

JOAN LIVINGSTONE



"At his third lie, his nose grew so extraordinarily long that poor Pinocchio could no longer turn around. If he turned this way he bumped his nose against the bed or the windowpanes; if he turned that way, he bumped it against the wall or the door of the room; if he raised his head a little, he ran the risk of poking it into one of the Fairy's eyes."¹

"Our complex cultural attitudes toward women's bodies—that they are sexual, ugly, mysterious, extraordinary, dark, bloody, and bad smelling—find a place in each woman's sense of self."²

The body—uncontrolled and uncontrollable—is an ever-present mystery with which we all live. Joan Livingstone's work represents a long-term investigation that attempts to understand the human form—its tensions, desires, potential, and power. She creates inanimate, abstract organic objects that have the appearance of resting uncomfortably—perhaps, like Pinocchio, surprised by the inexplicable extensions, crevices, and protuberances of their forms. Livingstone's sculptural objects, like Pinocchio, are frozen in a state between the human and the mechanistic, testing their own limits in an endlessly awkward, subliminally sexual encounter. And like Pinocchio, they "come alive" through a process that is, ambiguously, either mechanical or magic. Although Livingstone's forms reside squarely within the vocabulary of abstract modernism, they have an obscure quiriness. As Livingstone herself says, "I am very interested in identifying the idea of *anomaly* within the work: that which is uncomfortable, eccentric, or deviant, that which associates startlingly conflicting features while at the same time remaining oddly, and uncannily familiar. . . ."³

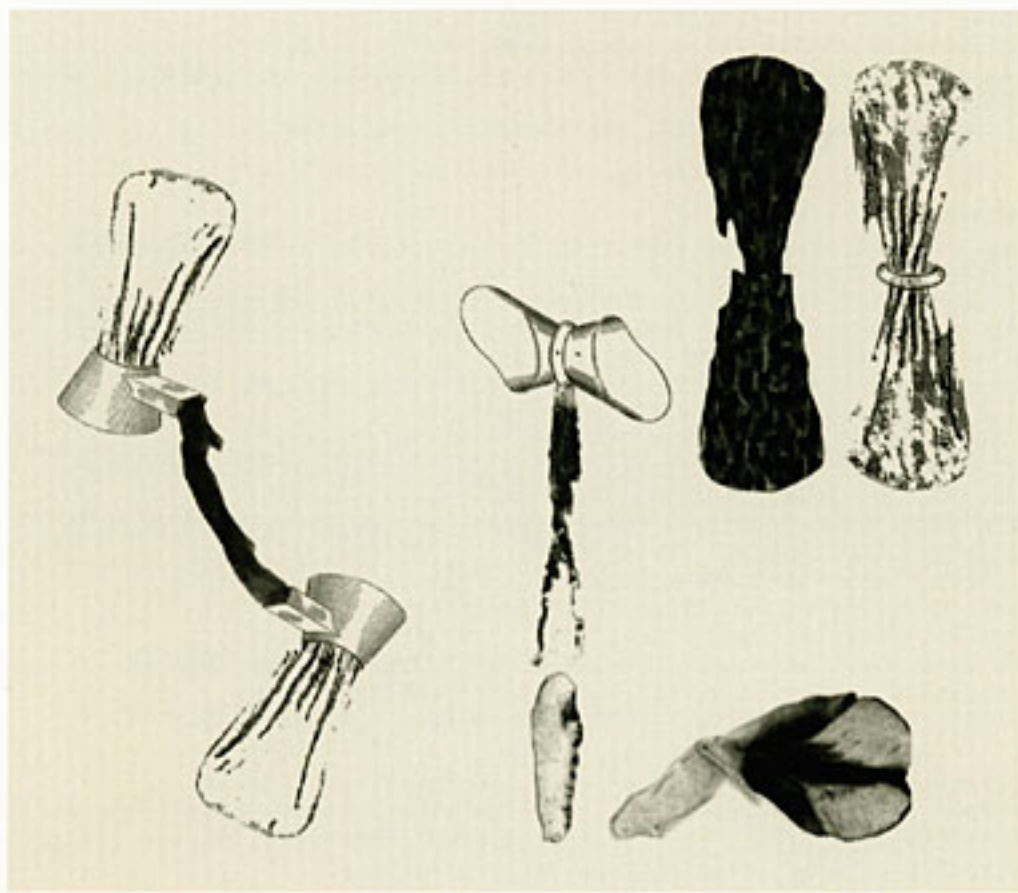
That which is "uncannily familiar" in Livingstone's sculpture is her consistent reference to the human body. Somatic understanding is grasped physically through our senses, environmentally, and often irrationally. As an artist, Livingstone investigates the qualities of our physicality, forefronting the awkwardness of body knowledge that so often inflects female experience. In making the pieces, she learns the shape of a cavity, imagines the internal pathways that circulate breath, blood, nourishment, and waste, and experiences the weight of organs and appendages. Her sculptures reflect both her profound admiration for the human form and an underlying discomfort. The pieces are both beautiful and ugly, though their ugliness is clumsy rather than grotesque.

