

A conversation between Jory Drew and curatorial director Elizabeth Lalley on the occasion of Jory Drew's exhibition "Curtain Wall."

*Elizabeth Lalley: There is a visual doubling that happens in your soft paintings—an ongoing series of works each titled "Untitled (Dissemblance)," in which bodies (torsos, genitals, partial legs) also can be read as faces (eyes, tongues, mouths). I'm interested in the way they slip between these two perspectives. How do you see this doubling in the work? How did the visual language for these bodies/faces develop for you?*

Jory Drew: I think a lot for me comes from this idea of "decapitation." I'm thinking about what it is to not actually have an identity, but to be seen as a "being" or to have an open identity. In terms of a viewer encountering the work, there's a readable body language happening, but the figure isn't necessarily an identified person.

Early on in my work, navigating ideas of desire, I focused on portraiture. I created a space where I could have people I was attracted to act as a sort of muse; where I could facilitate a certain type of action within a specific environment; or have a kind of one-to-one meaningful situation, experimenting with form.

When considering a person outside of objective beauty or some type of relationship or mental particularity that I held them in...it's more about how I could focus on social cues and contemporary social/political situations and paradoxes around desire, around the body, around identity, that aren't specifically tied to a person or myself.

I realized that I could mirror my own loneliness or lack within the work that I was making, rather than trying to use my craft as a tool to find an answer to that loneliness or lack. The work reflected my own situation and perspective of life, and I began to use *myself* and had to find a proxy form for myself, my loneliness, my lack. Having these kind of headless forms allows there to be an open and more relatable identity for everyone else's loss.

Also going back to the idea of decapitation...plenty of people have used it within the history of horror, and it's representative of a lot of spaces around desire, violence and

desire, and pain and pleasure. Just in terms of my own contemporary queer references or influences, there's the connection to things like thirst traps, cam boys—how much of it is torso and head.

*EL: This doubling, these ideas of “proxies” or “mirrors” which happens in both your paintings and in your ceramic figures, too, reminds me of an essay by Hilton Als, from “White Girls,” where he describes relationships where a “twin-ship” is happening, not in a biological sense, but in a sort of mirroring effect, an identification with (and even over-identification) with another. At one moment he writes: ‘Twinship...is the archetype of closeness; it is also the archetype for difference: In one’s other half, one sees both who one is and who one isn’t.’ To me this resonates with things that are happening in your work and what you have said about proxies, although in the case of this work, the doubling is being enacted within the same figure. How do these ideas of shadows/shadow-selves, mirrors, twin-ship, fit into your work?*

JD: I think that with what's interesting with Hilton Als and the book “White Girls” is that not only is it a criticism of different “icons” and the situational behavior that's forming them, but also of icons within black culture, as they're dealing not only with who they are but who they are as “black” or “white” people within contemporary culture at the time. There are plenty of writers who talk about doubling, whether it's double-consciousness or doppelgangers, or dealing with stereotypes. We can think about Melissa Harris Perry's “Sister Citizen” and work around the idea of dissemblance, which occurred so that one could operate in society, particularly American society, in terms of being a citizen and what that looks like through different races and locales within America.

Within the culture of dissemblance that Darlene Clark Hine brings up, it is not only about protection for yourself and your community, but the space it provides for you to be your autonomous self, where there is safety within this area of hiding, and not just hiding as a tool to accrue power for oneself or to “pass” or to “transcend.” That you can hold room for yourself and your community that other people can't penetrate and operate within.

So going back to Hilton Als...it's like there is this kind of figure that you're holding against other people as well as yourself, in terms of not what but *who* you are and what

you carry with you in terms of your own history and pain and pleasure. I had to figure out a way to encapsulate my emotions. Making these golem-esque figures, these dolls, these vessels, allowed me to take my fantasies and my fears and form them into these held moments. I think about snapshots in a way. To some extent, the figures can also be dancers. They also can be these flashes, because of the high contrast. I think with the composite forms, it really is my intention to have loops like a loose collage, where the sculptures are humanoid forms underneath body-shaped layers of clay. So who you are, who you become, what is forced upon you creates this pressure and this weight, but it is also your lived existence. I'm thinking about the literal work and pressure it takes to transform, and shapeshift, and to hold a certain stature. I can create a modular structure that can also mimic or reflect this kind of layered experience that I'm having as I live my life and how I may be read.

***EL: Within the distortion that happens in the work that I asked about previously—the shift from body to face and back— there's this element of humor in the optical shift (a phallus becoming a tongue for instance). There's a cartoonish-ness at moments, an animated quality. But then for me, there's also a pang of anxiety or discomfort that comes in the humor of it, too, which is maybe a result of laughing at or finding amusement in another's body. Maybe because it can overlap with a sort of schadenfraude or humor in humiliation and pain. I'm thinking, too, about the ways you've explored shame and entertainment. Can you speak to this a bit? This tension between seriousness and humor?***

JD: As you said, within my practice I've worked with shame before. There is a history of shaming...public, punitive games and acts that have happened in history that people have been pressured to partake in, whether it's a situation like the Salem Witch Trials. You have things like public stonings, and moments where people wear shame masks, and then you have dunk tanks and throwing pies at people. Sometimes it's related to protesting something as well, like mocking and shaming politicians. I do think there is a relationship to shame where people derive pleasure from it because we are all locked within a system of power and abuse. I think that our pleasure is connected to that and can't really be disconnected.

