

Dark Body Jack Butler

**an essay
Andre Jodoin**

Dark Body

Abbreviations used

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| GENI | Genital Embryogenesis |
| SER1 | Serpent Brain (Black) |
| SER2 | Serpent Brain (White) |
| MRI | In the MRI: Coffin and Chrysalis |
| STE1 | The Steps, Dundas Street West Rail Bridge |
| STE2 | The Red Steps: Love and Fear of Heights |
| IMAG | Imago |
| NINE | The Nine Circles of Hell |
| NINT | The Ninth Portion of Paradise |
| OCCA | Occam's Hand |

The plan for this exhibition came about in a discussion between myself and Jack Butler concerning the nature of an art practice. Generally the theory of art practice is often treated the same as the theory of art. However, while the theory of art (aesthetic theory) frequently touches on the practice of artists, it organizes itself around works. A thematic discussion of practice, a theory of practice, is left to artists themselves. There does not appear to be many takers.

In recent history, artists identified a practice with the art medium and with the production of works. In artist talks, practice was everywhere mentioned but production and technique were usually what was discussed. Since the 1970s, the proliferation of art products such as installation, performance and video has made such identification less desirable. Artists today are more likely to identify themselves as creative directors rather than as medium-specific artists. This has contributed to the tendency to incorporate aesthetic theory, now integral to the education of artists, in the practice of art. One thinks for instance of the role Merleau-Ponty's philosophy played in minimalist art or of Walter Benjamin's critical theory in productions of image-text. With the dissemination of cultural studies and media theory in graduate programs, this direction has culminated in the idea of aesthetic theory, not just as background knowledge but as (an artistic) practice. This should not be a problem but it seems that the result has been that artists are led to discuss issues and positions generated by the practice (of theory), rather than the practice itself. The grey and sometimes confusing or troublesome path that leads an artist to theorize is rarely given voice. Such a discussion may appear too modest for theorists but it is the threshold in practice that aesthetic theory does not or cannot surmount.

One of the great virtues of aesthetic theory---its portability, is also a liability. The practice of theory does not necessarily reveal how practitioners sustain their involvement with art, that is to say, how they practice a practice. The practice of theory could simply be an index of sociability, a rhetoric, operating in university art departments today. Practice means a way of sustaining a relationship with artistic expression. It concerns an ethical way of living as well as working and does not necessarily result in the production of a work or a model.

Despite this reservation, I do think that aesthetic theory is a great resource in theorizing practice. This discussion of JB's work begins with a sketch of his practice and then moves to a discussion of the aesthetic theory that I feel furthers our understanding of both practice and works.

Dark Body is comprised of works that date as far back as 1990 with the majority of works between 2012 and the present. JB's previous solo exhibitions have also included past works. This happens partly because his career is long, he has travelled widely and participated in a number of different communities. It is also due to the quantity of work he produces, and the infrequent opportunities for solo exhibition. The selection of works for solo exhibitions has been guided by his current interest and by works that have not likely been seen before at that locale, but which are not necessarily new. The approach differs from artists who have lived and worked in the same place for an extended period and are represented by a commercial gallery or an artist-run centre. For

these artists, solo exhibitions are typically comprised of only new works and are typically received as representing a phase in artistic development.

That being said, JB's approach to exhibiting is not just dictated by circumstance; it also proposes the existence of an indefinite series of works, or multiple projects. His solo exhibitions do not satisfy, address, the expectation of progress in artistic development; they are better understood in terms of spatial expansion.

The multiple series or projects presented in JB's exhibitions are related to what I would describe as community-based projects. One advantage of his long career is one can follow the ebb and flow of his involvement in multiple contexts; the Sanavik artist cooperative studio in Baker Lake, Nunavut, the medical research community of the Children's Hospital of Winnipeg Research Foundation and gay artist communities in Winnipeg and Toronto. Each series of works is generated through an engagement with a community over an extended period of time. Of course, most artists work through a community—it is not unusual and is rather more to be expected. But what I see with respect to JB's practice is that his community engagements are of a more particular kind of experience, an adventure. The communities referred to are by no means alike, each demanding very different abilities and capacities on the part of the artist. For instance, some knowledge of medical science and procedures, the ability to speak Inuktitut, etc. None of these communities are alike or have significant cross-over connections. That JB relates to these communities as a person directly impacts his artistic practice.

