is. A space opened in 2010 and backed by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation (the same couple who co-founded the nearby Rubin Museum, which

is focused on the art and culture of the Himalayas), the 8th Floor is only beginning to register, thanks to the hiring earlier this year of artistic director Sara Reisman. Reisman spent the previous six years commissioning art for the city's Percent for Art program, and she has put her intriguing Rolodex to good use here. Tasked with making shows themed on social justice and diversity, she tapped a dozen artists, all but one living, who hail from points far and wide — Jamaica, Japan, and Tibet among them — though many now practice in New York.

As its title suggests, "Between History and the Body" digs into the often compressed zone between the past as it is chronicled — with that unspoken caveat, by the Man — and individual experience. The earliest work here is by a feminist's feminist, Ana Mendieta, who in 1972 created a series of photographic self-portraits of her naked body smooshed up against glass plates. Any woman who has had a mammogram will know the feelings these pictures evoke — contorted and soft flesh up against unyielding edges. Breast tissue hangs over the plate like a cliff; a behind flattens against the sheet's strict geometry. The metaphor of compromise and contortion in the face of expectation — that unyielding glass — is pretty clear. But the pictures never feel heavy-handed.

Gender figures more playfully in Elia Alba's video, *If I were a...*, in which a male actor tries on a series of bodysuits printed with photographic images of a female figure. As he poses and preens, we can't help but think of America's lady of the moment, Caitlyn Jenner, and the finality of those surgeries Bruce underwent to become her. Good on Cait for becoming who she wanted to be, but damned if today's medical interventions haven't ushered in such accelerated gender change that it makes us wistful for the theater and play of drag. Made in 2003, *If I were a...* recalls an earlier, less medicalized era.

Remember Nick Cave? Ha-ha, yeah, just kidding. We see so many of his "Soundsuits" around — how many Jack Shainman shows, how many museum exhibitions — they're everywhere. But what about their origin story? Reisman's wall text reminds us that Cave started making them in response to the LAPD beating of Rodney King in 1992, one of the first police-brutality videos in a pre-cellphone era. Cave has said he made his suits — costumes that fit an adult human, wildly ornamented — in order to embellish the body while protecting the wearer from outside culture. Whatever humor and lightness the suits possess — the one here is made from rugs and afghans that form a massive gaping mouth, a touch menacing but mostly cartoonish — it was brutality that inspired them.

Very recent events — the deaths last year of Eric Garner and Michael Brown — inform several of Queens-based artist Shaun Leonardo's drawings. Best known for performance work about sports, masculinity, and race, Leonardo has more recently produced suites of graphite and charcoal drawings, many of them self-portraits (one is here). The artist's six-panel suite of Garner images repeats the identical, much-published photo of Garner in a chokehold; some iterations leave the cops unresolved, just a patch of blank paper where figures should appear, leaving Garner on his own with hands up. Another renders the scene in ghostly outlines. The notion of lost memory and conflicting accounts comes through here, but the source picture's heavy media rotation makes it hard not to see these drawings as news first, art later. Leonardo's at his best in an arresting portrait of himself as a wrestler battling an invisible adversary, intensity radiating from around his eyes as he contends with the unseen. The work speaks more eloquently to struggle — racial, personal, gender-based, whatever — than any of the rest. It's a show standout.

Where struggle with the outside ends and personal demons begin isn't an easy distinction, and some of that confusion is embodied in Chungpo Tsering's hilarious and horrifying charcoal *Selfie*. The Tibet-born artist drew the familiar arm-outstretched, phone-in-hand pose, but here the head isn't yours or mine but more than a dozen security cameras pointed this way and that, like a modern-day Medusa. Who surveils and who is surveilled? To Tsering, our lives are looking like a hall of mirrors.

Another power relationship gets analyzed in Brendan Fernandes's near-perfect video, *Foe*. It's a four-and-a-half-minute-long study of a non-native English speaker being taught how to pronounce lines from J.M. Coetzee's book of the same name (which in turn was based on *Robinson Crusoe*). The man voices phrases such as "they cut out his tongue" and "his teeth white as ivory" over and over; a woman, off camera, stops him, again and again, demanding he harden the R in "ivory" or refocus his breath. Now and then the camera closes in on the man's mouth as it works to accommodate her demands. The banality of the circumstances — this could be a language class — suggests something sinister. In an instant the piece becomes not about race, per se, but the power plays of everyday life.