

## Review: Flesh, York Art Gallery

[Ella Barker](#) bares all as the human body is brought into focus at York Art Gallery's latest exhibition

Friday 30 September 2016



Image: York Art Gallery.

Intimate, intrinsic, and often out of sight. Human flesh is as divisive as it is ubiquitous: retaining the ability to simultaneously incite and repulse. Yet the latest exhibition to grace the York Art Gallery is built on the very premise that flesh does not have to be of, or from the naked body. In quite possibly its most radical installation to date, the eponymous *Flesh* proffers the life processes, boundaries and liminalities concealed by our bodies, and explores issues of transience and time.

This isn't to say that as viewers, we are plunged straight in at the deep end. Easing us in gently, the first gallery *Figuring Flesh* introduces naturalistic nudes from the Renaissance such as Fiorenzo di Lorenzo's "Virgin and Child" – but these are swiftly contrasted by more visceral and, in turn, more visually arresting pieces. Francis Bacon's portrait of "Henrietta Moraes on a Blue Couch" depicts contorted flesh that is vulnerable to submersion. His sumptuous red paint strokes expose the subject's muscular composition even as her figure is seemingly enveloped by the surrounding furniture.

Venturing into *Still Life*, these works were noteworthy for the artists' employment of *memento mori* motifs, figuring the inexorable passing of time into each and every piece. Sam Taylor-Johnson's silent time lapse film "Still Life" features a hare ravaged by maggots: a mesmerising work as bleak as it is oddly beautiful – perhaps even more so considering the genetically modified peach that lies beside the hare, untouched neither by nature nor time. The arrangement of Berlinde De Bruyckere's "Romeu 'my deer'" (a

wax layered sculpture of a flayed carcass teetering over the edge of a plinth) resonated with the 17th century Dutch still life paintings hung nearby. The vulnerability of flesh seen in Bacon's work was carried through into this gallery; the pallid remains of De Bruyckere's deer lay violated and exposed.

Delving one room further, *Abstract Flesh* might have appeared a 'Ronseal' kind of room but delights were still to be found in the artists' manipulation of flesh and focus on its tactile and sensory traits. The Boyle Family's monochrome photograph "Skin series (No.8)" was an elaborate if initially bemusing work. A highly magnified image that revealed on close inspection – akin to the surface of human flesh itself – the complex latticework of the skin captured. Such idiosyncrasies were similarly evident in the exhibition's final installation: Steve McQueen's first major project *Bear*, a silent film of two interlocking male bodies, tussling with one another, displayed in a dark, confined space. As shots of indeterminate limbs panned across a screen of epic proportions, the onus was as much on these naked physiques as it was on our own silhouettes. Perhaps this was the exhibition's unspoken achievement: as we are drawn into such different forms of flesh often signifying an 'everyman' kind of figure, we are drawn ever closer to our own frames; gaining an appreciation for the human flesh in all its various guises.



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