On Exhibit: Marc Quinn and Alexa Wright: The Aesthetics of Disability, From Antiquity to the Modern Age.

In 1999, Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum re-opened its doors to the public in its new location: the Spa town's historic Royal Pump Rooms. Since 2000, the Art Gallery has developed a specialist collection called 'Medicate', which links to the history of the Pump Rooms as a former medical treatment centre, and expands the Museum's collections of contemporary art and medical equipment. Emily Smith selects four works from this collection that explore the aesthetics of disability, from antiquity to the modern age.

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In 2015, a unique collection of artworks was shown at Leamington Spa Art Gallery as part of the *Medicate* exhibition, curated by Alice Swatton. *Medicate* explored the physical, societal and psychological effects of disease and disability on the person, and concurrently examined the values and practices of medical science. The exhibition included recent acquisitions, which now comprise part of the 'Medicate Collection', such as the specially-commissioned work *Touch* (2010, slings and weight bags) by Lyndall Phelps (1958–), which is a response to the sling apparatus used in therapeutic pools, and the lifting exercises applied to patients by the physiotherapists. Another example is *Weight* (2008, pencil on mapping paper) by Jacqueline Donachie (1969–), which conceptualises the artist's sister's condition of Muscular Dystrophy. It was acquired by the Art Gallery & Museum for its resonance with the treatments that formerly took place in its building: as a former spa and public baths (1814-1990), it used to receive visitors for hydrotherapy and physiotherapy treatments. Other pieces featured in the *Medicate* exhibition include works by Marc Quinn (1964–), Alexa Wright (1962–) and Laura Glassar that explore issues of disability and body image, and challenge what it means to be beautiful. Both the Quinn and Wright pieces are currently on permanent display at LSAG&M amongst other notable works from the Medicate Collection, including Damien Hirst's *Last Supper* series (1999).

Mark Quinn, *Catherine Long* (2000)

Catherine Long (2000), a sculpture in Macedonian white marble by contemporary British artist Marc Quinn is a jewel in LSAG&M's permanent Medicate Collection. It is currently one of the first works that a visitor sees upon entering the gallery. It is part of *The Complete Marbles* (1999–2005) – a series of life-size, marble portraits of artists and sportspeople with

missing or miss-formed limbs resulting from illness, accident or birth. Catherine Long is a British performance artist whose work explores issues of objectification, restriction and freedom, and control and embodiment. Other sitters for Quinn's series include the artist Alison Lapper; whose 3.5m sculpture-portrait, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), was installed for several months on the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. *The Complete Marbles* was produced with the aide of traditional marble masons in Pietrasanta, Italy, and each model chose their nude, classical pose in discussion with the artist.

The Complete Marbles was first conceived when Quinn was looking at the fragmented marble sculptures in the British Museum. He was struck by the question of how the museum-visiting public would respond if they were faced with a real person with missing limbs. As the artist stated:

> It was interesting to me to see what is acceptable in art, but unacceptable in life. As I made the series of works, I realised that they were also about what a beautiful body is, and how narrow our vision of that is. Although the models' bodies are visually comparable to the antique fragmented marble statues, of course my sculptures are portraits of whole people and not fragments of people.[1]

This idea of *wholeness* in disability identity is very significant, as too easily the conversations around disability can fixate on ideas of lack or limitation. A comparable piece of work that likewise looks to reclaim the female disabled body from this disconnect is *Cutting the Ties that Bind* (1987, The Arts Council collection) a series of photographs by Mary Duffy (1961–). An Irish performance artist and painter, Duffy was born without arms after her mother was prescribed Thalidomide – a drug widely used in the 1950s and 60s to treat morning sickness, but which caused more than 10,000 children to develop foetal abnormalities. During her childhood, Duffy was 'normalised' through the use of prosthetic limbs – which were less of an assistance to her, than a comfort to those around her. Much of her art is an assertion of self, and *Cutting the Ties* is such an example. The first plate of this photographic series depicts a standing figure wrapped in a white cloth, completely obscured against a dark background. In the second plate, the drapery has partially slipped, revealing a female figure without arms, dramatically lit in a pose that references the Louvre's *Venus de Milo*; an artwork that 'we have no difficulty in compensating and seeing... as an aesthetic whole'.[2] The final plate shows the subject stepping out from the drapery and into the light with a triumphant smile. As Duffy wrote:

