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Now You See Me

"META VISCERAL"

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One of the most salient memes – bear with me on this – of 2021 is the one about hating to be “perceived”. The idea is simple: now that we’ve been given the tools to control our own image, and the option to watch with our own cameras off, it’s hard to go back. Like many things on the internet, the desire to avoid perception feels obviously gendered. It also seems like it might be particularly tempting for people whose gender identities are expansive beyond their assigned sex. Also like many things on the internet, the post’s humour comes from sheer hyperbole: it is impossible to move unnoticed through the world. But this desire also caveats the straightforward stereotypes that Gen Z loves attention, or that we’re our own favourite protagonists. It’s only fun to be the main character when you also get to be the author.

I like to think that Miles Greenberg (*1997), performance artist and the sole member of Gen Z in “Meta Visceral”, gets it. Over the course of his seven-hour performance *PNEUMOTHERAPY (II)* (2020), captured on video here, he manages to redirect attention from his appearance toward his experience. In the video, the artist stands on a rotating pedestal and moves his limbs balletically, at times so slowly that the change in position is nearly imperceptible. He is nude except for a gold jockstrap, his body painted black, his torso lean and muscular. He carries a large bough of pink flowers, and sap drips slowly onto his head from above. Greenberg’s video is overlaid with a soundtrack of his breathing, which is heavy at times, inaudible at others. It has a kind of meditative effect. Hear his breath, and you become conscious of your own.



View of “Meta Visceral”

Lévy Gorvy

2021

His stamina and self-control in this “ode to the respiratory system” remind me of going to see the queen’s guards in London as a child, watching vigilantly so as not to miss a secret scratch or fidget, a crack in the facade of power and authority. But here, Greenberg gives

us just enough action that our eyes move with him, rather than against him. Watching movements so controlled that they elicit a physical empathetic response from the viewer, there’s a kind of Abramovitchian discomfort to the whole thing (he considers her a mentor).



Still from Miles Greenberg, *PNEUMOTHERAPY (II)*, 2020

Single-channel digital video, colour, sound, 22:13 min.

Pneumotherapy (II) was the second performance in an ongoing series, each devoted to a body part. The first, the sanguine equivalent which debuted at Reena Spaulings in New York in 2019, saw him painted in white, with a bucket balancing on his head. He moved through a similar choreography for another seven hours. His interest in durational performance is present in other work, notably *Oysterknife* (2020), where he walked on a conveyor belt for twenty-four hours straight. (He cites the artist Pope.L as an influence too). He says that the most surprising result was the utter lack of thought after the halfway mark: “there was literally nothing – nothing – left in my brain.” It’s mindfulness to the extreme, his focus forced out from his mind and into the feeling of his body.

Greenberg’s work set apart from the other artists’ in “Meta Visceral”, and we might say that he shifts away from the old-school model. The meaning of the show’s title is anybody’s guess, but the painting and sculpture on view rely on iconography of the body, its imprint and traces: Sarah Lucas’s stocking sculptures, smears of blue from Yves Klein’s model, Carol Rama’s eyeballs, and Bruce Naumann’s gold, disembodied hands. It’s heavy on sculpture, both full figures and little fragments resting on warm wood plinths and amoebae tables. Giuseppe Penone’s *Svolgere la propria pelle* (1970–71) is a series of photographs of a sheet of glass pressed against every part of his body, here the left arm. The camera is zoomed out beyond the edges of the pane to show it propped up by his chest and right fingers, and the result has more delicacy and less contrast than if he had just used a Xerox machine. His body, flattened and displayed behind glass, becomes an exhibition object. Or, to put it another way, unlike with Greenberg, being perceived is the goal.

Back in *Pneumotherapy (II)*, the artist wears white contacts that hide his pupils and irises. The effect is eerie, and leaves him looking less human than



Front: Giuseppe Penone, *Gesto vegetale*, 1986
Bronze, 140.5 x 119.5 x 46 cm

Back: Thomas Schütte, *Basler Mask (No. 11)*, 2014, 36 x 30 x 20.5 cm

mannequin. But the costume also apparently renders him unable to see more than hazy shapes. In the original performance, viewers were invited to come and go as they please, with no prescribed length of stay or appointment system. In a relatively small

performance space, Greenberg would have been able to sense the flow of the crowd, if not their individual movements. Watching it played back on video, we are fully free from his perception, just as he frees himself from ours.

ALEXANDRA GERMER



View of “Meta Visceral”
Lévy Gorvy, 2021