

ART, CLASSICISM, AND DISCOURSE, FROM 1755 TO TODAY

TITLE **Fit for Purpose: The Classical Millstone, the Classical Touchstone**
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(1) Sanit Forma –
detail (title page)

In the nine years of my own Fine Art education I don't recall ever being shown classical sculpture, or having it recommended to me, nor hearing any reference made to it. Since my education was by no means unusual it follows that if, as this conference's call for papers stated, "every generation develops its own 'classic' and its own canon", then – for artists at least – that relationship to the classic is unlikely to be a received one acquired through their general art education.

Instead this relationship will have developed through more individual enquiries into issues of concern to them. In my case that connection to the classical is through male body image and gym culture, areas of research where the classical has endured more or less intact as an ideal for the male body and continues to exert its influence in discussions about masculinity.

Offering an analysis of three artworks from my studio (*Dependable Bodies*, *Sanit Forma* and *Dough Boy and the Iliac Crest*), this paper makes the argument that the classical can simultaneously operate as both touchstone and millstone for male body image. I should disclose my own biography here, in that though I normally define myself as 'pie-curious' I have used gyms fairly infrequently in my adult life – perhaps totaling 3 years in 28.

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(2) Sketchpad –
musculature (a)

For many men, particularly younger ones, building body mass is a key motivation in the gym as they seek to align themselves to the prevailing dogma that masculinity and a muscular body are inextricably linked. I use the term *mass* rather than *strength*, as it is muscular size (and actually the size of a limited set of muscles) that is the ideal being pursued. In this sketchpad study for *Dough Boy and the Iliac Crest* I erased muscle groups, leaving only those that young, male gym-users typically focus on. What remains are the upper arms, front torso and upper legs (biceps, triceps, deltoids, pectorals, abdominals, obliques and quadriceps). None of these muscles form the 'core' but are the superficial muscles, the muscles that show on the surface of the body and can be seen by the owner of that body. We might say that these muscles offer a 'presentation' to others, that they form a 'shell' or constitute a kind of 'biological armour'.

(3) Sketchpad –
musculature (b)

(4) Dependable
Bodies

The premise of muscles operating as armour, of a certain body shape constituting a mould, is explored in some of my recent work. In the etching

Dependable Bodies the ‘pregnant moment’ of neo-classical theoryⁱ plays out against the backdrop of an Arcadian landscape. A skeletal creature, a mutation with several deformities, crouches by and reaches out to a pair of hollow legs. These legs, which offer the kind of immutability found in statuary, suggest various roles: are they armour, a protective covering to be worn? Or a kind of mould, for shaping whatever inhabits its volume into their pre-determined ideal? With this encounter comes a choice – to inhabit the mould, accepting it and being sanctified and ‘dressed’ by the waiting putti, or to reject this proffered completion of self and turn away.

(5) Dependable Bodies (detail)

Michael Hatt makes a compelling case that “*depiction of the body as sculptural*” has historically been a strategy for “*stabilizing the male nude and mitigating the threats it posed, as well as denying the weakness of the male flesh*” – whether that be its biological failings or homoerotic tendencies.ⁱⁱ The legs in *Dependable Bodies*, with their aesthetic of designed surface, designed musculature, read as hard, hollow bronze more than soft, living flesh; similarly the legs of *Dough Boy and the Iliac Crest* are designed, manufactured product. To me both constitute moulds in which the unformed or imperfect can be stabilized and take form. The mould acts as a useful metaphor for a kind of designed, or at least regulated, masculinity, as does armour.

(6) + Dough Boy and the Iliac Crest

(7) Adonis Belt

Kenneth Clark’s term *Cuirasse Esthétique* relates to the muscle cuirass of the classical-era, armour that presents an idealised human physique. And since masculinity has been so inextricably linked to the physical qualities of the male body for the past two centuries, to the point where that relationship is rarely questioned, I contend that armour is what is being created in the gym.

(8) ‘Guns’ advert / Adonis Belt

In my adult life I’ve witnessed an arms race in which six-pack abs have been superceded by the eight-pack, and recent talk of a mythic ten-pack recalls the classical standard of the Iliac Crest or Adonis Belt. The term ‘guns’ to describe large biceps offers its own insight into the gym mindset, and so we arrive at a language – both textual and visual – in which offense and defense feature. This suggests an inherent weakness or vulnerability to the lived-body itself, an organism that needs protecting and toughening. Kenneth Clark suggested that any “*relaxation of the classical norm*” constituted “*a removal, so to say, of the armour of geometry*”ⁱⁱⁱ which implies a kind of potential failure of the body to hold itself together, and suggests willpower as some kind of moral imperative.

(9) Louise Bourgeois - Cell XXVI

The Fragmented

Clark acknowledges that “*in almost every detail the body is not the shape which art has led us to believe that it would be*”^{iv} and he foreshadows much subsequent discussion by Linda Nochlin and others of the fragmented body or the *body-in-pieces* of postmodernism.^v Nochlin’s argument that the fragmented body is transgressive strikes a cord with my own experiences and my own work. In *Doughboy & The Iliac Crest* there is a clear schism between the legs and the torso of the figure in terms of how they are manifested.

