



FECUND BODIES

BY ASHLEY CRAWFORD

DOBLE & STRONG

THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN PAINTER AND PHOTOGRAPHER HAS LED TO THE BODY GONE AWRY.

"THE MARRIAGE OF REASON AND NIGHTMARE THAT HAS DOMINATED THE 20TH CENTURY HAS GIVEN BIRTH TO AN EVER MORE AMBIGUOUS WORLD. ACROSS THE COMMUNICATIONS LANDSCAPE MOVE THE SPECTRES OF SINISTER TECHNOLOGIES AND THE DREAMS THAT MONEY CAN BUY. THERMO-NUCLEAR WEAPONS SYSTEMS AND SOFT-DRINK COMMERCIALS COEXIST IN AN OVERLIT REALM RULED BY ADVERTISING AND PSEUDO-EVENTS, SCIENCE AND PORNOGRAPHY. OVER OUR LIVES PRESIDE THE GREAT TWIN LEITMOTIFS OF THE 20TH CENTURY – SEX AND PARANOIA..."

J.G. BALLARD, INTRODUCTION TO *CRASH*, 2005





THE HUMAN BODY, MOST ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE OBSESSED WITH APPEARANCE, IS A FRIGHTENING THING INDEED. ASIDE FROM THE OCCASIONAL MISPLACED HAIR OR UNTIMELY PIMPLE, A BANE FOR TEENAGERS AND FASHION MODELS ALIKE, THE BODY CAN ERUPT, A PALETTE OF GROTESQUERIES AND MALFORMATIONS THAT TEST BOTH THE IMAGINATION AND THE STOMACH. AS BALLARD SO SUCCINCTLY PUTS IT, A REALM OF "SEX AND PARANOIA" INDEED.

Whilst this is but a part of the inspiration behind the remarkable collaboration between Robert Doble and Simon Strong, it is clearly a shared fascination. Over a pleasant lunch, conversation turns to the plight of the Indonesian Treeman, Dede Kosawa, whose grotesque warts studding his hands and feet multiplied and sprouted like gnarled roots. His hands resembled contorted, yellow-brown branches that extended almost three feet. He survived by performing in carnivals in rural Indonesia and became known as the Treeman. "I was absolutely fascinated," says Doble, with only a hint of embarrassment.

The growths encrusting Kosawa's arms accounted for

nearly 12 pounds of his 100-pound body. Insects had begun to infest the base of the wood-like material.

Doctors believe that Kosawa's case was created by a genetically inherited immune defect and a type of human papillomavirus, or HPV. Kosawa has a deficiency of white blood cells, which are crucial in fighting infections, and his weakened immune system couldn't fight the HPV. The virus hijacked his skin cells, causing them to produce massive amounts of keratin, a protein found in hair and fingernails. The warts sprouted into dense growths known medically as 'cutaneous horns' on his hands and feet.

Kosawa became a media sensation, but he is far from the

PAGE 14
BOTH IMAGES
Untitled studies, 2010
Gloss enamel, Iriodin® on
chromogenic print
51 x 36cm each

PAGE 15
Progenitus, 2010
Gloss enamel and Iriodin®
on chromogenic print,
mounted on aluminium
composite board
178 x 125cm

ABOVE
Progenitus (triptych), 2010
Gloss enamel and Iriodin®
on chromogenic print,
mounted on aluminium
composite board
3 x 178 x 125cm
Images courtesy of Block
Projects, Melbourne



first to achieve such notoriety. Joseph Carey Merrick, also known as John Merrick - The Elephant Man, lived from 1862 to 1890 and began to develop abnormalities during the first few years of his life. Massive, fatty-appearing protrusions grew around his body and a bony lump grew on his forehead. He became a freak show celebrity and the subject of David Lynch's renowned 1980 film *The Elephant Man*. Lynch had already expressed his fascination for deformity with the mutant child of *Eraserhead* (1976). The mutating body as a site for transformation has also been a favourite trope of the other renowned Hollywood surrealist, David Cronenberg in such films as *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *eXistenZ* (1999).