For this exhibition I have chosen to focus on his work with the Winnipeg medical researchers, and a particular event around which a series of works was organized. One work, in particular, (GENI), was the result of formal collaboration, realized as a visual component of the local team's empirical research, that also drew on published medical experts speaking on the subject of embryogenesis. This particular series drew me into JB's work and I shall discuss this more extensively below. Another show could be organized around a different series, coming, for instance from JB's involvement with the Sanavik coop and the later involvement with Art and Cold Cash .

In consultation with JB, I emulated his usual exhibition practice, and applied it in selecting works for the exhibition, with one exception. His last show at the Red Head Gallery featured an animation from his research in genital embryogenesis, a sculpture related to his long-term residency at Baker Lake as well as his then most recent series of drawings of gay erotic imagery. I began by re-selecting some still images from the animation (GENI) and two drawings done during the same year, 1990, neither of which have been shown publicly (SER1 and SER2). From that point I saw a connection to JB's drawing and his experience in the MRI (2011), all of these being related thematically to the interior of the human body. Next, three drawings with architectural renderings were chosen (STE1, STE2 and IMAG), this subject matter being rare in his work (2012-2013). At the start of our work together on this project, JB was finishing one of two major drawings in homage to William Blake and these were chosen as another series or direction(NINE and NINT, 2012-2013). The last work selected was inspired by series of drawings related to the artist's own hand and to a shoulder injury that has affected the use of his hands.

This is the collaborative work with Chandra Bulucon, (OCCA, 2014) that features a table-mounted drawing that may be activated by a viewer to play Bulucon's songs.¹

JB's works range from drawing to sculpture to performance. Dark Body features drawings that incorporate such approaches as expressionist gesture, architectural rendering, realist representation, notation—all of which are complicated by his practice of layering images. The layering is achieved either by creating an implied transparency in which one image is seen simultaneously through another, or by producing ambiguous contours between images that result in seeing two images alternately. In STE1 one sees a strongly defined architectural rendering of the steps of a pedestrian bridge transparently through a pencilled image of the heads of two men in amorous embrace. In STE2 another architectural rendering of steps is seen alternately with the image of a body drawn with colour washes.

The OCCA drawing shows the image of many hands, represented realistically, accompanied by string lines of handwriting that follow the contours of the hands, or are contained as blocks of text within those same contours. The multi-directional written lines are remarkable in that they oscillate for the viewer between legibility and readability. Seen as contour, the writing reveals an intimacy with the creases of the flesh in the hands. Seen as strings of words, they shift the image to an alternate conceptual plane. It is characteristic of JB's practice to create unstable sets of images, which ultimately refers to borders and thresholds.

The works devoted to William Blake, NINE and NINT, are extensively detailed with words and images in which, moreover, words and images interpenetrate. The spiral shape of the central figure in NINE suggest a stretching of the line from thought to body.

Dark Body is organized around the particular series and collaborative endeavour of JB's work with the medical research team, what we jointly refer to as the art/ science connection. This organizing centre is only directly represented by one set of works (GENI). My aim is to identify an event in his work that has some obvious implications in some works (SER1, SER2, MRI) but not necessarily in others (NINE, NINT, OCCA).

In a time where cross-disciplinary research is common, the relations between art and science does not necessarily appear as an issue. To a person of JB's generation and my own, however, the division between science and art has the hallmark of modernity: we interpret nature one way and culture another.

1. OCCA was produced during the preparation for the exhibition and was not complete before the writing of this essay. Consequently I can only comment on the drawing component of the work.

