



A Whole Culture: The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston's 2017 Foster Prize

By Leah Harrington | April 2017

This year's iteration of the James and Audrey Foster Prize exhibition (a bi-annual award and showcase of local artists) at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art presents five artists of international renown who've received scant attention in the city. Sonia Almeida, Jennifer Bornstein, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V erena Paravel, and Lucy Kim all live in Boston; still, what unifies their work is not a shared locality, but a thematic search of the human body as a physical, geographic, linguistic, or cultural being.

Curated by ICA Senior Curator Dan Byers along with Curatorial Associate Jeffrey De Blois, the 2017 Foster Prize engages Donald Judd's 1975 supposition in "Imperialism, Nationalism, and Regionalism" that "for local art, you need a whole culture." Systems of knowledge and perception inform the exhibition, with each artist engaging in repetitive, abstract processes that explicate how the body is informed externally (as by politics or society) and internally (as by the senses).

The exhibition begins with six uncanny portraits, Kim's representations of three people: plastic surgeon Melissa Doft, trainer Stephen Marino, and geneticist Eric S. Lander. Just as her subjects work to manipulate the body—its skin, muscle, or cells—Kim has transformed their forms from real to chimeric. For these recent works (from 2016 and early 2017), Kim took a silicone mold of each of their faces and torsos, which she then copied into a plaster cast and flattened. Painted in shades of blue, green, and grey, the bodily casts are configured as if on a canvas, their dimensionality in contrast with the planar wall.

How language is learned, communicated, and maneuvered is the crux of Almeida's installation. Alongside traditional two-dimensional paintings are three tapestries, an artist's book, and a suite of double-sided paintings on hinges; each work is occupied with symbols become language. Letters of the Roman alphabet drawn to look like the human body, Raven's Progressive Matrices (a non-verbal test of abstract reasoning), and Henri Michaux's trance drawings are Almeida's motifs, undulating throughout the work in ribbons of line reminiscent of both Matisse and cave drawings. Almeida expresses how histories are marshaled into dialectical symbols and learned through haptic experiences or brain games.

Bornstein, a daughter of a scientist, employs a playful empiricism to pay tribute to people and places. After spending years tracking down the mice that her father genetically engineered to have extreme flexibility, Bornstein crafted tiny, plaster "film sets" for them. The sets were created in accordance with standard psychological tests for the animals. Four videos depict the mice from above as they run through a maze or carefully across a high wire. Here, the plaster sets are displayed unceremoniously on a wooden table in the middle of the gallery. Tacked on the walls are rubbings Bornstein made from her late father's belongings, as well as impressions from destructed architecture and new technologies. Cumulatively, these works form a ludic memory of a body that lives on through a legacy of labor and material.

In *Leviathan* (2012), the only single-work installation here, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel synthesize and abstract the physical and sensory experience of industrial fishing. Shot on a vessel based in New Bedford (the largest fishing port in the United States, which was immortalized as the port of origin in Herman Melville's 1851 *Moby-Dick*), *Leviathan* disintegrates the differences between fish and fisherman. By placing GoPro cameras on the clothing of fisherman, and onto poles that plunge into the Atlantic Ocean, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel collapse particular perspective into a singular, equivocal abstraction. Vision depends not on sight, but on recording, thereby complicating the natural, the artificial, and the systems to separate the two.

Systems of knowledge and information are fluidly exchanged in Boston, a city that attracts scientists and artists alike through its universities. This year's Foster Prize demonstrates how such systems inform physical, sociological, and personal manifestations of the body. Moreover, it exemplifies how locality is shaped from collectivity, as a regional body is formed through, as Judd writes, "a whole culture."