

frieze

Chris Curreri

Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto



Chris Curreri *Beside Myself*, 2011, black and white photograph

If 'odd' were a compliment, it would sum up Chris Curreri's considered, impeccable photographs, which resist deciphering even though no tricks are used. The five monochromes in this show's title series, 'Beside Myself' (2011), for instance, feature waist-up views of a man who either exercises constantly, is genetically blessed, or both. Startlingly attractive, he exemplifies the masculine ideal that populates today's fitness magazines and that previously symbolized intellectual and spiritual perfection, rather than the grotesquery of *MuscleMag*. So far, so unremarkable. What catches our attention is the ectoplasmic material hiding his head, neither cloth, nor digital effect, nor glib: knowing that the head covering is dough doesn't dispel our interest.

For starters, the torso's contrast with the dough-covered face heightens the body's sense of armouring even though, ironically, it is bare and thus unprotected. And the photos' layered allusions augment this complexity. For example, the dough's obscuring of the model's face recalls the sculptural illusions of figures seen through stone shrouds, from Giuseppe Sanmartino's 18th-century trompe l'oeil to the subtle, affecting *fin de siècle* abstraction of Medardo Rosso (whom Curreri cites as a reference, if not as an influence).

Less literally, the play between the model's smooth body and the dough's uneven texture conjures Michelangelo's stone 'sketches', especially his *Saint Matthew* (1503–06) wherein contrast between finish and roughness suggests a figure emerging from stone rather than receding into it. While fainter than the 'veiling' references, these echoes foreground this series' existential undercurrent. To be 'beside oneself' means to be so emotionally overcome as to feel out of one's skin. Curreri's desire to double up on this expression's figurative aspect – to make the muscleman his doppelganger – comes through in the publicity shot. This image, which appears only on the publicity material for the exhibition and thus frames the show rather than participating in it, depicts the artist positioning the dough between the model's shoulders. Because Curreri stands behind the model, and they both crook their elbows, the model's physical perfection and psychological anonymity mirror and invert the artist's intellectual acuity and relative physical normality, while the artist seems poised to merge with the model.

This sense of doubled personae – of artist and model being linked uncannily, though looking nothing alike – points to a Surrealist element that connects 'Beside Myself' to the show's other series, 'Proud Flesh' (2011). This second series starts with an outtake from 'Beside Myself' in which the model strikingly recalls Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Saint Theresa* (1645–52). The image's red glazing rhymes discreetly with the other works in 'Proud Flesh' – three red glass vessels, each encased in a concrete cube so that a hole in the top of the block opens into the vessel's cavity.

The aridness of these works suggests that the title 'Proud Flesh' might better suit the bodybuilder pictures – except that the term 'proud flesh' has many associations (a King Vidor movie, a Robert Penn Warren play, a rock band), mostly related to its medical meaning of an excess of protective tissue around a wound (probably from the obsolete use of 'proud' to mean slightly raised). The title thus positions the contrasting red glass and pale concrete as an injury – but one that festers, since the overproduction of reparative tissue impedes recovery.

This piling up of meanings colludes with a re-use of materials to build a connection to Curreri's other work of the last few years: the vessels come from a collection he amassed for his photographic series 'Puppet' (2008) and 'Handle' (2009), wherein models deploy them as physical and visual weights to anchor themselves in disconcerting poses – disconcerting not because they're torturous but because, like the dough in 'Beside Myself', they're unexpected, and the vessels, though evidently jars and vases, suggest things quite other: sex toys, amputated limbs, specimen bottles, flags. 'Beside Myself' and 'Proud Flesh' continue these curious vacillations between organic and inorganic, sexual and abstemious – which make it hard to know where to look or what we're looking at, and play compellingly on those cusps.

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