> By confronting people with my naked body, with its softness, its roundness and its threat, I wanted to take control, redress the balance in which media

> representations of disabled women is usually tragic, always pathetic. I wanted to hold up a mirror to all those people who had stripped me bare previously… the general public with naked stares, and more especially the medical profession.[3]

Similarly, there is nothing tragic in Quinn's representation of *Catherine Long*. A parallel can also be made between his sculpture and the famous *Venus de Milo* (c.130-100BC) – with the right arm extended forward, and the left finishing at the shoulder – although with Quinn's sculpture, the body isn't twisted and yielding, but facing the viewer front-on, head held high. The sculptural Long plants her foot in front of her in a self-assured stance, but in the same gesture the figure, too, moves to step off the plinth and away from the conceptions that bind her more than her disability.

Diane Kirkpatrick wrote this of *Cutting the Ties* in her article 'Images of Disability':

> A viewer well-versed in Western culture is suspended between confronting Duffy's unmistakably living flesh and seeing that body through overlaid memory images of 'incomplete' Classical sculpture like the *Venus de Milo*, which have moulded our modern conventions for beauty.[4]

Duffy and Quinn's citations of classical statuary are pertinent only in terms of their form and material, but also in the way they break down classical constructions of beauty. The eighteenth-century Neoclassical aesthetic, which led to an idealisation of white marble, was underpinned by notions of an 'archetypal' and 'objective' beauty that had never existed in antiquity. Greek and Roman statues have long been regarded as fragmentary objects cast in a white purity, but in actuality, classical statuary in its prime was both complete in form and brightly painted.[5] Remains of pigments on these ancient sculptures reveal colours that modern tastes – trained by the Neoclassical movement – would consider 'gaudy' on a statue. Interestingly, this discovery has also revealed a more diverse range of represented ethnicities than had been previously upheld by Western art historians, with traces of different skin-tones challenging long-established ideas of whiteness and 'perfection'.[6] Works by artists such as Quinn, Duffy and Alexa Wright expose the fallacy of Neoclassicism and challenge the narrow representations of beauty in the art world.

Alexa Wright, *'I'1* (1998)

Another work from *Medicate* currently included in Leamington's permanent exhibition is Alexa Wright's *'I' 1* (1998). *'I' 1* comes from a series comprising eight digitally-manipulated photographic self-portraits, produced in Scotland from 1998–99 while Wright was artist in

residence at Napier University in Edinburgh. They were made in collaboration with people with congenital physical disabilities, and *'I' 1*'s model was also the artist Catherine Long. In the gallery, Quinn and Wright's representations of Long face each other.

Wright's work investigates the relationship between body and self, looking to challenge attitudes towards physical conditions and question the boundaries of what is considered beautiful or acceptable with regard to the human body. In *'I'*, Wright superimposed her face onto the bodies of her subjects in a way that would make the resulting composite figure look convincing. Her intention is that once viewers realise the portraits are of the same person, they will begin to question their reaction to seeing a disabled body: i.e. their tendency to fixate on a person's disability, rather on their individual appearance. The photographs of Wright's models were taken in a studio, and then the images were digitally constructed later, using photographed interiors of a preserved house in Arbroath, Scotland. The ornate, historical setting in which these figures are placed gives them status, and affords them space within the traditions of portraiture and fashion photography. *'I' 1* shows Wright in a red dress standing against a table, and features a piece of classical sculpture in the foreground that is also reflected in a darkened window behind her. The inclusion references the same traditional and historic ideals of beauty as Quinn's sculpture series. The statue reiterates the subject: all that can be seen of it is the right side of the body, which signifies Long's right arm – now on Wright. However, in the reflection, the left side of the statue's body is visible, with arm intact. Of course, on the portrait of Wright, this limb has been 'removed'. As the project evolved, Wright realised:

> […] these images are also about our relationship with ourselves: in a metaphorical sense this work represents the feelings of abjection or 'foreignness' everyone experiences at some time in relation to their own body. By superimposing each disability onto one single identity the intention is to permit the gaze of the spectator, but also to interrogate this gaze.[7]

