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Weingart Gallery at Occidental College
1600 Campus Road
Los Angeles, CA 90041

www.oxy.edu/oxyarts

Heather Rasmussen

**Sculptures, photographs
and movement**

Heather Rasmussen: Photographs, sculptures and movement

Heather Rasmussen's new work redefines the already well-established still-life tradition with its rich art historical framework as a memento mori. For instance 20th century photographers pioneered new principles for genre from the cubist explorations of Paul Outerbridge, mass-produced products posed by Irving Penn, and Michiko Kon's hybrid assemblages. Their representations of organic matter alongside steadfast inanimate objects suggested each artist's specific social and cultural agenda.

The cultural underpinning of Rasmussen's work, currently on view at Occidental College, is a departure from these modern photographers. While the typical vegetable that represents organic matter is present so to is hebody. Here either fleshly limbs intersect the still life directly or through plaster casts of her legs and feet.

These appendages have always been of particular importance in the artist's life based on her training as a classical ballerina. The pointed toe and the angling of the leg seen throughout the work are all particular nuances significant to a practitioner of the discipline. Within the sport there is a visible tension between the heightened athleticism yet skeletal frailty closely associated with Western notions of femininity and beauty.

Like this binary, there are consistent themes of dichotomies that run throughout her work. As both the subject and viewer she utilizes sculpture, photography, and video to explore relationships between living matter, functionality, and time that evolve through each layer of mediation. The act of arranging objects functions within Rasmussen's practice to create stand-alone sculptures, props to be photographed, and characters within her films.

The sculptural works such as *Untitled (Leg on towel on towel)*, create mixed media multiples that alter the purpose of each object. Here she positions a plaster cast of her leg wrapped in a towel upon a photograph of the same towel. This pristine multiple acts as a document of the pose as if attempting to preserve her skill from weakening due to the inevitable passage of time. In contrast, the towel functions as a protective skin to the plaster leg yet it is already worn and stained. As if to exaggerate this opposition Rasmussen places an enlarged photograph of the towel upon which both rest though provide little protection.

This absurd denial of an object's purpose is heightened in *Untitled (Leg on chair)* in which a hollow computer-generated copy of the artist's extended leg is placed over a toppled chair's. Now functionless the seat and shrunken limb both refuse a supportive role of the human body. Meanwhile the living sculpture on view in the gallery's defunct fireplace is yet to be determined, as she will alter the positions of the objects over the duration of the exhibition while the organic elements included will naturally decay.

An emphasis change moves the work into an overtly aesthetic direction with Rasmussen's photographs that document a physical passage of time. In *Untitled (Sprouting zucchini with mirrored hand and breast)* at first we see a rotting

zucchini placed at the center of the composition against a sherbet green backdrop that is growing fungus and bacteria producing dramatic color and texture variations. Once Rasmussen places two small circular mirrors amongst the decomposition, her image is reflected creating a palpable tension between life and the passage of time through her hand's gesture combined with the youth and fertility suggested by her breast seem to oppose the decomposition of the zucchini. Meanwhile the pale green sprouts rising up from the rotted mass remind the viewer that new life is also generated from death. By positioning these specific images of her body within the growing decay of another organic form there is a comparison to the inevitable effect of time on our own organic body.

In a similar work, *Untitled (Sprouting zucchini with mirrored breast and camera)*, Rasmussen utilizes the mirrors to reveal her physical presence and documentation process. Here, one mirror reflects a glimpse of her breast while the other captures the artist's gaze through the lens of the camera with a hand on the shutter. This seemingly impossible fragmentation of the body is inspired by the techniques explored by such influential volumes as "Weegee's Creative Camera". Rather than a result of post-production manipulation, Rasmussen reflects real time elements of her process into the photograph through the basic trickery of each mirror's angle and placement. Further, the artist's hand is made visible through smudged fingerprint traces on the mirror's glass surface. Rasmussen's playful reveal of authorship communicates the importance of her process to the viewer without producing an overly fetishized agenda.

When the artist's nude body replaces the zucchini as the still-life subject in *Untitled (Segmenting with mirror #1)*, elements of decomposition and mirror play function together to activate the photograph. Here the artist turns the mirror inward to acknowledge her shift from viewing her subject to being the subject viewed. The resulting displacement and distortion of her figure recalls André Kertész's surrealist nudes. However, her desire to self-manipulate a female artist's body into abstractions suggests alternative motivations. Referring back to her identification as a ballerina Rasmussen's altered self-representation is in stark contrast to this Western notion of flawless form. Here her reclining pose is bisected with the reflection of portions of her thigh and breast against a pattern shared by the studio backdrop and the upholstery of the cushion on which her body awkwardly rests. The resulting nearly life-sized distortion repels the sexual appeal of the historic reclining nude much like the zucchini's decomposition counters its appetizing draw.

Finally, Rasmussen's sculptural and photographic works become animated in a new video titled *Legs and legs movement #1 (two views)*. Here the viewer watches as the artist poses a still-life installation with two life-sized leg casts as if in ballet's elevated second position laid upon unfolded and stained packing blankets. The piece documents her playful choreography alongside a static presence of the casts that create a wry contrast. Unlike the liveliness of her tan limbs, these deathly-white, inert dance partners seem to be functionless relics while the artist's still limber legs continue dancing.

- Bridget Carron