

Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara

# Bodies, Perception, and Examining *This Basic Asymmetry*

By Daisy Scott / VOICE

**R**ARELY ARE VIEWERS CALLED TO CONFRONT THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR OWN BODIES AS WELL AS OTHERS IN THE DYNAMIC, INTRIGUING MANNER OF *THIS BASIC ASYMMETRY*. On display at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara through April 17th, the exhibition includes almost every art medium imaginable to create a thought-provoking and, at times, almost unnerving viewing experience. Harnessing the personal nature of each artists' works, they play off each other to present a multi-faceted glimpse into how individuals perceive the human form.



Fortune's Here by Miguel Angel Payano Jr.

“Our perception or understanding of ourselves is all through what’s going on internally,” explained MCASB Chief Curator Alexandra Terry. “And then we can really only perceive and judge others based on what is going on, externally, so what we hear, what we see. And that really causes this basic asymmetry, this disconnection between us. But the hope with this show is that by bringing awareness to that, we can sort of mitigate some of the potential issues that can come about through that.”

This concept, Terry explained, comes from the research of Emily Pronin, Associate Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University. Her work, combined with the pandemic’s surge of social distancing, masks, and greater awareness of the human body, inspired the exhibition’s creation.

Upon entering the gallery, viewers are greeted by a photographed self-portrait by Paul Mpagi Sepuya, showing the artist photographing himself, the camera obscuring his face. This repeats through his other photographs, forcing viewers to wonder if

they are in fact the subject. As the gallery artist statement explains, it also allows Sepuya to “situate queerness and Blackness as starting points for the medium of photography itself.”

When viewers cross the room, they encounter two sculptures that resemble a series of forms wrapped together. Created by Patricia Ayres, the pieces evoke an unsettling air with their misshapen shapes and bruise-like stains. This feeling is heightened upon reading her artist’s statement, where it reveals her works offer commentary on the “bodily subjugation”



Photo by Daisy Scott

of the American penal system and the Catholic Church.

Artist Gabriela Ruiz’s immersive installation works, *From Above* and *El Camino Solo*, also utilize a sense of uneasiness to prove a point. Located in an adjacent room, viewers step into a sandbox as they stand before a life-sized cast of Ruiz’s body and are filmed on a screen. A chaotic soundtrack completes the experience, forcing viewers to examine the difference between self-perception and surveillance.

The remaining artists offer a respite from this intensity, with artist Simone Forti’s projected video *Flag on the Water* exploring the connection between body, nature, and America’s identity by gracefully washing flags in a river.

Nearby, Afro-Caribbean artist Miguel Angel Payano Jr. humorously questions what it means to be a part of multiple cultures, languages, and the idea of “code switching” between them through surreal paintings dominated by mouths and eyes. There are also two of his mixed-media busts featuring animal figurines, fake flowers, and shoes.

Together, this broad range of styles and perspectives allow viewers to fully reflect on how the human body is viewed and treated. Regardless of an individual’s personal reaction, the exhibition highlights the power of art in tackling complex topics.

“One thing I want our community to understand is that there’s no right or wrong,” said Terry. “You could come in and totally dislike the work, or you could love it and not really understand why, but what we really ask is where are these reactions coming from?”

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