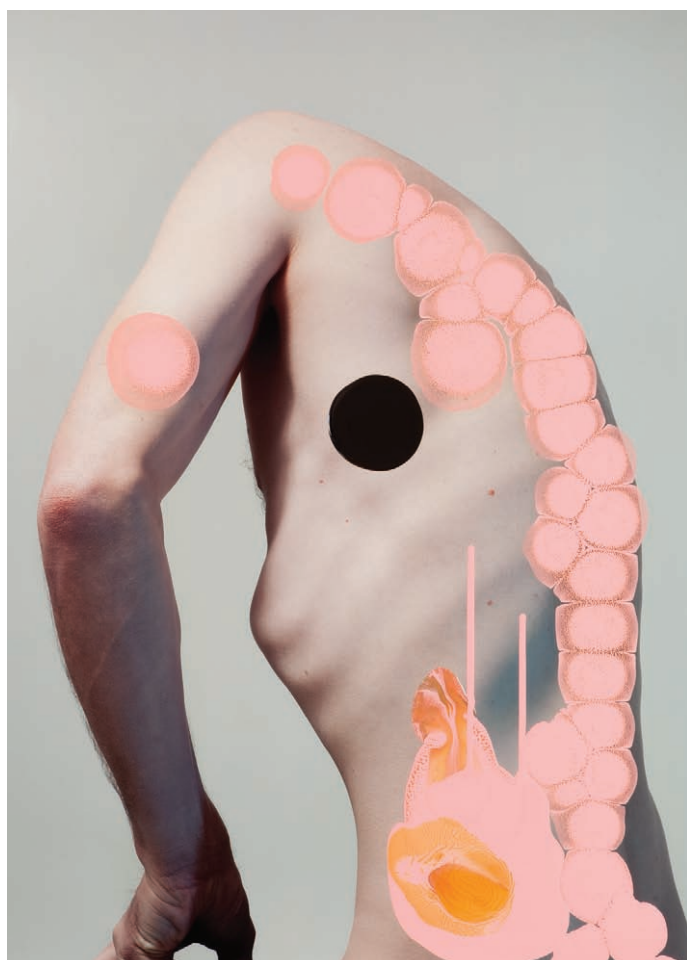
But it is when Doble begins enthusing about the recent horror flick *The Human Centipede*, that Strong balks. The premise of the film has two American women and a Japanese man fall victim to a demented surgeon who plans to recreate

a horrific operation with humans that he performed on his three dogs: reverse-engineering Siamese triplets by attaching their gastric systems, thus bringing to life his bizarre lifetime fantasy, the human centipede. "Truly horrible stuff," says Doble. "But that's the thing about popular culture - you're often not aware of just what it is that you're taking in."

Sheer grotesqueries aside, Doble and Strong's *First Born* has been given birth in a time that may be dubbed the post-posthuman. The posthuman, a concept that has floated in the ether at least since the emergence of the Golem and Frankenstein, seemed to reach something of a crescendo during the 1990s. Combining science fiction, futurology, contemporary art and philosophy, it reached a theoretical watershed in 1991 with the publication of Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* which revitalized Philip K. Dick's sci-fi quandary of what is was to be human. In the visual arts world this was quickly followed by Jeffrey Deitch's Post Human



THE GRUESOME RESULTS SEEN IN *DUR MATER* WERE THEN WORN BY DOBLE WHILE STRONG PHOTOGRAPHED THEM. IT IS, PERHAPS, THE SHEER PHYSICALITY OF THIS PROCESS THAT SHIFTS FIRST BORN FROM BEING NOT MERELY STRIKING BUT, AT TIMES, DOWNRIGHT SICKENING. THE MATER REFERRED TO IN THE TITLE REFERENCES THE OUTERMOST OF THE THREE LAYERS OF THE MENINGES THAT SURROUND THE BRAIN AND THE SPINE AND CONTAIN THE CEREBROSPINAL FLUID, PERHAPS THE PERFECT SITE FOR THE INJECTION OF INFECTION.