The dividing of nature and culture in this way has a long history of course and was laid out by the Finnish philosopher G. H. von Wright in his essays on understanding and explanation. In the simplest terms, explanation is the concept we use to refer to the scientific interpretation of the world produced, for example, by physics. Understanding refers to the interpretation of the world offered by basically any area of the humanities. The concepts are opposed; it is a two world theory. No one would like to say that they can explain a poem and no one would propose to say that they understand gravity. Nevertheless, both approaches to interpretation make a claim to truth. My own interest begins with an essay by Suzanne Langer *Suzanne Langer, Abstraction in Science and Abstraction in Art* (1951). In her view, the two approaches to interpretation are complementary. A more recent statement that encapsulates this idea is Jerome Bruner's essay *Two Modes of Thought* (1986). Bruner discusses the paradigmatic mode of thinking that is based in truth, logic and good argument and the literary mode that operates on the basis of a verisimilitude, a convincing narrative. There is a symmetry here that we associate with the stability of modernity.

This view seems to be widely accepted but it may be so just because art and science generally pursue different objects. Does this complementary relation of objective cognitions and subjective expressions appear in the case where the object is the same? The human body is a case in point. As JB writes,

Could the body stand in the place of the limen between two historically defined solitudes? Can the body be represented as an ontologically transparent layer through which art and science are mutually visible?²

For artists who enter the medical realm, the distinction between objectivity and expression can never be so clear cut as it is for Langer and Bruner. This is not because the works they produce appear markedly different from that of other artists, but because their practice of entering the body, as artists—not a physicians—involves a transgression. Since Greek sculpture and the classical nude, artists' powers of observation have been trained on the surface of the human body. Observing the dark interior of the body is largely the domain of science and medicine. When anybody other than a physician cuts into the body, the act is immediately associated with death or danger of death. The physician's observation of the body's cavity is justified by their practice of healing. The artist's observation of the body cavity cannot be justified this way (even though it may support the education of physicians). It transgresses not only medical science but also artistic traditions of the nude. The only justification an artist can claim for entering the human body, directly or by proxy, is a claim to truth that differs from the idea of aesthetic beauty. This is where an asymmetrical trajectory appears in the two world theory.

In JB's work with the medical science team, he identifies, and privileges through a sculptural process, a particular moment in genital development that is termed 'indifferent' and prior to sexual differentiation (GENI). Had this particular process been mod-

2. Butler, Jack. "Before Sexual Difference: The Art and Science of Genital Embryogenesis." *Leonardo* (1993): 196.

elled through the use of three-dimensional computer graphics instead of sculpture, it would not likely lead to confronting this particular moment as being significant since it would be the result of an interpolation of points. In contrast to an efficient technique, sculptural modeling involved the full deployment of an art practice in relation to a complex object:

The model...is produced by deliberately abstracting information from research in order to construct a selective visualization whose spatial dimensions are the product of the artist's knowledge of the objects described. The candid relationship between the abstract model and the theory that lies behind its creation is the source of the model's usefulness to science and its link with the visual arts.³

The idea that male and female genitalia are based in a common, 'indifferent' genital structure is by no means common knowledge and JB discusses what he takes to be the important implications for feminism, science, art and politics.⁴ My interest has been more in understanding how his medical work is integral to his artistic practice rather than a simple application of his skills.

Moreover, the tension between the regimes of art and science that becomes apparent in his medical research started me thinking about how his work might be described from an aesthetic point of view. It led me to consider more deeply than before conflicts that emerge from dividing the body as an inside and outside. That is, I began to think about the geometry of the body. Eventually I was led to read Gilles Deleuze's discussion of the 17th century philosopher Leibniz in Deleuze's book on the baroque. I was immediately struck by Deleuze's obvious excitement as he interprets Leibniz's understanding of the body.