As a viewer, however, the image can bring to mind ethical questions. As an able-bodied artist, is it ethical to 'appropriate' the bodies of disabled subjects, and 'try-on' their disability? What is the consequence of comparing the experience of disabled people to the otherness of a composite figure in this way? This sense of discomfort on first viewing is described by Gen Doy in *Picturing the Self: Changing Views of the Subject in Visual Culture*, but her uneasiness is somewhat assuaged when she reads a conversation between Wright and two of her collaborators/models:

> They too had been wary at first but felt very pleased with their participation in the work and with the final images… Long is particularly pleased with the

> way the reflection (of the statue) in the windowpane was situated between her shoulder and the arm of the statue, ambiguously suggestive of a merging of one body with the other… Long found the collaboration with the artist very positive: 'the influence it has had on my self-image and sense of self is immense'.[8]

With such testimony as this, there is nothing an able-bodied viewer such as myself can say to suggest that Wright's work is not successful. Moreover, its interaction with Quinn's statue in Leamington's gallery space is very compelling. Positioned facing each other, the upward tilt of Long's marble head in Quinn's sculpture is directed towards the composite Wright-Long image displayed opposite: essentially, the marble Long looks over towards a self-assertive, positive rendering of her body fused with Wright's. In an inversion and reclamation of the gaze, the statue upon the podium begins to contemplate herself, as opposed to becoming the subject of contemplation for others.

Body Image

The *Medicate* exhibition also looked to explore the interplay between physical and mental disabilities and body image. Two examples of this can be seen with Laura Glassar's (1975–) work comprising metal sculptures and photographic prints, *Sick Sticks* (2002), and Marc Quinn's photograph *Template for my future plastic surgery* (2002).[9]

Glassar offers a harrowing representation of the ways in which mental health disorders can manifest physically – with devastating consequences –through the lens of society's obsession with beauty and the 'perfect body'. In *Sick* Sitcks, she focuses on the experience of bulimia. Over 1.6 million people in the UK are estimated to be directly affected by eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia – most commonly girls and women, but increasingly amongst boys and men.[10] Bulimia itself can eventually lead to physical problems as a result of not getting the right nutrients, excessive vomiting, or overuse of laxatives. As well as weakness and fatigue, dental problems, irregular or absent periods, and dry skin and hair, other possible complications include fits and muscle spasms, heart, kidney and bowel problems, and bone problems, including osteoporosis.

With *Sick Sticks*, Glassar created beautiful metal sculptures that bend and twist like flower stems. These are is depicted in the black and white photographs displayed alongside, which show the stems being used to induce vomiting- the artist holds back her hair and pushes the sculpture down her throat, almost like a surgical instrument. This work triggers a visceral reaction in the viewer – not least the guttural title, which sticks in the back of the mouth as you say it – but also in the brutality of the size and form of the metal objects, and the

explicit photographic documentation of their use. *Sick Sticks* is also poignant because it seem evoke too the history of backstreet abortions, and the metal wire instruments that have been assaulting female bodies for many centuries, in accordance with societal pressures and governmental complicity. Glassar's sticks act as a gag in the second sense of the word: with her throat stoppered, the bulimia sufferer cannot speak out. The work seems to be almost a willingness for self-obliteration; for the body to get smaller and smaller until it is no longer itself. The terrible reality of living with an eating disorder is this self-punishment, both physical and mental.

Comparatively, with a disarming humour and sadness, Marc Quinn's *Template for my future plastic surgery* (2002) alludes to the modern epidemics of both Body Dysmorphic Disorder and its increasingly accessible 'solution', plastic surgery. Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is a psychiatric condition characterised by persistent and intrusive preoccupations with an imagined or small defect in one's appearance. While the severity of the disorder varies, it causes many sufferers real emotional distress and can have a disabling impact on their lives, work and relationships. It is estimated that one in 50 of the general population suffers from BDD; a figure which continues to rise in this digital age, where images of the 'perfect body' are a daily bombardment.[11] A dystopian fantasy, *Template for my future plastic surgery* overlays a photograph of the artist (taken by Dan Leppard) with images of casts of alternative body parts: the ear of a violinist, the nose of an impresario, the tongue of a noted chef, and the hand of Quinn's then-girlfriend, lying over his heart. The brain is depicted by a photograph of a section of coral.