FACING PAGE
Dur Mater, 2009
Gloss enamel
on chromogenic
print, mounted
on aluminium
composite board
178 x 125cm

THIS PAGE

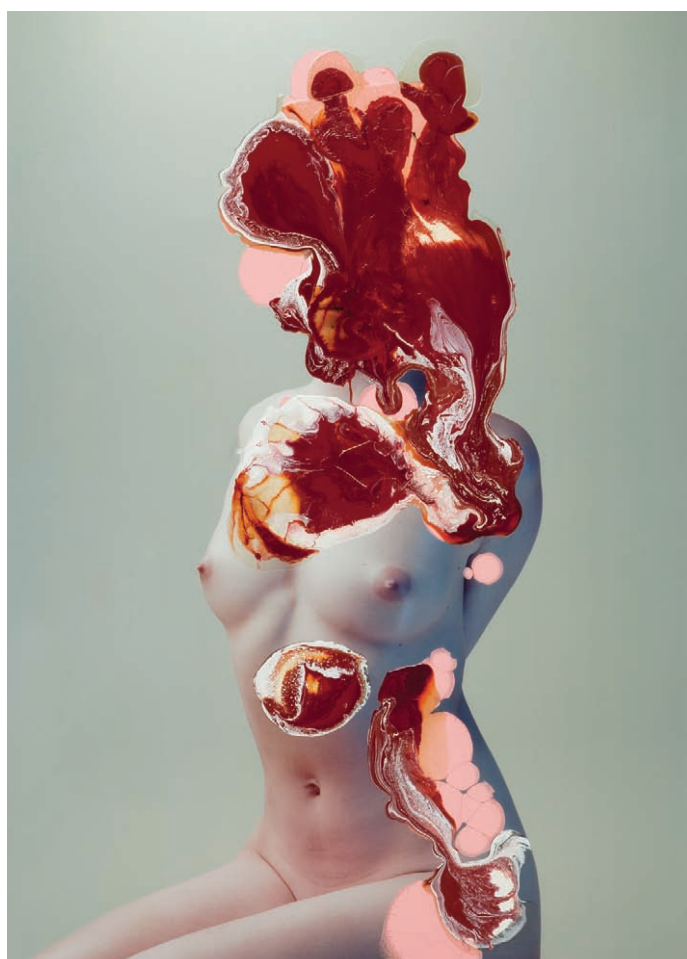
TOP LEFT
Morphogenesis, 2009
Gloss enamel
on chromogenic
print, mounted
on aluminium
composite board
178 x 125cm

TOP RIGHT
Sarcoplasm, 2009
Gloss enamel
on chromogenic
print, mounted
on aluminium
composite board
178 x 125cm

BOTTOM LEFT
Cisterna, 2009
Gloss enamel on
chromogenic print
178 x 125cm

BOTTOM RIGHT
Chromoplast, 2010
Gloss enamel
on chromogenic
print, mounted
on aluminium
composite board
178 x 125cm

Images courtesy
of Block Projects,
Melbourne





exhibition in 1992.

“Reality, fantasy, and fiction are merging into the inspiration for a new model of personality organization,” Deitch posited in the catalogue for his ground breaking show. “The interchangeable identities of Madonna and the extraordinary self-transformation of Ivana Trump are examples of this shuffling of reality and fantasy into a reassembled fictional personality that quickly becomes fact. The search for the absolute ‘true’ self has been replaced by a constant scanning for new alternatives.”

“Future genetic manipulation may spawn a race of post humans who are outwardly perfect but whose inner neuroses and instincts may not be so easily controlled. Artists are sensitive to this murky underside of displaced urges that may not be quite as easy to re-mold as a pair of flabby thighs. Janine Antoni’s cube of gnawed chocolate reveals the neurotic and desperate behaviour sometimes hidden beneath the sleek facade of a woman’s image perfected through cosmetics. Kiki Smith’s flayed bodies, dripping with excretions, bear witness to the emotional wreckage that festers below the plastic surface.

