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ART 4693

Paper II

Kiki Smith's *A Man*

*A Man* takes up a wall in the museum. The large, fluttering work is one of the most impressive pieces in the exhibit, standing out as the only “man” in the show. Through the choice of subject, the media utilized, and the method of display, the concept appears of a surface that appears solid and is not. This artwork expresses the permeability of Man in two senses: in man as a gender and body type as well as in the social and cultural perceptions of those socialized as men. This work criticizes gender roles, albeit gently, by poking fun at the male tendency to think of oneself as an enormous and impenetrable fortress.

It is difficult to distinguish what is being depicted in this enormous collage of printed orifices until one gets close enough to see what the abstracted, sometimes photo-negative images are depicting. Even then, it is not clear until the unobtrusive label explains it: it is A Man. The great size of this piece is overwhelming, taking up 78 by 200 inches. It is a collection of large grayscale prints of various human orifices, from eyeballs to anuses, on large rectangles of off-white gampi paper torn and pasted together. They do not appear in any sort of cohesive order, distributed randomly across the space. Each print is manipulated toward abstraction, whether through color adjustments or through distressing the print plates. Each orifice has been equalized in size, which contributes to the difficulty in identifying what exactly one is looking at.

The piece is attached to the wall with common thumbtacks, which stab through the skin-like gampi paper along its top edge. The organic properties of the paper-- its pale tan color,

wrinkles, and motion in the slightest breeze-- contribute to an impression of skin. Combined with the title of the work and the proliferation of orifices, the effect is rather uncanny, as if one is looking at a tanned hide hung on the wall.

Gampi paper is handmade, and the nature of the papermaking process means that each connected sheet in *A Man* has subtle differences in shape, color, and size. The glue that holds each piece together shows a slightly darker grid between the prints, and the work as a whole is laced with small creases and wrinkles. It is hung against a white wall, and through its slight translucency the fact that it is thicker in some places is made clear. Some of the prints have been reversed in color, making the deepest shadows the pale color of the paper itself. This brings to attention the deepest points of each print, the point of penetration. By hanging it with thumbtacks, the curators and gallery assistants become implicated in the act of moving through the piece with a familiar, generally non-violent device. From the gaping throat to the tiny, invisible duct of the nipple, each print points out the many points of accessibility to the interior of a body. The fact that the artist has utilized a male body illuminates a particular arena of male discomfort: permeability.

In the overall body of her work, the overwhelming majority of her subjects are female. This work could have shifted dramatically by including body parts assumed unique to women, or by changing the title, but instead it focuses on the orifices of what is commonly perceived to be a single gender. By titling the work *A Man*, Smith simultaneously removes individuality from the owner of the orifices and gives the idea of the piece as a man itself. It becomes every man, discussing the commonalities of human body parts, and in doing so pointing out how many entry points there are within every body. In American social culture of the 1990's (and twenty years

later, at the writing of this essay), those socialized as men were supposed to be not penetrable, but the penetrating party in all interactions. From slurs such as “faggot,” which insinuates a desire to be anally penetrated, to the fact that the finger on the button to send missiles from America to whatever nation has upset it has been consistently male, men are socialized to consider themselves composed only of exit points, of actions that affect the world.

*A Man* criticizes this tendency (quite literally, in the case of the tacks that suspend the piece) by simply highlighting and repeating an assortment of points of penetration. The media also addresses it through its very nature: the paper is very large, but very easily distressed, moving in the slightest breeze. It is also very easily penetrated by scissors or tacks. It takes up a large amount of space, but is spread very thin in doing so. *A Man* speaks to male insecurity, but also addresses the beauty of it. This enormous, delicate-looking work showcases the alien beauty of body parts not usually considered so, such as nostrils and urethras. Its graceful, floating motion is an ode to the joy that can be found with acceptance of permeability in the human body, not just physically but holistically.