I must have a body, , it's a moral necessity, a "requirement". And in the first place, I must have a body because an obscure object lives in me. But, right from the first argument, Leibniz's originality is tremendous. He is not saying that only the body explains what is obscure in the mind. To the contrary, the mind is obscure, the depths of the mind are dark, and this dark nature is what explains and requires a body... In place of Cartesian physical induction Leibniz substitutes a moral deduction of the body.⁵

Deleuze's extended discussion of Leibniz here helped me understand JB's response to the indifferent stage of embryogenesis and vice versa: in the making of GENI, it was impossible to remain indifferent to the staging of the body development as indifferent. JB

3. Ibid, pp. 194.

4. JB's full response to this moment of discovery is given in detail in his article in Leonardo as noted above.

5. Deleuze, Gilles, and Tom Conley. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. University of Minnesota Press, 1992: 85.

does in fact make a moral deduction. Deleuze's interpretation of Leibniz reveals the complexity of the latter's thought:

But this first argument gives way to another, which seems to contradict it, and which is even more original. This time, we must have a body because our mind possesses a favored—clear and distinct—zone of expression. Now it is the clear zone that is the requirement for having a body... It is because we have a clear zone that we must have a body charged with traveling through it or exploring it, from birth to death.⁶

Of course I do not hope to make this passage any clearer than it is, or aim to summarize the discussion of these two philosophers. What I want to draw attention to is that in order to apprehend the general sense of the above passages, one is required to at least imagine a geometry which is not Euclidean. Indeed, this is why Deleuze takes the figure of the fold as central in his elaboration of philosophical perspectivism, and, also, the aesthetics of the baroque. In relation to JB's medical research, the geometry of the fold, when thought in relation to the body, is especially suggestive in that we might see embryogenesis as an unfolding rather than a formation. At any rate, here, in Leibniz, is a geometry directly related to a moral idea. And that is a completely different beginning point than the two world theory where we must interpret nature one way and culture another.

In working out his own philosophy of perspectivism, Deleuze uses a wide range of concepts drawn from the study of the natural world and of cultural phenomena such as rhizome and nomad. His use of the concepts are not to be taken too literally because they are being used in aid of concretizing an abstract, metaphysical system. However, such concepts are useful in pointing to a more general appreciation of JB's practices: his approach to exhibition, his community-based projects and his layering of images. Moreover, I find use of these concepts useful in countering the common approach to viewing the works in terms of autobiography. There is certainly a great deal of autobiographical material in JB's work and the very use of handwriting in an art work does suggest the approach. However, JB's works are not framed as self-portraiture. The works are rather pathways that connect to other objects besides himself. The botanical concept of the rhizome refers to a root system that spreads across or below a surface that can suffer disconnection and still spread out, re-connecting with itself. Deleuze uses this idea to explicate the idea of a unity that is comprised of a multiplicity. JB's exhibition practice is similar to this in that shows do suggest successive phases of artistic development but expand in space through multiple projects.

Deleuze's concept of the nomad is particularly useful in understanding JB's community-based projects. I have previously noted how the communities in which JB has worked are very different from each other such that engagement in one will result in a sculpture related to scientific purposes, while engagement in another will produce a sculpture based on shamanistic practices. From a certain cultural perspective, these productions may appear opportunistic or even exploitative. However, nomadic

6. Ibid, pp. 85-86.

societies are defined by their movement across territories and have always evolved a culture based on trade. For Deleuze, the concept helps conceptualize a culture that is not based on accumulation but generally loses and gains in relation to directions taken.

In a study of historical nomad art, and drawing upon the works of art historians, Deleuze conceives of the perception of space from this perspective, describing the passages between smooth (or haptic) and striated space.

The study is useful in gaining a more general appreciation of the way JB uses the layering of images, which is really an art of transitions. However, a full discussion of these concepts cannot be accomplished here. My main effort has been to account for JB's artistic practices and create a link to aesthetic theory on that basis.

Toronto, May, 2014

I would like to thank JB, CC, VL and CG for their editorial comments and corrections on the first draft of this essay.