Artists are giving us a frightful warning of the irrational reservoir of dislocated emotions that may overwhelm the advances of technology.”

The desecration of the bodily image, from Hans Bellmer to Francis Bacon to Joel Peter Witkin, was finding a new medium - the body itself - as seen in the work of Stelarc and Orlan and The Modern Primitives whose obsession with piercing, scarification and tattooing reached new heights.

Doble and Strong could hardly have avoided such discourse. They grew up in a period of contrasts, from the skin-perfection of MTV to the degenerative horrors of HIV. A time when health-club obsession met with an outbreak of obesity of grotesque proportions and a time when the body itself - both internal and external - seemed to be being called into question in every corner of society.

As individual artists they could not be less likely collaborators. Doble was a painter, pure and simple, with a tendency towards bold, expressionistic colouration. Strong was a photographer, seduced by the mystique of the digital and a highly cool, fashion-oriented aesthetic. In short it was unlikely



ABOVE
ALL IMAGES
Untitled studies,
2009-10
Gloss enamel, Iridin®
on chromogenic print
51 x 36cm
Images courtesy
of Block Projects,
Melbourne

THE DESECRATION OF THE BODILY IMAGE, FROM HANS BELLMER TO FRANCIS BACON TO JOEL PETER WITKIN, WAS FINDING A NEW MEDIUM – THE BODY ITSELF – AS SEEN IN THE WORK OF STELARC AND ORLAN AND THE MODERN PRIMITIVES WHOSE OBSESSION WITH PIERCING, SCARIFICATION AND TATTOOING REACHED NEW HEIGHTS.

you would hang them in the same room.

But their impetus for the collaboration was equally unusual in a time of often overly cerebral motivations.

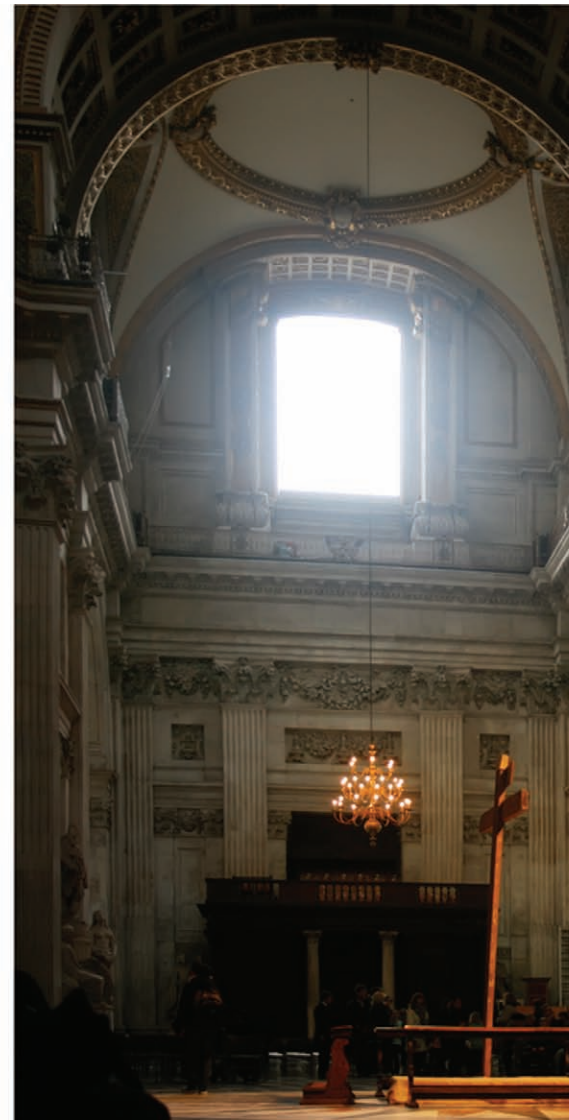
“Really the beginning of this was conceived when I talked Simon into coming to London with me last year when I had to visit a friend who was terminally ill with a brain tumour,” says Doble. Their visit coincided with Easter and on Good Friday, two days after Doble’s friend died, they visited St Paul’s Cathedral and, breaking the rules, took a single photograph. “That became the inspiration to do our first work together.” The result was *Salathiel (I have asked of God)* which was shortlisted for the Blake Prize for Religious Art last year.

