

The Washington Post

Alluring 'BodySpace' Pulls You In, by Michael O'Sullivan, (March 2, 2001)

WE ARE NOT yet accustomed, in our encounters with museums, to feeling helpless.

Perplexed, yes. Patronized, occasionally -- especially when it comes to contemporary art, which many curators seem to feel ought to come with printed instructions. But at least we have been taught how to behave in the face of it: how to look at it from a respectful distance, how to admire it (or shrug our shoulders at its inscrutability) but never (or rarely) to touch it. Art that invites contact can leave us feeling adrift from the moorings that make us feel at home.

So much for what we have been taught.

The wall between audience and art has been crumbling for a while. When the 1997 Whitney Biennial previewed in New York, the Charles Long/Stereolab collaboration "Bubble Gum Station," featuring a mountain of pink bubble gum (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) along with headphone listening stations, was reportedly approached with trepidation by most critics in attendance. Several weeks later, when I saw it, it had been transformed by less touch-phobic museum-goers into an ever-evolving sculpture.

By the time you get to "Sister Naves," the room-size installation by Ernesto Neto that forms the centerpiece of the Baltimore Museum of Art's delightfully disorienting "BodySpace," all rules are out the window. There, in a gallery empty but for some signage and a couple of low benches, the Brazilian artist has set up what looks like a diaphanous version of one of those "moon bounce" attractions you see at outdoor festivals. You know, the kind where you enter a big vinyl tent and jump around on a huge, air-filled mattress. Take off your shoes and jewelry, the BMA placard says, and come inside.

That scent? It's ground cloves hanging in pendulous, biomorphic sacs just inside the slit in the Lycra through which you enter. Yes, Lycra -- or "industrial-strength

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

pantyhose," as curator Helen Molesworth likes to call what Neto's funhouse is made of. Anchored with sand-weighted "feet" and tinged with patches of flesh-pink coloring, the mostly mist-white vessel (naves is Portuguese for ships) consists of two chambers connected by a narrow hallway. Since the whole thing is made of stretchy fabric, the floor and walls feel spongy to the touch, giving way just enough to allow passage (assuming you don't fall and lose your balance, which is a distinct possibility).

The first room is furnished with a beanbag-style pouch filled with small Styrofoam pellets. In the second, the floor itself is a several-foot-thick layer of Styrofoam pellets beneath a sheet of Lycra. In place of windows or other apertures, a few fist-size orifices have been punched through the material, leaving tubes of rolled up fabric dangling like so many discarded stockings. Similar holes in the soft Styrofoam floor invite you to explore further but, trust me, there's nothing there -- at least nothing you can touch with your hand. It's fun and a little bit scary. Sensuous, sensual even, with elements of the boudoir mixed in with a willing suspension of inhibition that verges on exhibitionism. Look around. People are watching you. Don't be surprised if your heart beats faster. "It is, after all," Molesworth says, "a very sexy show."

What exactly is going on here?

Only the most visceral demonstration of the question "BodySpace" means to ask, which is, according to Molesworth, "What does it mean to experience the body in the context of the museum?"

"We pretend," she continues, "that we're disembodied eyes when we look at art. This show puts the eye back in the body."

And the eye-bone's connected to the . . . oh, never mind.

Not every piece, of course, has such an immediate effect. Nor is everything meant to be touched, at least not literally. David Schafer's "Stepped Density I" and "Stepped Density II," two typewriter key-shaped sculptural objects inspired by the heights of bar stools and fast-food seating units, beckon you to sit on them but, should you try, guards will warn you off. The late Felix Gonzalez Torres's shimmering "Untitled (Water)," on the other hand, a larger version of the artist's blue and silver beaded curtain on view in the museum's contemporary wing, is meant to be parted, walked through, felt and heard. If you just stop and stare at it, as we're used to, you won't get very far. It's a barrier, but one designed to be penetrated.

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

Do-Ho Suh, a Korean-born artist working in New York, has two works in "BodySpace." The first, just outside the exhibition entrance, is a to-scale replica of a typical modern-day bathroom, done in pale green silk. While it evokes, on one level, both excretory and lavatory functions, it also calls to mind the larger theme of tension between permanence and the ephemeral, seeing as it could easily be balled up and stuffed into a purse. Its very title, in fact, "Seoul Home/L.A. Home: Bathroom," indicates not only the universality of the commonplace but cites the specific cities to which the artwork has traveled.

Just inside the first gallery, there's another of Suh's pieces, a scale model of the upper portion of a traditional 18th-century Korean house, also made of green silk. Hanging from the ceiling, it not only dramatically changes the light in the room but creates a kind of invisible room-within-a-room -- one you feel but don't see -- just beneath the canopy that floats above your head. Nearby, "Jennifer's Convertible," a digital print on vinyl by the Korean-born Sowon Kwon, depicts a pair of mirror-image sofas stood on end. It makes its own point about the disequilibrium of the familiar, but it is a weaker one.

Much of Robert Gober's contribution here -- an inside-out sink basin, two displaced drains set into the wall and a bundle of newspapers resting on the floor -- will be familiar to visitors to his show at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden a year ago, but the work nicely underscores Molesworth's themes. You have to move, to the right, to the left, even getting down on your hands and knees to read the headlines, in order to take them in. What's more, although they look like mass-produced artifacts, they're not. Gober casts his pewter drains (symbols of transition from, say, life to death), as well as his plaster sink and lithographed newspapers, by hand.

This notion of the handmade, another less obvious allusion to the body (but in this case the artist's body, not the viewer's), also comes into play in Claudia Matzko's "Salt Wall," a veneer of white tiles fashioned by the artist from salt and resin, and in "Untitled (White)," a display of blown glassware on white shelving by Josiah McElheny. At first glance, McElheny's display of virtuosic craftsmanship appears to be something that would be more at home in the Renwick, where it could certainly hold its own. But though the glass is handmade, it's meant to look mass-produced and is in fact a canny mimicry of machined-glass milestones of the 20th-century. An obscure irony, to be sure, however snug it fits into the overall theme of the show.

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

Here's what's really weird, though. For an exhibition whose temperature is overwhelmingly cool (there are but three colors on view: antiseptic white, mint green, chlorine blue), "BodySpace" generates surprising heat.

Molesworth is right: It's a sexy show. It stands in front of you like a cocktail party flirt and makes you walk around, under -- and sometimes through -- it to get to the next room. Touch? Don't touch? The message it gives out is decidedly mixed. Wearing perfume and spandex, it turns down the lights and invites you to slip into something more comfortable. It's not an experience one often gets, at least not in a museum: something akin to confusion, but one that's slightly exhilarating.

Molesworth knows just what I'm talking about when I compare my feelings of stumbling, crawling and fumbling through Neto's "Sister Naves" as a loss of control.

"Hey, sounds a lot like falling in love to me," she says.

BODYSPACE -- Through May 27 at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Art Museum Drive at North Charles and 31st streets, Baltimore. 410/396-7100. Web site: www.artbma.org. Open 11 to 5 Wednesdays through Fridays; first Thursday of every month until 9; Saturdays and Sundays 11 to 6. Admission \$ 6, seniors and students \$ 4, 18 and under free. Free on Thursdays.