(10) Doughboy and the Iliac Crest

(11-14: timer)
Farnese Hermes and
Doughboy – mould

The torso is malformed and rough in treatment. It is literally a dough-boy (slang for an overweight man), with bread cast into a mould I took from the torso of a Farnese Hermes copy. The initial use of dough was not simply for that cultural association with obesity; rather it was to employ a material whose materiality actively resists 'accurate' or 'faithful' replication from a mould. Or, put another way, a material that disrupts the mould form and thereby rejects perfection of the cast surface, and by extension transgresses the classical ideal.

The Sectional

(15) Charles Ray /
Cindy Sherman

The 'sectional figure' – rather than the 'fragmented body' commonly referenced in critical discourse around the body in modern and contemporary art – renders the human form into a set of constituent parts. This aesthetic is very familiar to us through mass-produced toys, mechanized components, and, of course, sculpture – Charles Ray's *Male Mannequin* [1990] or Cindy Sherman's *Untitled 261* [1992] typify this conception of the human form. This may seem at odds with the idealised whole of the classical tradition, but the sectional is something that belongs in parts, those parts being complete and perfect in themselves rather than broken. The legs of *Doughboy and the Iliac Crest* (carved into a cast of the Farnese Hermes) are highly finished, manifested as designed 'product' in order to reinforce that the classical ideal is a standardised (or at least standardising) form. They make equal reference to the design language of contemporary gym footwear, plastic toys and so forth.

(16) Doughboy /
trainers

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The shielded body

(17) Protein shake

Gym clothing, for me, also forms part of the 'armour aspect' of developing a masculine physique. If nakedness confers vulnerability then clothing and the wider paraphernalia of gym going – the wipe-down towel, the headphones, the protein drink bottle – offer defence (as an aside I find the protein shake especially humorous given that in a testosterone fueled, competitive environment grown men are effectively sucking powdered milk through a teat). The presence of the flayed skin of a lion in the Farnese Hercules is echoed in *Doughboy*, which offers an alternative flayed skin in the coalesced form of a hoodie, boxing helmet and weightlifting gloves draped over exercise equipment.

(18) Farnese
Hercules / Doughboy

(19) Doughboy detail
- 'codpiece'

Of course our 'gym skin' has one major advantage for me as the sculptor in that it de-problematizes that major attitudinal difference between the classical and contemporary - the size of the penis. In my work *Doughboy*, as with our gym-user, I have opted not to exhibit the penis, but to offer a generalised genital 'package' that acts as a kind of promissory note for virility. What I have arrived at in *Doughboy* is, in essence, a codpiece – simultaneously demure and boastful.

Poses and poseurs

(20) *Sanit Forma*
(groin detail)

In *Sanit Forma* the figure is entirely naked and on display, though the surface is rationalized to the point where the human and the mechanical share a common skin in which little specificity remains. Compositionally *Sanit Forma* makes clear reference to the louche Barberini Faun, who lounges back with immense satisfaction (and no small amount of confidence); but also the similar pose echoes in Michaelangelo's *Pieta* and Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Theresa*, in which St Theresa lies back swaddled in fabric in a manner akin to a smack addict who has just shot up. The relationship between focal figure and a secondary figure that we see in the Bernini finds a place in my work, as does the Laocoön's death struggle with the serpent, and the *Pieta*'s dangling arm and hitched shoulder. These connections have not been established in order to offer a kind of intellectual bingo for the viewer, rather the sculpture has developed in response to certain repeated poses and gestures within this sculptural lineage that I'm engaged with.

(21-27: timer)
Barberini Faun,
Pieta, *Ecstasy* etc

(28) gym user
exercising (x2)

We can see similar repetitions of pose in gym culture, where gym-users are held or posed in a limited number of positions as the body fits to relatively standardized machines and makes tightly controlled sets of movements. I might also add that the resting body between exercises – certainly amongst men – is equally posed and regulated. *Sanit Forma* posits a shift within gym culture towards exercise itself becoming a site of display as much as a transformational activity.

(29) Terme Boxer /
gym user at rest

(30) *Sanit Forma*

Since one of the great historic failings of sculpture is the convincing depiction of movement, these static moments within gym workouts offer real potential for male physicality to be explored through a sculptural methodology. I see exercise machines as a conceptual equivalent of mouldmaking; by extension the gym environment itself can be seen as a kind of mould in which bodies are formed into a well-defined, globalized aesthetic standard.

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(31) Doughboy torso
/ *Dependable Bodies*
skeleton

Conclusion

In conclusion, the classical offers artists a cultural shorthand to reference and a canon to fracture and challenge. The torso of *Dough Boy* is a blasted fragment, the skeleton of *Dependable Bodies* is malformed. Both constitute an 'Other', operating in fractious dialogue with the premise of an idealised classical body, the standardized body of industrial and post-industrial product design, and the shifting body typologies being developed and contested in gyms.

(32) Studio shot
(contact page)

ⁱ See, for example, Mirzoeff, Nicholas *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (1995) p18

ⁱⁱ Hatt, Michael *Muscles, Morals, Mind: the male body in Thomas Eakins' Salutat* in *The Body Imaged* Adler, K and Pointon, M (eds) (1993) p68

ⁱⁱⁱ Clark, Kenneth *The Nude* (1956) p127

^{iv} Clark, Kenneth *The Nude* (1956) p4

^v Nochlin, Linda *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a metaphor of Modernity* (1994) p54