Salathiel was very much the embryonic touchstone of *First Born*. A triptych that utilised the St Paul Cathedral as its centre point, it hinted at spiritual turmoil and surgical implant, as though they were setting the stage for a new viral form to be implanted. And indeed, the virus took hold.

They soon resolved what would in essence become a manifesto for the project: “The realisation that within our own bodies of work, we were both concerned with many of the same issues and aesthetics led to the decision to create collaborative works which incorporated both our art practices – photography and painting – but only on the condition that they were combined in a cohesive and logical manner.”

The duo were stringent about the conditions under which the collaboration would work. “In order for both of us to be involved in all aspects of creating an image, it was necessary for each of us to take an active roll in working with both mediums equally,” they say in a combined artist statement. “With this underlying principle in mind, we produced the works which make up our first collaborative exhibition – *First Born*.”

But the eight intense months that followed would be a steep learning curve for both artists. Doble, a painter at heart, would introduce Strong to various classical interpretations of



THE VISCERAL PROCESS BEHIND THESE WORKS IS HORRIBLY APPARENT HERE – DOBLE AND STRONG, RATHER THAN SNATCHING A SURGICAL IMAGE FROM A MEDICAL WEBSITE AS SEEMS TO HAVE BECOME STANDARD PRACTICE FOR PILFERING ARTISTS, INSTEAD VISITED A BUTCHER NEAR THEIR BORROWED STUDIO IN CHAPEL STREET, PRAHRAN AND STOCKED UP ON PIG SKIN TO PRACTICE THEIR SUTURING.

the human body. Strong, in return, would instruct Doble in the more esoteric branches of contemporary imagery technology. For both it was a realm of new challenges: the notion of painting on a photographic surface itself was problematic, with Strong eventually finding Dibond, an aluminum composite, to suit their purposes. “It was flat and smooth and the paint would adhere to it the way we wanted,” says Strong. “At first the paint kept moving around, it was very organic and we thought it would be great to capture those moments. It was hit and miss but eventually we used a syringe to apply the paint where we wanted it.”

They shared the process of selecting models, shifting from earlier explorations of the male form suggesting hints of homo-eroticism, through to an emphasis on the female torso captured largely in classical poses. “We didn’t want it to be sexual per se,” says Strong. “But the naked figure is always suggestive of arousal.”

They decided to avoid digital manipulation as much as possible. “It was one shot,” says Strong. “They were never highly manipulated.”

The results were divided into a selection of extremely large – indeed, unnervingly life-size – prints and a series of studies. “You can see hints of where it might have gone in the studies,” says Doble. “There is a sense of movement through space, like moving slides under a microscope, like watching a disease take over the cellular structure.”

One of the key successes of these works is the strange fuzziness between the external and the internal. In *Dur Mater* (2009) one could be viewing an x-ray from *The X Files* – an alien entity whose skeletal make up is formed out

of amphibian like platelets. Alternatively this could be an external growth, the flesh-like pinks gradually subsuming the entire body. What is visible of the human skin is a mottled blue as though the subject is suffering oxygen deprivation. Inevitably the eye drifts to the man’s skull where a gruesome incision has been made, perhaps in a bid to remove the growths or, even more chillingly, to implant them. This gruesome moment recalls what the French philosopher Roland Barthes termed the “*punctum*” – the *almost* extraneous moment in a photograph that “pierces the viewer.” But it also recalls the cinematic horrors of Ridley Scott’s *Aliens* when a surgical attempt is made to remove the invading parasite.