The negative impact that social media and advertising can have on our self-image has been widely discussed: a simple internet search brings up numerous results on the topic. Accountability is a crucial issue, especially since the bodies promoted in the media often do not genuinely look the way they do and have been subjected to some kind of enhancement. Many images distributed by online 'influencers' and brands reflect the result of cosmetic surgeries and a habitual use of Photoshop and FaceTune, a downloadable mobile app for doctoring photos, which is used to pinch waists to unnatural widths, amplify more advantageous body parts, and smooth imperfections on the skin. Pairing this with the fact that the 'perfect body' is largely portrayed as slim, athletic and able-bodied with Western features, the significance of representation is made even more critical. This is also explored in Quinn's *The Complete Marbles*, and Wright's '*I*' series. Attempts to reach these unattainable beauty standards can manifest in psychological and physiological disorders, eating disorders (as in *Sick Sticks*) and obsessive plastic surgery. According to the Priory Group, 'fewer than 10% of BDD patients will be satisfied with the results of the surgery, and their anxieties are often transferred to another aspect of their appearance. It is thought that around 15% of people seeking plastic surgery have BDD'.[12] These surgeries can lead to their

own health complications, and studies have even suggested that procedures such as silicone breast implants are linked with an increased risk of disabilities such as rare autoimmune diseases and cancer.[13] Quinn's composite photographs encourage us to reflect critically on society's current obsession with manipulating representations of body image.

Conclusion

These artworks, and the Medicate Collection more broadly, offer an important insight into cultural representations of [dis]ability because they challenge our idealisations of the 'perfect body', and throw into question the history from which this construct is formed.[14] They make room for conversations around disability – using and pertaining to modern technology – and in the case of Quinn and Wright, place themselves firmly within a historic and aesthetic tradition, whilst simultaneously looking to subvert it.

Catherine Long and *'I' 1* are currently on exhibition at Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum until 2020.

About the author

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Endnotes

[1] Marc Quinn, *Recent Sculptures Catalogue*, Groninger Museum (2006), www.marcquinn.com [accessed July 2019].
[2] Martin Hammer, *The Naked Portrait*, (Edinburgh: The National Galleries of Scotland, 2007), p.117.
[3] Mary Duffy, cited in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, edited David T. Mitchell, Sharon L. Snyder, (MA: Michigan UP, 1997), p. 63.
[4] Diane Kirkpatrick, 'Images of Disability', *Disability, Art, and Culture (Part Two),* Volume 37:3 (1998), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0037.309 [accessed July 2019].

[5] See Matthew Gurewitsch, 'True Colors', *Smithsonian Magazine* (July 2008), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/true-colors-17888/, [accessed October 2019).

[6] Margaret Talbot, 'The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture', *The New Yorker* (29 October 2018), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture, [accessed July 2019].

[7] Alexa Wright, https://www.alexawright.com/i, [accessed October 2019].

[8] Gen Doy, *Picturing the Self: Changing Views of the Subject in Visual Culture*, (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), pp. 84-85.

[9] These two works are not currently on display at Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum.

[10] See http://www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk/about/statistics, [accessed July 2019].

[11] See https://bdd.iocdf.org/professionals/prevalence/, [accessed July 2019].

[12] See https://www.priorygroup.com/blog/the-risks-of-cosmetic-surgery-for-body-dysmorphic-disorder-patients, [accessed July 2019].

[13] See https://www.mdanderson.org/newsroom/largest-ever-study-shows-silicone-breast-implants-associated-with-rare-diseases.h00-159227301.html, accessed July 2019.

[14] I am conscious that the works selected for this article were produced on the subject of disability, and in collaboration with disabled subjects – but by artists who are not themselves disabled. In the same way, as the author of this article, I myself am able-bodied, which raises questions about the representation of voices in the conversation. I can aim to write sensitively and without presumption, and to introduce the voices of disabled artists, and hope that I have been successful in achieving this.