The quintessential bodily experience for women is that of pregnancy and childbirth. In Livingstone's work, the processes of reproduction, both asexual and sexual, are referenced in forms that repeat themselves symmetrically and that appear to erupt in the growth of smaller yet similar forms. The umbilical connection between mother and child, that singularly tenuous tube that supports life, is suggested in the attenuated appendages of later pieces. Groupings of smaller sculptural pieces are like broods of children, each with an obvious genetic connection yet emphatically individual. Again, Livingstone's exploration of reproduction is fraught with an uncanny clumsiness in which the joy and love of childbirth is inextricably wedded with its mirror experience, horror and pain.

As viewers, we encounter Livingstone's sculptures as they relate to our own bodies. The physical experience of the work in an architectural space is essential to understanding the pieces; they are far more than the easily apparent abstract, organic shapes that reference plant and animal forms. In sculptures such as *Dyad* and *Doppelgänger*, in which body-scaled, paired forms rest against the wall, we, as viewers, understand the work physically and internally, rather than intellectually. We feel their weight against the wall and their precarious balance even as we begin to recognize their internal spaces within our own bodies. And always, this understanding is tainted with an awkward cognizance that the "body" (both sculptural and human), is inappropriate within this space. These sculptures do not reference the perfectly scaled golden mean; rather, they recall the unpleasant and unexpected travails of human bodily experience. They are the burps and belches that cause us to recognize our unacknowledged breath, the farts and blood that embarrass us in their escape, and the uncomfortable symptoms of disease that bring us to understand how invisibly our bodies function under "normal" circumstances.

Livingstone's sculptural practice is an investigation of the hollow form or cavity as it relates to the sculptural material as a protective skin or boundary. More traditionally, sculptural forms are either carved or constructed. The artist Michelangelo believed that human figures lived within his blocks of marble, only to be revealed by the artist's hand. In modernist sculpture, artists have relied heavily on constructive techniques such as welded steel and assemblage or the joining of found objects. Livingstone, on the other hand, has struggled with an exploration of interior and exterior space and skeletal and skin-like structures. In Livingstone's overall body of work, the relationship of the skeleton to the form/skin which it supports moves from mere implication to more concrete manifestation. Earlier sculptures are succinctly complete within themselves, while the later pieces begin to indicate relationships between forms, or perhaps, with an external environment.