The visceral process behind these works is horribly apparent here – Doble and Strong, rather than snatching a surgical image from a medical website as seems to have become standard practice for pilfering artists, instead visited a butcher near their borrowed studio in Chapel Street, Prahran and stocked up on pig skin to practice their suturing. The gruesome results seen in *Dur Mater* were then worn by Doble while Strong photographed them. It is, perhaps, the sheer physicality of this process that shifts *First Born* from being not merely striking but, at times, downright sickening. The *mater* referred to in the title references the outermost of the three layers of the meninges that surround the brain and the spine and contain the cerebrospinal fluid, perhaps the perfect site for the injection of infection. The physical remnants of the artists’ suturing practice were later taken home by Strong who cooked them up for his flat-mate as pork crackling. As Strong points out, this process of “recycling”, given the flesh had been the subject of a human figure, had its own unnerving

ABOVE
ALL IMAGES
*Salathiel (I have asked
of god)*, 2009
Chromogenic print
75 x 230cm
Images courtesy
of Block Projects,
Melbourne



cannibalistic aside.

The results of *First Born* suggest the almost surgical coolness of Hans Bellmer meeting the butchery of Francis Bacon with a hint of the perfected nudity of a Helmut Newton. Indeed, Bacon's presence is felt throughout the series. Doble and Strong's massive triptych, *Progenitus* clearly acknowledges Bacon's 1962 work *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*. But in Doble and Strong's work the first panel features two human forms, their heads melding in a burst of amorphous globs as though breeding has become a thought process (or nightmare). The central panel features a singular female form, her bloodied 'womb' an attachment held within a glass belljar. The third panel is the aftermath of birth, a crumpled, dejected figure. "Maybe the future of mankind," Doble says with a look of bemused distaste.

Mechanics and technologies meet the organic and the flesh in a confluence of physical transgressions here, seen clearly in the artists' titles as well as imagery. The body meets plant in *Chromoplast* - a reference to both the photosynthetic storage of colours in fruit and floral petals and to the palette used by the artists - chromoplasts particularly stores oranges, yellows and reds, colours used liberally in these works. *Sarcoplasm* refers to a muscular fiber which houses unusually large amounts of myoglobin, an oxygen binding protein. Again there is a physical reference here to the actual problem of binding paint onto a photographic surface. Throughout *First Born* there is a bio-alchemy occurring, a combining of two unnatural entities - paint and photography; the human subject and their 'disease'; and the partnering of painter - Doble, and photographer - Strong. But in this process the lines between

those practices, like the molecular disturbances they chronicle, have become so blurred as to be inconsequential.

Reviewing *First Born* in *The Age* newspaper, Dan Rule captured the impact of the images succinctly: "There's a fascinating polarity to the works. The paint acts as a violent gesture towards photographs; it turns the body inside out. The violence seems to allude to the unnatural sheen of fashion photography. It illustrates that the flawless body is in fact a living bag of blood and guts. Another vantage, however, might see such an unearthing as a paean to the mystique and poetry of human form and a reflection on the dehumanising horror of the surgical table."

Writing in the catalogue for the show, Jeremy Kibel raised further potential ramifications for what *First Born* may suggest: "Evolution... has given us the ability to select and de-select parts of our bodies, but what about our soul? Scientists would like us to believe that the soul is the construct of fiction and religion [but] what is the social impact on mankind? Are the changes irreversible? Has this way of life altered our historical path and affected our equilibrium in nature?"

First Born managed to weld beauty and horror seamlessly, indeed not unlike the gore and mucous on a perfect just-born child. Their human forms, or at least what one can see of them, are essentially perfect. Their globular, perhaps carcinogenic, outgrowths are contrasted with the ideal female breast, their dripping, corpuscular ectoplasm embracing the hour-glass figures of their models like an alien succubus lover. These are strange works indeed - both beautiful and repulsive - but then we live in strange times indeed, times for the *First Born*.