

Elizabeth Zvonar:
THE CHALLENGE
OF ABSTRACTION

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by Emma Healey

No matter how well your body works, it's often a weird and unpleasant experience just to have one. This goes triple if you're female-identified in the outside world. Writer Jia Tolentino articulates this nicely: "To be an adult woman is to have your body be near-universally read as a sexual object when, on the inside, you often feel very different, like a Pokemon or a hungover bag of meat."¹ As if there wasn't already enough static in just trying to square your own thoughts and feelings with the inescapable, incongruous fact of your physical self, you've got to walk around letting other people press into you all the time – reading a body into your body, reading your body into your self, deciding how you are and how you must be just by looking.

The gallery text for Elizabeth Zvonar's *THE CHALLENGE OF ABSTRACTION* says that her work uses "strategies of aesthetic seduction and sex often found in advertising as a means of teasing out a possible metaphysical or supernatural undercurrent." The metaphysical experience these works aim to encapsulate or express intersects neatly with questions of feminism and gender. Observing the way bodies are arranged and presented in advertising can create the strange, doubled-back sensation of feeling aware of and yet alienated from your own body all at once. Zvonar is highly aware of this disconnect – but instead of using it to sell us something, she's (playfully) using it to generate a more ineffable, spiritual experience.

As women, we are expected to conduct so much of our lives as though the way we feel, the way we look, the way other people see us and the way we're affected by their seeing are all seamlessly linked – like there's no disconnect or imbalance between those things; just an infinite, clean loop. This fiction is one of the side

effects of the patriarchy that's settled into every corner of culture, from art to advertising, and its ubiquity is what makes it such a relief to find art that knows all about this disconnection and misprision, and wants to make something out of it.

Zvonar's work in *THE CHALLENGE OF ABSTRACTION* is about the limits and possibilities of the body when it's divorced from context. Her collages, sculptures and casts – mounted to the wall, or printed on large pieces of silk and hung from the ceiling – take individual parts (fingers, feet, the open air between two bare legs) and elide them, working them into a new kind of visual language using shape and space. *IT'S THE GAPS THAT CHANGE THE SEQUENCE* presents two different images of open legs arranged in a mesmerizing spiral. A concrete cast of the crook of a knee creates a disorienting sensual impression. *DOUBLEHEADER*, a collage printed onto an enormous piece of silk and hanging from the ceiling, playfully inverts Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-1966): the frame is a head resting on two necks, and the landscape we see inside of it seems to go on forever, no bodies blocking our way – though the positioning of the silk, hanging from the ceiling in the centre of the gallery, means that when someone walks by it they're swallowed up by the landscape; the image assumes them.

These works are playful and sensual and serious and incredibly pleasing all at once. It may not be particularly unusual to see images of the human body taken out of context and arranged in an unfamiliar way, but it is rare – and very satisfying – when that new arrangement feels deeply intuitive, when it does a better job of evoking and articulating the strange, ineffable things about what it means to have and see a physical self than a more "straightforward" image ever could. The way it feels to be in a body is so radically different from the way it feels to look at one, and *THE CHALLENGE OF ABSTRACTION* creates a visual vocabulary that expresses and dwells in this difference instead of attempting to explain it away. This is the "metaphysical or supernatural undercurrent" that follows from Zvonar's new arrangements of the body; the experience of viewing them feels uncannily natural and revelatory all at once, like someone speaking to you in a language you didn't know you knew until you heard it. Zvonar's work gives the viewer the gift of being able to see the body as something other than the sum of its parts – for it to add up to something sublime.

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Elizabeth Zvonar, installation view of *DOUBLEHEADER*, 2015, silk, brass, 147.3 x 96.5 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF DANIEL FARIA GALLERY



1 Jia Tolentino, "The Right to a Sexual Narrative: On the Lena Dunham Abuse Claims," *Jezebel*, November 4, 2014, <http://jezebel.com/the-right-to-a-sexual-narrative-on-the-lena-dunham-abu-1654187731>.