Since the early 70s, Livingstone has used felt in her work, a material rich with multiple references. As a percussive textile, it has a rich history that has often placed Livingstone's work within a craft tradition. But equally important are felt's cultural references, some of which have been made familiar through the work of Joseph Beuys.⁴ Considered within the broad context of contemporary art, felt is similar to other organic substances used by artists such as blood, milk, honey, and wax. Felt is a material that is naturally produced from human or animal hair. Historically, it has been used by nomadic tribes to make shelter, clothing, and containers. Felt insulates, contains, contracts, and absorbs. When felt is used to create forms, it can either be pieced together and sewn, or it can be "cast," or molded around solid forms (as in hat-making). In much of her sculptural work, Livingstone has sewn together pieces of felt to create a form that is then suspended in a framed wooden "exoskeleton." Hanging, pulled, and weighted, the material is soaked in resins which harden into a hollow form. The surface of the form is then sanded, pigmented, and subjected to multiple procedures that create a subtle patina. It is fair to say that Livingstone has manipulated felt in nearly every way and conjured nearly every reference, yet still is engaged in a very active, lively discourse with the material. She says now that she is "interested in revealing the living property of the material," and her forms are beginning to show the felt both in its natural state and in an impregnated, resin-hardened condition.



Vents V. 1996. Collage.

In recent sculptures that are suggestive of mechanical forms and forces, Joan Livingstone has begun to examine the transport of "substance" as a bodily activity and the body as both an active and activated site. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, artists have been fascinated by machines, often treating them anthropomorphically. For example, Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* is an elaborate metaphor for gendered bodies in which machines like the Chocolate Grinder and the Nine Malic Molds transport an imaginary substance in order to imply sexual transformation.⁵ Livingstone's recent sculptures, however, attempt to understand the tensions and exchanges of power—both internally and externally—that comprise the human body. In postmodernism, we understand the body as a socio/cultural construct; therefore, the body is not an independent system, but rather, a participant in multiple systems. As Michel Leher states, "So the body is at once the object of power—or better the actualizer of power relations—and that which resists power. But again it resists power not in the name of transhistorical need but because of the new desires and constraints that each new regime develops. The situation therefore is one of permanent battle, with the body as the shifting field where new mechanisms of power constantly meet new technologies of resistance and escape. So the body is not a site of resistance to a power which exists outside it; within the body there is a constant tension between mechanisms of power and techniques of resistance."⁶

Movement, force, and resistance are implied in Livingstone's recent sculptures; they represent another chapter in the artist's understanding of how we know our bodies. By issuing a challenge, perhaps through exercise, sexual activity, or consumption, we understand the physical limits of our human form. In current works that incorporate both hanging, sac-like forms and mechanistic pulley systems, Livingstone imagines a system of exchange in which the body, as a limited human container, is challenged. Devices to test capacity, or perhaps, to extend pleasure, are beginning to appear in partnership with Livingstone's organic forms; they are sometimes suggestive of athletic equipment, exercise machines, sex toys, or sadomasochistic devices. This phase of Livingstone's career-long attempt to understand the human body represents a broadened investigation, one in which we may finally discover whether the animation of the wooden puppet is triggered by machine, morals, or magic.

Joyce Fernandes, Chicago, July 1997

¹ Carlo Collodi *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, trans. Nicolas J. Perella (California: University of California Press, 1986), p. 211.

² Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *Understanding Women* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), p. 58.

³ Excerpted from artist's statement.

⁴ "The aim of such an arrangement (*Felt Objects 1964-67*) is to concentrate the meaning of felt in one space. While the various elements illustrate different principles, they share common meanings and intentions, both physical and symbolic: felt as an *insulator*, as a *protective covering* against other influences, or conversely as a material that permits *infiltration* from outside influences. Then there is the *warmth* character, the greyness which serves to emphasize the colors that exist in the world by a psychological afterimage effect, and the silence as every sound is absorbed and muffled." Joseph Beuys interview with Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1979), p. 120.

⁵ "The *Large Glass* is a picture of a bride's undressing. Her striptease is a spectacle, a ceremony, a physiological and psychological phenomenon, a mechanical operation, a physico-chemical process, an erotic and spiritual experience all rolled into one, and all governed by meta-irony." Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Seaver Books, 1978), p. 50.

⁶ Michel Feher, "Of Bodies and Technologies," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), p. 161.



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Installation, Artemisia Gallery, Chicago, IL, 1990. L to R: *Sirens*, *Mace*, *Uma*, *Doppelganger*. Felt, epoxy resin, stain.
Photo Credit: Black/Toby Photography