Pleasure is problematic. But I think that entertainment is problematic. You think about the movie industry, you think about sports, you think about porn, which has a lot of areas

for empowerment but also has a history that extends to slavery and other things that aren't necessarily favorable or kind or just. I think that overall, I wrestle with how I make images that also deal with these situational circumstances. Because you're right, there is a tension there. It makes me think about Jennifer Christine Nash's book "The Black Body" and some of their arguments, and how pain and pleasure are connected, like we talked about before, but also how ecstasy and pleasure are different and how you can find pleasure in being able to inhabit stereotypical or minoritized forms and being able to extrapolate areas of empathy for yourself and your own pleasure.

*EL: As you're saying this, it's making me wonder...with your figures, in the paintings and in the sculptural forms, do you see them as being in a "state" of something? Are they in ecstasy? Are they "somewhere" ?*

JD: That's interesting. That's an interesting question. Are they somewhere? They're stand-ins, they're representations of things. To me, they are three tones, three colors within a field. And when considering depth or light, the forms could be hollow, like a Jack-o-lantern. The forms can be flushed with blood and color. I don't really see them in a state. I see them as they are. Because they are larger than life in terms of how you meet them, see them, interact with them, they become somewhat fictional. They become a part of fantasy. And I think that if someone is titillated by it, that it does enter into a realm of ecstasy where it is more about your own desires as they relate to society and systems of power. It's more about you. I don't really see them in a state, but I see them as how they could be seen.

I was also really interested in André Kertész's "Distortions" series. There are all these women who are in front of this crooked, kind of S-shaped concave, funhouse-like mirror. I think to some extent, people weren't ready for that type of shift in the body. And if you think about how so much of that is also light, is dealing with another structure, with the body in front of something, and then that image being held and encapsulated and mass produced. This photograph of a body in relationship to industrially-produced materials, but also to science and oddity, and pushed out to other people. And so that's also a part of it. Really it's like there's a third person in the room all this time. A phantom being.

*EL: In line with the ideas you've just mentioned (of the mirror, the illusion, the funhouse) I want to ask about architecture—specifically the curtain wall and also the presence of architecture in your work more broadly. Can you talk a little bit about these ideas?*

JD: We live in a built system. There's an architecture to it, there's a way to navigate it and there's a way that other things flow through it. And so I'm conscious of that. I've been trying to navigate around the idea of the curtain wall for a while, in terms of thinking about facades and the aspect of posing or passing or hiding. Masks, layers, graffiti. What is the frontality, the superficiality, of being. Half of that equates or relates to value.

In medieval architecture, the curtain wall is outer layer between the castle or town and what is outside of it. It's a protective layer. I saw that in relationship to the culture of dissemblance—how you have this outer layer of protection that not only allows you to operate within society, but gives you this space of protection.

In contemporary architecture, it relates to the factory or the glass home. I love the idea of the factory. I love the idea of the mass produced object, the repetition, but also the building up of something else, the amalgamation versus the loss, the erasure of detail and the self. Thinking also about light and cheap material. What is it to have a strong foundation and a well-built space or self.

*EL: Because the thing about the curtain wall is that it's an image in sense, right? The strength of the curtain wall doesn't actually indicate the strength of the kingdom. It's the first thing seen or encountered, but it could actually have no relationship to the inner part of whatever it is in front of, in terms of strength or foundation, right?*

JD: Right. And thinking about the use of the façade. I think about something like the Olympics, or I think about the “White City” of Chicago. I think about this history of the global fair. What is it to put up this image of America? Just thinking about ways of breaking through this forth wall of existence.

*EL: Often, the built forms that exist in your exhibitions—the pedestals in this show, for instance—show their “bones” in a sense. They are often stripped down to their barest parts, while also existing in the exhibition space as obstructions or guides, directing the viewers through the space. How do you think about these constructions or display methods in the larger framework of your practice?*

JD: Exhibitions have always been a huge part of my learning experiences. I spent a lot of time when I was younger being able to go to different art shows in town, and I would go to the library and look at different monographs. With these shows, I thought about and saw how they were putting things together. Later, with my own artwork, I saw how people were moving within the space where the work was being shown. I wanted to be able to interact not only with the mind and the eye, but also the body.

Part of installing and curating a space is the relationship to your viewer, and you can use your object in space to create a dance or relationship to your viewer as though you. I think about what it is to read a wall. The architecture of an exhibition is my chance of being able to build and create a specific environment or system that I'm trying to break down. And so I think that there is power in the ways in which you make space for or against people. And so why not use that? It's language. There is power in how you make space for or against people. And so why not use that? How the work looks is related to the bones of things—what's really holding things up and how fragile can those structures be? How easily can they be shifted and changed?

*EL: Right. It feels like exhibition-making is often about concealment. There's this sense, especially in big old institutions, that certain structures or methods of display have always been there and have to look a certain way...but the aesthetics of your show, the grommets that you hang your paintings from and the exposed hardware of the pedestals, are all about the scaffolding, about showing what stuff is made of.*

JD: Within larger institutions, these things are meant to be seen as foolproof, as historical.

*EL: Neutral...*

JD: Exactly. No faults. But if I'm going to give you a fake wall, you're going to be able to see the cracks, you're going to be able to see the paint drips, and you're going to be able to see how one screw is further in and more structurally sound than the other. It speaks to frailty, but it also to energy, to capability. Institutions don't want to have an open conversation about that because it allows people to see the cracks and find their own autonomy and agency. I think that these things need to be talked about, things that need to be seen.